



Nottingham Trent  
University



# Say My Name: Experiences & Impacts of (Mis)Pronunciation of Students' Names in Higher Education

## Summary Findings & Recommendations

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# Saying Names Right?

## It matters for

# Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion

### Project aims

- explore how pronunciation of students' names is experienced by students, & by teaching & professional services staff who interact with them
- use findings to constructively critique current language & behaviour practices & produce new evidence-based guidelines to help engender inclusivity & equality in higher education

### Project methods

- A survey of higher education institutions in England, to map current policy & practice
- In-depth interviews with 10 teaching & professional services staff in higher education in England, to capture their experiences
- In-depth interviews & 'name story' work with 22 undergraduate students in England, to capture their experiences

There are more international students & Black, Asian and other minority ethnic students studying in English universities (UK Universities 2018) than ever before, suggesting that higher education has become less monocultural, mononational, & monolingual in recent years. It is likely that there is an accompanying greater variability in students' names.

Personal names index identities, including socio-cultural identities of ethnicity, nationality, language & religion (Pilcher 2016). The complexity of entanglements between names & identities means that if names are misspelt/mispronounced, identities are misrepresented. This may result in affected persons feeling disrespected, disempowered, excluded & othered (Wheeler 2016).

Name mispronunciation &/or misspelling can be interpreted as ethnic or racial micro-aggressions which reinforce cultural paradigms of privilege & power (Kohli & Solórzano 2012; Payne *et al* 2018).

This study is the first to examine day-to-day experiences of students' name pronunciation in the context of UK higher education & to make recommendations for policy & practice.

# Survey Findings

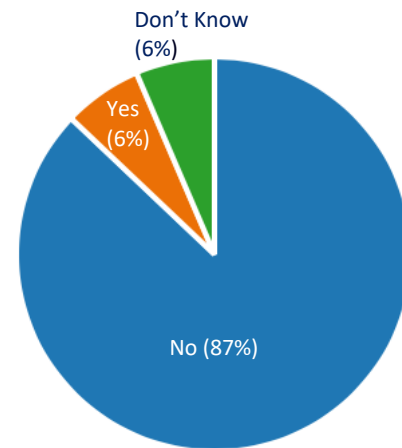
## The survey

- 31 responses (response rate = 10%)
- Including from 8 Russell Group universities & 14 post-1992 universities
- Roles of respondents included Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic Registrar, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Directors, Directors of Student Services

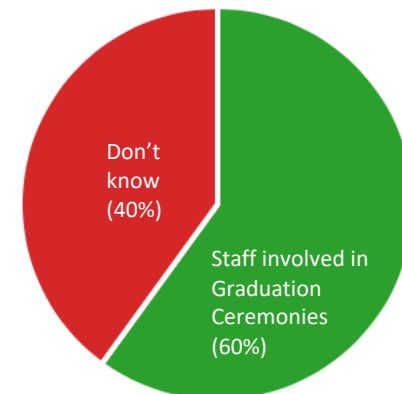
## KEY FINDINGS

- Based on our survey, it is rare for institutions of higher education in England to have any formal policy or guidance on the pronunciation of students' names.
- If formal policy or guidance exists, this tends to relate ONLY to the pronunciation of students' names at graduation ceremonies & not to day-to-day teaching & learning environments.
- Around half of respondents reported that, in their institution, there was some ad hoc, individualised 'activity' relating to students' names at graduation - but no formal policy or guidance.
- Around a third of respondents reported that they knew of ad hoc activity unrelated to graduation ceremonies e.g., by individuals, or special 'one-off' events or campaigns around the pronunciation of students' names by the Students' Union, or during Race Equality week.

Does your institution currently have a formal policy and/or guidance to ensure that students' names are pronounced correctly during their time at your college/university?



Which of the following categories of staff are subject to your institution's policy/guidance on the correct pronunciation of students' names? Select all that apply.



Teaching staff	0
Student-facing professional serv...	0
Staff involved in graduation cere...	3
Don't know	2
Other	0

“As a graduation presenter I am provided with a list of names &, where available, phonetic guidance on pronunciation. This information is provided by the students. I also spend a long time going through the list & writing my own pronunciation guide (based on Googling & seeking advice from those fluent in the language)”.

# Findings

## From STUDENTS

### Participants

- All participants were volunteers & were 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduates studying in England
- Participants included international students & home/EU students
- Pseudonyms are used in line with choices of participants

### KEY FINDINGS

- Students' experiences were not uniformly negative & some were appreciative of efforts made by individual staff to say their names correctly.
- Students felt that online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic had mixed impacts on the correct pronunciation of their names. A benefit was that their names were displayed on screen. But online teaching also made it more difficult to correct name mispronunciation by lecturers.
- Perceived power imbalances between themselves & teaching staff (& fear of repercussions) meant that incidences of mispronunciation of their names often went unchallenged.
- Mispronunciation of names by staff, & name avoidance by staff, can de-motivate students, hindering their participation & impacting their feelings of belonging in learning environments.
- Constantly having to deal with name mispronunciation &/or misspelling is hard & tedious work.
- For many students, correct pronunciation &/or spelling of their names are issues of respect, equality & inclusivity.

“So, the lecturer kept saying my name again & again till he got it right. So that was a really good situation of someone trying to get my name right”.

**Aamir, International Student**

“It's great online because you get to put your name, you can rename yourself.

So, I put my pronunciation in like the name thing which people are hugely appreciative of”.

**Vanika, International Student**

“I guess, when you're studying, we don't dare to say stuff because we're scared of the authority. Yeah, for sure 'cause they are the ones who are checking my assignments & exams”.

**Reka, International Student**

“I have given up correcting people now & answer to anytime it sounds like my name. I think it scares people to say my name, so they don't upset me or are being racist when they say it wrong”.

**Baako, Home/EU Student**

“It isn't really fun. Like, I have to, like, keep saying, ‘no, this is how you say my name’. I don't want to keep having that conversation”.

**Aamir, International Student**

“The lecturer, something starts to form on her lips, & then she's like, you know what, never mind. And then she just calls the person next to me”.

**Ayena, Home/EU Student**

“By misspelling & mispronouncing my name, it seemed certain staff members were failing to uphold the ‘inclusive’ part of the university's equality, diversity & inclusivity statement”.

**Safiyah, Home/EU student**

“It very much feels like I'm being disrespected & dishonoured when people don't get it right continually”.

**Cinnomen, Home/EU Student**

# Findings

## From STAFF

### Participants

- All participants were volunteers
- 6 participants were lecturers/associate professors/professors & 4 were professional services staff
- Pseudonyms are used in line with choices of participants

### KEY FINDINGS

- Most staff believed that pronunciation of names is an important issue for equality, inclusivity & respecting diversity.
- Teaching staff felt that power imbalances between themselves & students meant that students were unlikely to correct name mispronunciation.
- Both teaching & professional services staff said that they had avoided saying students' names due to worries about pronunciation.
- Individual staff used their own ad hoc strategies to try to improve their pronunciation of students' names, including asking students directly, using Google, writing phonetic notes, & asking colleagues with relevant linguistic skills.
- Most staff wanted more guidance & support to help them respect students' names.

"EDI is partly about that sense of feeling at home within an institution, and if in some small way, learning people's names & being respectful of the challenge of learning people's names, that does contribute to a more positive EDI outcome".

**Peter, Professor**

"I would ask the student & I would do that in a one-on-one meeting. I wouldn't really like to do that in a group with students. So that there's not that sort of awkward kind of conversation in front of everybody else".

**Sarah, Associate Professor**

"Even when I have mispronounced students' names, because of the power & equality of a teacher-student dynamic, they've probably not felt able to speak up & make a fuss about it".

**James, Lecturer**

"I ask students, in my first session, to write their names down on a paper & put it in front of themselves. And then I go around asking them to introduce themselves & I ask them to say their name & I make little notes for myself how they pronounce it".

**Iris, Associate Professor**

"Sometimes, you just configure the sentence to avoid saying the name. Or you find yourself sometimes saying it really quickly or really quiet, perhaps a little bit more quietly than you normally would".

**Peter, Professor**

"So, I literally Googled how to say each name & then wrote it phonetically, because I wanted to make sure".

**Sarah, Associate Professor**

"I got in touch with the equality & diversity people at my university & asked them if they had any resources & they shared the 'hear my name resource' with me, which is really good. And I really need to put that on my email signature".

**Katy, Lecturer**

You can't train everybody to be able to pronounce everyone's name. But training can raise awareness of issues that students might encounter when their name is mispronounced & so staff could then put strategies in place.

**James, Lecturer**

# Messages for policy & practice

## KEY MESSAGES FOR POLICY

- Saying students' names right is not just for graduation
- Names & their pronunciation are an important EDI issue & can also impact student belonging & engagement
- Ad hoc &/or individualized activities around pronunciation of students' names should be replaced with institution-wide guidance &/or policy
- Institutional strategies should address the pronunciation of students' names from registration right through to & including graduation - & everything inbetween
- EDI training for all staff should include names & their pronunciation & cultural variations in naming conventions
- Induction programmes for all students should address issues of names & identity & cultural variations in naming conventions. Let students know it is okay to correct name mispronunciation by staff!
- Software solutions such as NameCoach should be used to embed audio recordings of name pronunciation within students' records systems & in email signatures of staff & students

"It's better if the university has some guidelines or something where the staff now has to get to know the name of the students in the classroom, so that they don't mispronounce & doesn't make anybody feel awkward just because of this".

**Aabir, International Student**

## KEY MESSAGES FOR PRACTICE

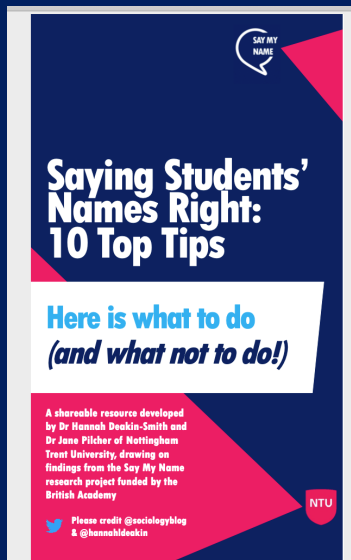
- Students appreciate attempts to pronounce their name correctly & see it as a matter of equality, & of respecting cultural diversity & their individual identity
- Ask a student how to say their name, but not in group settings. This puts them in the spotlight & may be experienced as 'othering'
- Don't avoid saying a student's name & don't offer to alter their name: always use their preferred name
- Use online resources to help you say students' names correctly, such as NameShouts.com or Howtopronounce.com
- Help normalize the declaration of preferred pronunciation of names by including an audio-recording of your own name in your email signature. Encourage your colleagues & your students to do so, too

"When I mention names, people would say its only a little thing. I'm like, it's not, it's not. This may sound little but it has such a huge impact on a person's identity & sense of belonging".

**Lian, Advisor for International Students**

# Resources

Want to access some shareable resources?  
Go to <https://bit.ly/3LwDf3c>  
or use the QR code!



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