

BLACK STUDENTS TALK: MENTAL HEALTH PEER SUPPORT FOR BLACK UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE UK



Impact Report 2020/21

Published:

November 2021

Version 1

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PEOPLE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Black university students across England and Wales have had to survive racism, discrimination, and harassment whilst simultaneously being expected to thrive as students. In addition, many Black students are collectively grieving the disappearances and murders of Black people around the world; and then used as unpaid Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Consultants for their departments based on their lived daily trauma.

Black Students Talk (BST) is a mental health and wellbeing peer support group run for and by Black university students in England and Wales. Black students come together to listen, learn, and support their own and each other's mental health and wellbeing.



Methods

Black students' described their experiences of attending or facilitating Black Students Talk by completing an online qualitative survey.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was conducted on the student's feedback and summarised with illustrative quotes.



Findings

- Anti-Black racism impacts university students' mental health. Black students need Black-only safe spaces to be brave and support eachother's mental health and wellbeing.
 - Black students value and trust resources and support that has been designed by Black students, for Black students. Currently there are not enough sources of support for Black students at university.
- Peer support facilitators need to be compassionate, flexible, open, honest, and casual. Facilitators need mental health support, training, reflective practice and supervision, access to resources, and professional development.
 - Black Students Talk has led to students engaging in mental health services, receiving diagnoses and support, and learning how to heal and support others.

"From Black Students Talk I get recognition that what I feel is not the brain of a mad woman"-**BST** attendee

Next Steps for Black Students Talk

- Network and community building.
 - Reflect on lessons learnt.
 - Grow Black Students Talk.
- Research Black university student mental heath and wellbeing.
 - Further resource development





Recommendations for others

- Invest resources into and collaborate with Black students, groups and community organisations (including Black Students Talk) to (re-)design mental health support that meets Black Students' needs and builds trust.
 - Look after yourself, your peers, and your colleagues.
- Engage with and share the free resources designed by Black university students: https://Blackpeopletalk.co.uk/resources

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BACKGROUND

BLACK STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Black university students across England and Wales have had to survive racism, discrimination, and harassment whilst simultaneously being expected to thrive as students. In addition, many Black students are collectively grieving the disappearances and murders of Black people around the world; and then used as unpaid Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Consultants for their departments based on their lived daily trauma.

Often, university mental health services fail to recognise the impact that racism and anti-Black stigma, discrimination, bullying, abuse, and harassment has on the mental health of Black students. When this happens, Black students may feel ignored, invalidated, and unsupported.

There are many ways in which Black university students attempt to find sources of community support, joy, and healing. One way is peer support. This report introduces Black Students Talk (BST), a mental health and wellbeing peer support group for Black university students; and presents the self-reported experiences and outcomes of mental health peer support for Black students who attend or facilitate Black Students Talk (BST).

BLACK PEOPLE TALK

Black People Talk (BPT) is a community interest company (CIC) that was established in 2019 by Yannick Yalipende and Nkasi Stoll to provide safe spaces for Black students to be brave and talk about their mental health. Since then, BPT has opened up to educational institutions, places of work, and in the community. BPT works in collaboration with Black people and allies, to reduce mental health inequality in access to appropriate support.

The aim of Black Students Talk (BST), developed by Black university students, are to:

Challenge

Challenge the unhelpful narratives around Black students and their mental health.

Unpack

Unpack the lived experiences and life events that shape the mental health and wellbeing of Black students in the UK.

Awareness

Increase awareness and understanding around UK Black student mental health and wellbeing.

Support

Support the mental health and wellbeing of Black students by providing them with the tools needed to advocate for themselves

BLACK STUDENTS TALK

Black Students Talk (BST) is a mental health and wellbeing peer support group run for and by Black university students in England and Wales. Black students come together to listen, learn, and support their own and each other's mental health and wellbeing. The Black Students Talk (BST) team currently consists of two directors, one manager, eight facilitators, and one Counselling Psychologist.

STUDENT SPACE

BPT was given funding from Student Space, a programme being run and delivered by Student Minds, the UK's student mental health charity, to run weekly Black Students Talk (BST) for Black students across England and Wales from April 2021 until August 2021. To find out more about the Student Space programme visit: https://studentspace.org.uk/.

BLACK STUDENTS TALK X STUDENT SPACE SESSIONS

The peer support sessions were designed by and for Black university students. The content of the sessions were based on the findings of the <u>Black Student Wellbeing Study</u> (a qualitative study on Black student wellbeing in UK Higher Education), experiential knowledge, and workshops conducted with Black students in 2019 and 2020.

The structure of the sessions were as follows: 1) Session agreements including confidentiality statement 2) introductions and icebreaker 3) an introduction to current research and cultural explanatory models of mental health 4) a practical peer support exercise using the 'listening triad' technique 5) group discussion 6) self-care and coping strategies discussion. Guest speakers from Black community groups, mental health services, and university services were invited to collaborate on a session each month.

Month and Year	Session	Number of attendees
May 2021	Depression and low mood	15
	Anxiety and stress	20
	Unbelonging at university	18
	Grief and loss	9
	Relationships	13
June 2021	Body image	16
	Race-based trauma and stress	10
	Neurodiversity	16
	Identity	10
July 2021	Motivation	12
	Reclaiming the Narrative	6
	Tree of Life	12
	Self-expression	16
August 2021	Blue and green spaces	10
_	Transitions and endings	13

ATTENDEES

All the attendees were Black university students from a British or international Caribbean, African or mixed with Black heritage background. Attendees were either studying an undergraduate or postgraduate course or recently left a university course. Students found out about the Black Students Talk (BST) sessions via social media (Twitter

and Instagram), Eventbrite, BPT website (<u>www.blackpeopletalk.co.uk</u>), Student Space website (<u>www.studentspace.com</u>), word of mouth, and university newsletters. To sign up for Black Students Talk (BST) sessions, students had to register on the BPT website with their university email address and were then sent a unique Zoom link and passcode a day before the session.

FACILITATORS

The facilitators (n=8) were Black university students from a British or international Caribbean, African or mixed with Black heritage. Facilitators were either studying an undergraduate or postgraduate course or recently graduated from a university course in England or Wales.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

From April 2021 facilitators received weekly reflective practice sessions with Dr Hayat Hussein (Counselling Psychologist). During reflective practice, the facilitators were encouraged to present an experience from the Black Students Talk (BST) sessions to the group, reflect and review the experience, and explore new understandings, ideas and learnings from the experience. The aim was to provide mental health support to the facilitators, and guide them to implement the reflections and learnings into their professional and personal experiences.

TRAINING

Before commencing Black Students Talk (BST), the facilitators received training from the co-Founders on i) Black student mental health ii) facilitation skills iii) safeguarding and referral processes iv) signposting and v) data protection.

In June 2021 facilitators were provided free training on understanding hearing voices and supporting people who hear voices. The training was delivered by <u>Voice Collective</u>, an organisation that supports young people who hear, see or sense things other people do not. Black Students Talk (BST) organised this training as attendees and facilitators expressed their desire to know more about the experiences of people who hear voices. The facilitators fed back that the free 3-hour training was helpful for their personal and professional knowledge and understanding of psychosis and psychotic-like experiences.



SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS FOR FACILITATORS

Supporting the personal, academic and career development of the facilitators is of utmost importance; this is why Black Students Talk (BST) actively provides facilitators with opportunities to develop their presentation, networking, leadership, and communication skills.

This year, facilitators were paid to present at the <u>AMOSHEE conference</u> on 'Creating An Anti-Racist Culture In Higher Education' as part of Stephen Lawrence Day. On the anniversary of George Floyd's murder, facilitators were paid to design and facilitate a workshop on anti-racism for staff at a London university. They received glowing praise from senior members of academic and professional staff at the university.

BLACK STUDENTS TALK RESOURCES

With the right materials and resources, Black students can live happy healthy lives. Therefore, Black Students Talk (BST) is collaborating with a Black digital artist @waitingtocreate to create resources that capture some of the key stressors that lead to mental health difficulties, and share ways of healing for Black university students.

Resources are curated by Black university students, for Black students and those interested in supporting others. The resources aim to create awareness of these stressors and presents an opportunity to discuss issues and healing in more detail. All resources are free to read and download from: https://blackpeopletalk.co.uk/resources.

Several of <u>@waitingtocreate</u>'s digital art, commissioned by Black Students Talk (BST), have been illustrated throughout this report.



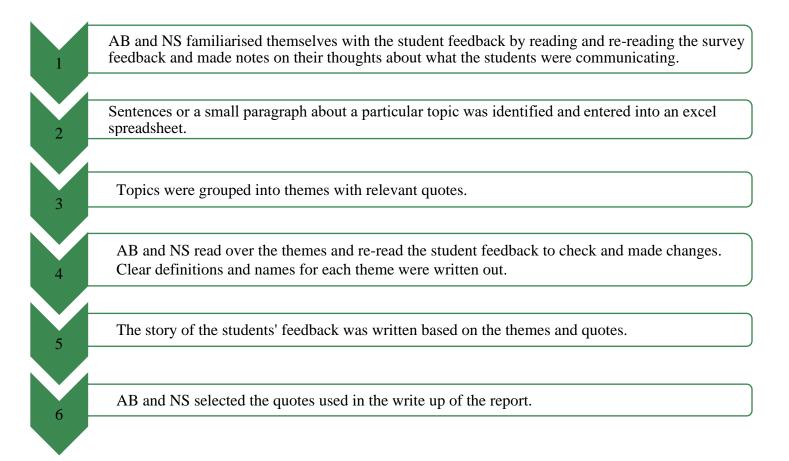
SPTBLACK PEOPLE METHODS

FEEDBACK COLLECTION METHOD

To understand how Black students', describe their experiences of attending or facilitating Black Students Talk (BST), Nkasi Stoll and Yannick Yalipende designed an online qualitative survey on Google Forms to elicit the students' anonymous feedback. Attendees were asked by the facilitators after every session to fill out the survey. Facilitators were invited to fill out a survey specific to their role after every session by the project manager.

ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was conducted by Abiy Babatunde (AB) and Nkasi Stoll (NS) on the student's feedback which has been summarised below using illustrative quotes. NS conducted the write up of the feedback.



BLACK-ONLY "SPACE FOR THE VOICELESS"

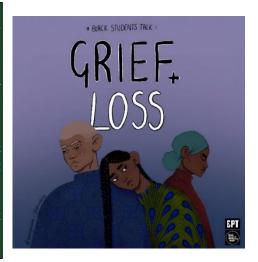
Students spoke about Black Students Talk (BST) being a "safe" space where they can heal and get mental health support from other Black university students. They expressed the importance of the sessions being for and by Black students only, so they can discuss issues specific to the Black community (e.g. anti-Black racism, prejudice, discrimination, harassment; shared cultural practices and experiences) that affect them without potential repercussions. These repercussions included being gaslit, silenced, misunderstood and judged by white or other racially minoritised students. Many students highlighted that Black Students Talk (BST) is one of the few, if not the only, community where they can access this support. One student said that the programme "provides a space for the voiceless".

"It was the first time I felt like I had a safe space to discuss issues with my mental health and well-being with the acknowledgment of how being Black affects my experiences".

"I like how different topics are mentioned and talked about in detail from colourism to texturism. I also like how the audience are encouraged to participate if they feel the need to".

"What I liked most is the idea of providing a space for the voiceless, it was so great to be heard and I just really enjoyed hearing others' perspectives and just listening for a change".

"BST is a space where we can be human together in all our differences and without judging each other or placing unnecessary expectations on each other. It is a space we can be ourselves, without a fight, without fighting, without having to be strong".



Students spoke about the racism they face being Black at their university and how racial discrimination and stereotyping can impact their mental health and wellbeing. They felt that Black Students Talk (BST) gives them respite from the unsupportive communities that exist at university, and often exclude Black students. Many students spoke about feeling liberated, relieved and at peace after attending the session(s) because they can talk in an "unfiltered" and "truthful" way, whereas outside of such safe spaces, it can be hard to be themselves.

"Being able to have a space with only Black people where we can freely talk about subjects, we are not able to with others like the daily racism and hatred we experience, is so important for mine and others' healing".

"We always have great discussions and it's important to have a space to talk about the issues that worried us that affect us differently due to our racial background".

"BST is so helpful especially for those who may be the only Black person on their course. There were people I could relate to in this session, and it made me feel a lot better".

"I have learnt that there are other people who look like me that feel the same sense of not belonging at university".



The opportunity to support fellow Black students to share their stories, sometimes for the first time, with peers was discussed as a personal benefit to facilitating and attending Black Students Talk (BST). Students discussed feeling a sense of "pride" and "joy" in being able to help students on their mental health journey. Students also spoke of the encouraging and supportive attendees who, with the facilitators, helped to create a safe and brave space for Black students to share their mental health and wellbeing concerns. This was especially important for students who felt they did not have an existing safe space at their university to explore their Blackness and mental health.

"I love the sense of community, real understanding, and a truly safe space to comfortably talk about the issues we face".

"The sessions are a really good way to listen to diverse thought and really hear and understand these diverse perspectives. So much to learn from the different voices I listened to so far at the BST sessions".

Students valued the fact that Black Students Talk (BST) is not designed and run by their university, but by and for Black students. This is because many students do not trust their university mental health services to not be racially insensitive. Some students recognised that universities do not have Black students only safe spaces that are designed and run by and for them so "Black Students Talk (BST) should be at every university that cares about Black students".

"I would recommend BST because they recognise that being Black is not a monolith, there is a shared common understanding in BST that not all other "EDI", "outreach" or whatever term they use is".

"So many universities don't have mental health support specifically for Black students so having this support group has been really helpful".

"I 100% would recommend BST because not a lot of support especially for mental health is available to Black students. This would enable a lot of us feel heard and supported".

HEALING THROUGH BLACK STUDENTS TALK CONTENT

Students spoke about the Black Students Talk (BST) psychoeducational content feeling validating and relevant to their identities, experiences, and lives; especially for their understanding of the intersection between Blackness, mental health, and neurodiversity, grief, collective trauma, and relationships with the self and others.

"Today's theme grief and loss was so needed and is critical in these trying times. We shared about grief, loss, but also about joy. It was very insightful and also comforting to see how we all share similar (although very different) experiences. We also talked about Black collective grief and how that is not often possible especially within the London Black community. We talked also about toxic behaviours around grieving, and how to support oneself and others when grieving. It is really healing to have this session today".

"The sessions were always really interesting and let me think more about my own identity".

The neurodiversity session, in collaboration with <u>ADHD Babes</u>, was reported as particularly beneficial for students' understanding of themselves. Multiple students reported that since attending the session they registered for an assessment, signed up to their university disability services, and/or received an ADHD diagnosis.

- "I have a better understanding about my own ADHD".
- "I think most I got out was not to feel guilty because I'm a high functioning person with neurodiversity. I needed to hear that, be told that".
- "I've started to respect my mind more: before, I was clearly seeing my ADHD as a hurdle or an obstacle but now I understand it's just another part of who I am and that I just need to take my needs into consideration if I want to be my best self!"
- "I have an improvement in knowledge about the way I function and process information".



Students felt the content was "insightful" and "interesting" as they were able to learn about and give a shared language to experiences shared by Black students. Because of this, the content was also seen as a way of connecting Black students through mutual self-discovery. A couple of students said how this gave them the motivation to continue their mental health and self-care journey outside of the sessions.

- "They are all relevant topics that I can relate to and made me feel like I was not alone and that we all go through it".
- "I love how we discuss a typical topic, and find the ways being Black influences it and makes it a bit more difficult and then we brainstorm together to fight that, and to make it a positive experience! I really feel more motivated to do many, many great things, thank you guys so much!!!"
- "The topics are awesome and led to in-depth thought, critical thinking and greater understanding of each other. Some have created more questions, which are always good to support (personal) research and discovery".

The use of questions and prompts during Black Students Talk (BST) sessions was said to be helpful to keep discussions structured, relevant and helpful. They also expressed that the personal attributes of the facilitators e.g., being "compassionate", "flexible", "open", "honest", and "casual" made the discussions more positive to have.

- "I loved the themes and the question prompts; they were really helped prompt discussion. I also like how they were on the PowerPoint in the background for reference, so I could keep track of the discussion topics".
- "I was shocked that I felt quite close to the facilitators even though I had never seen them before!"
- "The format is really nice. And it works for people on the neurodivergence spectrum (I am one of them)".

Students felt all Black students should have access to Black Students Talk (BST) content, resources and sessions because "knowledge is power" and because several reported there is currently a lack of content that supports Black students' mental health. There was a shared belief that Black Students Talk (BST) content is needed to support Black students on their journey throughout university and beyond.

"There were topics we discussed during the BST sessions today i.e. Black identity, being one of few Black students at uni, that I think other Black students would benefit from hearing and joining the discussion".

"I would recommend BST to other Black students, so they gain knowledge on the topics mentioned as it is of help, and we need to share the reality of our lives with each other".

"Every university needs BST, for all the things I've gained, and then some. The facilitators are always fantastic, and the sense of community I've literally not been able to get anywhere else is much needed. Even if you feel you have a handle on being Black in the UK/US/Western World--trust me, there's always more to learn, which is more ways to grow your self-confidence, compassion, and self".

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Students felt Black Students Talk (BST) provided the space for them to grow in their self-esteem, self-worth and self-love, through community support. Students shared that they were able to learn about themselves and ways of looking after their wellbeing through facilitating supportive and brave spaces with other Black students.

"This session has motivated/pushed me to go forth with running for the Afro-Caribbean Society at my uni".

"From BST I've gained motivation, community, understanding, respect, confidence, self-assurance, and genuine, nurturing kindness. I really feel more ready to face the world (and University). A healthy dose of knowledge also helps me properly navigate the spaces I'm in for my best rates of success!"

"I've started standing up for myself more and looking after my mental health every day".

"I've formed a better understanding of myself and what is it to be Black and tools in navigating society".

"I learned to be more understanding towards myself, as everyone in the talks are so understanding of each other".

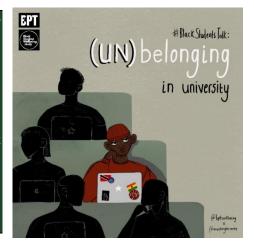
Several students indicated that they would not have been able to receive the personal benefits they got from Black Students Talk (BST) if it was a racially mixed space. They felt this is because Black students share specific pressures and difficulties that only other Black students can provide support and advice on, only Black students can model healthy coping strategies for, and only Black students can understand and validate.

"I got a sense of community, a safe place to vent and express myself without filter and lots of helpful advice on how to better treat my mental health and look after myself considering the specific pressures I deal with as a young Black woman".

"I feel like I had a weight being lifted off my shoulders, it's really nice to receive support from Black peers".

"At BST I feel peace – I can talk when I wanted and listened when I wanted. I felt valued as part of the discussion even when I didn't say anything".

"From BST I am heard, I am validated. Sharing humanity with other amazing women who are also figuring out their own spaces of healing and joy in their lives. Healing and a sense of justice".



Many students mentioned that they are doing more things to look after their mental health since going to Black Students Talk (BST) including reading recommended self-help books, signing up to therapy, pursuing a mental health diagnosis and treatment.

"I have been journaling with active purpose to find out more about myself".

"I've re-started my happiness jar, I've started journaling, I've started opening up about my experiences as a Black person to those around me, and just. It's been nice to be more confident and stand up for myself more regularly. I feel like I'm growing more and more proud of myself".

Some students spoke about being able to sit with their thoughts and feelings for the first time because Black Students Talk (BST) provided a safe space to "explore issues and hear different perspectives". Students expressed this led to a change towards a more positive mindset.

"BST fueled a thought in me about things that has helped me with my mental health without me realising it".

"More of a change of attitude and confidence that I am on the right track".

Several students spoke about Black Students Talk (BST) sessions being "difficult" due to the content or conversations being emotionally triggering. A couple of students spoke about coping with the difficult sessions by practising self-compassion (including reassuring themselves that they are okay or being patient with themselves when they are struggling).

"The session was hard today but I plan to not beat myself up so much and giving myself grace".

"Rediscovery is hard but is so important - I'm not the same person I was 10 years ago".

"Some of the conversations, they've taught me how to be okay with the fact that I am struggling, it's not easy, but I have my self-care now".

WHAT DO WE WANT? CHANGE!

Students were asked what changes they would like to see in Black Students Talk (BST) i.e., what they would like removed and/or added to the programme. Most students said they enjoyed the sessions as they were and recommended no change. However, some students gave helpful and insightful suggestions for change (the following are quotes from students):



Based on the feedback from Black university students who either facilitated or attended Black Students Talk (BST), numerous next steps for the programme have been planned. Our next steps are to continue to grow, learn and improve the service for and by Black student communities across England and Wales by focusing on reflection, community building, and growth:

Community Building

- Build a network of people working, researching, studying, living Black student mental health.
- Attend and actively participate in community events.
- Invest in existing collaborations and new collaborators.
- Design and organise ways to connect Black students together.

Growth

- Improve access to mental health support for Black students nationally.
- Develop more helpful content and resources via Black Students Talk (BST)'s social media and website.
- Re-design Black Students Talk (BST) peer support sessions based on student feedback.
- Invest in the personal and professional development of the Black Students Talk (BST) team.

Reflections

- Co-design a method of reflective practice for the Black Students Talk (BST) team.
- Celebrate and reflect on the lessons from Black Students Talk (BST) so far.
- Listen to learn from Black students about what they need from us.
- Recruit paid student consultants and advisory team to plan Black Students Talk (BST)'s next steps.



PLE RECOMMENDATIONS

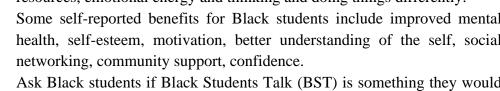
The following recommendations are based on student feedback collected as part of this report, and reflections made by the Black Students Talk (BST) team. These recommendations are not an exhaustive list and any changes should be based on the needs of the cohort of Black students at any given university.

INVEST IN BLACK STUDENTS

- Listen to and believe Black students when they tell you that you, your peers and/or your institution are racist or racially insensitive. Offer support but know your limitations and signpost them to support.
- Co-design anti-racist, pro-Black mental health support with Black students, recent graduates, staff and anti-racist community organisations.
- There is information out there read and/or listen to books, research outputs, videos. Don't rely on Black students to teach you, unless they are doing so in a paid and supported capacity.
- Anti-racist training and mental health training for staff can improve the relationship between Black students, their peers, and staff.

INVEST IN BLACK STUDENTS TALK

- Black Students Talk (BST) is a huge investment requiring time, finances, resources, emotional energy and thinking and doing things differently.
- Some self-reported benefits for Black students include improved mental health, self-esteem, motivation, better understanding of the self, social
- Ask Black students if Black Students Talk (BST) is something they would benefit from being set up at their university.





- If you are a Black university student who is struggling at university check out www.Blackpeopletalk.co.uk for free resources and events.
- Build a supportive community around you and invest in them as much as they invest in you.
- Find what brings you joy and do more of it.

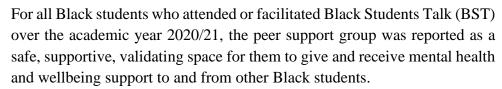
"Every university needs Black Students Talk to give us a safe where we accepted are unconditionally and we know there will be no judgement, no denial, no gaslighting. Where we can talk about specific sensitive community struggles for us Black *people*" – Black Students Talk attendee





PEOPLE CONCLUSIONS

Black Students Talk (BST) provides Black students with a supportive community to (i) challenge the unhelpful narratives around Black students and their mental health; (ii) unpack the lived experiences and life events that shape the mental health and wellbeing of Black students in England and Wales; (iii) increase awareness and understanding around Black student mental health and wellbeing and (iv) support the mental health and wellbeing of Black students by providing them with the tools needed to advocate for themselves.







The evaluation of the Black Students Talk (BST) x Student Space programme was used to build on the Black Students Talk (BST) model to improve the programme and make resourcing decisions that are in the students' best interests. We will continue to collect and analyse session-by-session feedback from attendees and facilitators to help us learn about the impact, effectiveness, and value of mental wellbeing peer support for Black students over the next academic year.

The report highlights the importance of Black Students Talk (BST) being designed, developed, delivered, and evaluated by and for Black students. Attendees and facilitators feel a sense of ownership over the group, which adds value to the effectiveness of the programme. We will continue to work with sponsors, collaborators, community organisations to provide effective mental health and wellbeing peer support for Black students across England and Wales.

Please send all correspondence to: Nkasi Stoll (hello@blackpeopletalk.co.uk).

Black Students Talk x Student Space Team

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