Pre-Assessment Support: Student Uptake and Preferences

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Introduction

Course Evaluation Plans for Sport Science, Nutrition and related courses have identified a difference in attainment between white students and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic group (BAME) students across a range of modules, which has persisted despite efforts of staff to minimise the attainment gap. It has previously been identified that use of academic language can be a contributing factor to lower attainment for BAME students (Open University Annual Report, 2013) and that BAME students may be less likely to access support (Stuart et al., 2011). Course staff and Faculty provide various services that aim to support students with academic writing for assignments but anecdotally this beneficial resource does not appear to be well used and submission of poorly written and prepared reports affects grades.

This study investigated the use of currently available pre-assessment support services and students' preferences. We aimed to determine whether students knew about available academic support and whether they had used such support in order to evaluate whether there are differences between student groups. We also explored student perceptions of the support available and preferences for help and advice when preparing for submission of assessments to determine key factors in providing affective academic support to all students.

Methods

Needs Analysis
Data collection consisted of hardcopy questionnaires, targeting student members within Sport Science and Nutrition courses at Kingston University London, publicised by word of mouth and distributed by student research partners. The survey took less than 5 minutes to complete and asked for anonymous demographic information (course, year, ethnicity, commuting status). The questionnaire aimed to capture the awareness and use of pre-assessment support, based on the academic services offered by the university, in addition to students' preferences and reasons for not seeking support. The survey was conducted in December 2019.

Surveys were complemented by a focus group with students across levels 4, 5 and 6. This focus group allowed the study to capture a more comprehensive view of student members preferences, as suggested by McKenna (2017). The focus group followed a semi-structured guide, led by student partners.

Data Analysis
Descriptive statistics were analysed from the survey and processed in Microsoft Excel to determine means, averages, sums and percentages. The qualitative data was analysed using hierarchical content analysis, which identified codes, grouped them into categories and dimensions, and identified the way these patterns interact (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This allowed the identification of similarities/patterns in the data and the creation of higher and lower order categories.

References

McKenna, C. (2017). Hearing student views through focus groups: creating spaces for dialogue. LSEBlog, accessed online [04/10/17, 14:00]: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/education/2017/05/09/hearing-student-views-through-focus-groups-creating-spaces-for-dialogue/
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Stuart, M, Lido, C., and Morgan, J., 2011. Personal stories: how students' social and cultural life histories interact with the field of higher education. International Journal of Lifelong Education. 30 (4) pp. 489–508
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Acknowledgements

Results

A total of 80 students completed the survey, 47 reported their ethnicity as white and 33 reported as BAME. Overall, students reported moderate awareness of support services (65% SEC Academic Skills Centre (SASC), 83% office hours, 56% appointments) but use of these was much lower (Figure 1; 25% SASC, 50% office hours, 30% staff appointments). There were trends towards differences between the white and the BAME students (Use of office hours 55% white: 42% BAME, Use of staff appointments 36% white: 22% BAME), which are reflected in reported preferences (Figure 2.) where BAME students highest preference was In-Module Tutorials (52%) compared to white students preferring office hours or appointments (57%,53% respectively) but no statistically significant difference was observed. Use of email and online support was also indicated as a moderate preference for the whole student group (45% and 31%, respectively). The focus group found that student use of pre-assessment support is influenced by pre-assessment concerns (e.g. · deadlines, the content and existing responsibilities), preferences for more specialised and personal forms of support (e.g. subject specific lecturers and personal tutors), and preferences regarding the nature of communication (e.g. face to face and flexible).
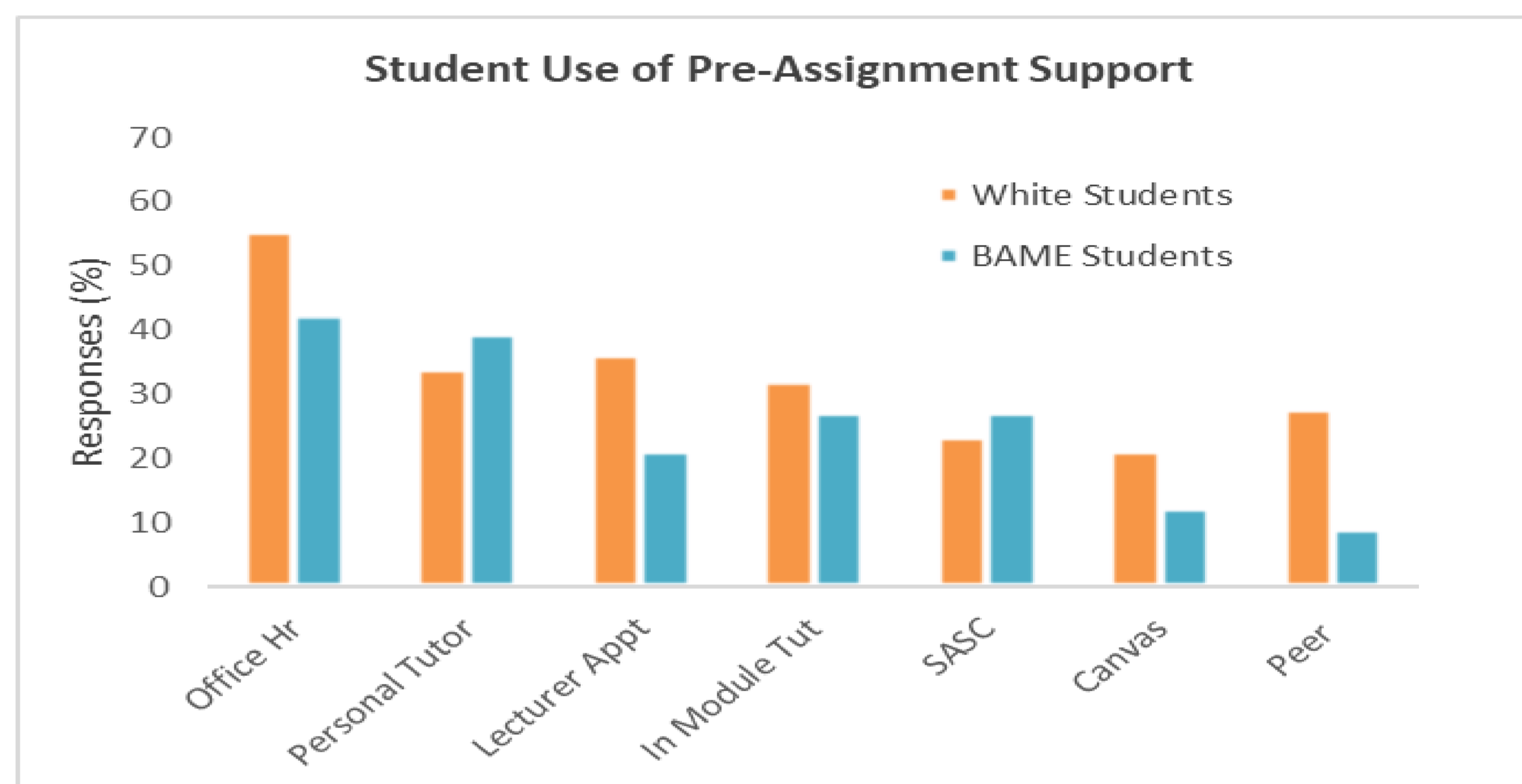

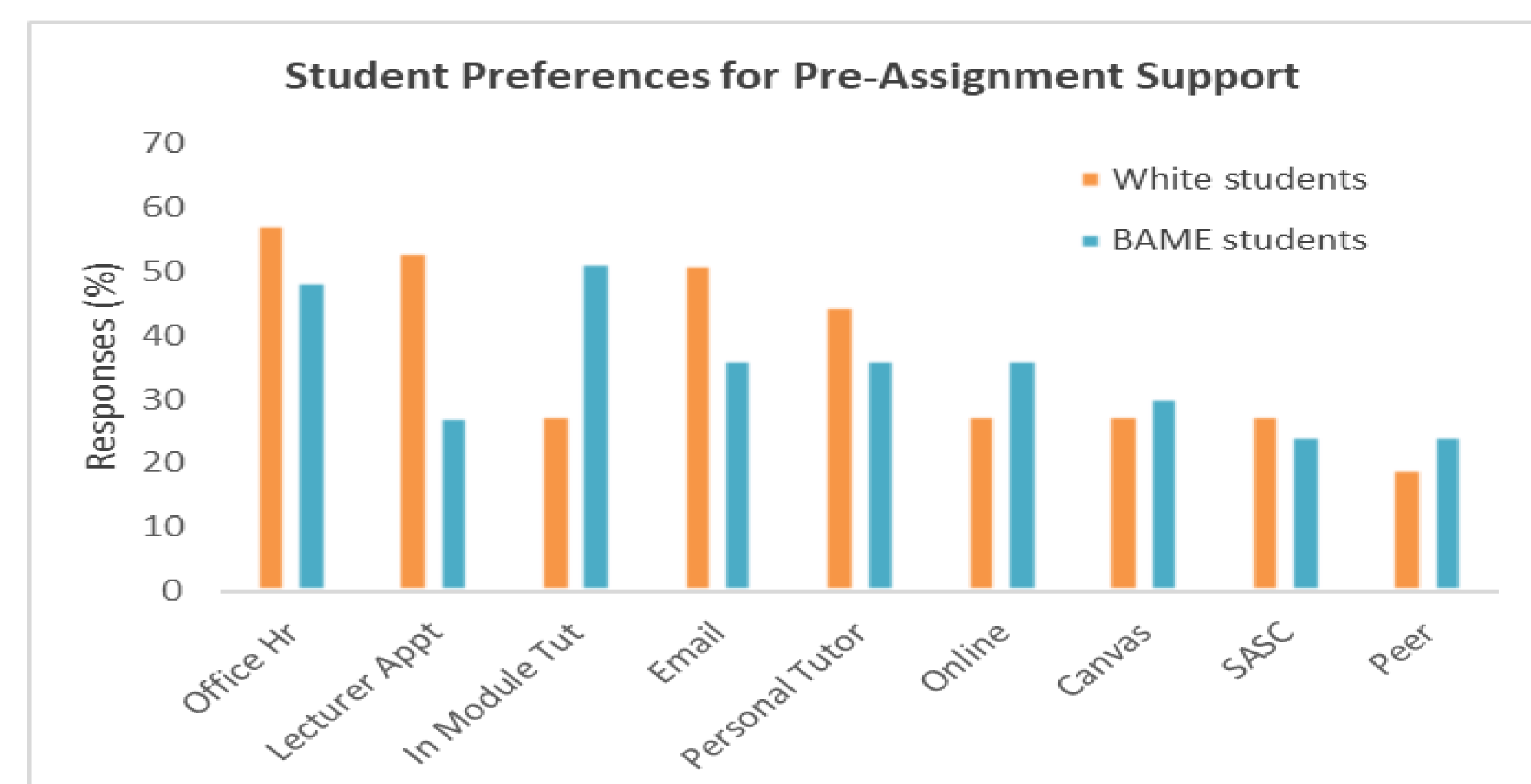**Figure 1.** Reported use of sources of academic support (white students, n=47, BAME students n=33)

Figure 2. Student preferences for sources of academic support (white students n=47, BAME students n=33)

Discussion & Conclusion

Use of academic support prior to assignment submission is low for all students and particularly so for faculty provision, which was noted in the focus groups as not subject-specific enough. The data demonstrate the importance of accessibility and relatability of staff and the benefits of setting aside time within modules to support preparation of assignments. In terms of student preferences for support, most students reported a preference for face-to-face support (office hours, lecturers, personal tutors, in module tutorials) but this tended towards more one-to-one support (office hours, lecturers, personal tutors) for the white students and a notable difference between the groups for in module tutorials, preferred by 52% of BAME students but only 28% of White students. Almost a third of students reported a preference for online support, which could be achieved through online chat or video conferencing, which has not been widely used to date and might offer greater flexibility to the students.