

Research Report No.129

# Racial harassment inquiry: survey of university students

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IFF Research

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# Acknowledgements

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## Executive summary

This report presents the findings from a survey of students in Higher Education at universities across England, Scotland and Wales on their experience of racial harassment in their place of study. IFF Research conducted the study on our behalf. The study forms part of our wider inquiry into racial harassment in British universities, which also included a call for evidence from staff and students.

Just over one in ten of all students (13%) had experienced racial harassment since starting their course. Around a quarter of students from an ethnic minority background (24%) had experienced racial harassment, compared with 9% of White students. Men were twice as likely as women to have experienced racial harassment (16% and 8% respectively).

Eight per cent of students had experienced racial harassment in the 2018/19 academic year. The most common types of harassment were name-calling and insults: 56% of those harassed said they had been subjected to this. The research also found evidence of people being ignored or excluded from conversation or group activities (34%) and even physical attacks (20%). The harassment tended to be in the form of multiple incidents rather than isolated, one-off events. Three out of five students (57%) who had experienced racial harassment said that they had experienced it multiple times.

One in three students (33%) who had experienced racial harassment in the 18/19 academic year reported it to their university. Students from an Asian background were least likely to report cases. Those who reported racial harassment were asked what action their university took in response, if any. The response was mixed.

Of the 23 students who reported cases of racial harassment to their university, eight said that action was taken against the perpetrators by the university. Six said that the matter had been referred to the police (this may have been in addition to action taken by the university) and six said their university took no action at all. Five students were asked to attend mediation with the perpetrator.<sup>1</sup>

The most common barrier to reporting incidents of racial harassment was a lack of confidence in the system. Other key deterrents raised were lack of evidence to support the case and students being unsure as to whether the incident was serious enough to warrant reporting. One in ten students (10%) were deterred from reporting as they had tried to report previous incidents but no action had been taken. Victims of racial harassment were most likely to feel angry and upset. Almost one in ten (8%) had felt suicidal. Women were more likely than men to have felt upset and vulnerable because of their experience.

One in five students (21%) had witnessed racial harassment since the start of their course. The types of racial harassment witnessed were similar to students' direct experience of it – predominantly name-calling and insults. Witnesses were more likely to have seen multiple incidents than just one. Men were more likely than women to have witnessed verbal abuse and physical attacks.

Most students were not worried about being subjected to racial harassment at their institution. Only a small minority was worried (5%). This figure was higher for students from an ethnic minority background (11%). More than eight in ten (84%) White students said they were not at all worried compared with only four in ten (42%) students from an ethnic minority background.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that given the low base number of reported cases (23), the figures in this paragraph are unweighted to show the actual number of students reporting the different types of outcome of cases.

A small proportion of respondents (7%) said that their university had a problem with racial harassment. Most said it did not have a problem. A quarter of students felt their university was doing well in dealing with racial harassment and only a small proportion felt it was not doing well (7%). Many students were unsure (40%).

# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Background

This research was conducted as part of our inquiry into racial harassment of staff and students at British universities.

The overall inquiry focuses on five areas:

1. To understand the types of racial harassment experienced by staff and students at publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and where these incidents take place.
2. To understand the extent to which publicly funded HEIs provide routes to redress through which staff and students can report incidents of racial harassment and the extent to which these are available and accessible.
3. To understand what constitutes effective action in response to a report of racial harassment and the extent to which the routes to redress which are available to students and staff in publicly funded HEIs result in effective action.
4. Where the routes to redress through which staff and students in publicly funded HEIs can report racial harassment are not available or accessible, or do not result in effective action, to recommend improvements to better enable staff and students to obtain redress.
5. To assess whether the statutory and other legal responsibilities of publicly funded HEIs to staff and students at those institutions who experience racial harassment are adequate to ensure the provision of available, accessible and effective routes to redress.

For the purposes of this inquiry, ‘racial harassment’ has been taken to mean when someone engages in unwanted behaviour which is related to a person’s perceived or actual race, and which has the purpose or effect of:

- violating that person’s dignity, or



- creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that person.

For the purposes of the inquiry, ‘race’ has the same meaning as set out at section 9 of the Equality Act 2010. Race includes: colour, nationality and ethnic and national origins.

The inquiry is looking at racial harassment occurring in the following ways:

- university staff on student harassment
- university staff on staff harassment
- student on student harassment
- student on staff harassment, and
- third party on student or staff harassment.

It focuses on a time period from the start of the 2015/16 academic year to the date of survey completion in early 2019.

Organisations within the scope of the inquiry are those that received public funding through the Office for Students, the Scottish Funding Council, and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales in the academic year 2018/9. However, we expect the findings to be applicable to the HE sector more widely.

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## 1.2 Methodology

We commissioned a short, online survey of higher education undergraduate and postgraduate students looking at the prevalence of racial harassment in England, Scotland and Wales. One of the objectives of the research was to understand how the incidence rates of racial harassment vary by demographics such as race, sex and phase of study. The fieldwork was conducted in March 2019.

The survey was designed to maximise the scope for sub-group reporting, in order to analyse differences by sex, ethnicity and so on. We therefore intentionally over-represented some groups in the sample, relative to the proportion of the student body that they represent. Table 1.1 shows the numbers of survey participants achieved for each sub-group. We achieved the targets for most sub-groups; the only groups where there was a small shortfall were black postgraduate students and postgraduate students of other/mixed ethnicity background.

**Table 1.1: Numbers of students achieved across key demographics**

	Number	Percentage of sample
<b>White – Scottish, English, Welsh, Northern Irish, British</b>	483	48%
<b>White – Gypsy traveller</b>	4	0%
<b>White – Irish</b>	12	1%
<b>White – Other</b>	26	3%
<b>Black</b>	141	14%
<b>Asian</b>	200	20%
<b>Mixed/ other</b>	143	14%
<b>Summary: Ethnic minorities</b>	526	52%
<b>Male</b>	301	30%
<b>Female</b>	701	69%

	Number	Percentage of sample
<b>Other</b>	7	1%
<b>18–21</b>	639	63%
<b>22–24</b>	225	22%
<b>25+</b>	140	14%

	Number	Percentage of sample
<b>England</b>	688	68%
<b>Scotland</b>	167	17%
<b>Wales</b>	154	15%
<b>High tariff</b>	507	50%
<b>Medium tariff</b>	302	30%
<b>Low tariff</b>	182	18%
<b>Undergraduate</b>	796	79%
<b>Postgraduate</b>	213	21%

At the analysis stage, the data have been weighted based on ethnicity, level of study (undergraduate/ postgraduate) and sex to generate results that are representative of the student body as a whole. HESA data for the most recent academic year (2017/8) has been used to weight the data.

Please note for analysis on questions where the base size is below 30, unweighted figures are reported.

A short questionnaire of 7–8 minutes was compiled, covering the following:

- personal experience of racial harassment, if any
- witnessing of racial harassment, if any
- whether or not they had any concerns about racial harassment at their university
- perceptions of whether or not their university had a problem with racial harassment, and
- perceptions of whether or not their university handled cases of racial harassment well.

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### 1.3 Statistical significance

The questions in the survey were targeted at different groups, based on their experiences. Some were asked of everybody and are based on the final sample achieved (1,009 students). Some questions were based on just those students who had personally experienced racial harassment since the start of the 2018/19 academic year (92 students) and others were asked of those students who had witnessed incidents of racial harassment since the start of the 2018/19 academic year (138 students).

When we broke down the responses for the latter two groups by measures, such as sex and ethnicity, or country, the base sizes for some responses became very small. Where base sizes allowed, we reported on differences between ethnic groups in a more granular way. Where base sizes for specific ethnic groups have been too small we have reported significant differences based on the summary ethnic minority grouping, thereby producing a binary difference between White British and ethnic minority students.

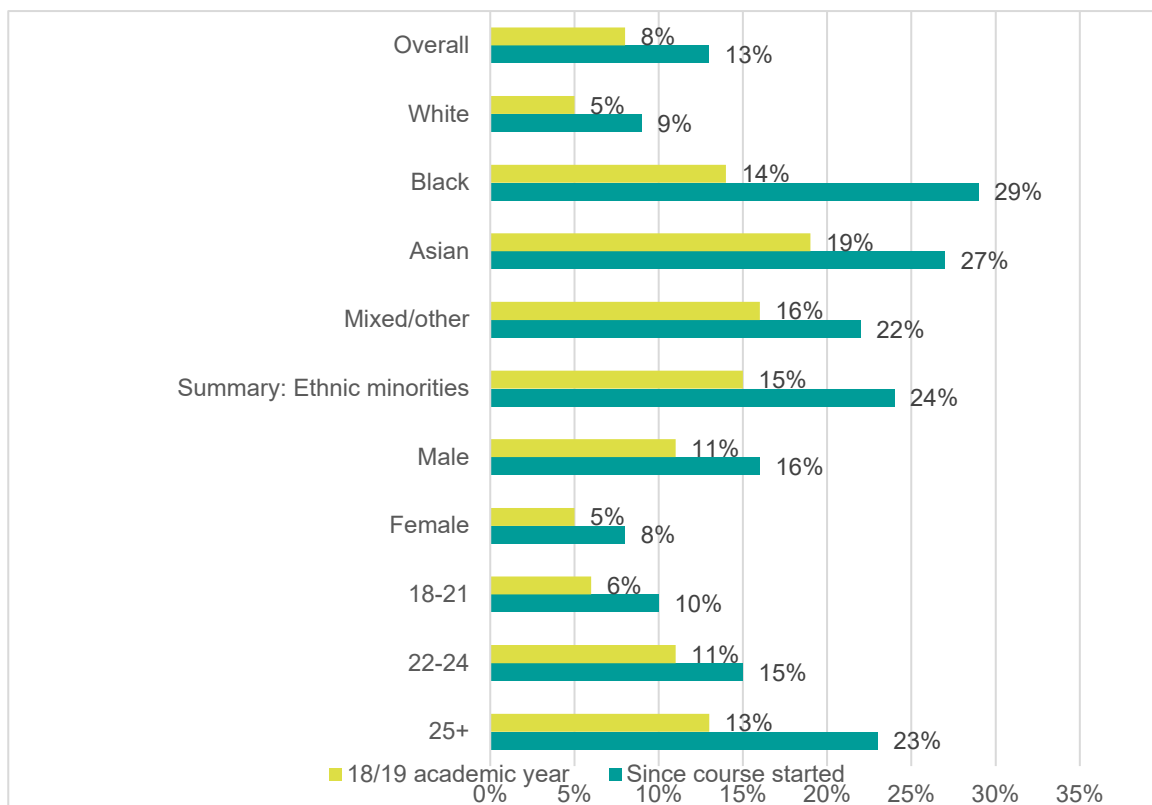
Throughout the report, we have reported on differences between groups – for example, men and women, ethnic group, or country – only where those differences are statistically significant. Where the differences are based on relatively small numbers this has been noted in the text.

## 2. Experience

### 2.1 Numbers and profile of alleged victims

Around one in eight students (13%) had experienced some form of racial harassment since starting their course (see figure 2.1). The figure is significantly higher among students from an ethnic minority background (29% for Black students and 27% for Asian students). Men were more likely to report experiencing racial harassment than women (16% vs 8% respectively).

**Figure 2.1 Experience of racial harassment by demographics**



Base: C2 Have you personally experienced racial harassment at your place of study since you started your course? (1,009)

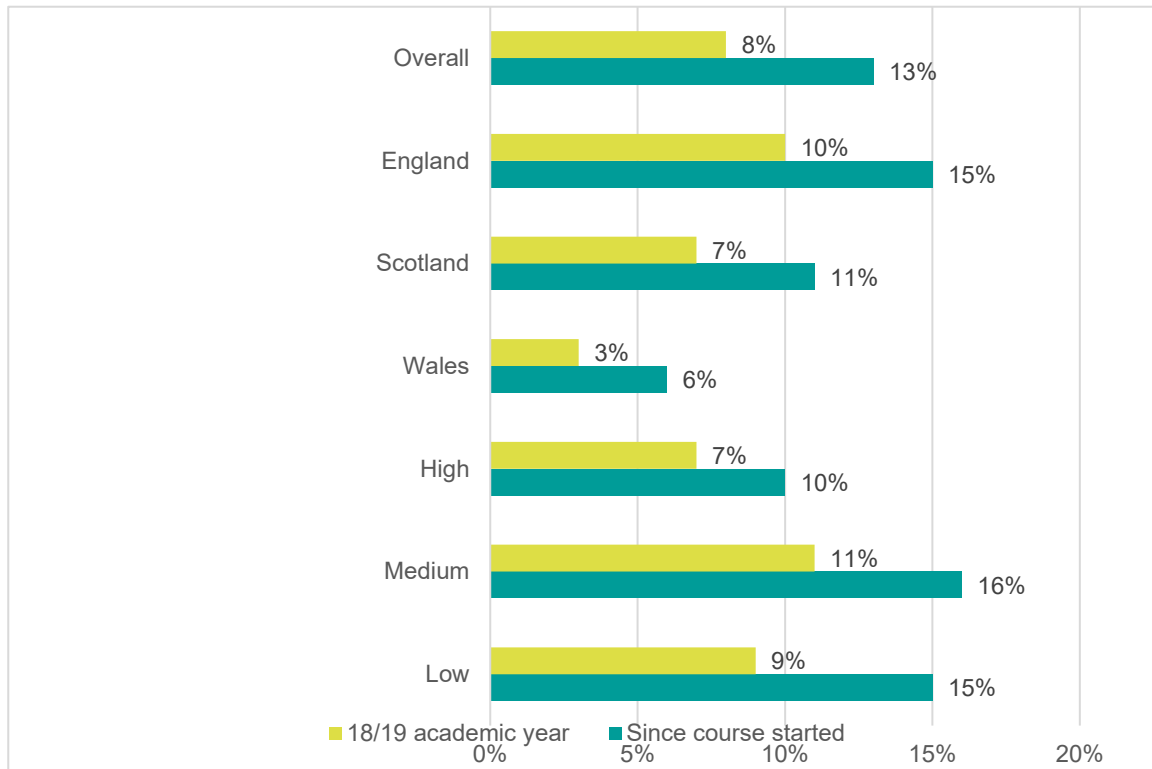
The incidence of racial harassment was higher among students attending English universities (15% since starting their course), compared with Scottish or Welsh institutions (11% and 6% respectively). This is shown in figure 2.2. To some extent, this is likely to reflect the different racial profiles of the student population in each nation. England has a more diverse student population than Scotland and Wales.

The results were also analysed by institutional tariff. In this report, 'high tariff institutions' are defined as those in the top third of average UCAS tariff rankings, 'medium tariff institutions' are those in the middle third, and 'low tariff institutions' are defined as those in the bottom third.<sup>2</sup> Students at high tariff institutions were less likely to have experienced racial harassment (10% since the start of their course). The figures were around one in six for both medium tariff institutions (16%) and low tariff institutions (15%).

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<sup>2</sup> UCAS institutional tariffs are calculated via the average tariff for all courses delivered at the institution. Please see ['Information on new UCAS tariff advisers'](#) for more information.

**Figure 2.2 Experience of racial harassment by country and tariff**



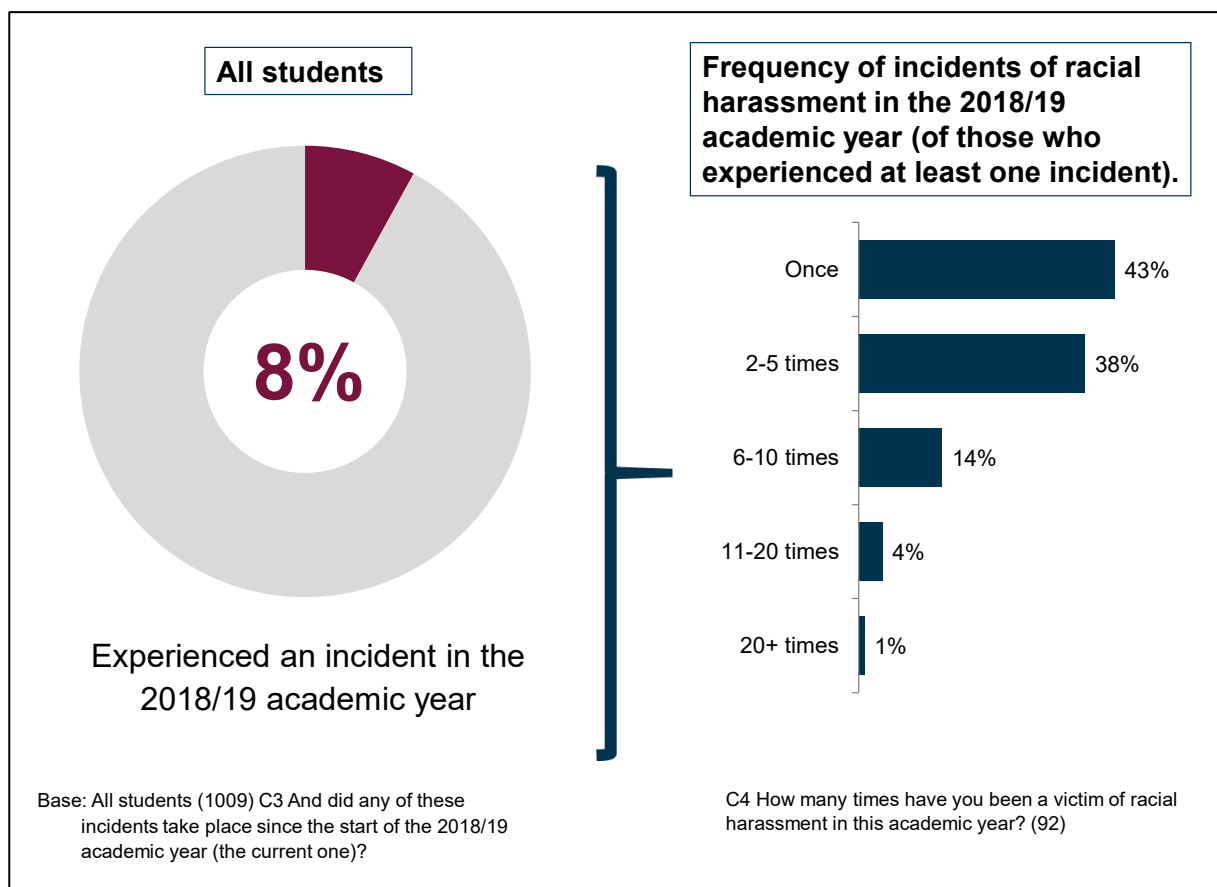
Base: C2 Have you personally experienced racial harassment at your place of study since you started your course? (1,009)



## 2.2 Nature of racial harassment experienced in 2018/9

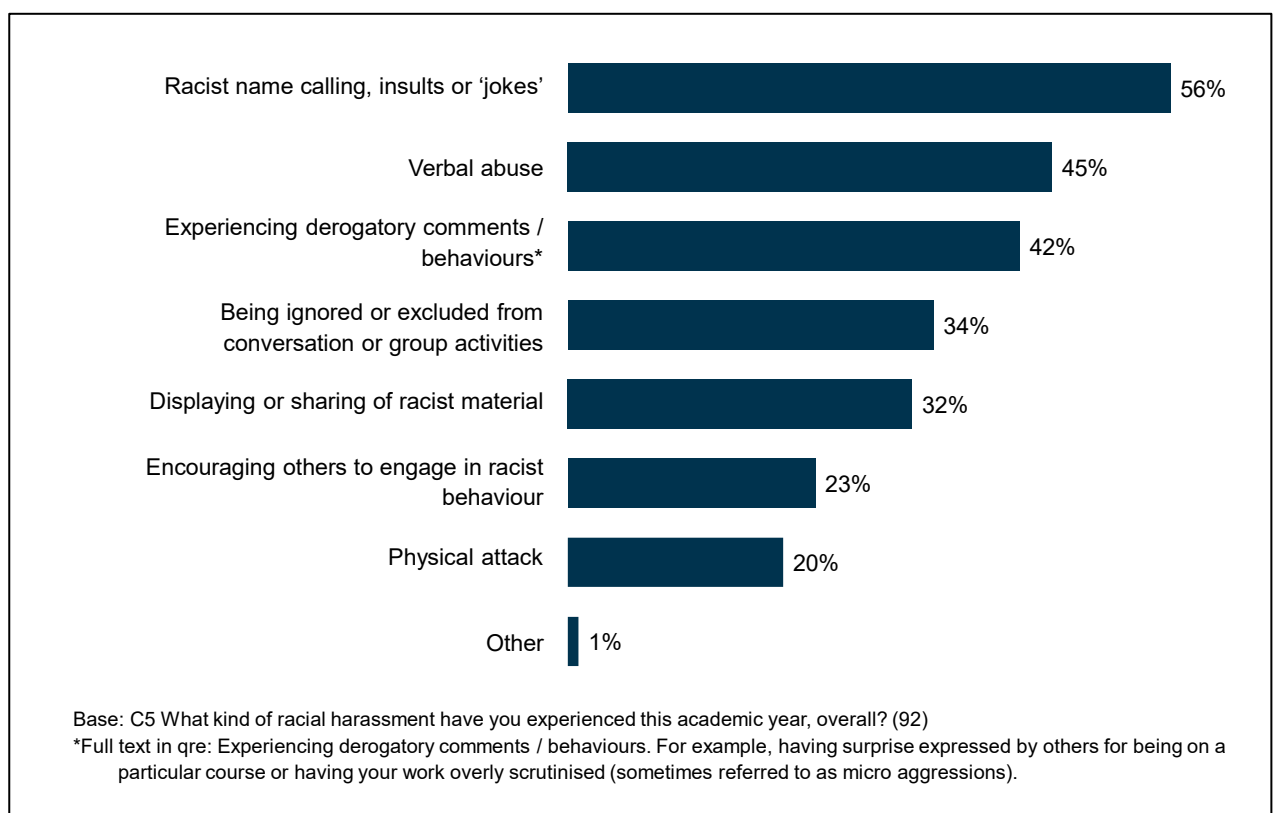
Just under one in ten (8%) students (92 in total) said that they had personally experienced racial harassment since the start of the 2018/9 academic year (see figure 2.3). Students were also asked how many times they had experienced racial harassment during 2018/19. This was designed to gauge whether people’s experiences tended to be one-off, isolated incidents or part of a systematic pattern of harassment. Three out of five students (57%) who had experienced racial harassment said that they had experienced it multiple times. The remainder (43%) said that they had experienced it just once.

**Figure 2.3 Experience of racial harassment 2018/19**



The most prevalent form of racial harassment experienced was racist ‘name calling, insults or ‘jokes’ (see figure 2.4). More than half (56%) of those that had experienced racial harassment said they had been on the receiving end of this. Four in ten students (42%) who experienced racial harassment in the 2018/19 academic year had faced derogatory comments/behaviour. One in three victims (34%) had been ignored or excluded from conversation or group activities and around three in ten (31%) experienced the displaying or sharing of racist material. One in five victims (20%) had experienced physical attack. Female victims of harassment were more likely to have experienced derogatory comments/behaviours (60%) than male victims (35%). Although the numbers are small, the difference is statistically significant.

**Figure 2.4 Type of racial harassment experienced 2018/19**



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## 2.3 Reporting racial harassment

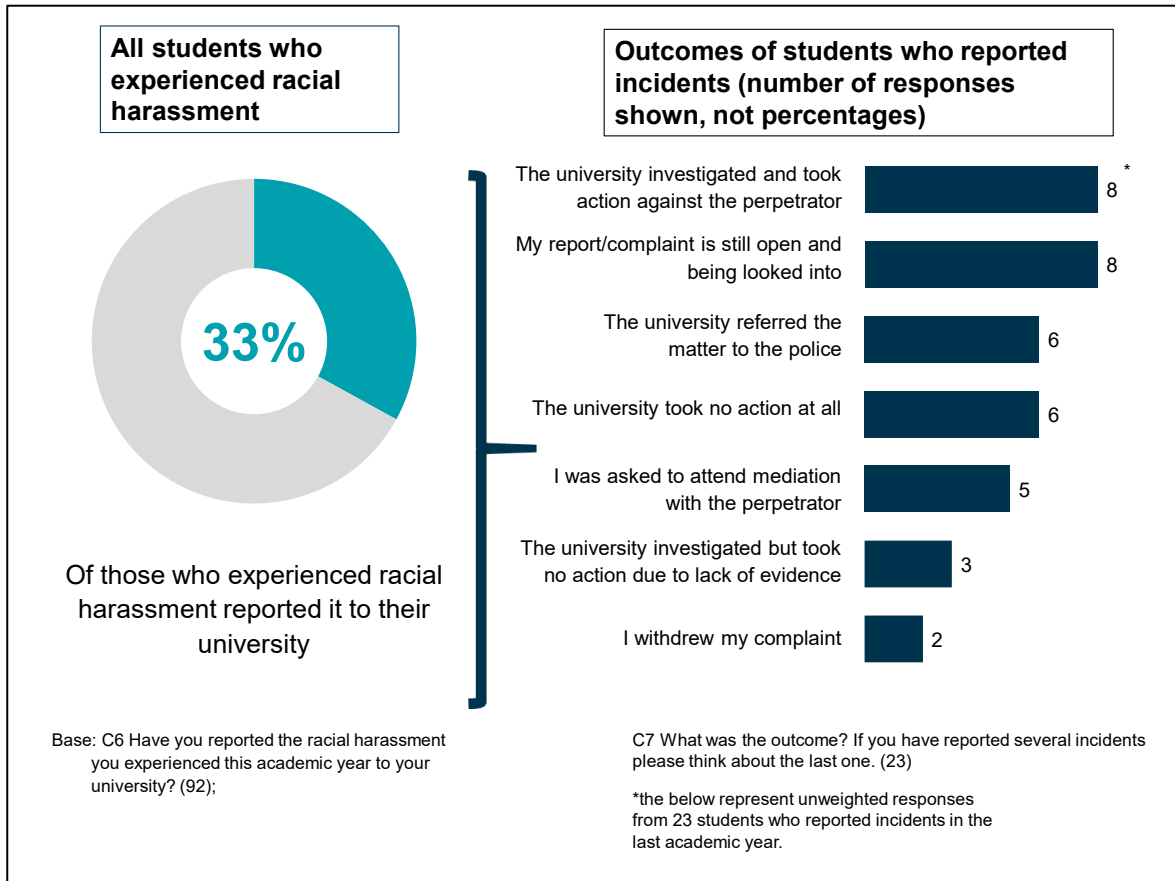
One in three students (33%) who experienced racial harassment in the 18/19 academic year reported it to their university (see figure 2.5). Students from an Asian background were less likely to report racial harassment than other groups (11%).

Of the 23 students who reported cases of racial harassment to their university, eight said that action was taken against the perpetrators by the university. Six said that the matter had been referred to the police (this may have been in addition to action taken by the university) while six said their university took no action at all. Five students were asked to attend mediation with the perpetrator.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Please note that given the low base number of reported cases (23), the figures in this paragraph are unweighted to show the actual number of students reporting the different types of outcome of cases.

**Figure 2.5 Level of reporting and outcome of complaint**

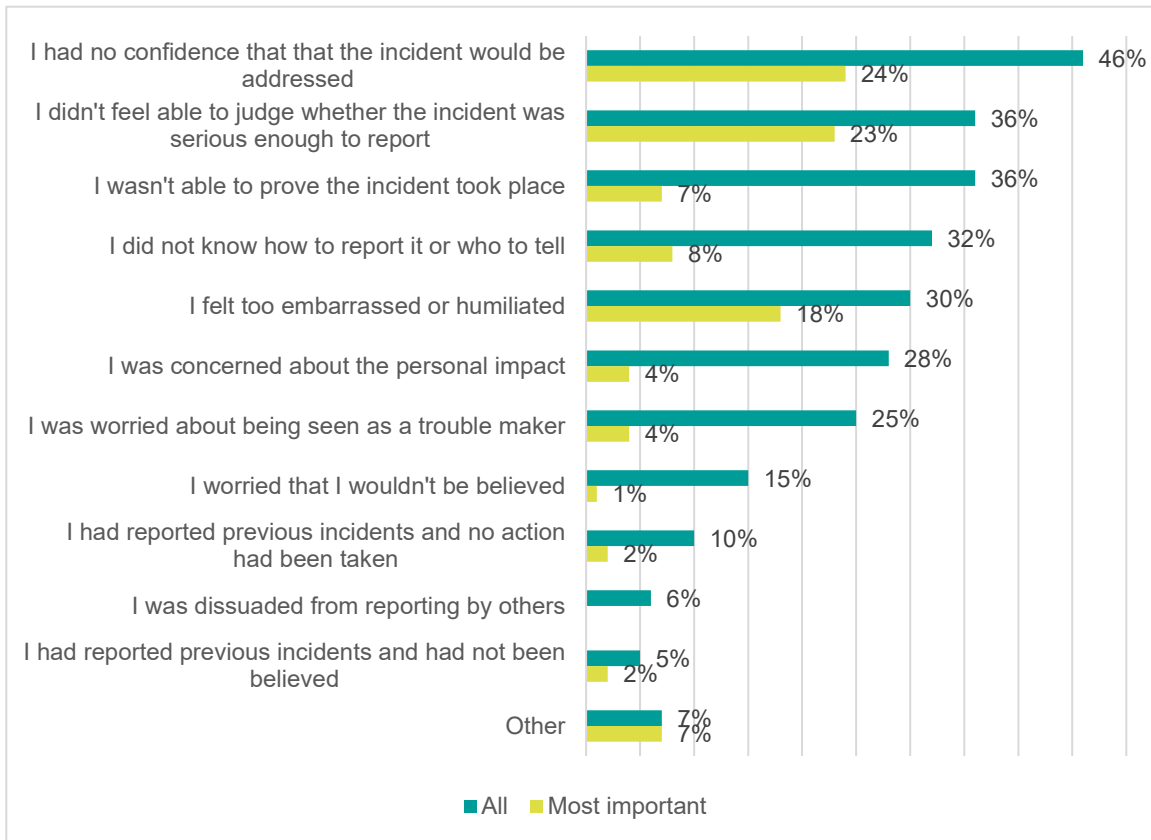


## 2.4 Barriers to reporting racial harassment

Of those who experienced racial harassment in the 2018/19 academic year, but did not report the incident to their university, the most common barrier to reporting was a lack of confidence that the incident would be addressed, cited by almost half (46%). This is shown in figure 2.6. The next most common barrier was an inability to judge whether the incident was serious enough to warrant reporting and, separately, lack of evidence to support the complaint (36%). One in ten students (10%) were deterred from reporting as they had tried to report previous incidents but no action had been taken.

When students were asked which single barrier was the biggest deterrent to reporting, one in four (24%) said they lacked confidence that the incident would be addressed and around the same number felt unable to judge whether the incident was serious enough to warrant reporting.

**Figure 2.6 Barriers to reporting**



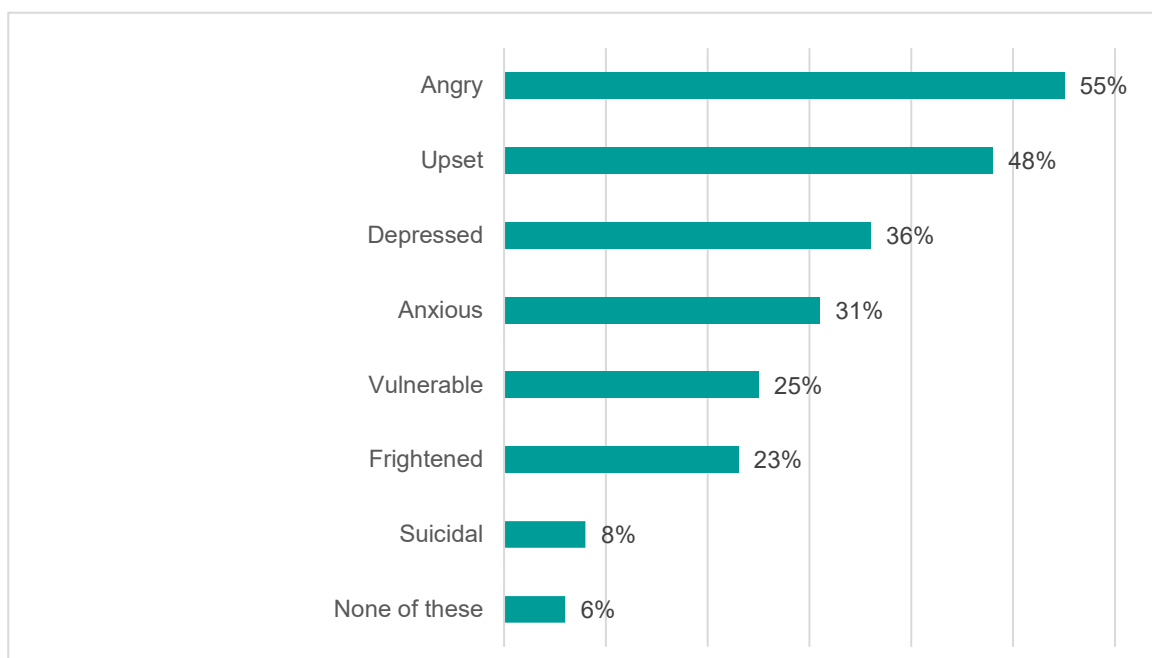
Base: C8 Why did you choose not to report it? (69) C9 Of these, which had the biggest influence on you to not report the incident? (69)

## 2.5 The effects of racial harassment

We asked respondents how they felt as a result of being racially harassed. The emotions cited most commonly by students who had experienced racial harassment in the 2018/19 academic year were anger (55%) and upset (48%). This is shown in figure 2.7. Other emotions experienced included depression (36%) and vulnerability (25%). Eight per cent had felt suicidal.

Women were more likely than men to say that they found the experience upsetting (65% and 42% respectively). They were also more likely than men to say that the experience had left them feeling vulnerable (44% compared with 19% for men).

**Figure 2.7 Emotional impact of racial harassment**

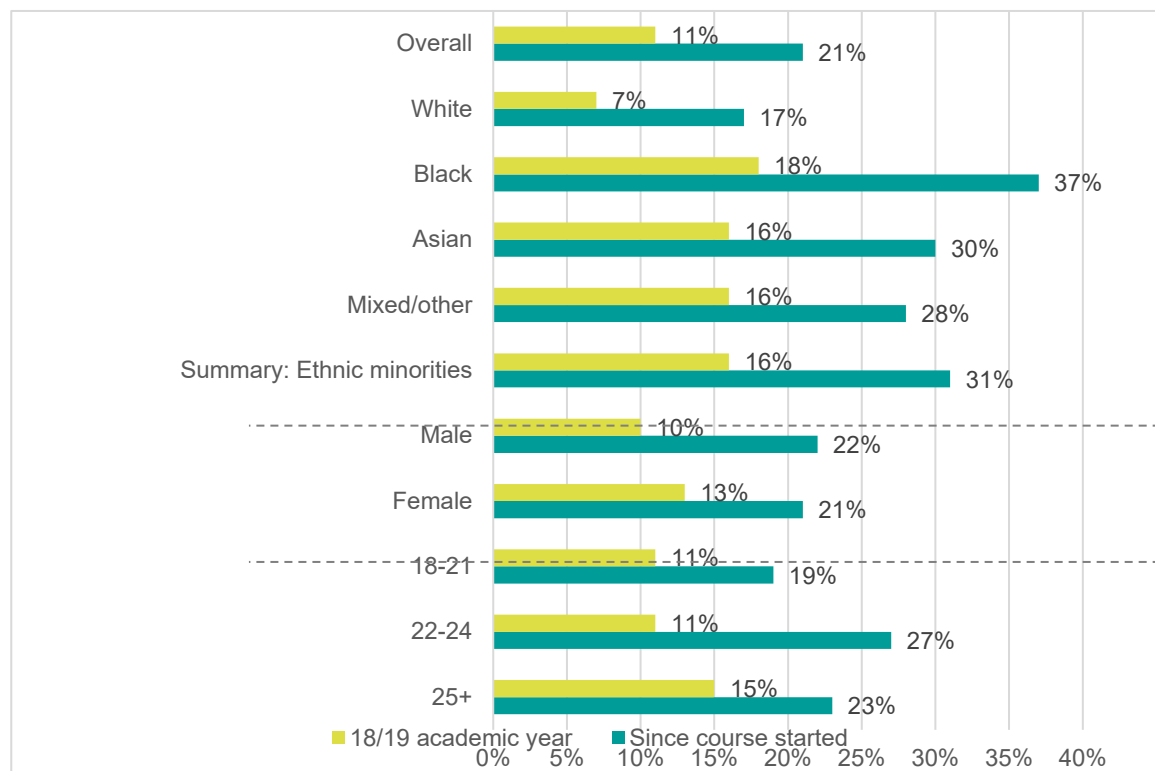


Base: C10 How did the incident(s) make you feel? (92)

## 2.6 Witnessing racial harassment

Beyond their own personal experiences, students were asked whether they had witnessed any incidents of racial harassment of others. One in five (21%) said that they had witnessed racial harassment of others since starting their course; one in ten (11%) had witnessed racial harassment of others in the 2018/19 academic year (see figure 2.8). Ethnic minority students were more likely to have witnessed racial harassment since the start of their course (31%), compared with White students (17%).

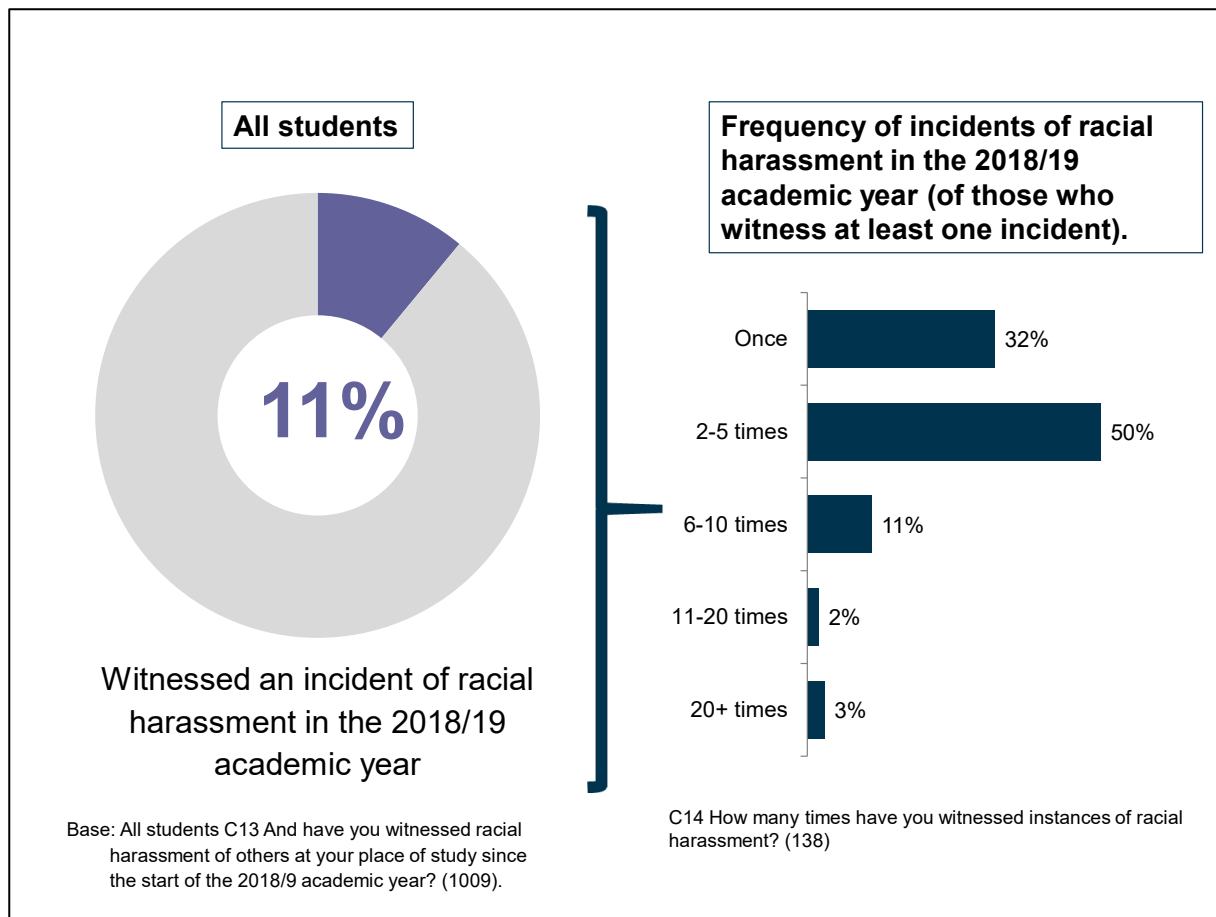
**Figure 2.8 Witnessing racial harassment**



Base: C2 Have you witnessed racial harassment of others at your place of study since you started your course / in the 18/19 academic year? (1,009)

Two in three students (66%) who had witnessed racial harassment in the 2018/19 academic year had witnessed more than one incident (see figure 2.9). Around one in three students (32%) said that they had witnessed racial harassment just once. Postgraduate students were more likely to report witnessing multiple incidents of racial harassment compared with undergraduates (84% and 60% respectively). Conversely, undergraduate students were more likely to report witnessing isolated, one-off incidents compared with postgraduates (38% and 14% respectively).

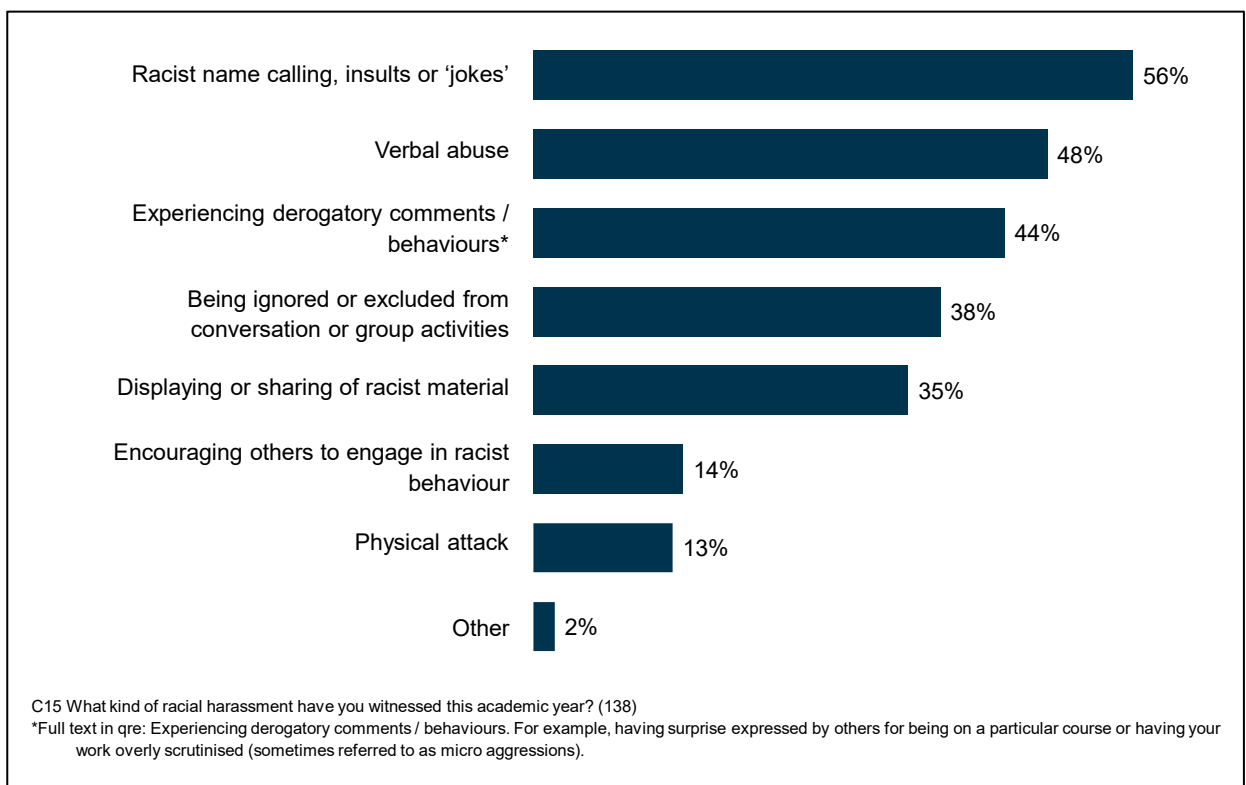
**Figure 2.9 Witnessing of racial harassment in 2018/19**





The most common forms of racial harassment witnessed were racist ‘name calling, insults or ‘jokes’ (56%) and derogatory comments/behaviours (44%). This is shown in figure 2.10. The findings are very much in line with the experiences of students who had experienced racial harassment directly. Men were more likely than women to say that they witnessed verbal abuse (67% and 29% respectively) and physical attack (24% compared with 2% for women). As before, the numbers are small but the findings are statistically significant.

**Figure 2.10 Type of racial harassment witnessed in the 2018/19 academic year**



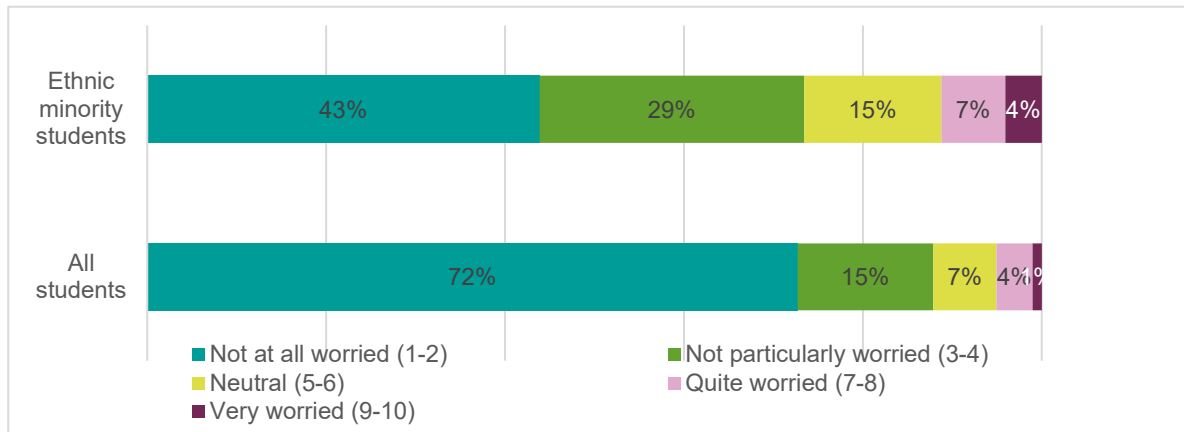
One in four students (27%) who had witnessed racial harassment in the 2018/9 academic year said they had reported what they saw. More than one in three students (36%) at English HEIs reported the racial harassment they witnessed. While base sizes are too small to report significant differences here, it is worth noting that only 4 of the 25 students (15%) at Welsh institutions reported the harassment they witnessed and none of those in Scottish institutions (base: n=18) did so.

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## 2.7 The student's institution

All students were asked the extent to which they were personally worried about being subjected to racial harassment at their place of study. They were asked to rate their level of worry on a ten-point scale where 1 is 'Not worried at all' and 10 is 'Extremely worried'. The responses have been grouped, with 1–2 representing 'not at all worried', 3–4 representing 'not particularly worried', 5–6 representing 'neutral', 7–8 representing 'quite worried', and 9–10 representing 'very worried' (see figure 2.11). The majority of students (72%) said they were not at all worried (scores of 1–2). More than eight in ten (84%) White students said they were not at all worried (scores of 1–2) compared with four in ten (42%) students from an ethnic minority background. Ethnic minority students were also more likely to say they were worried (11% gave scores of 7–10), compared with White students (3%).

**Figure 2.11 Personal worry about racial harassment**

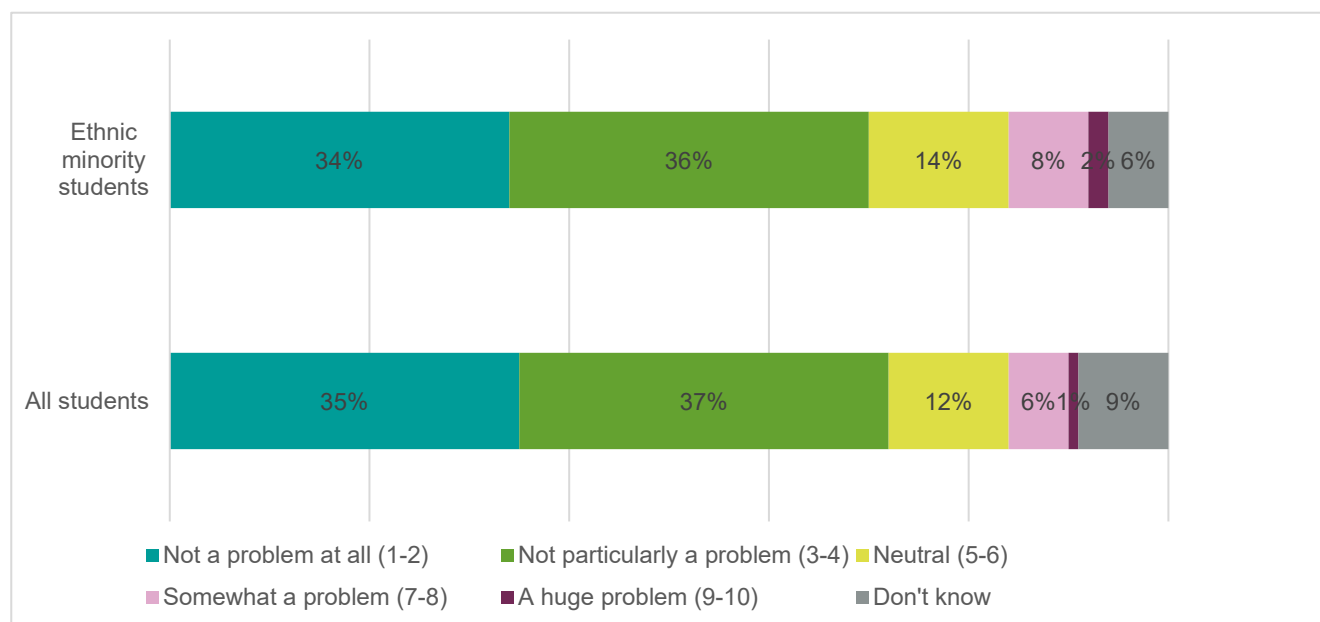


Base: C17 How worried are you about being personally subjected to racial harassment at your place of study?

Please answer on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means 'not worried at all' and 10 means 'extremely worried' (1,009) Ethnic minority students (526)

Students were then asked how much of a problem they felt racial harassment was at their university. This was also asked on a ten-point scale. The scale has been collapsed as above with 1–2 representing 'not a problem at all', 3–4 representing 'not particularly a problem', 5–6 'neutral', 7–8 'somewhat a problem' and 9–10 representing a 'major problem' (see figure 2.12). Around one in twenty (6%) students said that their university has somewhat of a problem with racial harassment (scores 7–8). Around one in three (35%) said that their university did not have a problem with racial harassment at all.

**Figure 2.12 Degree to which racial harassment is a problem**

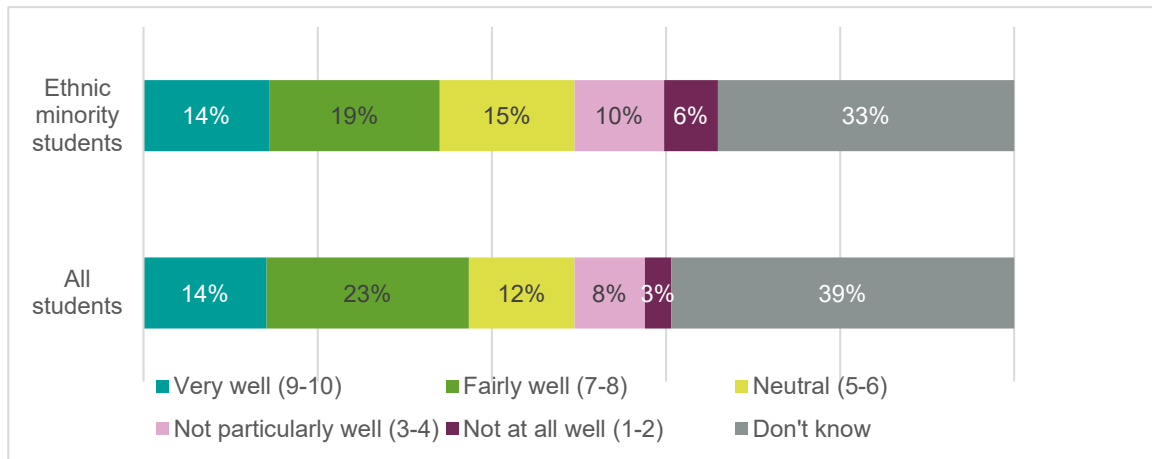


Base: C18 How much of a problem do you think racial harassment is at your university?

Please answer on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means 'not a problem at all' and 10 means 'a huge problem' (1,009) Ethnic minorities (526)

Finally, students were asked how well they thought their university was tackling the issue of racial harassment. This was also asked on a ten-point scale and the codes have been grouped as above with 1–2 representing 'not at all well', 3–4 'not particularly well', 5–6 'neutral' 7–8 'fairly well' and 9–10 'very well' (see figure 2.13). One in seven (14%) students said that they felt their university was handling the issue of racial harassment very well (scores of 9–10), a further one in four (23%) felt that the university was handling the issue fairly well (scores of 7–8). Less than one in twenty (3%) students said that their university was not handling the issue at all well. Four in ten students (39%) felt unable to answer the question and selected 'Don't know'. This may reflect the fact that most students had no direct experience of racial harassment. They would therefore not feel able to judge how effectively their university was handling complaints of this nature. Ethnic minority students were more likely to say 'not well' (6% gave scores of 1–2) compared with White students (3%). The numbers here are small but statistically significant.

**Figure 2.13 How well is the student's university handling racial harassment?**



Base: C19 How well is your university tackling the issue of racial harassment of students?

Please answer on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means 'not at all' and 10 means 'very well'  
(1,009) Ethnic minorities (526)

## 3. Conclusions

**A substantial minority of students have experienced racial harassment.** Almost one in ten (8%) students had experienced racial harassment during the 2018/9 academic year and 13% had done so since the start of their course. One in five (21%) students had witnessed racial harassment of another student.

**Some student groups are particularly likely to experience incidents of racial harassment.** Around a quarter of ethnic minority students (24%) had experienced harassment since starting their course, compared with 9% of White students. Men were more likely than women to have been racially harassed.

**Most victims of racial harassment do not report it to their university.** One in three students (33%) who had experienced racial harassment in the 2018/19 academic year had reported their experiences to their institution. Universities' formal complaints records are therefore likely to underestimate the true extent of racial harassment.

**Students face barriers to reporting racial harassment.** The main concerns are that they will not be believed or that the complaint will not be taken seriously. In some instances, students said that that they had previously reported racial harassment but that no action had been taken. Another notable concern was that students were unsure whether what they had experienced was serious enough to warrant reporting.

**Despite racial harassment being relatively common, only a small minority of students believe that their university has a problem with it.** This appears surprising and warrants further investigation.