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CASE STUDY

Student partnership to achieve cultural change

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ABSTRACT

This case study offers reflections on a student-led collaboration between the university and its student representative body (the Students' Union) and outlines the successes and challenges of partnership to address institutional cultural change. The project was set up to improve students' experiences and raise awareness of the existence of differential outcomes between Black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) and white students and to promote strategies to build meaningful relationships through the development of internal and external networks. It was led by 11 BAME student ambassadors who developed and delivered campaigns and events for students and who linked with university staff and the Students' Union to represent students' views on ways to achieve positive change on campus. Partnership working was essential to enable the student ambassadors to develop trust, make their own changes, and influence key decision makers across the University.

KEYWORDS

students as partners, differential outcomes, Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME), listening

Within the United Kingdom (UK), most universities have a diverse student body; however, there are differences in how students with distinct characteristics experience and succeed in higher education (Austen et al., 2017; Islam et al., 2018). Nationally, Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) students achieve significantly lower final grades compared to their white counterparts (Universities UK [UUK]/National Union of Students [NUS], 2018); this is known as "the award gap" within the UK. To address these differences in final grades,

universities across the UK have developed a series of initiatives and policies; however, there is still no simple solution to the complex issue of differential outcomes (Alexander & Arday, 2015; Richardson, 2015; Richardson et al., 2020). In light of this gap, the independent regulator of higher education in the UK, the Office for Students, requires universities to ensure that all students can access, succeed, and proceed from higher education in an equitable way (Office for Students, 2018).

Over the last decade, there has been a shift within the higher education literature towards the development of partnership working with students, and consideration of how universities can best support partnership working has been discussed and debated at length (Bryson, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2019). It is noted that partnership working provides opportunities for true collaboration and facilitates an environment in which students can feel that they belong, with the educator's role developing into that of facilitator and co-learner (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2019). Partnership enables co-creation and collaboration in which students' voices are valued (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2019), and one of the main objectives of this project was to reach beyond existing institutional networks to connect and collaborate with the university's BAME student community.

This case study considers the challenges and successes of the implementation of a Students-as-Partners initiative to enhance BAME students' experiences whilst studying at one university by drawing on the literature exploring the power of student partnerships in higher education (Healey et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2019). This partnership process has been instrumental in driving innovation and cultural change across the university and has supported the development of additional means of representation, such as an Instagram page linked to podcasts and blogs, as well as a process which emulates a UK Parliamentary system for checking and reporting on government departments, the "Select Committee" process, in which student partners are able to ask staff teams about departmental actions to address inequality of opportunity and which provides a safe space for students to share their experiences and opinions and for staff to make meaningful commitments to change.

OUR PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

The Inclusive Learning Communities Project at Manchester Metropolitan University was established in 2019 following a longitudinal study that highlighted that some students, especially those who are first generation, do not always feel that they belong at university (Hamshire et al., 2017; Hamshire et al., 2018; Hamshire et al., 2012, 2013; Laubscher-Kelly et al., 2018). Combined with the troubling evidence of the award gap in final grades for BAME students, this 4-year strategic project was designed to change the way our BAME and first-generation students' experiences are considered and included within teaching practices in order to enhance their sense of belonging to our university, increase student satisfaction, and improve student achievement in terms of progression and degree outcomes.

At the centre of this project is a partnership between staff in a range of roles across the university, including senior staff and the Students' Union, which inaugurated the BAME Ambassador programme. This programme employed 11 students from across the institution to provide an authentic and meaningful voice for BAME students in bringing about change. The students were recruited via an institution-wide call for applications and an interview

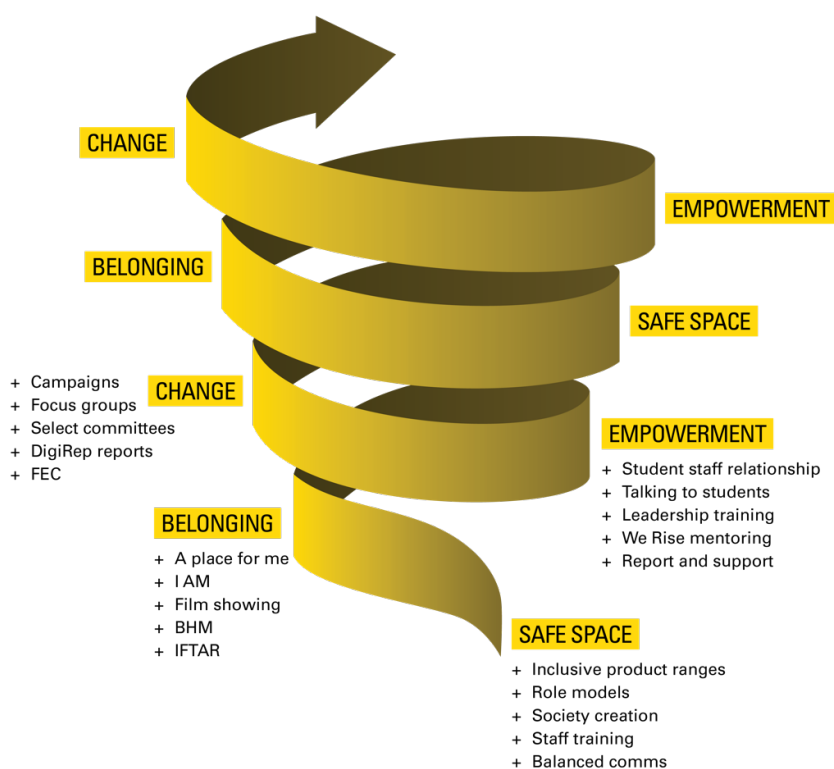
process. The ambassadors were empowered to design, develop, and deliver campaigns and events for students which related to BAME students' experiences, as well as to link with university staff and the Students' Union to feedback students' views to influence positive change on campus. To achieve this, the ambassador team developed their own project aims to improve student experience and BAME academic outcomes through a series of student-led initiatives and engagement:

- Safe spaces: Create safe spaces (both physical and metaphorical) to have a dialogue on inclusive learning and teaching environments.
- Belonging: Increase students' sense of belonging and build meaningful relationships between students and between staff and students through the development of internal and external networks.
- Empowerment: Empower students to tackle the negative effects of stereotyping and microaggressions and safely challenge forms of discrimination on campus.
- Representation: Allow students to make their own change and influence key decision makers in the university through campaigning and other representative functions.

Figure 1 characterises our vision of the ways in which these aims combined and continued across the project, represented by the repeating spiral which represents our commitment to ongoing work.

Figure 1. Insert brief descriptive figure title here

[The diagram uses a 3D spiral to represent an upward trajectory of enhancement in which each of the four aims of safe spaces, belonging, empowerment and representation build on each other.]



In the first year of this project, the BAME ambassadors began this work with enthusiastic commitment to achieve their self-identified aims. Whilst there was enthusiasm to facilitate change across the project, collectively we struggled to identify how we could best structure a cross-institutional change project with meaningful student partnership. Following the murder of George Floyd towards the end of that first year, there was new impetus to question the experiences of BAME students at the university. This provided a stimulus for all members of the project team (university staff, Students' Union staff, and BAME student ambassadors) to have an honest discussion about issues of power and expectations and to further develop the trust and confidence necessary to enable the ambassadors to succeed in their aims. It was clear that the white members of staff within our project team, who were all very familiar with the university's organisational structures, had made too many assumptions and perhaps not listened enough to the student partners. These assumptions were about the value of the faculty partners' good intentions and about the readiness of the BAME ambassadors and colleagues across the wider university to overcome their reticence to have difficult conversations about inclusion more generally, and race in particular (DiAngelo, 2019). This case study is about how the partnership was developed with a more inclusive approach from the second year of the project to have a significant impact across the university.

PARTNERSHIP OUTCOMES

Listening to students' experiences was central to the project, but before the project team began work, we needed to acknowledge that generating conversations about racism is

difficult. Therefore, the ambassadors undertook a month of internal university training at the beginning of the second year of the project to equip them with the skills necessary to convey their opinions confidently to staff. Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) say that “building partnership learning communities requires critical reflection on and consideration of key issues within specific contexts of practice” (p. 8). This foundation has been pivotal in creating safe spaces; one of our ambassadors described the training as “a tool that enabled us to articulate our thoughts and feelings to those of power in the university.”

Listening events

One of the key project aims was to increase students’ sense of belonging. Exploring how we could facilitate this became a focus for the ambassadors’ conversations with students and staff. The ambassadors began by sharing their own narratives of their university journeys:

For most students, university is a roller-coaster, one moment you’re on cloud nine and the next you don’t quite know where you fit in. Our expectations coming into university are so high; after all it’s supposed to be the time of our lives. So, if the reality doesn’t live up to the hype, you can be left thinking: “is this my fault?” In these moments it is so easy to doubt yourself, to start asking yourself “what am I doing wrong?.” Being from a minority background can make these voices of doubt even louder. You may be faced with microaggressions and a general lack of understanding from your well-intentioned classmates and house mates.
(ambassador scheme leader,)

The safe spaces provided by our partnership scheme with BAME ambassadors allowed these narratives to be openly shared without judgement across our student populations and further encouraged others to consider their personal circumstances. Amplifying these voices on public platforms such as our podcast and Instagram page allowed the students to realise that they were not alone and to explore and debate perceived stigmas. For example, one student ambassador explained that “talking openly about your thoughts and feelings may not be a part of the culture and normality of some of our BAME students.”

Building on these early successes, the ambassador team were empowered to work with staff teams across the institution using a select committee approach in which they carried out formal interviews with academic and professional services staff. Throughout the academic year they also regularly attended and contributed to faculty meetings with members of staff from departments across the university. Access to these meetings provided the opportunity for student representation at all levels and for students to directly influence staff decisions, “the faculties’ honesty and openness regarding the improvements they needed to make was inspiring, it gave us the confidence to express our own and student’s opinions as honestly as we could” (student ambassador,).

Despite not being on campus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the student ambassador team were able to have valuable discussions with student groups such as the BAME School of Theatre Group. The acting students shared their opinions, experiences, and the issues affecting them, such as a lack of BAME role models within the department. These listening events were valued by both our students and ambassadors “Hearing the experiences and struggles these students went through was extremely difficult; however, the feeling of understanding I felt listening to them and the gratitude they showed us for listening and caring about their experiences was truly heart-warming” (student ambassador).

Overall, the discussions with both staff and students were positive and constructive and equipped the project team with a deeper understanding of our students’ lived experiences and how our partnership work could improve their student experience “As a BAME student, it can be hard to find your place in university and figure out where you belong. It is important to know that you are not alone. The BAME Ambassador Project was created to help BAME students find a safe space where they can share their experiences and meet like-minded students who are feeling the same way” (student ambassador, 2021).

Instagram account

As well as listening events with student groups, the student ambassadors launched an Instagram page, “@MMUBAME.” This account was used as a communication platform and to inspire and empower students to get involved in university activities and campaigns. The aim was to build a presence within social media platforms regularly used by our students, rather than the institutional webpages. “Social media is a huge part of our daily lives and has worked as a great way for the project to build a following and a sense of community amongst students” (BAME ambassador,)

Within the first 4 months of creating the page, the team gained over 350 followers, many of whom were students, as well as staff and departments from within the university. Other university social media channels have been able to promote and collaborate with the project outputs, allowing us to reach an audience of over 16,000 potential students.

The relatable content shared via the Instagram account was important in building a trusting relationship with our BAME student population and facilitated a sense of belonging for students. Examples of content shared include careers and employability opportunities, BAME related events, health and well-being help, religious and cultural celebrations, and any other work the ambassador project has undertaken. Whilst we have not been able to reach the entire BAME student population at the university, and there is no accurate way of monitoring this, informal feedback has been positive. "Overall, the Instagram page has allowed us to create a different avenue of connection with fellow students. We believe that it has provided us with a strong basis for future ambassadors to build on" (student ambassador,).

Podcast

In addition to the Instagram account and to increase opportunities to connect with our student population, the ambassadors also created a podcast, named *Shades of Tea*. The podcast offers the flexibility to discuss current events and issues faced by BAME students and features a variety of content, with the first series, "Breaking Stereotypes," focusing on exploring harmful stereotypes many BAME students face regularly, through open, genuine conversations. One of the student hosts described the podcast as "an opportunity to have positive conversations around race and empower students to make a difference."

REFLECTIONS ON THE PARTNERSHIP

Framework and structure

Placing the ambassadors in positions where they may engage with staff at meetings or committees is done to create a framework and structure so that they can be "change agents" (Dunne et al., 2011) and so that a student perspective can be heard, and can influence key decision-makers at the university. The BAME ambassadors are recruited across the institution so that the team has representation from each faculty and a breadth of perspectives and experiences can be brought to the attention of staff. Professional services and faculties often gain feedback from students who are existing service users, but the students who do not engage with services are often not heard. Our partnership model was intended to overcome this, but we learned that this work needed to be framed very carefully. Simply inserting the ambassadors into the usual governance structures of the university had the potential to perpetuate the feelings of confusion and lack of belonging which the project was designed to reduce. Dunne et al. (2011) suggest that the involvement of students at the development stage is what takes them away from the idea that they are "passive consumers" and establishes them as "active collaborators" and "co-producers." The BAME Ambassador structure ensures that students are consulted within the planning and development stages of procedures and that they recognise the needs of the BAME student population. Particularly in the second year of the project, the project team has been very aware of the need to acknowledge that although this work is rewarding and exciting, it can also be emotionally numbing and demanding (Sarfaraz & Hartland, 2021). The project has provided well-being resources and opportunities for structured debriefs to support the ambassadors. "I viewed it much more of a partnership and a friendship. . . . We were all on that ship together and we were a team" (Ambassador scheme leader,).

Power dynamics

As we noted above Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) state that “building partnership learning communities requires critical reflection on and consideration of key issues within specific contexts of practice” (p. 8). This is a lesson that the project team brought forward from the first year of the project to the second.

The project team considered carefully how to strike a balance between empowering ambassadors to speak on key issues in a variety of settings with exposing them to situations where there was likely to be academic challenge, as explored in the work of Flint, Goddard, and Russell (2017). This has worked well where the ambassadors are given agendas and relevant documents in the days before meetings, allowing them to have the time and space to consider what they would like to speak on and to discuss that with other members of the team. One of the key success factors outlined by Sarfaraz and Hartland (2021) is that staff working with students in these situations must leverage their privilege. Therefore, the project included senior members of staff, so the ambassadors were supported by those with influence who are “mindful of power, privilege and social location” (Verwoord & Smith, 2020, p. 30) “I’d never spoken this much about race in my life and it’s not a problem. I don’t see it as an issue at all and it’s quite empowering to know that it’s not a problem for the white members of staff” (student ambassador).

CONCLUSION

The second year of this project has moved the aspiration to a truly inclusive learning community nearer. The focus on safe spaces, belonging, and empowerment has increased the visibility and value of BAME student representation, and this has begun to be demonstrated in the improvements in BAME student academic outcomes (identified through student metrics collected annually, such as pass and progression rates) which had triggered this project. Our experiences of developing this partnership highlight the importance of providing supported spaces for listening to our students and ensuring that resources are developed for both students and staff that focus on student narratives and experiences. Allowing students’ voices to be heard, unconstrained by traditional institutional hierarchies, facilitates different and important conversations and topics. Enhancing empathetic understanding of our students’ experiences has been a strength of this project and is the main feature we would recommend to others wishing to do something similar.

Both individually and collectively, we have learned and achieved a lot. However, we need to be alert to how power dynamics can shape and influence partnership relationships and explore how we create safe spaces to listen and address the challenges of partnership working (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2019). There have been challenges across our partnership, but we have all learned from our experiences, and, by recognising and remembering these challenges, we continue to develop and enhance students’ experiences across the institution. Building on these strong foundations, the project will continue for 2 further years to embed partnership working and the project aims into standard institutional practice to improve student belonging, broaden curricula, and develop responsive support services.

AUTHORS' NOTE

This case study has been co-authored by students and staff at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom, and as we worked and wrote together, we discovered that we had considerable difficulty in finding the right language to use when we wanted to refer to students' characteristics. In the UK, the term "BAME" to describe Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups is in common usage; however, understandably, this does not sit well with everyone, as the term is so broad and no one describes themselves as "BAME" in everyday conversation. Ultimately, we all agreed that whichever term we decided to use, it would not speak to all audiences. BAME is not specific enough; "Black" or "minority ethnic" alone are not always accurate, depending on which country you are in; and "person of colour" or "coloured" denies the fact that all people have a colour. We all (both authors and readers) have different preferences, and the real issue is not what we are called but one of raising awareness of the multiple issues affecting our students. We have therefore used the term BAME as it relates directly to UK literature and statistics, and continue to keep our terminology under review.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Shuab Gamote is the Project Coordinator of the BAME Ambassador Project at Manchester Metropolitan University. Having joined the university as a student three years ago, Shuab has been actively involved in University activities. His interest range from being a national ambassador with One Million Mentors to local community work with disadvantaged high schools.

Leonie Edmead contributed to this project as a student partner. She is currently in a BAME Ambassador for the Arts and Humanities faculty at Manchester Metropolitan University. She has completed her final year of studying BA Hons Textiles in Practice at Manchester School of Art.

Bethany Stewart contributed to this project as a student partner whose role involved representing the Arts and Humanities Faculty as a BAME Ambassador. She is currently studying for her master's degree in Architecture at the Manchester School of Architecture.

Tamara Patrick contributed to this project as a student partner. She currently holds a BA Honours degree in Media and Communication and is currently pursuing her Master's in Creative Advertising Strategy at Manchester Metropolitan University. Tamara is also a co-host and producer of a podcast dedicated to exploring BAME-related matters.

Claire Hamshire is a Professor of Higher Education and the Head of International for the Faculty of Health and Education at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. She is also a UK HEA National Teaching Fellow, HEA Principal Fellow and the Vice-President for the European Region of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL).

Rachel Forsyth is a project leader at Lund University. Her research interests focus on institutional change, particularly in relation to inclusive learning communities and assessment in higher education. As Editor-in-Chief of the *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, she is an active member of the *Researching, Advancing, Inspiring Student Engagement (RAISE)* network.

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