

“Maybe it's not... because I've done a very good job at determining that it wasn't. Or maybe I don't want to see it, maybe I'm imagining.” - Narratives of Racism Encounters by International Students at a Finnish University.

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined the experiences of racism encountered by international students at a Finnish university, addressing the following questions: What are the encounters and experiences of racism faced by international students at the university, and how does the university address and manage these issues? The research explored how students interpret and navigate these experiences using qualitative methodologies, including semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The participants selected through snowball sampling included a diverse representation of international students of colour.

The findings revealed that participants experience racism in the university environment, manifesting as subtle biases, direct racism, language-related microaggressions, and a lack of representation in the curriculum and staff. Participants also expressed mixed views on the university's approach to diversity. As established by previous research on racism, this study highlights the complexity of racism and its intersections at both the micro and macro levels, evident in the connection between individual experiences and systemic structures. The study concludes that, while the University of Jyväskylä has made strides in promoting diversity, more deliberate and sustained efforts are needed to ensure the effectiveness of its equality plan in managing diversity and addressing racism.

This conclusion can also serve as an indicator of what is required across other Finnish higher education institutions.

Keywords: Racism, Institutional Racism, International Students, Diversity in Finnish Higher Education Institutions, Antiracism.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
CRT	Critical race theory
HEI	Higher Education Institution
JYU	University of Jyväskylä
POC	People of Colour
SIT	Social identity Theory
TA	Thematic analysis
UAS	Universities of applied sciences
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural

1. INTRODUCTION

*...The politics of stranger making; how some and not others become strangers; how emotions of fear and hatred stick to certain bodies; how some bodies become understood as the rightful occupants of certain spaces... by thinking more concretely about institutional spaces, about how some more than others will be at home in institutions that assume certain bodies as their norm...
Ahmed (2012 pg.3)*

1.1 Contextual background of study

As universities across Europe become increasingly diverse, the experiences of international students bring to light unique challenges and questions related to integration, acceptance, and equity within educational settings. Finnish Higher educational institutions (HEIS) are a prime example of this, now tasked with navigating the new normal of an increasingly diverse student body. Finland, up until the 21st century, was argued to be a unified ethnically homogeneous country, consisting primarily of people of Finnish descent, contrastively this idea has been critiqued to be a “myth” and instead has always been a multicultural society and diverse for centuries (Keskinen, 2019; Steenroos, 2023). Regardless of these differing views, an unrefutably fact is the significant increase and changes in the population demographics in recent times, largely due to an influx of migrants for various reasons, such as an increased intake in the quota of refugees and asylum-seeking individuals starting in the 1990s, family reunification, employment and economic opportunities, education and of latest the Ukraine war. This study, for clarity, begins by focusing on a smaller subgroup within the broader migrant population: "student migrants," identified in this study as individuals who have migrated to Finland from various parts of the world for educational purposes.

Higher education institutions in Finland (HEIs), as part of Finland’s academic landscape, have experienced a significant rise in international student enrollment,

typically called “foreign degree student”. Finland has emerged as a prominent destination for international students, with the number of foreign enrollees nearly doubling between 2000 and 2008 (OECD, 2010). Recent data further highlights this trend, for instance in 2023 alone data shows that the total of 12,795 first residence permits were granted for study, a remarkable increase of 4,412 compared to 8,383 permits issued in 2022. This upward trajectory aligns with the OECD's (2022, p.3) projection, which anticipates that the number of new foreign degree students in Finland will triple to 15,000 by 2030. This increase also aligns with the Internationalisation Strategy of 2009–2015 (Ministry of Education, 2009), which was aimed to expand Finland’s higher education landscape to attract a global student body and internationalise higher education. A key driver of this growth has been the strategic emphasis on the introduction and expansion of English-medium degree programs across various HEIs, which has enhanced their appeal to diverse international students and reinforced Finland’s reputation for high-quality education.

Despite this exponential progress in attracting international students, challenges persist, particularly concerning racial discrimination. For instance, the *Being Black in the EU* report from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2018) highlights that in Finland, around 63 percent of respondents reported experiencing racial harassment, derogatory remarks, or threats—the highest proportion recorded among the 12 surveyed countries (FRA, 2018). While these surveys did not specifically focus on migrant students in Finland, who are central to this research, they serve as pointers to supports the notion that such experiences can extend to them. The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's report, *Racism and Discrimination – Everyday Experiences for People of African Descent in Finland*, further underscores that racism and discrimination are not limited to public spaces or workplaces but reach into every level of education, from early childhood onward. With accounts of experiences of racism been reported not only from “other students but also from teachers, guidance counselors, and even school nurses”. More relevant and recent surveys such as those conducted in 2023 by the University of Jyväskylä (JYU) and the local Student Union JYY revealing that about half of respondents encountered racism on campus, with many unaware of where to report incidents. Similarly, the Student Union of Tampere

University (TREY) equality survey found that 14% of respondents reported witnessing or experiencing racism within teaching environments or university facilities. Accordingly, these findings underscore the need for meaningful discussions and a thorough examination of institutional efforts to cultivate a more inclusive university experience for all students.

Finally, this topic regained significant relevance in the summer of 2023, as I began considering potential ideas for my final thesis. This period coincided with a racial remarks scandal involving a newly elected Finnish government official, which sparked widespread protests and extensive discussions on racial equality within various societal groups. While the government has since issued statements reaffirming its anti-racism stance and outlining measures to promote equality. Notably, initial discussions on race and inclusion within Finnish society expanded to address experiences of racism on campus. These dialogues, which were initially surprising to me, revealed accounts from international students, that highlighted the prevalence of such issues in settings closer to me than I expected. These events and discussions were instrumental in shaping the research question underpinning this thesis: How do international students encounter and navigate racism in this context? By "this context," I refer specifically to Finland, particularly within the university setting.

1.2 Problematisation and Significance of the Study

Numerous studies conducted in multiple countries have documented the challenges that students and faculty of colour encounter in predominantly white post-secondary institutions, where they can frequently experience marginalization, discrimination, and invisibility. These challenges have identified to stem from racially problematic behaviors and attitudes of peers, faculty, and institutional cultures that do not adequately promote anti-racist values (Moodie et al., 2018; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Gusa, 2010). Gusa (2010) reveals how systemic practices can uphold "white-centered norms while discussing the concept of "white institutional presence," in the study on "*White Institutional Presence and The Impact on Campus Climate*", these systematic practices that become norms Ahmed (2012) further argues can undermine

diversity efforts and can result in environments that fail to meaningfully support inclusivity as well as reinforce the invisibility of marginalized groups within academic settings.

This study therefore is important given the rapid increase and diversification of student body and the projected future increase due to international migration. It has already been noted that a characteristic of international migration is the global expansion of ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic, and racial diversity within societies. (Castles et al., 2014, p.57), that is these “student migrants” come with their own established form of identity be it ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic, and racial. Examining their narratives can therefore be vital to allow for the acknowledgment and understanding of how racism may be encountered by international students and how it may affect students' educational experiences within Higher education institutions in Finland.

This research therefore aims to Firstly, contribute to the growing body of literature on challenges and experiences faced by international students in Western universities, specifically within the unique context of Finnish higher education. While global studies on racism in education are extensive, research focusing on Nordic institutions remains limited, particularly concerning international students' experiences in Finland. Secondly, findings from this study can inform the development of more effective support systems for international students at Finnish universities. By identifying the manner racism is experienced and evaluating the university's response mechanisms, this study has the potential to offer insights into how policies can be created to foster a more inclusive campus. Finally, this research has potential to advances theoretical discussions on racism in education by synthesising concepts from Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) discussed extensively in later sections.

1.3 Research Task and Questions

Initially the goal was to investigate if, international students experience racism or have racist encounters within the university setting, if they do, where and how does it occur? The research process thus started with the intention of speaking with international students about their experiences with the aim of situating the results from these discussions within larger topics of issues such as Internalisations strategies of the university, diversity management by the university and Migration. This thesis therefore aims to answer these research questions.

1. What are the encounters and experiences of racism of international students in the university if any.
2. How does the university address and manage issues of racism experienced by international students?

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is organised into seven main sections. This **Section** so far has introduced the study and provided the necessary background for the research. **Section 2** clarifies the ontological and epistemological perspectives guiding the study, followed by a review of the main concepts related and relevant to the topic with the aim to provide an operational definition of these concepts, as applied within the study. This is also accompanied by a brief overview of the theories the study draws from. **Section 3** details the research methodology and implementation, describing the processes and methods utilised. **Section 4** examines the equality plan of the case study University and briefly analysis it. **Section 5** presents the study's findings, organized and critically analysed according to the research questions and objectives. In **Section 6**, I discuss the main findings of the study and spotlight what can be recommended from the study, evaluate the study and its limitations, and suggest directions for future research. Finally, **Section 7** concludes the study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section briefly defines key concepts relevant to the study and gives operational definitions, as well as giving a brief introduction of the theoretical framework which the study draws from.

2.1 Guiding Perspective; Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology refers to the nature of reality and what constitutes the truth, raising questions about what exists and the nature of entities. Epistemology, On the other hand, refers to the theory of knowledge, focusing on how we create knowledge based on the methods, validity, and scope of understanding, reviewing how we know what we know and the reliability of such knowledge. (Moon & Blackman ,2014; Berryman,2019). These two concepts, the nature of reality (Ontology) and how it is viewed (epistemology), shape the researcher's approach to knowledge and are fundamental components of any research and its design. (Tracy,2013), this is why I start this section by reflecting on where my beliefs as the researcher stands own on these concepts to contextualize the research. My first step was to ask, "What is known about this topic?" This allowed me to frame my research and explore the existing knowledge on the subject.

According to Schwandt (2000), the understanding of the social world requires interpreting the meanings and experiences individuals ascribe to it, by implication this allows for the acknowledgement of multiple realities grounded in a specific context and the meaning they attached to them. I interpret this to mean the possibilities of varied number of realities (with all equally valid) within the same research field. Following Crotty (1998) summation that social phenomena like racism and power structure dynamics are created through human interactions and are subjectively experienced I have framed my study on relativist ontology and Constructionist epistemology perspectives, and

incorporated an interpretive paradigm, because it believes that knowledge is constructed through the interpretation of individual experiences (i.e. Social actions are thus analysed from the standpoint of the actors involved) and that reality is subjective and context dependent. As the researcher in this paradigm, I therefore focus on understanding the subjective experiences of individuals and the ways in which they construct meaning in their lives (Moon & Blackman, 2014 ;Berryman, 2019; Corona-Lisboa, 2018) In alignment with this paradigm, the assumption in this research therefore is that ; **knowledge is subjective**, and I seek to understand phenomena accordingly to individual cases as such I can frame questions like; **What people think and do, what kind of problems they are confronted with, and how they deal with them.** For instance, my research questions both ask the question “**what**” and “**how**” seeking to describe what is communicated i.e., by participants and policy documents.

- ✓ *What are the encounters and experiences of racism by international students in the university, if any*
- ✓ *How does the university address and manage issues of racism experienced by international students?*

As a result of this paradigm and assumption, I approached the research process with the understanding that I do not seek to study an objective entity, but a complex social construct that varies across contexts and experiences; and that the findings I would find and present subsequently cannot necessarily be generalized or transferred into another context. This foundation thus significantly impacts the research design, influencing the utilization of a qualitative approach and the choice of in-depth semi-structured interviews. These methods allow for the unrestricted sharing of participants' stories and the creation of a contextual background to richly understand their lived experiences, aiming to highlight how they describe their experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them, capturing the complexities of how they perceive and navigate their realities within the university setting.

The subsequent sections in this examines existing literature relevant to the study aiming to position this study within the broader academic discourse as well contextualize it specifically within Finnish higher education institutions.

2.2 Theoretical Concepts

This study draws from two theories: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT)

2.2.1 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Although more usually noted to be one of psychology theoretical perspective on racism, (commonly called Intergroup theorist) In this study, Social Identity Theory (SIT) serves as a background for understanding how individuals can categorize themselves and others into social groups. Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), The theory posits that people derive a sense of self from their membership in social groups often defined by shared characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or nationality., which leads to the categorization of individuals into in-groups (those perceived as "us") and out-groups (those perceived as "them") These categorization forms the basis for intergroup dynamics and influence perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, particularly in contexts of intergroup interaction.

SIT outlines three main processes: Social Categorization, defined as how Individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, creating distinctions such as "us" versus "them.", Social Identification: how people adopt the identity of their group, internalizing its norms, values, and behaviors and finally, Social Comparison: the evaluation of groups relative to one another, often leading to the perception of in-groups as superior to out-groups. In this study, the theoretical process of conceptualizing self is used as a starting point to interpret and make meaning of how international students to experience, hence the focus on how they categorise themselves.

2.2.2 Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a critical methodological lens for the study, Originating in the United States during the 1970s, CRT was developed by scholars

such as Bell (1980), Crenshaw (1991), and Delgado & Stefancic (2017) to address and counteract the structural mechanisms that sustain racial inequalities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 29) CRT challenges the earlier traditional view of racism as an individual bias and instead positions racism as a systemic and permanent feature of social systems, embedded within laws, policies, and institutional practices.

This study applies CRT's principle of counter-storytelling, a methodological tool that seeks to amplify marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives. It thus encourages counter-storytelling, to amplify marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives. CRT's method of counter-storytelling is particularly relevant in education, where policies and curricula are often shaped by dominant perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It also serves as a fitting framework for this study, Delgado and Stefancic (2017) noted that counter-narratives are crucial for disrupting the status quo and promoting equity in institutional spaces. This study thus brings forward the experiences of international students within a predominantly white Finnish university, aligning with CRT's aim to highlight their stories and elevate the perspectives of those often excluded from institutional discourse.

Finally, CRT's conceptualization of Whiteness as a form of property (Harris, 1993) provides a critical lens for understanding the privileges and protections afforded to dominant groups within educational systems. Harris theorizes Whiteness as a tangible asset that confers social, economic, and cultural advantages to those who align with its norms. Bell's (1980) principle of "Interest Convergence" further highlights how racial progress often only occurs when it aligns with the interests of dominant groups, this principle signifies how changes can be slow as well as the systemic nature of resistance to meaningful change. In conclusion while SIT focuses on group dynamics and identity, CRT complements this by clarifying the structural component of racism. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive approach to the study in the study's aim to understand how racism manifest both at the interpersonal and institutional levels.

2.3 Diversity in Higher Educational Context

Defining diversity in higher education requires examining the multiple dimensions of diversity because of its complex nature. Thomas and Ely (1996) describe diversity as the “collective number of differences among members within a social unit,” highlighting that effective diversity management promotes creativity, problem-solving, and the full realization of each member's potential. Owen extends this idea by defining two main interpretations of diversity in higher education; “**Diversity of difference**,” which values the presence and appreciation of difference, and “**diversity for equity**,” which emphasises social justice and the pursuit of more inclusive, equitable institutions – which he terms “**the difference that differences make**” (Owen, 2009 p.187). Hurtado et al. (2012) view diversity as a dynamic institutional system that not only continuously adjusts to demographic shifts but also promotes equity and organizational effectiveness. Swain (2013) further identifies diversity’s manifestations in higher education institutions, to include in the “representation, climate and intergroup relations, curriculum, and scholarship, and finally in institutional values and structures”.

In this research, when reference is made to diversity it is used to mean not only "a collective difference among members within a higher education institution" but also as the “distinctive mechanisms” that enable HEIs to adapt and foster coexistence and inclusion among all members. This study focuses on the intersection that is possible between “diversity for equity” (Owen 2009) and its manifestation within institutional values and structures. Building on Museus and Quaye’s (2009) participatory approach to diversity, I focus on the role that “student voices” (in this research experiences) can play in shaping institutional policies and practices as a challenge to traditional top-down diversity management. This shifts the definition of diversity from just the presence of individuals with varying ethnic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to the amount of participation of these groups in shaping institutional policies regarding them. In essence by examining the institutional life with this approach international students do not merely,

- a) represent diverse ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds, or
- b) tick the diversity quota as justification for Internationalisation of universities programs.

I align and spotlight the view that diversity must encompass more than demographic representation; while numeric diversity may be a necessary beginning, true diversity requires addressing the structural power dynamics embedded in the system. This perspective partly drives the choice to focus on students' own descriptions of their experiences, as discussed, the methodology section later in the study.

2.4 Main Concepts

2.4.1 "Race"

The concept "race" has been applied across different discourses, including philosophy, medical science, everyday life, and political contexts. From my reading and understanding it was used originally in the late 16th century, "race" to describe biological distinctions with the intent to explain perceived differences in "psychological" and "social capabilities" among groups. This classification, based on biological features, was also used to establish a hierarchical order among distinct groups of people (Miles, 1993). In UNESCO's 1967 declaration on race and racial prejudice, "race" was defined as; *"a group characterized by certain concentrations, frequencies, and distributions of hereditary particles (genes) or physical traits that fluctuate over time due to geographic or cultural isolation."* Although there has been subsequent scholarship that argued that the idea of distinct "races" does not exist as biological categories, the term, nonetheless, persists in everyday discourse due to its social use, especially in everyday social contexts, where it is used to denote perceived or imagined differences.

This classification of people into race also involved the attribution of social meaning to physical traits such as skin colour, which consequentially over time organized individuals into socially constructed racial categories (Miles, 1989; Montagu, 1964; Rose et al., 1984.) Omi and Winant (1994) observed that racial categories often carry assumed cultural traits. These traits reinforce the concept of "race" as a distinguishing factor based on real or perceived characteristics.

Through ongoing social interaction, race becomes a tool for categorization and exclusion, determining who is accepted within a social group. Goldberg (2015) adds that this process sustains structures of inequality that persist to this day. In this study, I have deferred to researchers who conceptualize "race" as a social construct (usually signified by placing the word in quotation marks) because I believe from this analytical conception the examining of how racial categories became socially accepted and continue to shape interactions is possible and advantageous.

2.4.2 Racialization and the Construction of Difference

Racialization as a concept introduced by Frantz Fanon (1963), further expanded and argued as a replacement for race by Robert Miles. (Miles ,1989, 1993). It is used to explain and describe the processes or how social ideas about race and ethnicity define and reinforce differences between groups. While it is not impractical for the process of racialization to change depending on the context, a consistent feature is that certain groups are identified based on physical traits and set apart and treated as distinct social groups (Murji & Solomos, 2005; Omi & Winant, 1994; Gilroy, 2002; Miles, 1994).

In Finland, the discourse around racialization, racial identities, and racial categories has been described to be quieter compared to global discussions (Rastas, 2005; Keskinen & Andreassen, 2017; Hoegaerts et al., 2022). However, these concepts still play an essential role in current day Finnish societal context, even if the discourse is less visible. Rastas (2005) suggests that even when these terms are used, they can unintentionally reinforce segregation by oversimplifying the complexities of racism. Keskinen (2019) remind and spotlights that Finland's has considerable racial histories are deeply rooted in state and nation-building processes, particularly in how Indigenous Sámi and Roma communities were treated as biologically or culturally inferior. These narratives of inferiority or has researchers have termed it otherness have not disappeared; rather, they persist as hidden yet integral aspects of Finland's modernization process. Consequently, discourses of racial and cultural Otherness continue to shape Finnish social dynamics today.

The process of racialization today manifests through cultural and social discourses that position whiteness or in this context being Finnishness as the normative standard. Keskinen (2019) highlights that Finnish national identity has often been framed in opposition to perceived non-whiteness and in the constructing of immigrants, refugees, and other racialized groups as cultural outsiders. Whiteness therefore is often unmarked, functioning as a normative standard against which other identities are measured (Keskinen, 2014). It additionally operates as a social construct that grants privileges and shapes power dynamics, that have the potential to reinforce exclusionary practices against those racialized as non-white. For instance, the discourse around immigration and integration often assumes the cultural superiority of the Finnish majority, positioning immigrants as subjects who must adapt to Finnish norms while their own cultural identities are marginalized (Keskinen & Andreassen, 2017). This dynamic is further reinforced through media representations, where racialized groups are frequently depicted as problems or threats to social cohesion. Ahmed (2007) notes that such processes of "othering" are central to the maintenance of whiteness, as they establish clear boundaries between the included (in this context white Finns) and the excluded (racialized groups).

These dynamics are also reflected within the Finnish educational system, where diversity is often approached and managed alone through multicultural and intercultural frameworks. While such approaches have been successful to some extent, they have also been criticized for reinforcing unequal power hierarchies, with the goals typically directed by the dominant Finnish group. For instance, Layne (2016, p .20) notes of the tendency of intercultural approach to education to often be "framed from the perspective of otherness, placing a political focus on creating categories for individuals identified as immigrants, refugees, and similar groups ". Alemanji (2018, p.5) argues further that this result in development of multicultural Initiatives and resources created to encourage the "Other" to transform themselves to align with mainstream norms in mind.

This argument appears to be supported, particularly at the higher education level, as evidenced by the critical analysis of university-published "survival guides," by Dervin and Layne (2013) that revealed a focus on the adaptation of international students to Finnish norms, rather than fostering a mutual exchange

of cultural perspectives (Dervin & Layne, 2013). Dervin and Layne (2013) contend that these guides reflect an ethnocentric and judgmental stance, perpetuating a one-sided cultural discourse, arguing that international students are primarily encouraged to mainly assimilate into Finnish culture, while reciprocal integration where Finnish culture evolves to accommodate incoming perspectives is largely neglected. This imbalance, which they describe as a “defeat of hospitality,” to my understanding typifies an establishment and reinforcement of the power dynamics earlier mentioned and critiqued. I revisited this description of “defeat of hospitality” later in the discussion section.

In this study, I have used the term "persons of color" (POC) specific to "international student of colour" to refer to all individuals i.e. (participants of the study) typically otherwise categorised as non-white in Finland, I discuss this later in the subsequent section as well as in the research implementation section of research participants.

2.4.3 Racism

The concept of racism has been said to be a complex one to define because of a few reasons; for one it has a continuous evolving nature as a concept, the manifestation and interpretation of the concept in different contexts (Alemanji, 2018). According to McConahay (1986), “Racism” is the belief in and practice of considering certain races as inherently superior or inferior to others, which can result in discrimination, prejudice, and unequal treatment based on race. He went further to note that this could involve systemic and institutionalised, marginalisation, and disadvantage of individuals or groups based on their racial background. From my reading, I came across a related concept to this study is the term "new racism," introduced by British researcher. I am bringing this term up because I particularly found the argument for it to be interesting and understandable. Barker (1981) refers to a form of discrimination that is justified as a natural preference for people to live among those who share similar cultural or social characteristics as new racism. This perspective to racism avoids explicit references to racial hierarchies while implicitly reinforcing exclusionary practices. Barker links the emergence of this "new racism" to a

broader conservative ideological shift that frames immigration as a threat to a nation's cultural homogeneity, this perspective in some way can be paralleled to Finland. A key takeaway, however, from Barker's work is the notion that humans have an innate tendency to form communities that are exclusive to self-identified members, perpetuating social divisions under the guise of cultural preferences (Barker, 1981).

In perhaps rather contrast, in this study racism is understood to be a system of social stratification and power relations rooted in the belief in the superiority of one racial group over others, resulting in the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and rights based on perceived racial differences. It operates at individual, institutional, and structural levels, manifesting through discriminatory practices, prejudiced attitudes, and systemic inequalities that perpetuate social, economic, and political disparities among racial groups (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2013). My definition and understanding has heavily inspired by Bonilla Silva's racialized social system approach in his article *Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation*, (Bonilla Silva 1997 p. 475-457) which suggested that "racism should be studied from the viewpoint of racialization and as structural"; according to him this is advantageous for several reasons, firstly racial phenomena are viewed as the natural outcomes of a society's racial structure, shaped by ongoing racial contestation within a racialized social system. This framework also explains both overt and covert racial behaviors, treating racially motivated actions whether conscious or unconscious as rational, based on perceived group interests. It additionally emphasizes the contemporary reproduction of racial phenomena, linking them to present-day societal structures rather than historical legacies which I understood to mean that is manifestations of racism now would mirror what present day structure looks like. And lastly this approach explores how racial and ethnic stereotypes emerge, evolve, and dissipate over time. Premised on this structure Alemanji, 2021's concession on the concept of "otherness" interpretable to mean to racist dynamic between different groups in which "we" (the mainstream group) and "the Other" (non-mainstream group) confront (Alemanji, 2021, p. 205-206) is logical obtainable as this reflect the possible on-going racial contestation with a racialized social

system. Thus, in reference to the SIT earlier discussed, the three main processes is enacted Social Categorization, Social Identification and Social Comparison.

Earlier research has identified that forms of racism could include; microaggressions, stereotyping, and exclusionary practices (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Sue et al., 2007; Pérez Huber & Solorzano 2015;). Microaggressions are everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, insults, or invalidations that communicate hostile or derogatory messages to marginalised individuals (Sue et al., 2007). Stereotypes on the other hand have been defined as preconceived beliefs about a group of people that are often based on limited information and can be both positive and negative (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000) and finally exclusionary practices has been said to take many forms, including differential treatment, lack of representation in the curriculum and faculty, and inadequate support services (Museus et al., 2016).These can occur, and very often may not be paid attention to, and may not always be intentional, but continued avoidance of its occurrence results in its persistence and prevalence (Denaro et al., 2022). Furthermore, Individual perception of events as discriminatory or racist can have traumatic effects on psychological well-being (Suárez-Orozco & Hernández, 2020).

Institutional racism: because this study is contextualized within Finnish HEIs it is important to look how racism can become institutionalised. The term “Institutional racism” first used by Carmichael and Hamilton (1968), to describe the difference between overt and covert racism (direct by individuals); and institutional racism (the actions and inactions that maintain disadvantaged situations as well as the active and pervasive operation of attitudes and practices that remain anti-black (1968 p5). This term significantly expands the theory of racism beyond everyday than actions that can be done by individuals to more structural preservation and continuity of it. This definition is further expanded in Macpherson's report (1999), that describes it as;

“The collective failure of an organisation to provide appropriate and professional services to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. Detectable in processes, attitudes and behaviors' which amount to discrimination through

unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people" further emphasising that its existence remains "... because of the failure to openly and adequately to recognise and address its existence and causes by policy, example, and leadership. Without recognition and action to eliminate such it can prevail as part of the ethos or culture as a corrosive disease..." (Macpherson 1999 p34).

In this research I view the term according to the comprehensive a 3-main definition developed by Wellesley Institute (2017) that theorises Institutional racism to be;

I. an ecological form of discrimination.

II. referring to inequitable outcomes for different racialized groups.

III. a lack of effective action by an organisation or organisations to eradicate inequitable outcomes.

Expanding from this definition, I interpret the *ecological description* as an interconnected system that can operate across multiple levels of an institution, which can create a ripple effect of affecting not just individual interactions but the structural dynamics of the organization. This ecological form of discrimination could be embedded in the policies, norms, and everyday practices that create an environment where inequitable outcomes can be normalized and reproduced over time. While this study therefore begins with the task of speaking to individuals who share their experiences, it is less about isolated incidents and more about seeking to understand how deeply rooted framework can impact racialized groups disproportionately. In this view, the *inequitable outcomes* highlighted therefore become both a **symptom** and a **consequence** within these structures. The persistence of these disparities points to a failure to address the broader ecological factors that allow such inequities to thrive. Finally, the *lack of effective action* by institutions is interpreted as a potential for complicity, which in turn feeds back the ecological form, allowing discrimination to become an unchallenged part of institutional life. This perspective aligns with Ahmed's (2012) exploration of the concept of "institutional as usual," used to highlight ways in which academic spaces may be assembled and held for a certain group and hence discrimination can become an integral part of institutional life embedded

in the "normal" operations of institutions, perpetuating harm in subtle yet profound ways. (Ahmed, 2012).

To summarize this study examines the manifestations of racism at both the micro and macro levels. At the micro level, it focuses on the personal narratives of international students, highlighting their individual experiences of racism. At the macro level, it investigates how institutions address and manage these issues (see Alemanji,2021). By elevating these individual accounts, the research establishes a critical connection between personal experiences and systemic structures, illustrating how micro-level incidents serve as an indication of how it is made possible at the macro level.

3. RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

Qualitative methods are particularly effective for capturing personal narratives and exploring the depth of lived experiences, though they are often limited in their generalizability. This study employs a qualitative approach, which, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p. 43), is a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world”. It involves an interpretative and naturalistic approach where “researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.” Qualitative research focuses on exploring issues, understanding phenomena, and answering questions through the analysis and interpretation of unstructured data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The primary characteristics of qualitative research include using the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher as the key instrument; multiple methods to establish different perspectives of the phenomenon; Complex reasoning is used, moving back and forth to generate a comprehensive set of themes and an holistic account, including contextual descriptions and reflexivity, where researchers position themselves within the study (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017, pp. 36–39).

This section, therefore, describes the practicalities of the research implementation focusing on these characteristics.

3.1 Research Context

The context of the study was Finnish Higher educational institutions. Finland's higher education system comprises two main types of institutions: universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS). As of 2024, there are 13 universities and 22 universities of applied sciences in Finland. For this study, the University of Jyväskylä (JYU) was selected as a case study for a few reasons: firstly, due to its prominence as a research-intensive institution with a strong commitment to

both academic excellence and internationalization. As one of Finland's leading universities, JYU offers a diverse range of programs, attracting students from around the world and fostering a multicultural academic environment. This makes it an ideal context for exploring the experiences of international students within the Finnish higher education space, particularly regarding integration, diversity, and encounters with local and institutional cultures.

The other reason was because it was easier to negotiate my access as a researcher. Tracy (2013,pg. 66) noted that the most basic question for qualitative researchers is "What is going on here?" and before one can even begin to answer such a question ,one needs to find people and places that will let you "in" to study their lives, viewpoints, and routines because a key part of this question is the word "here". As an early researcher in Finland and an international student myself, JYU was a suitable research field to which I already had access. While the process of seeking interested participants was rather another longer slow snowballing process, I at least had platforms to invite interested participants, it was also easier to create a safe research environment and trust where participants felt they could openly share their experience

3.2 Research Participants

The participants were recruited from the international student body of the University of Jyväskylä (JYU). The eligibility criterion for participation was that the individuals were "International students of colour" currently enrolled at JYU. The term "International students of colour" seemed appropriate to use as an umbrella term to facilitate the inclusion of a diverse group of participants irrespective of the program they were enrolled in i.e., master's or PhD or their racial & ethnic identity. About 50 percent of the Participants who eventually signed up were recruited through the Snowballing sampling method. After the initial broadcast of the research invitation a group of four people signed up to participate in the first group focus of which three showed up to participate and the fourth person requested for the possibility of an individualised interview for personal reasons, following the privacy, this resulted in the adjustment of the data

collection instrument to allow for individualised interviews; subsequently, further invitation expressly gave the choice to the participants of whether to join a focus group or an Individual interview.

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interview was the chosen method of data collection for this qualitative research study. This decision was based on the desire for a flexible, less rigid method of inquiry to allow for the exploration of individual experiences and perceptions. As earlier noted in section 2, since the epistemological assumption is that knowledge is subjective, an in-depth semi-structured interview served as a tool of inquiry into the topics in detail, allowing the researcher to probe deeper based on the responses given. This allowed for the ability to ask follow-up questions that are not predefined but arise naturally from the dialogue, to explore nuances and subtleties of the interviewee's experiences and opinions to provide detailed responses.

A total of 10 participants were interviewed with one onsite focus group of three participants, one pair interview and 5 individual online interviews. Participants choose the most comfortable format of the interview for them. Each individual interview lasted about an hour and the focus group and pair interview lasted about two hours each. The research invitation gave comprehensive details of the study, this included the research notification, privacy notice, consent form, and an invitation to participate in an interview with the flexibility of either onsite or online (see Appendix A, B, C). As regards privacy of the research participants, Participants were told that their data would be anonymized to ensure a safe environment, as well as build trust to share openly.

The interview guide was loosely divided into three sections. The first section included questions about the participants' backgrounds, and journey to study in Finland JYU. The second section focused on the aim of the study, asking questions about specific experiences they feel were impacted by their race, questions on their sense of inclusion in the university community and how they navigate their realities. The third section of the interview focused on the support system by the

university, and they perceived its effectiveness as well as an open-ended opportunity for further discussions. The researcher guided the conversation but maintained a collaborative approach, taking cues from the interview while taking field notes. All interviews were held in English, recorded, and transcribed. These interviews were conducted between November 2023- February 2024.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) was utilised as the analytical methodology for the study due to its flexibility, accessibility, and robustness in analysing qualitative data. TA is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes the data set in rich detail and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p. 79). TA is also a foundational method of qualitative analysis that offers a flexible and useful research tool, potentially providing a rich, detailed, yet complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). This flexibility was essential to me for this study, as an early researcher. Moreover, TA's systematic approach to data coding and theme development ensures that I go through a rigorous and transparent analysis method useful to my research seeking to identify recurrent patterns. Additional justification for my choice of TA was because the method is not tied to a specific theoretical framework, which allowed for a more inductive approach, this is particularly important for my study, because as an early researcher. Finally, Vaismoradi et al. (2013), noted that TA can be effectively used for interpreting data in a way that is faithful to experiences, as this was one of my ethical questions further discussed in section 3.5. This solidifies the justification for the choice to use the method to conduct an analysis that is not only methodologically sound but also deeply rooted in the real-life experiences and societal contexts of the study 's participants. The analysis process started with the transcription of the recorded interview word for word, which was about one hour long for the individual interviews and two hours for the focus group interviews which generated a total of about 160 pages of raw data. An intentional effort was made to exclude identifiable personal data as well as all identifiable personal information mistakenly mentioned during conversion and to anonymize all

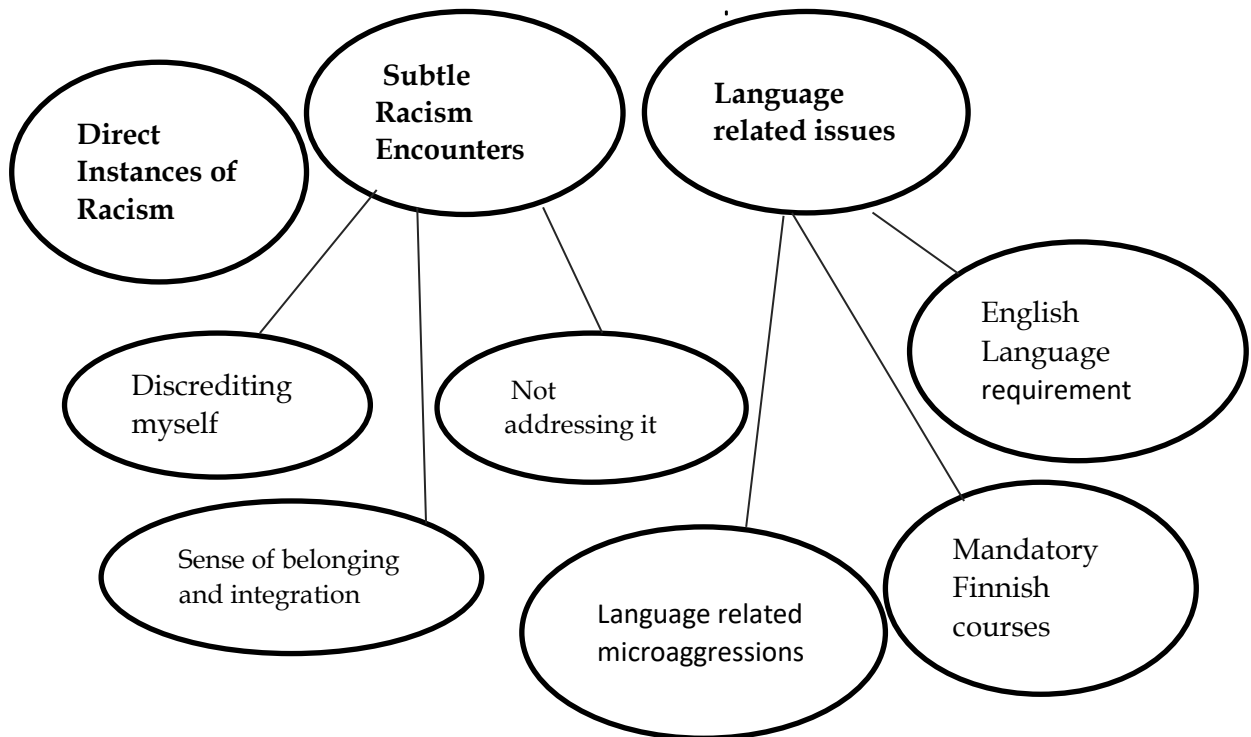
participants before analysis started in accordance with the data management privacy laws of JYU. Participants were thereafter assigned a numerical code for reference such as P1 - P10. The data was then uploaded to Atlas.ti (version 24.1 v0.4.0) a computer-aided qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) to facilitate initial coding and an organised analysis of the data. I adopted (Braun and Clarke, 2006) six steps of a reflexive TA, the stages in the analysis after the transcription of the interviews as therefore included;

Familiarising with the data, I Familiarised myself with the data by reading all my interview transcripts again while listening to the recording repeatedly to immerse myself in participants' responses. At this stage I ensured to make notes on the initial thought, reactions and reflection points I had and began to recognise the recurring answers.

Generating initial codes: During this stage, I started the process of identifying semantic codes and emergent themes. The initial phase of coding involved a careful reading of each transcript to generate concise descriptions or single words capturing the essence of what was communicated in the text. This initial step generated a total of 52 codes related to various dimensions of the participants' experiences, including "Discrediting myself," "Not addressing it," "Sense of belonging and integration," "Support systems," "Language-related microaggression," "Lack of representation and tokenism," and "Direct instances of racism," among others. These codes were then further combined and categorized broadly under themes such as "Subtle Racism Encounters," "Direct Instances of Racism", "Language Issues, Lack of Representation and Tokenism," and "Other Diversity and diversity management-Related Issues." For example, as shown in figure 1 (*Example of code combination on how participants experience racism*) below codes like "Discrediting myself" and "Not addressing it" "Sense of belonging and integration, were then regrouped and combined under the theme of Subtle Racism Encounters; similarly under the theme of Language related Issues, sub-codes included challenges such as "Language-related microaggressions" and "English language requirement," "Mandatory Finnish courses,"

Figure 1

Example of code combination on how participants experience racism



Defining and naming themes. Here I reviewed the themes once more to confirm that each one effectively addressed the relevant research question and accurately reflected the data extracts. Each thematic area was developed to align with key topics that emerged across both individual and focus group interviews, as shown in the Sankey diagram Figure 2 below. This visualization illustrates the flow and relationship between specific codes (on the left side) and broader themes and types of interviews (on the right side). The diagram effectively highlights how individual experiences converge into common thematic areas, facilitating an understanding of the overarching issues faced by international students in this university setting.

Finally, I **wrote down the final report** using quotations from the data in a narrative manner to report the bigger story my data tells. These results are then finally grounded within appropriate literature and theoretical concepts.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and solutions

In this research process various, I came across ethical questions that required careful consideration and navigation. The first ethical consideration was how to maintain objectivity and avoid research bias.

Reflexivity, Objectivity, and Avoiding Researcher Bias: Maintaining objectivity and minimizing personal biases were essential components of my research process. Throughout data analysis and reporting, I engaged in a reflexive approach, critically evaluating my own beliefs, values, and assumptions to prevent them from influencing my interpretations. This reflective practice allowed me to accurately represent participant narratives and ensure the integrity of my findings. To further address potential biases, I incorporated multiple safeguards, including continuous consultation with my research supervisor. These check-ins provided guidance on research design and analysis, offering an external perspective that reinforced objectivity. **Recognizing the importance of positionality,** I consciously acknowledged my role as a researcher and actively worked to separate my biases from the research process. This proactive reflexivity helped maintain the rigor and credibility of my work, enabling me to represent participants' experiences authentically and uphold high ethical standards. Through these measures, I was able to navigate the complexities of personal perspective while ensuring that findings were driven solely by the data collected

The second concern was **data management.** Ethical and planning safety are important during the research process, (Byrne, 2016) In conducting this research, I prioritized ethical standards to ensure participant consent, privacy, and data security. Following the ethical guidelines established by the Finnish Board for Research Integrity (TENK, 2021), I aimed to protect participant rights, maintain transparency, and foster trust throughout the study by doing the following.

Consent and Voluntary Participation: Each participant received an email prior to the interviews containing a research notification, privacy notice, and consent

forms. This initial communication informed participants of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, ensuring that they fully understood their role and the nature of the research. Informed consent was confirmed on the day of the interviews, with participants acknowledging that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without any negative repercussions. At the beginning of each audio recording, I reiterated the study's purpose and obtained explicit verbal consent, further solidifying participants' willingness to be recorded and involved in the research.

Privacy and Confidentiality: Due to the sensitive nature of the study, particularly concerning discussions on experiences of racism, confidentiality was paramount. To protect participant identities, all interview recordings were securely stored and accessible solely to the researcher. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym based on a numeric scale P (1-10) with P meaning participant, ensuring anonymity in the analysis and reporting of findings. This step also minimized researcher bias by avoiding name-based identification. The data will be presented in an anonymized format to maintain confidentiality, and participants were assured that their identities would not be disclosed in any published material.

Data Storage and Security: Data management practices were established to prevent unauthorized access to participant information. Audio recordings were saved in a password-protected folder on my personal computer, to prevent any potential breaches of confidentiality. In line with the privacy notice provided to participants, all data collected for the study is scheduled for secure deletion by December 2024, ensuring that participant information is handled responsibly and ethically over the study's lifecycle. See Appendix A, B, C for more on data management. In adhering to these ethical practices, I aimed to ensure that participants' rights are protected, their experiences are honored, and their contributions to the study are handled with the highest level of integrity.

4. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

4.1 Overview

According to Sara Ahmed “*To ask what diversity does, we need to follow diversity around us, by essentially following documents that give diversity a physical and institutional form.*” (Ahmed2012, p.12)

In Finland, the promotion of equality within educational institutions is mandated by national legislation, ensuring inclusivity across all levels of education. For instance, *The Act on Equality between Women and Men* (Equality Act, 1986/609) obligates education providers to actively foster gender equality and prevent discrimination based on gender identity or expression. This includes the development of equality plans in collaboration with both staff and students (*Tasa-arvo.fi*, n.d.). Additionally, the *Non-Discrimination Act* (1325/2014) extends these requirements by mandating that educational institutions promote equality and prevent discrimination on various grounds, such as age, nationality, language, religion, and disability. Consequentially the "obligation to draft an equality plan that aims to develop the educational institution's operations applies to all institutions providing statutory education or training, extended at the beginning of 2015 to also include schools providing education under the Basic Education Act". The Ombudsman for Equality notes that this document must include the following.

- A review of the equality situation in the educational institution
- The necessary measures to promote equality
- an assessment of the implementation and results of measures included in the previous plan.

As a result of this, it is very common for most higher education institutions to have an equality document that is available to the public.

4.2 Document Description; JYU's Equality Plan

The University of Jyväskylä's (JYU) Equality Plan is a document that informs the public about the comprehensive equality and non-discrimination goals and actions of within the University community, which is derived from and align with the core values and principles outlined in the university's strategic plan. It defines diversity and outlines the responsibilities of university management in implementing and monitoring equality measures, including annual reporting to the University Board. The plan also emphasizes the importance of open and transparent decision-making processes, and reports surveys used to assess the state of equality within the university with the overall aim of ensuring a supportive and fair environment for all members.

4.3 Document Analysis

In *The Language of Diversity chapter*, Sara Ahmed introduces the concept of **institutional speech acts** to describe how institutions use language to make declarations or claims about themselves. Drawing on the framework of performative utterance by philosopher J.L. Austin, she argues that for instance, when an institution declares values like diversity, it does more than describe its state, it performs an act that creates or reinforces a particular narrative about itself. These speech acts, when delivered even if by individuals on behalf of the institution, construct a reality that circulates within and outside the organization, aligning it with cultural or political norms. (See Ahmed 2012 p 54-58 for more on this). In this study, I have taken the University of Jyväskylä's (JYU) Equality Plan 2024 as an example of an institutional speech act, as it is a document that constructs and communicates the institution's commitment to equality, diversity, and non-discrimination. Therefore, using the keyword search tool, the text in the document has been analysed for keywords related to "Racism" and "diversity", aiming to see how it is described, defined and reported. The relevant part of the document has been extracted and is indicated in Tables 1, 2 and 3 below.

Table 1*Overview of the Goals and previous plan*

Category	Description
Overview	
Definition	Diversity ” refers to “various aspects of a person’s identity including gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, physical qualities, language, sexuality, lack of disability, religion, convictions, neurotypicality or racialization”
Work and study Environment and operating culture.	When developing the diversity of the University, the following aspects related to the members of the community are acknowledged: age, nationality, gender, language, disability and state of health as well as other person-related reasons.
Actions of the previous equality plan period (2022–2023)	Student admission has been developed in national cooperation. Various paths have been created for student admission to take into account the diversity of students : certificate-based admission, entrance examination admission, and the open university path.
Work and study conditions	Diversity is considered a strength, and the University is able to benefit from it. JYU acknowledges the diversity of genders in its surveys, systems and statistics.

The term "Diversity" was referenced several times as seen Table 1 below, With the broad definition of Diversity of as “various aspects of a person’s identity including gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, physical qualities, language, sexuality, lack of disability, religion, convictions, neurotypicality or racialization “ .There is a communication of an inherent promise of inclusivity with the statement , “When developing the **diversity** of the University, the following aspects related to the members of the community are acknowledged: age, nationality, gender, language, disability and state of health as well as other person-related reasons. Sara Ahmed argues that this approach of promised inclusivity can serve merely as a “container for anything and everything” (Ahmed

2012). I return and expand more on this in section 6.1. Furthermore, declarative statement like, “Our university community is diverse and multicultural...” (p. 2) operates both descriptively and performatively. These statements not only describe JYU’s identity but also act to create and sustain the image of an inclusive university. Going forward we can then examine the description of the goals and actions implemented towards students indicated in table 2 below

Table 2

"Diversity" Mention *Education: Goals and action*

<i>Education: Goals</i>	
Category	Description
Student admission, study guidance and counselling	The diversity of students is considered in student marketing and opportunities are expressed in an equal manner. Students are encouraged to select lines of studies and careers open-mindedly. Admission criteria do not Favour or discriminate. Applicants with various cultural backgrounds have equal opportunities to succeed, with special attention given to the language skill requirements in studies. Students have equal rights to receive sufficient guidance and counselling.
Studies	Curriculum development, selection of teaching material, teaching, and assessment of completed studies are performed in an equal and non-discriminatory manner. The relationship of staff and students is based on mutual respect that should not be weakened because of any characteristic or quality of an individual. The selection of representatives for administrative bodies and the preparation of decisions promotes equality and non-discrimination and takes into account the diversity of students. Any results from surveys the Student Union conducts among its members about equality, non-discrimination and possible related problems are taken into account in the promotion of equality.
<i>Education: Actions</i>	
Student admission	The diversity of students is acknowledged in the development of student admission. Our student admission is fair and appropriate.
Diversity of students	Developing communication and content that acknowledge the diversity of students. Developing Student Life activities.
Student representation	Student representation in the University’s administrative bodies is ensured, with special attention given to the representation of international students in the working groups.

The education goals and actions presented demonstrate a commitment to fostering diversity and equality through admissions, curriculum design, and governance. The university emphasizes non-discriminatory practices in admissions, equal opportunities for all students, and mutual respect in teaching and learning environments. However, when evaluated through the lens of Sara Ahmed's *The Language of Diversity*, these efforts may fall into the realm of performative institutional practices. Ahmed critiques the language of diversity as often serving as a branding tool or a "feel-good" mechanism, which, while projecting inclusivity, can obscure deeper systemic inequities. For example, JYU's focus on student representation diversity in marketing aligns with Ahmed's observation that diversity can often become a containment strategy, for attracting and managing differences without disrupting entrenched power structures.

Table 3

Racism Mention.

Reference to 2023 survey	In spring 2023, implemented a survey, which inquired about racism in the university community.
Survey report	From one hundred respondents, about half had faced or noticed discrimination that could be classified as racism in some way
Survey report	However, only half of the respondents intervened in or reported about noticed racism .

Finally, the term 'racism' appeared three times in reference to the 2023 survey conducted by the University and the Student Union on racism, which revealed that half of the respondents had experienced or witnessed racism, yet only half reported it (JYU Equality Plan 2024, p. 3)." There is a noticeable absence of explicit anti-racism frameworks in the plan, which can create a potential gap between the institution's stated goals and the actions required to address it. I extend more on this in the discussion section.

5. RESULTS

In this section I present the results from the data analysis, organised and discussed according to thematic categories, each grounded in addressing the study's research questions. Subsection 5.1 explores participants recount relevant to answer the first research question: *How do international students at the describe their experiences with racism within the university setting?* Subsection 5.2 subsequently examines responses that address the second research question: *How does the university address and manage issues of racism encountered by international students?*

Table 4.

Thematisation of manifestations of racism as described by participants.

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Themes Manifestation Areas</i>
Subtle Experiences of Racism	Indirect forms of racism, including microaggressions and covert discrimination.	Classroom interactions, other school social settings
Direct experiences of Racism.	Clear and explicit acts of racism that are openly identifiable and intentional	Classroom interactions, Other school social settings
Language related macroaggressions	Behaviors related to language use	Administrative emails Course design Student union
Lack of representation	Insufficient presence and representation of international or minority groups in various visible roles.	Curriculum Student union representation Staff (teaching and administrative)

Note. This table outline's themes of racism experiences, as well as showing areas, they manifested subtle and direct racisms, experiences of language-related macroaggressions, and lack of representation are encountered across classroom settings, administrative contexts.

5.1 Does it happen here?

The first research question asked if and how international student experience racism and their description of their racism encounters within the university setting? The responses touch on various aspects. From the thematic analysis, four main themes emerged that summarised these varied experiences as shown in Table 4 above.

5.1.1 Racism through Subtle/Unconscious instances

The theme of subtle and “unconscious” instances of racism consistently appeared across all participants’ reflections. These instances, often hard to categorize as overt racist actions, led participants to a state of continuous deliberation. As they recounted experiences, they frequently used phrases like “challenging to term a direct racism incident,” to indicate a deep internal negotiation where they searched for language to convey what they perceived as racially motivated undertones. This internal struggle aligns with Sue et al.'s (2007) microaggressions framework, which describes the often ambiguous, implicit nature of racial microaggressions. This ambiguity complicates the experience, leaving individuals to question the validity of their perceptions

While on one hand, these isolated encounters lacked overtly racist actions or undertones, which made it challenging for participants to categorize them explicitly as racist. On the other hand, however, they ascribed meaning to these interactions. These may perhaps be based on their pre-existing sense of self, combined with specific words or attitudes that added layers of racial undertones. Jones'(1997) argues that subtle instances of racism, often indirect and ambiguous, tend to compel individuals to engage in self-reflective cycles that question the nature and legitimacy of their experiences. P4 articulated this complexity of identifying racism, highlighting the subtlety and ambiguity that often accompany these encounters.

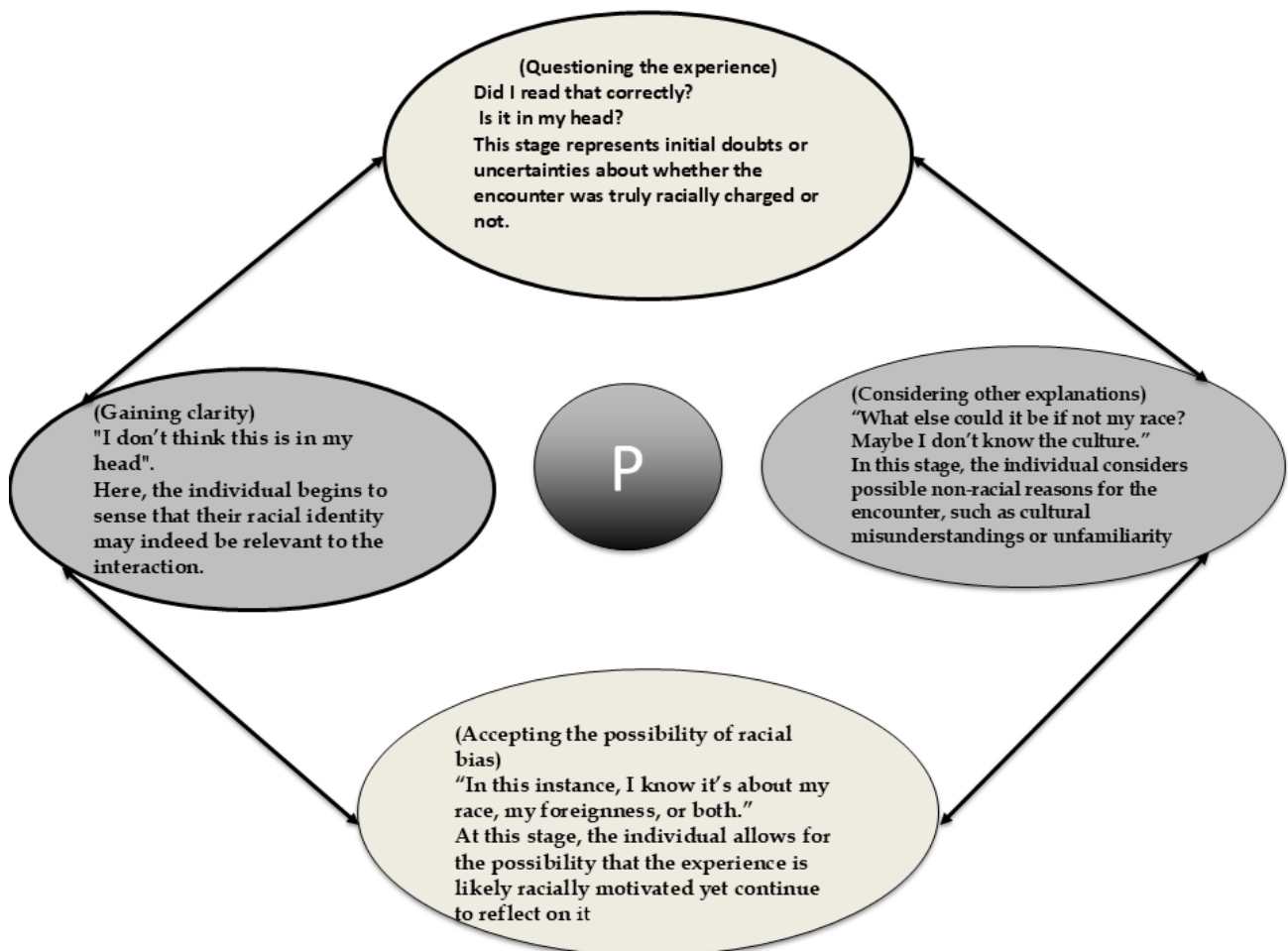
"Yeah, of course, but the biggest problem with race experiences, as in experiences of racism, is that it's very hard to ever pinpoint and be sure that this is a race thing, there is a risk. But in other cases where, I was sure." (P4)

Participant 6 further describes the tendency to discredit one's own experience noting that

"I have had many instances where I felt 'Hmm, that was discrimination, that was racism,' but it's something I have had to constantly reflect on as to... 'Hmm, I've done a very good job at discrediting myself when I think that I've been discriminated against... I go like...maybe it's not racial discrimination (laughing), because I've done a very good job at determining that it wasn't. Or maybe like I don't want to see it, maybe I'm imagining, maybe, blah, blah, blah. Except sometimes when I can't, like in one instance of an interaction with a professor in my department that I never had to, I'm 100% sure she's a racist. So, with her, I never really did the maybe thing." (P6)

Figure 2

"The maybe thing," Self-Reflective Cycle of Navigating Subtle Racism encounters



In this study, I have termed this “**the maybe thing**” to suggest the internal conflict expressed by participants. This conflict appears to be rooted in their inability to dismiss the existence and manifestation of racism while simultaneously lacking tangible or concrete evidence to classify it. Figure 3 above depicts how participants negotiated and interpreted some of those interactions. Furthermore The “maybe thing” as described by participant aligns in some way with Pierce’s concept of “subtle and stunning” daily racial offenses. (Pierce 1970) further expanded by Sue et al.'s (2007) Microaggressions Theory. In sue et al they theorize that, Racial microaggression are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, de-rogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group.” Additionally, they are not limited to human encounters alone but can also be environmental in nature. They further argue that Racial microaggression can take the shape of three forms, micro assault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Other responses grouped together under this theme also suggest instances of some of these forms such as microinsult such as when as evidence by P3 reply that

Yeah. I'd be more aware of it. Because there have been instances where I could see the surprise on people's face, (referring to classroom interaction) that I'm actually like, really intelligence. I don't know what P3

Finally, it is also important to note and distinguish subtle instances apart from unconscious instances, according to some participants there are occasions where it is evident that it is unconscious P4, notes that:

"It's difficult when you're talking about racial motivation for people's actions, because you have to be careful which one it is; sometimes it is, other times it's just not your race—it is the way things are done. Ahem... But obviously, there's a high level of unconscious racism within the university system, or maybe I should say in classroom system...unconscious, but they are being..., having racist motivation, for some of the comments they make, but they are just not conscious about it." (P4)

This participant acknowledged the difficulty in categorizing people's actions and comments as explicitly racially motivated. However, they emphasized that while there is a possibility that such behaviors and comments are unconsciously influenced by racist biases it doesn't negate the message, they communicate. This is also echoed by other participants.

5.1.2 Manifestation of Direct Racism

In contrast to subtle experiences, participants also recounted direct instances of racism. Unlike subtle encounters, where participants often struggled to acknowledge or interpret the situation, direct experiences similarly left participants unsure of how to react or proceed. For instance, one participant (P3) described a situation they found overtly offensive during a lecture presentation and their subsequent response:

"There was this situation in class where a teacher was presenting and showed something racist. I felt this had a racial undertone; I found it offensive and thought this should be corrected. I went looking for information – like how to seek help on the website, (suggesting the school website) where to complain, or something like that. I found a section on the website about equality and an equality plan. There's a click to know more, but then it's only available in Finnish, not translated into English. I got frustrated and decided to move on." (P3)

Another example was shared by P6, who detailed an overtly discriminatory interaction with a faculty member:

"So again, I'll talk about this one professor. During a conversation, she asked, 'What are your plans?' I replied, and she said, 'Because I don't think there's a place for you here.'" (P6)

These direct instances, unlike subtle experiences, leave little room for doubt and present a clear message. Participant 4 further explored the paradox of a seemingly open academic environment, but where freedom of expression can be restrained. This duality highlights a tension between freedom and the need to conform to the dominant norms within the institution:

"You feel like this is a free system where you can speak and be who you are, but you're really not free. You're careful about what you say. From the outside, it looks like you can be open, but actually, you have to say what Finns want to hear. I can't openly say that there's racism; if you do, it's seen as anti-country or anti-people. Professors might freak out. There's a sense of feeling good about our country, but there are things that are terrible, and you can't really speak about it. If you do, it comes across as ungrateful, even though we're grateful to be here." (P4)

Finally, participants discussed the importance and their process of reflecting on their experiences which usually involved seeking validation from peers and in some cases relating their experience to other people they trust such as friends in their community to be sure they read the situation correctly. P10's response provided robust evidence, detailing what they did after a "racist incident", highlighting their reflective approach to understanding these experiences and analysing it:

"Usually, I take time to read the situation because sometimes one can react to a situation very quickly than what it actually might have been...I reassess the situation to see how I'm reading it and how it actually played out over there. And then maybe I'll talk to another friend saying, hey, this happened. What do you think actually happened over there? This is what I'm feeling ... Do you think I'm overreading it or over exaggerating? Because at that time it happened, I couldn't read through to respond. I just wanted to get out of it. But then later when I was discussing it with my friends, they said Oh that's not acceptable. Asking me if it was a Finnish person would he say, He would never do that," (P10)

In this instance the participants noted their inability to react in the moment and were able to reflect on it by talking to a friend and discussing their feeling and found reassurance and validation through the discussion, which helped them assess the experience properly.

In summary so far Participants described both subtle and overt instances of racial discrimination, which is often accompanied by internal conflicts and self-doubt. The subtle instances reported by all participants were reported to be rather significantly challenging for them to properly address. Direct experiences of racism, on the other hand, were reported less often though less frequent, and were similarly highlighted. The constant point, however, across board is that both

forms contributed to or added to the situations where students felt the need to constantly reassess their interactions thereby placing the added perhaps psychological burden on them.

5.1.3 Representation is Essential

Participants expressed a lack of representation in three specific areas, which included faculty and staff, in the curriculum and course content as well as in student union associations. Participants perceive the university's attempts at Internationalisation as superficial, failing to genuinely reflect or embrace the increasing demographics of the student. P6 highlights the profound impact of representation:

“It has to say something that you won't come across a head of department, or a dean, or even a professor that looks like me in a Finnish university so easily. I think right now in the whole of Finland that there's one black assistant professor, then you have that as being the person who has gotten to a professorial level. Okay, fine. So, I know that I look to see what is possible, what is viable, it's not so viable, that it will grow”
(P6)

This underscores the discouragement that can be felt by students of colour when they do not see themselves reflected within staffing positions. Another participant adds further even at the international office there is no representation in the staffing of the unit, this participant is further for why it is was important;

“Even at the student union all the three international office coordinators I met were all Finns, it's not a problem... however we are saying that's probably the only office that can be an entry for diversity, other offices will be dominated by Finns because they have the numbers. So that's probably the only entry into this organisation.” (P4)

Some other participants expanded on by pointing out the university's marketing of diverse appearance, questioning the depth and citing appearances of tokenism, for instance P7 says

“But it's funny, because when you go to the website, you see a picture of like black people and people of colour. And I don't even know if those guys know that they use

them to portray that diversity. But the university itself is not even a reflection of that diversity, because I haven't been taught before by someone of colour. I haven't... So, it's not representativeness, and that kind of makes me question how much I can be able to achieve here" (P7)

Structural barriers are a reason mentioned that might be behind the lack of representation, at least within the student council, particularly for international students. Participant 4 highlighted in practical terms how hard it can be to even run as a candidate for the election;

"Student council for example, before you get into representative Council, as an international student itself it's a struggle. Because here, unlike maybe in other places where you can just run on your own, you have to run on the ticket of a group like a student organised by a certain association. So, let's say there's an association called maybe socialist Students Union. I have to be part of the socialists to be able to run on their tickets, because you cannot run as an independent person. That's how the system is run; you run like a caucus system. So the first challenge is picture yourself arriving in this country, and then study starting September and the union election is held probably in November, and you have to start looking for an association, which one you are going to join, which group would accept you, so to even get into it itself is a problem." (P4)

However, despite this barrier the need for representation is emphasised because of the importance of the council and echoed among several participants

"All the decisions about students' stuff are taken by the student union, they represent the students and their other business. They do have an international office, but it's, it's a name, it's headed by a Finn, it is mostly dominated by Finns in that international body within the student union, and it's basically telling students about how great Finland is and all that. Not much real substantive work in terms of inclusion and diversity has been done." P4

"Since there are international students here who are also students, they also need a representative. As he said (referring to another participant in the focus group), like most revolutions happened through a student union. And if you don't have a representation, like international representation in the student union, like even in my student association in the faculty student association, the international coordinator

is a Finn.” (P5)

It happened last year where the student council of the university did not have any students other than Finnish students earlier. And I think this year, we have two international students as part of it, too. Yeah. which is a nice step. But even if you look at JYY, like the student union, you don't see anybody other than a Finnish person (P10)

The theme of representation also extended to educational content, with references to library books and curriculum content. Several participants reflected on the contents of the curriculum and class program as well as the books at the university library;

I will first all look even from the academic curriculum, most of the theories and the lessons we have are and are still learning are still very White than diverse, so almost all the predominant theories of the White people and white writers you know, theories are still very much at play. I don't know if you have gone and taken a look at the library. If you're looking at the libraries, it is very difficult to see books from where I come from, or from developing countries, so it's still very much like US, Canada, UK kind of scholars, but there's a very obscure African collection at the library so academically the inclusion is very minimal.” P4

In conclusion, as related to course design and program participants highlighted other major points but they have all been categorised under the language related Microaggressions and will be presented in the next sections below.

5.1.4 A Dash of Language-related microaggression and barriers

Several participants reported instances of experiencing language related exclusion. This has been grouped together under this theme because these instances, while may sound minor, bothered participants enough to mention them quite a lot in the interviews. These experiences spotlighted not only the challenges encountered because of Language barriers, but also in a way the subtle forms of exclusion through language. Participants detailed systemic and personal challenges posed by language barriers and illustrated the emotional and practical impacts of such barriers. Despite the university's bilingual policy, participants

still reported instances where some services are only in Finnish as explained in the following excerpt.

“Quite recently, we had a course and then we must host our projects on the university service. So, you have something like a university drive where you can put your or store your document or project and so we were looking for how to set it up ...And then it came to our notice that the instructions to do that were only in Finnish because we've been looking for it and couldn't find it. Like how do we do it? Until one of our classmates, who is a Finn but is offering the course in English, notified, and told us that oh, you can find it here on the website but it's in Finnish... “. (P1)

“If you look at it closely, and I mean really closely JYU says that its international, but somehow having to access some needed documents as a student and you told that this is only in Finnish having to have go for some lessons and then realize oh, we are sorry, but this is in Finnish , the blend of English and Finnish is really not there meaning that of course, they are trying I think this is the points were I have my mixed feeling is the fact that has to do with what I call unnecessary language requirements, this thing about , language becomes a tool , unnecessarily puts in a way of student of limiting your access and thereby your experience..,”(P4)

Another participant continued by adding that:

“And I don't know if this happens to others who find it annoying like me. Like, there are some teachers who even mail you in Finnish, you have to translate it every time. I don't know, could it be the Outlook problem or something? I'm feeling like, oh, my God, I have to translate it. And sometimes I lost my interest to translate it because, you know, I don't have the mental ability to translate everything, so I ignored that email sometimes.” (P2)

Another participant further shared their frustration with having to make extra effort to be included in teaching planning as a PHD student:

"I mean I have emails to back it up if needed. I've signed up for the planning of teaching. And I know its exclusion because first, the email has only been circulated in Finnish. And I've come to learn that when something is being circulated in Finnish, it is saying, look away if you're not Finnish speaking, it means this does not concern

you. But I decided that I'm interested. So, I translate the email, and I answer and I'm like, I know it's going to be in Finnish. But I want to be a part of this..." (P6)

A recurring consequence among participants was the attitudes they developed to this. They expressed that they altogether stop paying attention to this. This Participant further reported how this also manifest with communication interactions with the Student Union might also be the similar case:

"It's more like we are included, kind of and we are not. Like, for instance, my student association? Like the faculties have their own student association... The email is mostly in Finnish. Although I'm a "part" of this student association, the faculty student's association, I purchased the overalls. I missed out on the fitting for the overalls because there was no communication in English. It was sent in Finnish." (P2)

More significantly P4 expresses an experience with interactions with the Student Council, and how language became a main issue:

"I would like to share my experience with the Students Union, it is probably the most non inclusive and, and undiversified student organisation I've ever come across, totally not there. When it comes to diversity, I was the only person of color in the union last year when I go for conferences, it's totally all in Finnish. Now, I'm not saying they should not speak Finnish, no its the official language of this country. However, I expected some accommodation of what I represent also, I cannot communicate in Finnish. And I am obliged to say I am present, even if I'm registering my attendance, I'm obliged to say that in Finnish...English is also not my language I am already making the accommodation for everybody..." (P4)

Furthermore, other participants noted language barrier relating to course available to international students reporting issues with limited options of some elective courses which are presented as available to everyone, but upon registration realising that the language of instructions for the lectures or discussions and reading circles is Finnish with self-study or independent study options available to international students in they report this in their own word below;

“At the doctoral studies level, there are a bunch of programs that you can't even attend because they are only offered in Finnish, like there was a compulsory course that I was supposed to take. I think something about studies in my discipline. And then they were like... So, we're holding the lectures in Finnish, because you're not Finnish speaking I will prescribe some books for you. And then you will read them and write a book exam. And I'm like, No, that's not fair. They get to come to class, and they get to have discussions, and they get to learn. While I get to struggle with a book on my own and then write a book exam and then you mark it. That's not the same thing” (P6) P8 also added

“Some of the courses I wanted to take were taught in Finnish, meaning that you are supposed to study independently, but you get assistance if you need. Then I started taking some other elective courses from other departments. Oh, it was not easy. Because even the ones that I was going to for lectures, I was not getting them. Imagine the ones you are studying independently. It's kind of hard. So yeah, it's actually a very bad experience.” (P8)

P7 added that *“...In that independent study, I feel like it's not enough teacher interaction in them.”* and further asked *“So why don't we have the classes in English?... Is it that there are no teachers for them?”* (P7)

I raised a question to follow up, regarding the expectation of language barriers in Finland, given that English is not the official language of communication. However, participants responded by highlighting a key point: education is a paid service, and as such, students if viewed as clients in this context should not be expected to put in extra effort to get the best value and fully engage in a service they have already paid to receive in English. (P1) answered as follows:

“Because I'm paying to study in English, and all things required to complete my course (referring back to an earlier cited incident of language barrier), I'm expecting it to be in English...” (P1)

This response when interpreted from the point of view of a service that is being provided “Education;” in an English medium program it makes sense that clients can have expectations of the service they would get. From participants point of view the program i.e. the service they were marketed to be in English, for which they also had to pass an English language requirement for ; they can then also

expect that an effort must then be made by the seller of the service i.e., the University to ensure that they are indeed effectively and efficiently delivered in English. P 6 adds to this below:

“Because I am their client. I am their student, and I am the foreign one...it still goes back to that question of half assing internationalisation, which is a way for the universities to be entrepreneurial, to make money...Did they think about what it means to make these degree programs available to international students... do they remember that these international students walking these corridors need to be taken into consideration with those kinds of things?” (P6)

Here the participant used the term “half assing internationalisation” to further explain the situation above, in their own words to mean noting that the university has to truly consider what it means to make a program available to international students. Finally on this theme participant 6 (expressed a personal feeling from incidents like this and noted how these seemingly micro language barriers can translate into bigger issues:

“...I experienced this, if you feel like you're weak for example in methods, and there's a good methods course, you should be able to take it, but you will probably not be able to take it when it is in Finnish... It's then always like there's a parallel train for international students and another for Finnish students, and it takes a whole lot of work for those two parallel trains to interact...” (P6)

5.2 Perspectives on Diversity and Racism Management at JYU

The second research question examines how international students perceive the University of Jyväskylä's approach to managing diversity and addressing institutional racism, specifically through its existing systems and policies. Table 5 below provides an overview of participant responses, thematically grouped to illustrate their experiences and concerns.

Table 5

Thematisation of how Diversity and Racism are managed.

Theme	Description
Support and Reporting Systems	Participants expressed a lack of clear reporting system for reporting and weak assurance for follow-up actions when issues arise.
Diversity Management Policies	Participants perceived that the university's diversity management policies to be well-intentioned but do not adequately address their needs.

Note. This table summarizes participant feedback on diversity and racism management, highlighting issues in support/reporting systems and perceived gaps in diversity policies.

5.2.1 Support and reporting Systems

Responses to the question described lack of clear-cut channel to report and inadequate support to follow-up actions, as P2 simply puts it: *“Actually, I don't know about any such kind of support system”* (P2),

P4 in the response outlined not only the lack of appropriate reporting channels, but also other reasons people who experience racist incidents do not come forward about these experiences.:

“First of all, it's difficult to know who to report to when these instances happen, whether subtle racism, whether what I call unconscious biases, when that happens, you don't know who to report to. Okay. And even if you go and report, I mean, Ehmmm I feel like, first of all, there is no diversity and inclusion officer in this university as far as I know. And so how and who do you report to, so your report ends up caught up in the middle of nothing? If you ever make a report.” P4

Other participants highlight the possibility that issues of racism incidents were not assumed to occur, hence there isn't a specific system created to report them. If there is no acceptance that such incidents like these exist and happen, why and

how will it be addressed at all:

"If there is a system to report, I am unaware of it, because nobody ever told me again, I guess at that onboarding, maybe somebody should have said, maybe nobody ever even imagined that race, identity, and cultural things can be issues and that there are ways to deal with those. I don't know about it. And nobody ever said anything about it. In my moments, I've worried about where to go." (P6)

P1 Further highlighted how easy it ought to be to be able to report without having to go through different channels citing for instance how easy reporting house disturbance is, as easy as filling in a form.

... don't know, do I have to book an appointment with you before I can tell you because if it happens today, I have to be able to report it that day. (P1)

...Because for instance, let's take if you're living in an apartment, and maybe someone is making noise or something, there is actually a system where you just report it and the next day, those people get an email warning them, Yeah, so the landlord makes such a form and the report goes straight it, you have to have such a system in place where you can just send it and then they'll be like, hey, there was a report that this happened." (P1)

This also aligns with participant 7's response who acknowledged the knowledge of only feedback channel for lectures, but not knowing how to report specifically instances of subtle racism

I don't know. But I do know that the university has a feedback system, especially for lectures. You know, at the end of lecture, there is actually a feedback system. I guess in the feedback, people can actually talk about this. (P7)

Furthermore, another participant acknowledged that their own mentality has a part to play in why they didn't report to anyone when there was an incident perceived to be of direct racism, they outlined the fear of repercussions and lack of confidence as reasons behind it.

"So, as I told you, where I am coming from, we know the consequences of this kind of report of making a complaint about a professor, you're going to face some kind of difficulties you're not supposed to make such complaints. So, I am still having that

mentality because I was new here, and so I only explained to another teacher the reason why I didn't want to be here... So, I was kind of not confident enough to go out to say it, that's why." (P8)

A participant expressed trying out the wellbeing workshop but reflected on how that couldn't directly help in the situation.

"When this happened last semester, I think I went to a wellbeing workshop (organised by the University). I think that was not working for me, and they don't know how to guide you to like, what kind of support you need. And they fail to, like, give a suggestion, like, here you should go here or something like that, so there is an information gap, I don't know where to go or whom to go. So, I guess at least I have to say that the support system is very poor." (P3).

Overall, the response suggested a need for a clear-cut reporting channel and actionable steps to take if or when an individual experiences of racism within the university.

5.2.2 Diversity Management Policies.

The theme of "Diversity Management Policies" addresses the effectiveness and visibility of diversity initiatives within the university setting. Participants shared varied perspectives on the university's efforts on addressing diversity. Participants expressed a mixed view on the visibility and presence of diverse groups within the university, *"In terms of diversity, I think now it's a little better than before. But I think that there are not enough foreigners from outside of the EU; if they are, they're kind of like submarines, I guess they only pop up once in a while."* (P9). This metaphor suggests that while there may be instances of diverse groups, diversity is not consistently apparent or actively integrated within the university community. Participant 5 critiqued the university's claim to be diverse: *"For me, they say, well, diversity and all that, I always ask this question, where is it? ... As international students, you are forced to do*

the diversity on your own; there is nothing that is being propelled by the

institution." (P5).

Participant 10 noted that initiatives often seem to originate from individuals rather than from a structured university-wide policy: *"I think there are pockets of these diversity initiatives here and there. I don't know if there's one by the university, But I think it's more about the individuals that come up with the initiative..." (P10)*

This observation suggests that while individual efforts were present, there was a lack of a cohesive or recognizable strategy from the institution itself. Participant 1) provided a comparative insight by reflecting on their experiences in another country, reflecting on what effective diversity management can look like:

"I would say, there isn't much diversity. From my experience I also studied in a different country, which also is not an English-speaking country, so I could compare. So, if I'm trying to compare how the university is trying to diversify things to include all cultural backgrounds, then I feel the University is not doing that much. In my previous University, there was an International Week organised by the university where every country must come and showcase their culture, so that the students would come and learn and experience the culture of every country. Every country will set up tents. And then you have to do something, you have to prepare food from your country." (P1)

This response described cultural exhibitions and interactive participation serving as a platform where diversity is not only celebrated but actively facilitated by the institution, which fostered deeper cultural integration, and understanding among students. In conclusion the narratives shared by participants pointed to a need for more robust, consistent, and engaging diversity initiatives. While there are glimpses of individual efforts contributing to a diverse environment, the lack of structured, university-led initiatives is regarded as not doing enough. Drawing from best practices, as described by Participant 1, the university might consider adopting more interactive and inclusive events that encourage active participation and cultural exchange among all students. This approach could facilitate a more integrated and genuinely diverse academic community, reflecting the true spirit of inclusivity the university aims to promote. This and other additional points of discussion will be explored further in the next section

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Examination of results

The purpose of this research was to examine how international students encounter or experience racism at the University of Jyväskylä as well as how they were addressed and managed from the perspective of international students. This goal was achieved by engaging international student of colour who were currently enrolled at JYU in a semi structure in-depth interview. This section reflects on and discusses the results in response to the study's research question. Subsequently after that, I evaluate the study as well as offers a concluding thesis.

6.2 Addressing Racism and Promoting Diversity in Finland's Higher Educational Institutions

In this study, racism has been conceptualized as the individual perception or valuation of the superiority of one racialized group over another, as reflected in institutional norms and indicative of structural foundations that either enable it or fail to confront and dismantle it. (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2013). The result of the study revealed several areas in which participants perceived occurrences of racism within the university environment including various contexts, including teaching-learning interactions, university social gatherings, and during other campus activities. Incidents were experienced in multiple forms such as; subtle or unconscious biases, direct instances, observations of lack of representation among staffing and student unions, and language-related microaggressions.

(Alemanji, 2021) notes that "Understanding racism as complex and multifaceted is an important first step but understanding alone cannot create change. Action is the cornerstone of change". The result of this study reemphasis this as necessitated, while acknowledging that there are manifestations of racism is a crucial first step, the acknowledgment should be followed closely by actions that are rooted in changes in education and schooling policies and practice that

provide the foundation for an antiracist society (Alemanji, 2018; 2021).

To wrap up the discussion on "Diversity of Difference" versus "Diversity for Equity" and the concept of "the difference that differences make" (Owen, 2009, p. 187), it is important to address the noticeable absence of explicit conceptualizations of racism in institutional discourse. This gap is particularly evident in the analysis of the equality plan. Ahmed (2012) critiques such institutional diversity initiatives as often serving merely as symbolic compliance mechanisms what she terms "tick-box exercises" rather than tools for genuine transformative change. As discussed earlier in Section 4, repeated references to "diversity" and an emphasis on respect and inclusion, while suggestive of a commitment to tolerance, fail to explicitly confront racism. This omission reflects Ahmed's critique that institutional speech acts often manage diversity superficially, sidestepping the deeper structural inequities that perpetuate discrimination. This highlights the need for institutions to move beyond symbolic gestures and address the root causes of inequality directly

The findings also revealed instances of subtle racism and microaggressions, which, although often assumed to be unintentional, were the most frequently mentioned by participants. These experiences significantly undermined students' confidence and sense of belonging indicated by *Self-Reflective Cycle of Navigating Subtle Racism encounters* in figure 2 Addressing these biases requires a strong institutional commitment, potentially through regular anti-racism training for faculty and staff. Such training would be most helpful in enabling staff members to recognize and mitigate unconscious biases while equipping them with tools to reflect on and address their own prejudices (Shore et al., 2010).

In addition to microaggressions, participants reported overt acts of racism, admittedly this was at a lower percentage in comparison to others however such as exclusionary remarks and discriminatory behaviors were particularly notable in teaching-learning interactions and other social interactions. Alemanji (2016) argues that addressing such incidents requires proactive, rather than reactive, approaches to anti-racism. At JYU and other Finnish HEI, this necessitates the development of robust systems for reporting and addressing racism, alongside efforts to cultivate an anti-racist campus culture. Participants also highlighted the lack of representation as reinforcing perceptions of superficial

internationalization, where diversity is celebrated symbolically but lacks meaningful integration. To address this, institutions could consider targeted recruitment strategies, mentorship programs for underrepresented groups, and a critical re-evaluation of hiring practices to prioritize diversity and representation.

Language barriers were a recurrent theme in participants' narratives, affecting their academic experiences and social integration. Despite JYU's bilingual Policy, participants encountered significant challenges in accessing administrative services and elective courses, many of which were available only in Finnish. These findings align with Saarinen and Nikula's (2013) critique of bilingual education policies in Finland, which often fail to meet the practical needs of international students. Addressing these barriers requires a systemic reevaluation of institutional language policies. This could include expanding English-language course offerings and ensuring that critical administrative processes are accessible to non-Finnish speakers.

Finally, the study highlighted a lack of trust in institutional reporting mechanisms for addressing racism. Participants noted that the absence of clear and accessible reporting channels discouraged them from lodging complaints. This finding is consistent with Sue et al.'s (2007) observation that ineffective reporting systems perpetuate a culture of silence around discrimination. Establishing a dedicated Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) office at JYU could address this gap, providing a centralized platform for monitoring, reporting, and addressing incidents of racism.

6.3 Evaluation of the study

The characteristics for qualitative research—credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity—have been carefully considered throughout this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Below, I provide an overview of how these criteria were addressed:

In this study, **credibility** was ensured by systematically applying data collection methods, such as interviews and focus groups, and including rich, direct quotes from participants to capture their perspectives accurately. The findings were

further supported by comparing them with relevant documents, like institutional policies or equality reports, to provide a well-rounded analysis.

To make the findings applicable to other contexts, I offered detailed descriptions of the settings and research processes, to allow for the evaluation of how the results might be relevant to other situations. For **dependability**, consistency was ensured through careful documentation of the data collection and analysis methods, ensuring that every step was transparent and aligned with established qualitative research standards. Finally, Throughout the research, I actively engaged in **reflexivity**, critically examining my role as a researcher and the potential influence of my background and assumptions on the study. Regular discussions and presentation of the research process with classmates, my research group, and advisors were integral to refining the analysis, identifying potential biases, and ensuring the findings remained grounded in the data. These peer debriefings and presentations provided external checks and balances such that at almost every stage I have reflected on why I made different decisions on the study. All this feedback has greatly contributed to the trustworthiness and overall rigor of the research process.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

The study is not without its limitations, some of which must be considered when interpreting the findings. The main one was the **limited sample size**. Although the participants were diverse in their backgrounds, the total number of participants was not representative of the entire international student population at the university. This inherently limits the generalizability of the findings and calls for cautious interpretation of the results. The experiences shared, while valuable, may not fully encompass the diversity of perspectives that exist within the broader population. Closely related to this was the study's **context-specific nature** which further constrains the applicability of its results. Since the data were collected from a single institution, the University of Jyväskylä (JYU), the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of international students in other universities in Finland. As a result, the **transferability** of the results to other contexts is **limited** and should be interpreted with this context in mind. I also reflected on the data

collection scope, since I primarily relied on participant interviews, which, while this was conducted systematically, I think the study could have been enriched by employing additional methods such as interviews of administrative staff for a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem and allowed for deeper triangulation of the data. While still on data management, it is also important to state because all data analysis was handled by me a single researcher, the possibility of personal bias affecting the coding and theme development cannot be eliminated, consequently, the findings rely heavily on the available data and my interpretation of them. Although, I tried to remain objective through regular discussions and presentation to my research group as well as to my supervisor.

Additionally, **anonymization and contextual constraints** posed another challenge. Ethical considerations required the anonymity of participants, which, while essential for ethical compliance, may also have limited the depth of contextual information available to readers. Reflecting on this, I deliberated whether to include basic biographical details, such as participants' ethnicity, to provide more context. However, I ultimately decided against it to safeguard confidentiality. To mitigate this limitation, the findings were presented narratively, offering as much context as possible without compromising participants' privacy.

Finally, all other ethical considerations were thoroughly reviewed and adhered to throughout the research process. These principles, as discussed extensively in Section 3.5, demonstrate the commitment to maintaining the ethical integrity of the study, even amidst these limitations.

6.5 Implications for further Research

Future research might benefit significantly from expanding the scope of the study to include a larger sample size. A comparative analysis of equality documents from multiple higher education institutions (HEIs) across Finland could also provide deeper insights into systemic trends and variations in equality practices.

Additionally, incorporating surveys of students' experiences from these institutions would offer valuable perspectives, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and impact of equality policies within the Finnish higher education context. In addition, collecting data from members of the university staff and administration might also help balance the perspective.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This objective of this study to explore how international students experience racism and diversity-related challenges within the University of Jyväskylä (JYU) was achieved. As indicated by this study, racism is a complex, deeply rooted phenomenon that requires a more profound exploration within educational research. A continued understanding of its systemic nature and institutional dynamics is vital for confronting and dismantling its influence.

As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997) aptly observed, societies, and by extension institutions, function as systems that structure social relations through principles such as race and gender, which have both individual and intersecting effects. Acknowledging and addressing these dynamics is not optional; it is fundamental to fostering meaningful structural and cultural change within academic institutions.

Consequently, while efforts to promote diversity are important, they remain insufficient without a parallel commitment to racial equity and proactive anti-racism strategies. Multicultural approaches, while valuable, fall short of addressing the structural underpinnings of systemic racism. Institutional transformation requires the explicit integration of anti-racist practices into every facet of the university's operations Alemanji (2016) defines Antiracism as “a political discourse, an intellectual and practical commitment to challenging racism, at all levels.”

Currently, JYU's framework for fostering inclusivity appears limited, relying on vague language that lacks explicit anti-racist strategies. This suggests a gap in commitment to addressing systemic inequalities. Reframing diversity as an actionable, anti-racist practice is essential for bridging the divide between policy aspirations and implementation.

In conclusion, while Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs), including JYU, have made notable strides in promoting inclusivity, significant work remains. The gap between policy intentions and practical implementation undermines the potential of these institutions to be genuinely inclusive spaces for international students. This is especially critical in light of the OECD's (2022, p.3) This is particularly pressing given the OECD's (2022, p.3) projection that the

number of new foreign degree students in Finland will triple to 15,000 by 2030.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Research Notification

FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND
PSYCHOLOGY

08.11.2023

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

Research Notification

“Maybe it's not ... because I've done a very good job at determining that it wasn't. Or maybe I don't want to see it, maybe I'm imagining.” -Narratives of Racism Encounters by International Students at a Finnish University.

Master's Degree Research Thesis

We invite you to participate in this qualitative research study that is aimed at examining the unique experiences of international students at the University of Jyväskylä. The purpose is to explore the Issues of diversity and occurrences of incidents of racism if any within the university setting and how it's being addressed.

You are invited to participate in this study because of your suitability. You are an international student or identify as a racialized individual at the University of Jyväskylä.

The study will involve an individual interview or a focus group. You have the choice to decide if you want to participate in a one-on-one Interview or a Focus group Interview. Additional questions about the research participants' Specific locations or countries of origin are not a primary concern.

This is a single study; hence you will not be contacted again later.

2. Voluntariness

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study, stop participating, or cancel your previously given consent at any time, without stating any reason. This decision will have no negative consequences for you.

If you stop participating in the study or if you cancel your consent, the personal data, samples, and other information collected about you and your interview answers will not be used as part of the research material.

3. Progress of the Study

This study seeks to understand the experiences and perceptions of international students regarding institutional racism at the University of Jyväskylä. The research will involve data gathering through interviews, analysis, and review. The estimated duration of the study is expected to be a year, which includes your participation in the data-gathering process. Interviews will take approximately one hour.

4. Possible Benefits from the Study

The result of this study is intended to benefit members of the academic community, particularly those involved in international Higher education. On a smaller scale, the audience includes educators, university administrators, and fellow researchers. On a larger scale, the findings could help in understanding and addressing institutional racism within universities, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students with multicultural backgrounds.

5. Possible Risks, Harm, and Inconvenience Caused by the Study **and** Preparing for **this**.

No significant risks or harm are anticipated to be caused by your participation in this study. However, there is an anticipation of the possibility of time inconvenience as related to scheduling, but adequate effort will be made to minimize this through prior arrangements that suit your schedule.

6. Study-related costs and compensations to the subject as well as research funding

No rewards will be paid for participation in the study. but your participation is highly valued and will contribute significantly to our understanding of the topic of study.

7. Informing about research results and research outcomes

This study is intended to yield a master's thesis and be published accordingly on the university's official portal. Therefore, the research result in general will be reported and accessible within the thesis work itself

Contact person for further information.

Name: Miracle Akangbe

Email: makangbe@student.jyu.fi

Master's Degree Student in Development, Education, and International Cooperation

Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Role in the research project: Research conductor/author

Name: Heidi Layne

Email: heidi.j.layne@jyu.fi

Role in the research project: Supervising teacher

Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland



Privacy Notice

You are participating in scientific research. This privacy notice informs you about the processing of personal data as part of the research. You have a legal right to receive this information in accordance with the European Union and Finnish legislation.

1. Data Controller(s)

The Data Controller is responsible for lawful processing of personal data in this research.

The Data Controller of this research is: **Miracle Akangbe**

Responsible leader or team of the research

Name: Miracle Akangbe

Email: makangbe@student.jyu.fi

Role in the research project: Researcher of master's degree in educational sciences, Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Name: Heidi Layne

Email: heidi.j.layne@jyu.fi

Role in the research project: Supervising teacher

Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

2. Processor(s) of personal data

Processor of personal data refers to somebody processing personal data on behalf of the Data Controller and according to the Data Controller's instructions. A Data Processing Agreement must be signed with the processor of personal data.

During research, the Data Controller can also use other processors of personal data who cannot be named beforehand. Necessary agreements are always signed with the processors and their eligibility for the processing of personal data in terms of information security is assessed before signing the agreement. The data subject will be informed separately about the use of another processor if the change is significant from the data subject's point of view.

To ensure the accuracy of research data, the Data Controller may submit data for processing (primarily without direct identification data) to a so-called research reviewer or verifier for a defined period when necessary. These reviewers or verifiers work under the supervision of research staff, and data processing agreements are signed with them.

3. Other disclosure of personal data during research

Your personal data will be handled confidentially and without disclosing them to any outsiders.

4. Personal data to be processed in **Creating Room for Diversity? Exploring Issues of Diversity and Perceptions of Institutional Racism within Finnish Higher Educational Institutions; A Case Study of the University of Jyväskylä**

5. Your personal data will be processed for the research purpose described in the information letter.

In this research, we will collect the following personal data on you [e.g. name, email address, survey responses, audio records, interview notes]. Data collection is based on the research plan.

This research does not involve processing of personal data of special categories.

This privacy notice has been delivered to the data subjects via email. All data subjects are adults.

6. The lawful basis for processing personal data in scientific research

Data subject's consent (GDPR, Article 6.1a, special personal data categories 9.2a)

7. Transfer of personal data outside the EU/EEA area

In this research, your personal data will not be transferred outside the EU/EEA area.

8. Protection for personal data

Processing of personal data in this research is based on an appropriate research plan and the study has a designated person in charge. The personal data collected and saved for this research will include only such data that is necessary for the research purpose.

Preventing identification

☒As a protective measure, any direct identification data are removed upon the compilation of the data set (pseudonymised data allowing restored identification by means of codes or equivalent information, and new data connected to the data set).

The personal data processed in this research will be protected by means of:

☒by other means, how: all data obtained during the interview will be processed confidentially and anonymously. I am the only one who will listen to the recording. The content of our interview may be disclosed to the supervising teacher of the data controller/researcher for study purposes only.

9. PROCESSING OF PERSONAL DATA AFTER THE RESEARCH HAS ENDED

☒ The research register will be deleted after the research has ended, approximately by 09/2024

10. Rights of the data subject

You have the right to cancel your consent if the processing of personal data is based on consent. Such a cancellation has no impact on the lawfulness of consent-based processing conducted before the cancellation of consent.

Right to access your personal data (GDPR, Article 15)

You have the right to get to know whether and which personal data of yours are processed. If you wish, you can also request a copy of your personal data to be processed.

Right to rectification (GDPR, Article 16)

If there are any inaccuracies or errors in your personal data to be processed, you are entitled to request that these be rectified or supplemented.

Right to erasure (GDPR, Article 17)

You have the right to demand in some cases that your personal data be erased. However, the right of erasure is not applicable if the erasure would prevent or greatly hinder reaching the goal of processing in the scientific research.

Right to restriction of processing (GDPR, Article 18)

You have the right to restrict the processing of your personal data in some cases, like when you challenge the correctness of your personal data.

Right to data portability (GDPR, Article 20)

You have the right to receive your submitted personal data in an organised, generally used, and machine-readable format, and also the right to transfer the data to another Data Controller if possible and processing takes place automatically.

Deviating from the rights

In some individual cases, it is possible to deviate from the described rights on the grounds stipulated in the GDPR and the Data Protection Act insofar as the rights would prevent or greatly hinder reaching the goals of scientific or historical research or statistical purposes. The need for deviating from the rights is always assessed case-specifically. It is also possible to deviate from the rights if the data subject cannot, or cannot any longer, be identified.

Profiling and automatised decision-making

In this research, your personal data will not be used for any automatic decision-making. In this research, the purpose of the processing of personal data is not to assess your personal qualities, i.e., profiling, but personal data and qualities are considered from the perspective of broader scientific research.

Implementing the data subject rights

If you have any questions about your data subject rights, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer. All requests concerning the implementation of data subject rights are submitted to the JYU Registry Office. Registry Office and Archives, P.O. Box 35 (C), 40014 University of Jyväskylä, tel. 040 805 3472, email: kirjaamo@jyu.fi. Visiting address: Seminaarinkatu 15, Building C (University Main Building, 1st floor), Room C 140.

Reporting an actual or suspected information security breach to JYU

<https://www.jyu.fi/fi/yliopisto/tietosuojailmoitus/ilmoita-tietoturvaloukkauksesta>

You have to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority especially with a locally relevant one in terms of your permanent place of residence or work if you regard that the processing of personal data violates the EU General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679. In Finland, the supervisory authority is the Data Protection Ombudsman.

Updated contact information of the Office of Data Protection Ombudsman:

<https://tietosuoja.fi/etusivu>

Appendix C Consent Form



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

I have been asked to take part in a study named, **Narratives of Racism Encounters by International Students at a Finnish University**

I understand that participation in the study is voluntary and that I can stop participating at any time, without giving a reason. There will be no negative consequences for me if I withdraw. The data collected about me up to the point of withdrawal may still be used in the study.

I have been adequately informed about the study and the processing of my personal data. I have received the information sheet about the study, as well as the privacy notice. I have also had the opportunity to ask the researchers further questions.

I confirm that I will not participate in interview data collection if I have flu symptoms, fever, am recovering from illness, or am feeling otherwise unwell.

Yes No

I understand the information that I have received and agree to participate in this study.

Yes No

I give my consent to the sections specified above by ticking the "yes" boxes. If I do not wish to participate in a particular section, I have the right to refuse by ticking the "no" box. However, I still agree to participate in the study otherwise.

Confirmation

By signing this consent form, I accept that my data will be used in the study described in the research notification.

Signature of the recipient _____

Name in print _____

Date _____

Appendix D: Interview Guide

The interview starts with brief reintroduction of the study to participants and opening question to start the conversation

Opening Questions

Let us start by sharing our/your stories.

1. Tell me a little about yours.
Name?
What current program you are enrolled at the university?
Where you from?
2. Can you describe your academic journey at the University of Jyväskylä?
3. Why you choose to study at university of Jyväskylä?

Questions On Personal Experiences of racism and other diversity Issues:

1. Have there been specific instances where you felt that your racial or ethnic identity influenced your university experience? Could you describe such these instances? (IF any)
2. Have you ever had any encounter of racism within the university.
If you have, would you like to share them
3. When this happened and what did you do or think? (Reactions to Racism IF any)
4. How did you manage the situation, did you seek support from the university, and if so, what was that experience like

Question on Support and management.

1. Let us discuss the support systems available at the university for

addressing racial discrimination. Have you ever needed to use them, and **(If you have)** what was your experience?

2. What improvements can be made at the university to support students in such situations?
3. How do you think incidents of racism be addressed by university? what will this do to help?
4. In your view, how effectively does the university address diversity and inclusion within the classroom and campus environment?
5. Reflecting on your time here, how would you describe your inclusion or exclusion within the university.
6. Are there any specific challenges or positive experiences you would like to share?

Closing Question,

Let's have an open discussion about this

1. Considering recent shifts in government policies and the broader social climate, have there been any impacts on your student experience and overall well-being?
2. Are there any additional experiences or thoughts related to the subject based on your time at the University of Jyväskylä that you would like to share?

Appendix E: Code-Document Sankey Diagram (Source Atlas.ti).

