Exploring the 'unexplained' awarding gap through understanding BAME students' experiences

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Abstract A narrative method of enquiry was used to investigate the university experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students studying in a south-eastern UK business school. Participants were self-selecting undergraduates and postgraduates and academic and professional staff. The three facilitators were all academic staff from the Business School: two who identify as Black, one who identifies as white. Using a 'Thinking Group' (Kline, 1999) narrative methodology, it was found that issues relating to belonging, isolation, inclusive curriculum, and employability are all impacting Black, Asian and minority ethnic students' success in the Business School currently. The research resulted in the co-creation of 30 recommendations for action in the following academic year.

Key words Black, Asian and minority ethnic; transition; belonging; isolation; inclusive curriculum; employability; Thinking Group; higher education; business school; awarding gap

Introduction and Context

This article sets out the findings of a small research project exploring the university experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students studying in a business school in a UK university using a 'Thinking Group' (Kline, 1999) methodology to investigate the 'unexplained' racial awarding gap (NUS and UUK, 2019).

The University's student population is ethnically diverse with over 50% of students identified as being from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background. Within the Business School, there is even more diversity, with 67% of students identifying as Black, Asian or from a minority ethnic background.

Although significant progress has been made in some subject areas of the Business School in reducing the gap in outcomes between BAME and white students, other subject areas continue to experience a pervading differential. Additionally, for certain subject areas it was noted that although both BAME and white students met or exceeded their degree outcomes benchmarks, there was still a marked differential in how far the benchmark was exceeded., whereby BAME students are meeting expectations, but white students are vastly exceeding expectations.

Furthermore, whilst attrition rates for BAME students and white students in the Business School are similar, further scrutiny of the data by ethnicity shows that non-continuation rates for Black students are 4% higher than those for white and Chinese students, and 8% higher than for Asian students (at undergraduate level).

The project researchers therefore adopted a reflective pragmatist approach to developing innovative practice without assuming what the solutions are. Thus, we sought to uncover some of the experiences of BAME students in the Business School and build trust in the process so that staff and students co-create ideas for increasing belonging, retention, progression and success amongst BAME students. It was essential to achieve this through 'collective endeavour' (Arday et al., 2021: 308) in order to truly place inclusivity at the heart of School culture. In this way it was hoped that the

School would move beyond the discourse of 'diversity and inclusion' to develop educational models of emancipatory and 'heterarchal knowledge that centers all students as normative' (Swartz, 2009: 1046).

The project was also informed by analysis of national data as reported in Advanced HE Equality in Higher Education: Students Statistical Report (2019) and the Access and Participation Plans (APPs) from the Office for Students (OfS, 2020) with particular reference to the BAME attainment gap, student success, continuation and progression. This provided additional information which framed our understanding of the national picture and developed some of the lines of inquiry of the project, namely the sector-wide Key Performance Measure (KPM4): to monitor the reduction and removal of the attainment gap, especially between white and Black students.

Additionally, the Closing the Gap (2019) report by Universities UK (UUK) and the National Union of Students (NUS) was instrumental in developing the lines of inquiry of the project. The report asks for universities to consider five steps as a basis to develop a framework to accelerate their progress in reducing the attainment gap. In considering these five steps, this project directly addressed the second step: having conversations about race and changing the culture. By gathering 'student voice' with a view to understanding the lived experience of BAME students studying in the Business School, opportunities were created for students to talk about 'race, racism and the attainment gap and to identify what students think is causing it … ' (NUS and UUK, 2019: 42). Through holding difficult conversations about race, racism, privilege and power within their own specific HE context, it was hoped that resulting recommendations for action, co-created by students and staff, would break pervading patterns of inequality (Arday, 2021) contributing to the 'unexplained' gaps in retention, progression, awarding and graduate outcomes.

Methodology

The exploratory purpose of this research implied the selection of a design which centred the voices of those with lived experience as a BAME student in the UK; thus, a qualitative approach of narrative enquiry was adopted (Kitts, 2018). Furthermore, considering the sensitive nature of the research topic, the researchers wanted to create a safe environment where participants felt free and comfortable to express their thoughts and experiences whilst limiting any influence from the facilitators. For these reasons, the data collection method was based on Nancy Kline's ten components of a Thinking Environment (Kline, 1999).

All BAME undergraduate and postgraduate students within the Business School were invited to participate in a two-hour conversational style Thinking Group via VLE (virtual learning environment) notifications, word of mouth from Programme Leaders and poster adverts. Prior to the session, participants were informed of the study's purpose to allow them to make an informed decision on whether to participate (self-selecting convenience sampling). The two Thinking Group sessions were held in a carefully chosen student-friendly location in the Business School with break-out rooms to enable privacy, comfort and some levelling of perceived power distance between students and academic facilitators. The first session comprised six student participants; the second had eight staff and eight student participants.

An icebreaker 'speed-meet' activity was vital at the start of the sessions, to allow staff and students to feel comfortable in one another's presence and 'know' one another a little outside of their usual prescribed roles. This was enabled through asking predetermined intentionally light-hearted questions of each other in pairs, in rotation, on topics including leisure, interests and tastes e.g. "if

you could go on holiday anywhere this year, where would you go and why?" The session then followed a conversational-style discussion within an open framework (semi-structured) to allow for focused yet flexible two-way communication (Bryman, 2008). In this way, issues that both the researchers and students deemed important and relevant were explored. One of the three researchers introduced the session with the other two, then stepped back (Wyatt, 2018) so as not to allow their whiteness (Parker and Lynn, 2016) to impact the comfort and ease of discussion between the students and the other two researchers who all identified as Black, Asian or minority ethnic.

Following the student-only group, eight Business School academic and professional staff (including the three facilitators) gathered with the students to co-create workable ideas for action linked to the nine themes raised in the first Thinking Group. The discussions in both Thinking Groups were recorded using digital recorders, transcribed and then coded by the researchers. A summary of the results from both groups was shared with all participants, to democratically validate (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007; Floyd and Arthur, 2012) the assumed meaning attributed; no changes were requested.

Findings

A wide range of issues emerged under nine broad themes – Transition, Community and Isolation, Cultural Identity & Heritage, Extra-Curricular Life, Inclusive Curriculum, Student Support, Student-Staff Interaction, Employability, Human Resources.

In the first three themes, the student-only group acknowledged the feeling of isolation and the important role of orientation in preventing loneliness and enhancing belonging

Table 1. Themes 1–3: Transition, Community & Isolation, Cultural Identity & Heritage

Students would like an opportunity to meet and mingle with the years above.   'I realised a lot of people didn't know what to expect from university, they didn't know about going to societies, they didn't understand what Freshers Week was meant to be …'
Students attributed isolation and a feeling of community back to orientation.   'I said these two are kind of interlinked, if we don't get our orientation and transitioning for the Level 4s and get them part of a community right at the beginning, it's hard to, for some people, not to be isolated.'
There was a general consensus that celebrating diverse heritages and cultures was a good thing to develop an understanding of different cultures.   One female BAME student spoke about the stereotypical perception of 'angry Black girl', and how   '… if I'm speaking passionately about something, to them it's like I'm really angry and I'm about to throw the tables over, but I'm just speaking passionately.'

The next three themes focussed on students' learning experience and academic support.

Table 2. Themes 4–6: Inclusive Curriculum, Staff-Student Interaction and Student Support.

The students felt that they should be given the opportunity to express and be provided 'with choices to interject identity' into the curriculum. It was suggested that this could include collaboration and the opportunity for co-creation/writing of assessment briefs with staff.
Students discussed their feelings around the notion that being from a BAME background meant that they were disadvantaged and therefore no matter how hard they worked, the perception was that they would still be disadvantaged, which was demotivating.   'I wouldn't want to work hard if I know that when I work hard, and my results are amongst the best but still I will be disadvantaged. I will just feel I could just relax and be average and still be disadvantaged. That's like my summary of the whole inspiration thing.'

The last three themes captured students' experience and suggestions around employability.

Table 3. Themes 7–9: Employability, Extra-Curriculum and Human Resources

There was a sense that BAME students have to prove themselves far more than white students when applying for graduate roles. The students felt that a 'BAME Alumni mentor' would be helpful as a role model.
Students suggested having an Africa or China/Asia week, similar to the current Europe week.   'Why don't we have an Africa week and a … China or Asia week, … that would give us a chance to invite lecturers, academics and entrepreneurs from those parts of the world [that don't get spoken about]?'
The students spoke repeatedly about the need to see themselves reflected in all levels of the staff structure in order to aspire to senior roles themselves in future.   'Obviously if I'm doing four courses I don't expect for my teachers to look like me but having one wouldn't be bad.'

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study gathered 'student voice' to understand the lived experience of BAME students studying in a Business School at a UK university. This initial study also enabled evaluation of the Thinking Group model (Kline, 1999) as a method of accessing deeper reflections on experience.

Overall, the findings generally reflect the national picture in terms of BAME students' experience at university whilst confirming that issues such as belonging, isolation, inclusive curriculum, and employability are all impacting BAME students' engagement and success in the Business School (Sanders and Rose-Adams, 2014; NUS and UUK, 2019; Bale et al., 2020).

However, in order to gain more in-depth perspectives on some of the issues raised, the project would have benefitted from recruiting more student participants. Moreover, given that only two of the eight staff who volunteered to participate in the second Thinking Group were professional staff, any follow-up research should actively encourage non-academic staff to participate and contribute.

An important feature of the project was to develop students as 'change agents' (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011: 16); by participating in the Thinking Group conversations, they were able to discuss their lived experiences in an open and safe environment that would stimulate actions to address issues raised during their conversation. The students reported that they found the experience very positive, some suggesting that it would be beneficial to continue this forum regularly as a vehicle to effect change within the Business School. Another valuable aspect of the Thinking Group concept was that it enabled staff and students to form a partnership that empowered the students to have conversations about their lived experiences in an environment '…that is different from the established teaching and learning relationship in the institution' (Jarvis et al., 2016).

Recommendations

Following the second Thinking Group where staff and students discussed the nine broad themes which emerged from the student-only discussions, thirty recommendations were developed into workable ideas by the researchers. All the recommendations were shared with the Dean of the Business School, a selection of which are presented in Table 4 below.

Actions taken as a direct result of the recommendations include two very successful Black History Month schedules aligned to Business subjects with c. 600 participants over two years; the conversion of Europe Week to Global Week with contributions from academic speakers in Global South nations; BAME student input to assessment briefs; and ten video-recorded interviews with inspirational BAME alumni now being used in employability teaching across the School.

Research to evaluate progress on these recommendations has been funded for 2021–22.

Table 4: Staff-Student Recommendations

Transition, Community & Isolation, Cultural Identity & Heritage

Transition, Community & Isolation, Cultural Identity & Heritage
Support students to set up a School BAME student network where conversations such as the 'awarding gap' can be sensitively communicated in a safe and supportive environment and to co-ordinate social and extra-curricular activities to build connections within the learning community.
Establish a student mentoring/buddy system to match new students with students in the older year groups from the BAME student network to help facilitate the transition into university study.
Black History Month could incorporate a number of activities aimed at building communities, understanding Black heritage, showcasing BAME role models, supporting the mental health and wellbeing of BAME students.
An 'International Week' could be celebrated in HBS, where the many diverse nationalities, cultures, religions and languages can be profiled and shared

through social events to enable students and staff to make connections with one another.
Inclusive Curriculum, Staff-Student Interaction, Student Support
All programmes and subject areas to diversify their reading lists to include (where possible) at least two BAME authors; academic staff to review/develop their modules to reflect the diversity of the student population in the classroom.
Academic staff to produce assessments that allow/encourage students to share examples from their own experiences and identity; investigate ways to work in partnership with students to co-create assessments and/or case studies that appropriately reflect the diversity in the classroom.
Facilitate student-staff talking spaces where staff and students can meet informally to discuss aspects of university life impacting on BAME students' experience.
Investigate the introduction of a Scholarship Scheme at postgraduate level for the highest-achieving BAME student at undergraduate level.
Employability, Extra-Curricular, HR
Additional guidance and support with applications to placements could be offered to BAME students delivered by trained careers advisers.
Motivational talks could be booked and offered to BAME Student Network members, by BAME alumni who have navigated the barriers perceived by BAME students in accessing the professions.
Black History Month could incorporate activities aimed at building communities, understanding BAME heritage and showcasing BAME role models.
Ensure that more BAME speakers are invited to give guest lectures on modules or in programme time, attend student-wide events and give MBA Masterclasses.

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