STUDENT HUT: BLACK LIVES MATTER

A report on how students feel about the state of racism and the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK.

STUDENT HUT

Sparked by recent incidents of senseless police brutality and racial violence against Black Americans, the **#BlackLivesMatter** movement has galvanised the globe, triggering protests and social activism across the world. There has been outcry from millions, social media blackouts and, most importantly, a spotlight has been shed on the lived racism and prejudice that is still all too familiar for the Black diaspora across the world.

Students make up one of the most diverse demographics in the world, and Black students are fighting to have their voices heard too. Rightly so; universities and brands are being held accountable for their public displays of solidarity and the dissonance between their words and their actions, both online and on campus.

Rather than guessing what Black students are feeling, we asked them directly. What do they want to see from their institutions and the brands they admire and follow? What do they hope for the future and what do they expect for the now?

Student Hut and Natives commissioned new research to find out. We conducted an in-depth focus group, made up of Black British students, both undergraduate and postgraduate. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 24 years old and were all recruited from our Student Hut Opinion Panel. They shared how they really feel about the racial prejudice they face every day, as well how they're being represented on campus, in faculties and in the media. They discussed what universities can and should be doing to offer meaningful change and support and how that makes them feel about associating themselves with those brand names.

This report challenges brands, agencies and institutions to truly *#thinkstudent*. And to use these insights as guidance and direction, as we all strive towards a more inclusive, diverse and equal future. One that welcomes and represents every student, regardless of race, class or identity.

'OTHERNESS', DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION.

For many, **diversity and inclusion** are easily conflated; people assume that with diversity comes inclusion, and vice versa. We've seen quotas implemented across all sectors in a bid to ensure that a diverse range of individuals are given the chance to apply and interview for jobs. However, while some people may have been offered a seat at the table, this does not mean they are welcomed or acknowledged in the same way as their white counterparts. The students involved in this research project highlighted that this same issue is prevalent on campus.

The concept of inclusion means doing more than just putting a handful of Black faces on the cover of your prospectus. Acknowledging and addressing the difference between diversity and inclusion was a major theme.

"It makes you feel like just a number. Just a token."

"It's easy to tick a few diversity boxes to hit the 'quota' but facilitating real inclusion is focused on much less often."

While societies such as African Caribbean Societies (ACS) are deemed to be positive and supportive influences within institutions, some students don't want to join these groups as it makes them feel even more 'other'. The students confidently commented on how valuable ACS, and other similar groups, are to institutions, providing a source of advice and guidance from students who have varied lived experiences, requirements and demands. However in reality, they are rarely listened to and can be cast as "unfriendly" and "unapproachable", as one student commented, to the rest of the university. Working to foster a line of communication between these Black student advocates and staff would be a positive step forward.

Similarly, opting for the term 'BAME', used by many institutions in their communications, had negative reactions. The acronym makes no attempt to distinguish between different ethnicities and gives the impression that they are all 'other' to the white population. The only individual on our panel to state that their university had a support system in place for race-related issues said that there was only one Asian member of staff in the department. Evidently, she would not be well-equipped to deal with issues Black students were facing, as she does not necessarily share the same lived experiences.

"If you were to talk to someone, it's like you're trying to be difficult, or you're trying to start a division for no reason."

The students in our study were keen to stress that the issues faced by Asian and other minority ethnic populations differ drastically to those faced by Black people. Therefore, when addressing the nuances of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, universities should use the terms 'Black students/staff' and not shy away from using **#BlackLivesMatter** either. By referring to their Black students as 'BAME', they are diluting their struggles and exacerbating any disillusionment they may already be feeling.

While it's important to put appropriate services in place, reevaluate your recruitment processes and implement necessary procedures, you don't need to have all the answers right now. Signposting to **professional therapists and services** can be an important and effective way of showing students where they can get support if it's currently not available on campus.

CAN BLACK STUDENTS SEE THEMSELVES AT YOUR INSTITUTION?

Generally, mentorship programmes are considered positive services that offer and forge the inclusivity that everyone looks and hopes for at university. However, our research found that these mentoring schemes are not effective in their aims, or supportive of students, unless the mentors are reflective of the diverse student body. One student recounted how they were told "not to take things personally" when experiencing racial prejudice and inequality, by white mentors.

There was a unanimous feeling among the students that there was not enough representation in staff or mentoring positions at their respective universities, which made it hard for them to feel 'seen' and valued as Black students. The students recalled how they were told by college reps and peers that "nothing was ever going to change, they won't listen to you, [and] they have structural issues."

Our previous research found that six in 10 students don't feel that their university represents them - so what can you be doing to turn this around?

IT'S NOT BLACK STUDENTS' RESPONSIBILITY. IT'S YOURS.

In the era of social media, saying anything that lacks authenticity, integrity or transparency is no longer an option. Anything that you may say internally has the potential to become external news just as quickly, and the same applies to what you don't say too. Which is why it's important to get it right. But in instances such as the Black Lives Matter movement, what's right and what you can say as an institution are difficult to navigate.

Another student told us how, when the news on George Floyd broke, their university didn't initially issue a statement. As a result of countless messages to the ACS' Instagram account, the ACS emailed the university with recommendations and questions regarding the university's stance. Since then there has been no more open communication between the university and the ACS.

"Universities have no excuse not knowing what to say. They all have Black students or staff. Ask them, listen to them. It's just laziness."
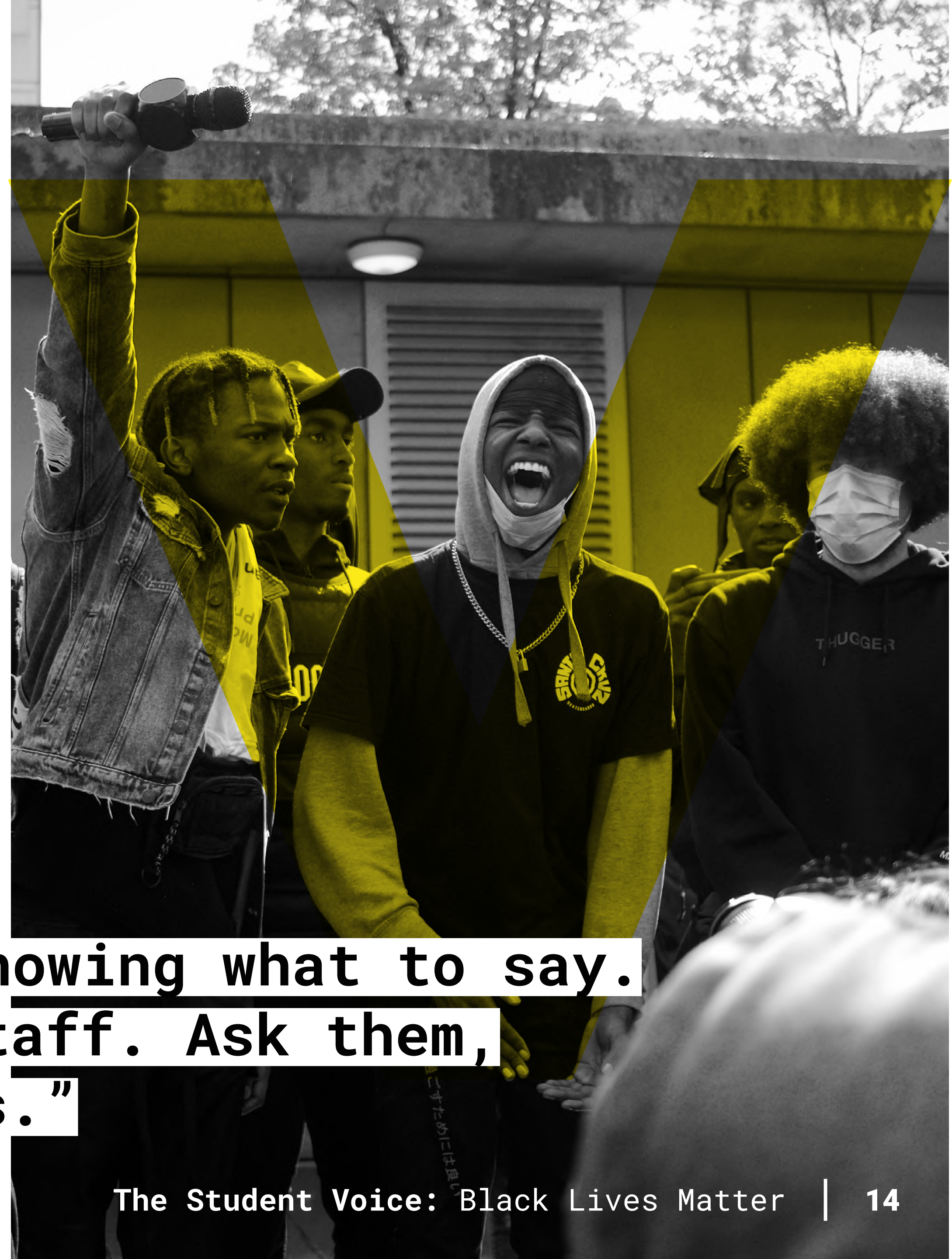
"A uni saying they don't know what to say just doesn't make any sense, they probably have an ACS."

What we can learn here, is that the student body relies on the ACS, and other representative societies, to get their voices heard. And this is a valuable opportunity for universities to stop what they think they should be doing, or scrambling for ideas, and instead, listen to these respected societies that are uniquely qualified to talk on behalf of the students affected.

However, the group were quick to point out that it is not the responsibility of the ACS or Black students to educate, drive or supply resources to the rest of the institution. Fostering a mutually beneficial and comfortable relationship between societies, unions and institutions will be an individual, delicate process, but one the students wish to see more of.

"If you're unwilling to learn, consult experts, and think inclusively about your audience, you're going to spend far more on damage control than you would on the professional and personal development you need to become inclusive." - <u>Forbes</u>, 2017.

If you're still scratching your heads at this point, start with the **foundations of your messaging** that already exist and build from there. Whatever you do, it's essential to be directed by the three pillars of being sincere, concise and clear. For the rest, consult with diversity and inclusivity experts that have that lived experience. Listen to students, give them a platform to tell their stories and be heard, but do not rely on them.

TO SIN BY SILENCE WHEN THEY SHOULD PROTEST MAKES COWARDS — ELLA WHEELER COX

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA.

On 2 June 2020, whole corners of Instagram suddenly went dark in support of BLM; #theshowmustbepaused. But just as quickly, the show went back to normal. For one Tuesday, over 28 million people posted plain black squares to Instagram as part of **#BlackoutTuesday**, and other apps such as Spotify and Apple Music also joined the movement.

We took to the focus group to find out how they felt about the Blackout and social media response.

While it was positive to see the world come together on this one campaign and see the industries and companies who would never ordinarily have diversity on their PR agenda take a stance, the students felt there had been some virtue signalling.

> **Virtue signalling:** *The action or practice of publicly expressing opinions or sentiments intended to demonstrate one's good character or the moral correctness of one's position on a particular issue.*
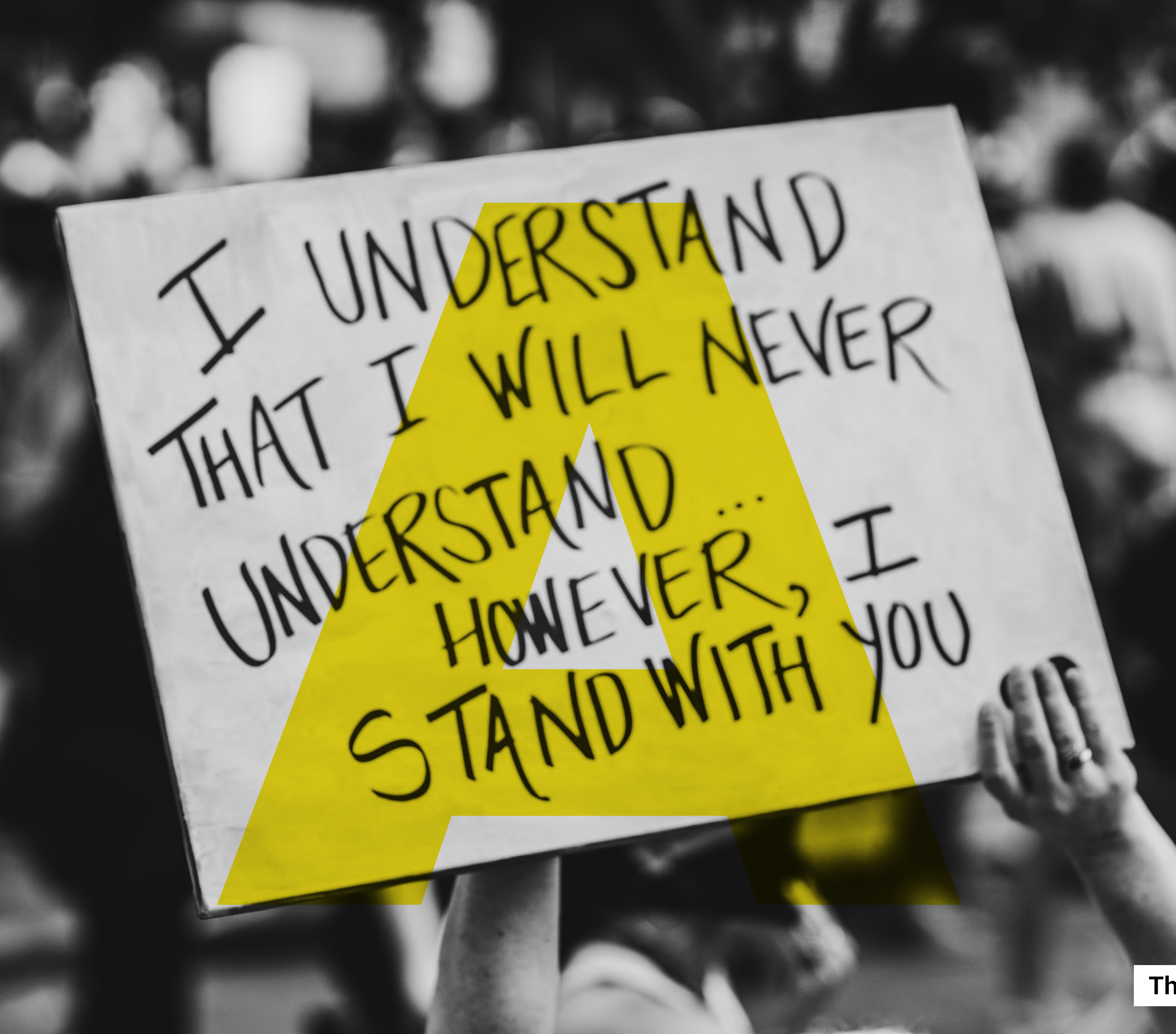
Watching social media silence Black voices with the black squares was upsetting for every student asked during this session. A quick hashtag as a quick fix for all the wrongdoings in the companies' or institutions' pasts was difficult to see.

We discovered that the whole group consequently took time off social media because it was emotionally exhausting to watch and consume this type of content.

But while social media can be overwhelming, it does have a positive function too.

When asked whether students look to the mainstream news or social media for coverage and societal narrative, the whole group agreed that social media was the chosen one. The students commented on how it wasn't just because social media offers a more positive take on the BLM movement, but because it is a truer, fairer picture of what's happening.

What we can learn from this? That social media is the perfect place to cultivate and foster a safe, trustworthy, representative environment, which students will be open to listening to. Can you collaborate with your African Caribbean Societies for content, or empower aspiring writers and content creators to support your brand's accounts? Students aren't looking for that polished news reporting that was once the norm, instead, real, human updates are what they're after. And as social media is students' medium of choice, are you investing in it, or is it an afterthought? Platforms like TikTok can be intimidating at first, but just look at the Washington Post's success - it's a place to really connect and tell true and authentic stories.

EMPTY PLEDGES.

A relatively new byproduct of today's online landscape is that brands are expected to speak their truths and stand up publicly on the issues that matter, usually via social media. And in many ways, this is a positive step forward, holding brands and companies accountable for what they put into the world, beyond their products and manufacturing. However, this has come with a downside, which the students from this research talked at length about.

The students questioned the authenticity of many brands' posts as they didn't match up to the practices the brand had been executing behind the scenes.

"You'll see them hastily post a black square, and then a quick hashtag not to be seen as someone supporting racism."

"Posting because they should… because they have to."

The students observed this trend, as followers consequently outed specific brands for their poor history towards people of colour, and the pledge in solidarity became superficial. We know that students, specifically, and the younger generations in general, seek out this authenticity when it comes to brand and institution communication, and this instance is no different.

"Fair enough yeah, light-skinned is Black as well, but it's not dark-skinned girls which is the main issue here. They're doing what is already socially acceptable. And [the brand] wouldn't even pay their Black influencers or post their images."

They also discussed the fact that some brands have now started to post seemingly natural content with Black models, however if you scrolled back, there wouldn't be any faces of colour on their feed.

Similarly, one student recounted how a fashion retailer is now posting "Black models. But only light Black models."

The students concluded that these brands are 'performing' their solidarity, "jumping on the bandwagon" as one student proclaimed, in an effort to avoid a PR scandal. And they're profiteering off it as a result. **"It's a good business move to support the movement."**

But when these brands do it right, the response and result is progressive and positive. When brands authentically stand with diversity and inclusivity, **we found,** from students, that the three strongest emotions felt were 'included', 'motivated' and 'inspired'. When you're building any campaign, these are the kind of emotions you want your audience to feel, so diversity is very important. But this isn't just on an emotional level – as strategic marketers, it's also crucial that you consider the bottom line. What impact does creative diversity have on your brand value and ROI? Well, seven out of 10 students stated that they were more likely to buy from brands that they felt represented them, and six out of 10 students think that brands are more successful when they show diversity in their advertising.

Just look at the likes of **Dove, Nike and Fenty Beauty** and the successes they've had for getting this right and living by it. The latter company was recognised for having the 'Biggest beauty brand launch in YouTube history'. You can't deny the power of diversity and inclusivity on a brand connection.

For example, the focus group's favourite from the recent #BlackLivesMatter social drive: Reebok's ode to the Black community, which did stand out and appear genuine. Thanking their Black audience for Reebok's own success had a powerful impact. Is there more you need to do to acknowledge the effect the Black community and students have had on your company or brand?

The students also offered an alternative solution, which would be to take the time to research the target audience and see what they want from the brand.

When companies are pledging millions of pounds and dollars to Black Lives Matter causes, while any donation is welcomed, the students hope to see some of that money reinvested back into the company's culture to train staff on diversity and inclusion. Throwing money at this won't end racism. And hypocritical posts on social media won't either.

IS REAL CHANGE POSSIBLE?

The students unanimously felt that the government's response to Black Lives Matter had not been good enough, and it had negatively affected the way the government is perceived. Earlier this year we found that seven in 10 students consider our Prime Minister untrustworthy, so the focus group's feelings were not surprising.

But this sentiment links strongly to how they feel that the news and the media "puts us in a bad light." One student commented that they felt that news outlets and publishers are trying to cause more division, with the likes of Sky News broadcasting the London protests as violent, however, the student knew first hand that the protests were peaceful.

"It was just calm, it wasn't chaotic. It was just people protesting for something they believe in."

"I'm not confident. Nothing will change. No one is listening. Trump is just sending an army in to take them away. Maybe in the UK, it could change… but it's very unlikely."
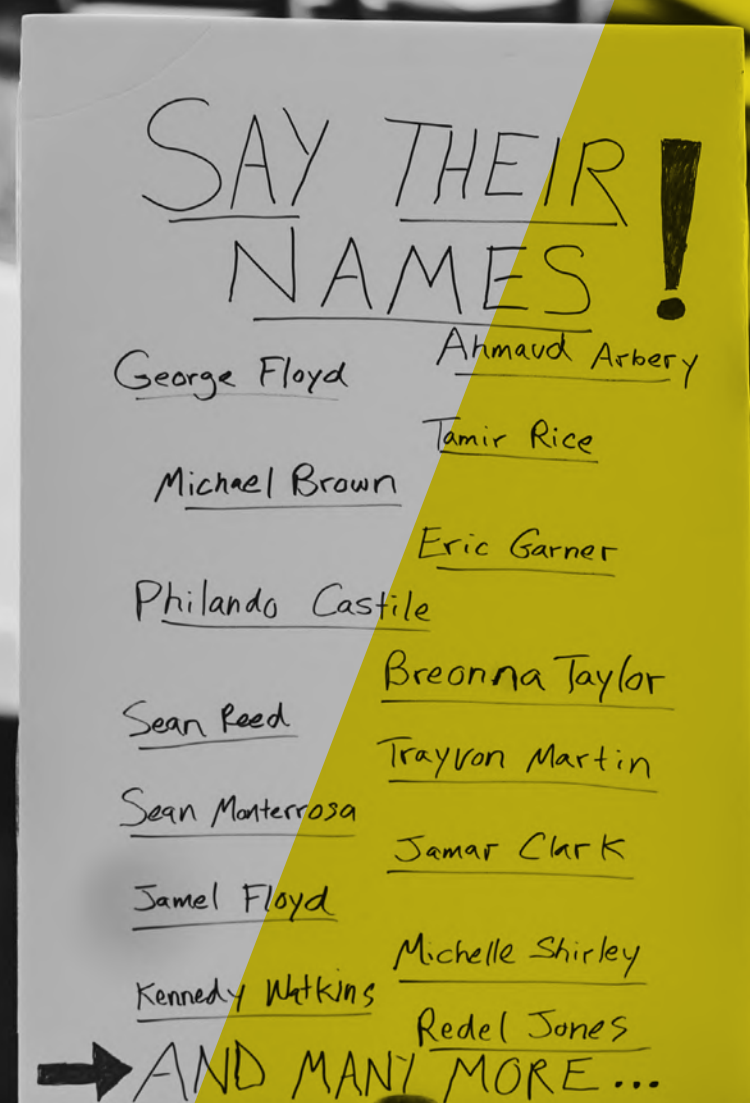
We've heard this before, again from our politics research, six in 10 students say they see fake news regularly.

And the same applies to their thoughts towards change at university. On the outside, it seems that institutions have 'diversity and inclusion' teams but "once you get there, you realise it's not inclusive." The students pointed out that they were told "we don't have that here" in terms of racism, and racial prejudice, and that's left them feeling unheard and frustrated.

Students addressed how top-down reform is the only way they believe there will be real impactful change. Employing more Black staff and senior decision-makers, as well as having dedicated officers, creating that representation in the workforce, will be the only way. Universities need Black voices from the inside, to then drive forward the agenda, in turn allowing Black students to be heard.

How is your institution or brand ensuring that your actions aren't just performative and tokenistic, and instead creating real meaningful change and impact? Whether it's online counselling, diversity and inclusion training, or more diverse recruitment, are you keeping in touch with your students about these issues? Allowing them to be a part of your journey, communicating your next steps? And, in turn, maintaining the momentum of this important culture shift?

"Part of me hopes this is the equivalent of the #MeToo movement, that it will stick and have some sort of lasting impact. But I'm also quite cynical because it just feels like a lot of performative action."

STUDENTS LISTEN TO STUDENTS. SO SHOULD YOU.

We know from **previous research** that students listen to students. If a peer vouches for a product, service or even a university, it is worth its weight in gold.

This philosophy applies to Black students when thinking of which university to devote their next three years to as well. Hearing from existing students that the university doesn't appropriately address racial issues is incredibly damaging to the brand for prospective students.

The students pointed out that a university's reputation goes beyond the grades, the new building or the type of curriculum on offer. If past and present students can't vouch for you, you're a no-go for many others.

"I would have friends or people already there, I'd always ask 'how is it?'. Especially for a Black person. Especially as a Black woman. And that will literally make or break."
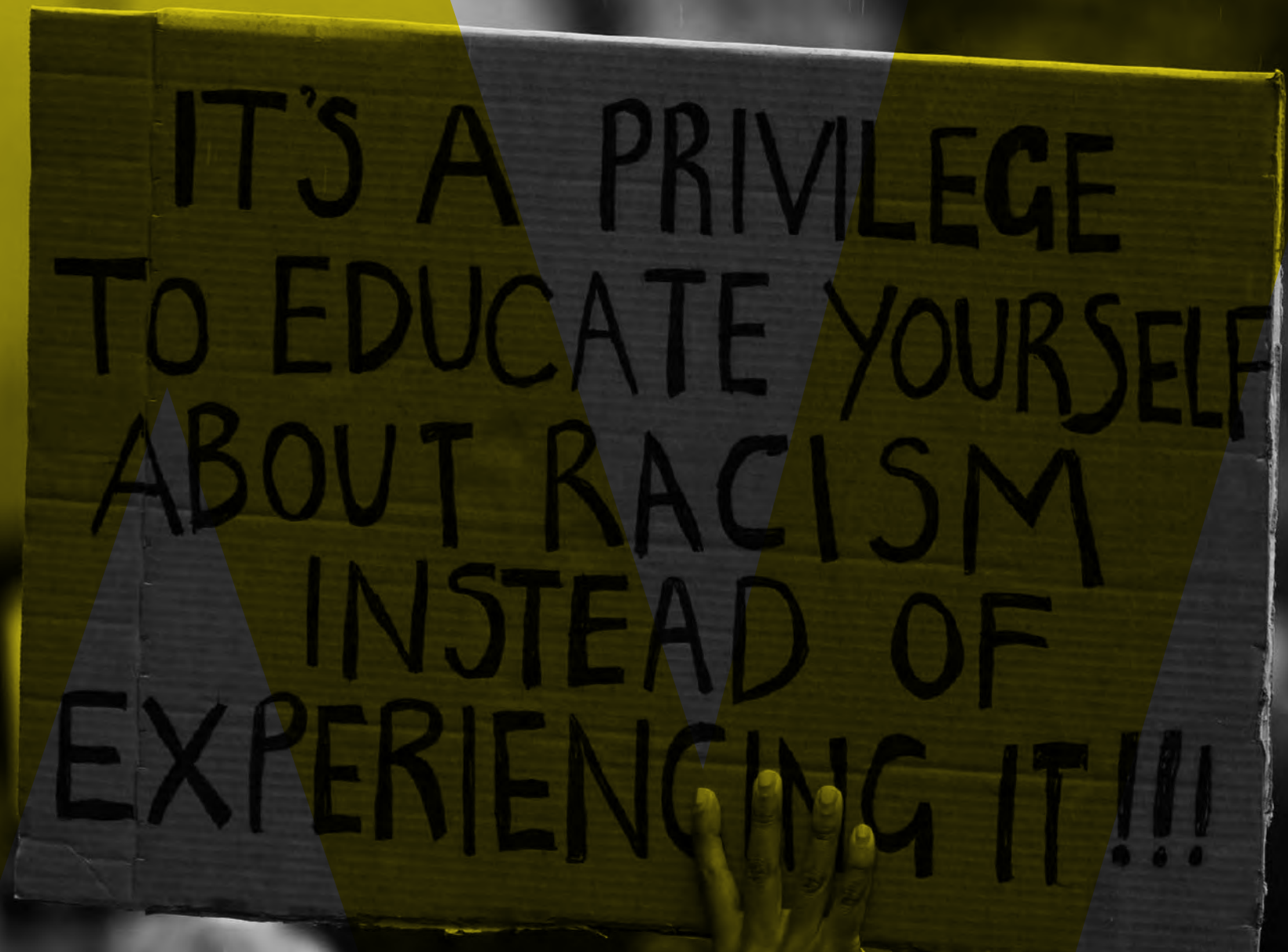
"It doesn't matter if the university is top of the ranks if your university life is going to be hell."

This shows the power and necessity of keeping engaged and connected with your existing student and alumni body. How are you supporting them through their university degrees? With online counselling? Are newsletters signposting support?
Is your student union uniting your entire student body or just a small cohort? Is your messaging, communication, stance incorporating other cultures and ethnicities? Are you confident that your existing and former Black students are giving glowing recommendations to prospective ones?

Allowing for genuine, authentic reviews from students (check out **what was said in 2018** that still definitely applies) could be a powerful way to foster an inclusive and honest environment for prospective students looking for a new home. Student Hut heralds reviews from students across the country; how is your university holding up in the eyes of the students, and not some official ranking? Can you assemble an army of alumni and ambassadors that can speak their truths from real, lived experiences of your institution? Now they would be reviews worth listening to! Check out the brilliant work of **London South Bank University,** which does a stellar job of fostering their **alumni community** and empowering them and their stories to attract and engage prospective students.

SO WHERE TO GO NEXT?

The overarching theme of all of these points is that listening to your students should always be your starting place. ==Don't assume== you know what they're thinking, wanting or needing. Stop the guesswork and ==start connecting.== And then, when you have listened, ==do something about it.== It's no good hearing that students at your institution need more representation, better support networks or a platform to be heard from, and then doing nothing. Tackle this issue head on, and act authentically.

So. Getting started. We've made that part easy with the help of our Student Hut Opinion Panel. With bespoke surveys and hyper-targeted capabilities we can work together to hear exactly what your students are saying. And if you've already been inspired with so many new ideas for your next campaign, we can help you with that too. We'll advise how best to use your newly-gained student insight, overlaying it with first and third-party data, and making sure your creative lands appropriately and effectively. Just **get in touch** and we'll take it from there.
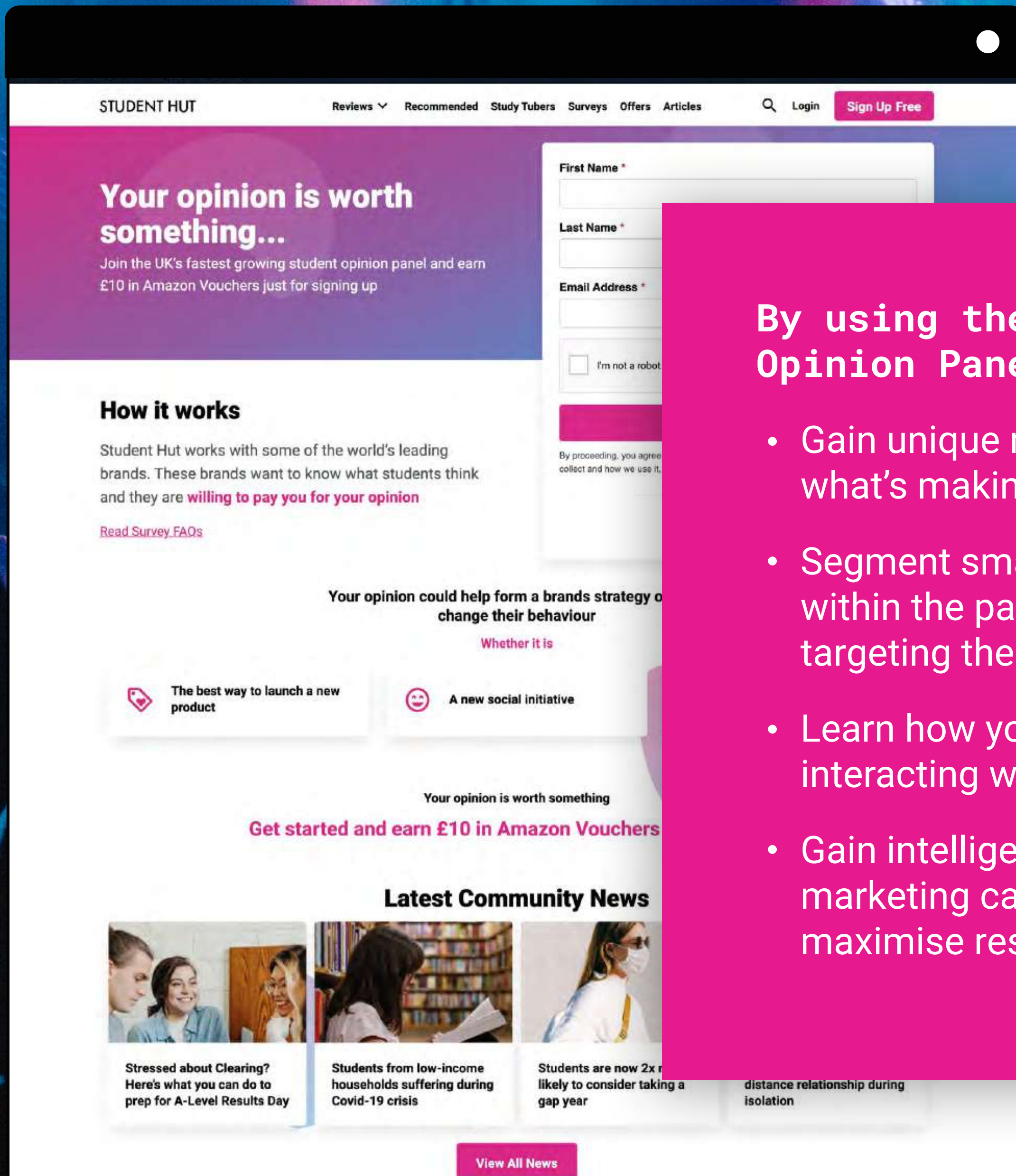
By using the Student Hut Opinion Panel, you can:

• Gain unique marketing intelligence on what's making the student market tick.

• Segment small and specific audiences within the panel to ensure you're targeting the right students.

• Learn how youth markets are interacting with your brand.

• Gain intelligence to improve your marketing campaigns and maximise results.

Student Hut's Opinion Panel is the country's largest community of engaged students, who are actively signed up to take part in market research. You can use the panel to collect data from real students and then use this research to learn how students are engaging with your brand to better inform your marketing strategy.

Get started now, and above all else, let's keep showing students everywhere that **#BlackLivesMatter.**

#BLACKLIVESMATTER

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