CASE STUDY: Enhancing the Learning Experiences of BAME Students at a University: The University Role

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Abstract: This case study examines the role of a university and academics in improving the learning experiences of BAME students, drawing on student-led participatory action research with Social Sciences BAME students at Bournemouth University (BU henceforth) between 2018-2020. The paper seeks to illuminate the critical role of the university by focusing on three inter-related facets at macro, meso and micro levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979): financial and temporal/spatial support for students; collaboration between academic staff at departmental and faculty levels to address any issues that arose from student meetings; and its consequential impact on student wellbeing, self-worth and their overall engagement in their learning. I argue that to achieve the utmost improvement in BAME students' learning experiences, these different levels of the support system need to work together. I further argue that maximising the potentiality of 'ethnic capital' (Modood, 2004) could be a powerful resource that could bring significant changes to the experiences of BAME students and subsequent outcomes of their learning during and after university.

Keywords: BAME students, ethnic capital, institutional support, participatory action research

Introduction

The project described here examines the role of a university and academics in improving the learning experiences of BAME students, based on a student-led participatory project carried out between 2018-2020. Consistent with a UK-wide trend (Universities UK and National Union of Students, 2019), data drawn from Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) indicated gaps between the two groups at BU in 2017. This was also the case for those on Sociology programmes at BU between 2014-2017 with lower rates of achieving a 2:1 or first-class degree, compared to non-BAME students. Moreover, the National Student Survey (NSS)[1] data in 2016/17 indicated less satisfaction among BAME students in the Social Sciences (SS) programmes, in line with the wider university. However, it was unclear what exactly caused such experiences for those students as the data neither revealed the deeper causes nor the overall picture of the problem. Whilst there already existed projects targeting BAME students at BU, we strongly felt there needed to be a more student-led project that provided a platform for them to take initiatives in identifying the underlying issues as well as ways in which their learning experiences could be improved. Thus, I proposed a project based on the proactive role of BAME students in gaining positive experiences and enhanced results through action research. Taking a case study approach (AHRC, 2012), this paper aims to illuminate the vital role of the institution by focusing on three inter-related facets at macro, meso and micro levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979): financial and temporal/spatial support for students; collaboration between academic staff at departmental and faculty levels to address any issues that arose from student meetings; and its consequential impact on student wellbeing, self-worth and their overall engagement in their learning. In order to achieve the maximum improvement in BAME students' learning experiences, these different levels of the support system need to work together.

The case study

BU's initiatives to address racial inequalities among students in their learning experiences and outcomes were pivotal in enabling the current project to run. In line with a UK higher education

sector-wide goal of eliminating or reducing disparities between different social groups of students under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, BU set targets to tackle the existing lacunae by improving the outcomes of socially disadvantaged groups, including BAME students. This project was one such initiative. A member of staff from the Access, Excellence and Impact Committee (the university's strategic group leading on Access and Participation) was allocated to support the project, with whom I had regular contact. This was vital as whenever some unexpected hurdles emerged, I was able to consult with her and work through challenges. The first setback occurred in the area of incentivising students' participation and commitment. The major support provided by the institution was financial, which covered catering for the meetings and payment for students[2] as part of incentives to encourage their engagement and commitment to the project. Initially, the idea of offering gift vouchers for attending students was proposed. However, due to the university rules around the payment for longer-term projects where one-off payment was not possible, we had to find another way to incentivise their participation on a regular basis. This process made us consider two things. First, students were active participants in this project and directly contributing to the data collection, therefore, their participation deserved to be recognised as such. Second, the alternative incentive should go beyond the remit of financial compensation for their time and contribution, and have longer-term benefits, such as being able to include this in their CV as work experience. This led us to decide to offer them contracts as research assistants and paid them on a monthly basis through the payroll.

Recruitment

Ethical approval was obtained from Bournemouth University's Ethics Committee (Ethics ID Number: 23907), prior to the recruitment. Once the ethics were approved, the lead academic contacted the university's central information management team and the social sciences department administrative team to access relevant data on ethnicity. Only a small proportion of students come from minority ethnic backgrounds in SS programmes at BU. For instance, only 25 students belonged to ethnic minority groups out of a total of 345 SS students among

2016-8 cohorts. Using the above data, I emailed individual students who were categorised as ethnic minority and mixed-race students, with participant information. Through this process, an initial 20 students who were from our three social science programmes (Sociology, Sociology and Anthropology, Sociology and Criminology) with mixed year groups agreed to participate. However, only 10-12 students attended the meetings on a regular basis with some having other commitments, such as part-time jobs, which overlapped with the meeting dates.

Action research

In order to achieve the enhancement in the overall learning experiences of BAME students on SS programmes, three objectives were set: 1) To identify the underlying issues that have engendered the negative experiences of BAME students by providing a platform for expression and for their voices to be heard; 2) To work through the identified problems with the students in order to transform these into opportunities and positive outcomes; 3) To compile tangible qualitative data that can be used for the future as well as for wider application at an institutional level.

To attain the above goals, the project formed a working group, consisting of the lead academic and BAME students from all three SS programmes at all three levels. In total, nine monthly meetings took place[3]. The meetings were scheduled for two hours. In general, the first 30 minutes were spent informally talking to each other while having food and drinks to create a relaxed atmosphere. In relation to that, the first part of informal mixing formed the vital part of the session as it provided an informal environment whilst enabling students to catch up with each other. The discussion usually lasted between one and a half hours. All the meetings were audio recorded, with consent from the students. The meeting records were then transcribed verbatim.

In terms of action-research, the project adopted an organic form in its development and did not follow the 'typical' format of action-research: e.g. 'look, think and act' (Stringer, 2007) or 'plan, act, observe, reflect' (Kemmis and McTaggart,1999), although these processes were implicitly embedded in the overall project. In addition, the social values that encapsulate

action-research were strongly present and reflected in this project. These included: being equitable by acknowledging people's equality of worth; being liberating through the provision of freedom from oppressive and debilitating conditions; and being life-enhancing by enabling the expression of people's full human potential (Stringer, 2007: 11).

The first meeting was carried out using questions prepared by the project lead academic. I am cognisant that this does not align with the central principles of participatory action-research because the lead academic could have influenced the initial coalescing of the group. This might also potentially have affected the direction of the following meetings. However, guided by Stringer (2007), I made clear to the students that my role was a facilitator and a catalyst to assist them in identifying problems and to support them to work towards effective solutions. After the first meeting, students took the initiative in deciding which topic(s) to focus on in the ensuing meetings, ranging from negative to positive experiences at university, and subject-focused discussion, such as how to improve students' experiences in social sciences. This case study forms an important part of that observation and reflection.

Evaluation of the impact

The impact of the project has been evaluated by reflective exercise among students both at individual and group levels, based on two sets of qualitative feedback from students: focus group discussions (van Teijlingen and Pitchforth, 2006) and self-evaluation questionnaires (AHRC, n.d.).

Findings

Evaluation at a group level took place throughout the meetings on a regular basis by asking what they found helpful and what could be done differently, which fed into the following meetings. Students were also asked to evaluate the impact of the project on their experiences towards the end of the last academic year, and a total of 11 students responded. The findings can be categorised into three main themes: main reasons for their participation; enhanced engagement with their learning and conscious efforts to improve future career; a sense of

community and student wellbeing.

The major reasons given for their participation were: 'to share, to help, to effect change.' Being part of a project directly related to their identity and experiences was considered to be important for many students who were given a platform for their voice to be heard. The majority of students (6/11) expressed that one of the main reasons why they participated in the project was 'to share their experiences as well as hearing other students' opinions and experiences.' In association with this, students also reported a reason for their participation was to help and improve the experiences of future BAME students, to bring about positive changes:

> I saw the project as an opportunity to contribute my personal experience as an ethnic minority (student). I also wanted to learn from the experiences of others and see if I can help change the experiences of future BAME students.

These clearly suggest students were motivated by helping others, not only for themselves, by bringing positive changes in the current state. This is significant as it offers guidance for the future direction of such work.

Better engagement in learning

All 11 students agreed that their participation in the project helped them better engage with their learning[4]. One of the major reasons behind it was participants' enhanced awareness of issues and barriers that BAME students face as well as a range of opportunities available at university that they learnt from other students in the project, especially those who were further advanced in their university careers:

> It has made me more aware of the fact that ethnic minorities may, in some cases, find it harder 'climbing the ladder' but has motivated me not to allow this to be an excuse in failing to realise my potential.

Hearing 3rd years talk about their experiences has helped me identify possible problems that I may encounter and how they would have handled things differently.

It has been inspirational and meeting other Sociology students has been helpful.

I had been motivated to attend more lectures and become more engaged in these lectures.

In relation to this, almost all students also reported that participation in the project motivated them to have a clearer focus on their academic performance (10/11):

It has encouraged me to keep on target because it makes me realise how much to utilise my lectures and opportunities. I take time to read relevant articles outside the reading list.

I want my academic level to grow and become more advanced than it was at the very start.

I feel more encouraged to get as much as possible out of this degree.

As a result, the dominant majority of the students expressed that they had become more proactive learners. Moreover, being part of the project has also enhanced students' focus on their future career:

It has made me more conscious of my possibilities in the future.

Today we spoke about future careers, which helped me with what I want to do.

It had helped me focus more on my future career as a teacher, which has led to me currently doing my PGCE.

As the above accounts suggest, talking about a certain topic with other people in the supportive network can be a powerful tool to motivate and think about their future.

Effect of the project on a sense of community

Almost every student agreed that their participation in the project enhanced their sense of belonging and community through their 'discussions of shared experiences' and realisation of other people who 'have similar struggles' to themselves. This made participant students 'realise they have quite a bit in common': 'I enjoy being part of this group. It enhances self-worth! Furthermore, making new friends has been a significant benefit of being part of the project by many students:

It is very nice to come here and talk to fellow students about fellow problems.

It was reassuring that there were other students who experience the same experiences I did.

This was crucial in enhancing their sense of connection with other students who faced similar challenges, and in feeling part of a community. Subsequently, this sense generated the improvement in their self-worth and confidence for some students, as captured succinctly by one student: 'The project really helped with my confidence as that was my barrier.' Additionally, it emerged that all 11 students felt they were supported and valued by the university and the department:

Great to see university is being proactive in responding to the issues BAME students are facing.

I also feel a lot more valued as I am heard lots.

The fact that this project was made to support us and identify problems makes me feel our opinions are valued a lot.

My experience is very positive and I feel like I have all the support I need.

This perceived support from the university and the department helped students feel more confident to seek help, which contributed to improvement in their learning:

During this project I was able to create a better relationship with my lecturers and I was able to appreciate the effort they put into our lectures, which made me feel more supported and comfortable enough to ask for help if needed.

Motors of change from 'negative to positive'

Social capital

Putnam (2000: 19) defined social capital as 'connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.' According to him, the concept is built on the idea that 'our lives are more productive by social ties'. He argues that social capital can benefit not only individuals but also wider communities through cooperation for mutual gains. In particular, what he categorised as bonding (or exclusive) social capital delineates networks that reinforce exclusive identities among members through the mobilisation of solidarity, which 'constitutes a kind of sociological superglue' (Ibid.: 23). According to Putnam, bonding capital can be vital for disadvantaged ethnic minority individuals in receiving social and psychological support from their ethnic networks.

'Ethnic capital'

Echoing Putnam, numerous scholars have suggested that ethnicity can operate as a form of social capital that offsets the disadvantaged social positions of minority groups in society through dense ethnic networks and support (Zhou and Bankston, 1994; Modood, 2004; Shah *et al.*, 2010). Zhou and Kim (2006: 5) proposed that:

> The ethnic community contains a common cultural heritage along with a set of shared values, beliefs, behavioural standards, and coping strategies with which group members are generally identified. It also contains social institutions and interpersonal networks that have been established, operated, and maintained by group members. Community forces are the product of sociocultural adaptation embedded within an ethnic community, which entails specific beliefs, interpretations, and coping strategies that an ethnic group adopts in response to hostile societal treatment.

Consonant with this, Modood (2004) sought to explain the upward social mobility of ethnic minority groups in Britain (specifically the South Asians and Chinese) despite the socio-economic disadvantage and racism they encounter, using the notion of 'ethnic capital'. This concept combines the positive effect of cultural and structural forces established from interactions between family and ethnic community, and social capital as benefits mediated through social networks and group membership, highlighting the broad roles that ethnicity can play through 'ethnic capital'.

Adding to this, I suggest that reciprocal sharing and mutual respect are other important components in the development of ethnic capital as emerged in this case study. This expansion of the concept could have the potential for opportunities for academics and universities to engage better in supporting BAME students (and staff).

Conclusions

As demonstrated in this small project, the role of institutions is pivotal and has great potential to change the learning experiences and outcomes of BAME students. In this, universities can

be highly instrumental in encouraging BAME students to take a proactive role in addressing the existing lacunae and to take ownership of handling the issues directly facing them. As I suggested previously, universities should take a systemic approach in which macro, meso, and micro levels of support mechanisms work together to generate the best possible outcomes for BAME students. There should be structural support systems in place at institutional, faculty and departmental levels to make this work, as illustrated here. First, financial support for the project was crucial in encouraging students to attend the meetings in terms of offering free catering and payment for their participation. Secondly, institutional support was vital in allowing the time available to the academic(s) to plan, organise and run the project. Thirdly, any issues that emerged from students' discussions can only be addressed and tackled head-on with full institutional support. For instance, I was supported by the department and worked closely with the colleagues in the team. Thus, if any teaching-related issues were raised by students that could be addressed immediately, I communicated directly with colleagues to deal with them and fed back to the students about how we as a team responded to their feedback. This was critical in building trust among students and for their continued participation in the project. Finally, students' sense of being valued by the university and the department is important in their wellbeing, self-worth and consequent learning experiences. I further argue that maximising the potentiality of ethnicity as a form of social capital could be a powerful resource that could bring significant changes to the experiences of BAME students and subsequent outcomes of their learning during and after university. This is the potential that universities should tap into by providing a structural platform, built on a supportive and inclusive foundation that encourages the proactive participation of BAME students in their learning and beyond in collaboration with academic staff.

This case study describes a small project whose findings, based largely on qualitative data, are necessarily limited. Whilst the project initially sought to also obtain quantitative data on their outcomes, it was not possible to draw any meaningful conclusion as such data was only available at a department level, which also included Social Work programmes and the separation of SS programmes was not possible due to the small number of BAME students.

Social Policy and Society, Special Issue: 'Race', Learning and Technology in Social Policy. 21 (1): 134 – 141.

Nonetheless, the case study is important in illuminating the positive experiences of BAME students which universities could build on to unearth and maximise their potential.

Notes

1. An annual survey of final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students in the UK that gathers their opinions about their time in higher education, asking them to provide honest feedback on what it has been like to study on their course at their university (The Student Survey, 2020).

2. Although this was helpful to some extent, I feel students would still be happy to participate without getting payment and in many ways non-payment would have been better to minimise bureaucratic intervention and delays.

3. Further scheduled meetings had to be cancelled due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in March.

4. Some students also became more proactive in extra-curricular activities as a result of partaking in the project, e.g. leading and being involved in the Social Sciences Student Academic Society at BU.

Social Policy and Society, Special Issue: 'Race', Learning and Technology in Social Policy. 21 (1): 134 – 141.

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