

Creation and confidence: BME students as academic partners...but where were the staff?

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Creation and Confidence: BME students as academic partners....but where were the staff?

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Context

Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) collects achievement data and this indicates that it has a larger-than-expected BME attainment gap - both across the sector and when considered against relevant sector-benchmarked groups; it is therefore keen to work in partnership with others to examine which aspects of teaching, learning and assessment might be responsible for variations in the attainment gap of this group of students. Richardson (2015) notes that consistently lower attainment levels experienced by Black, Minority and Ethnic (BME) students in the UK can be explained only partly by entry qualification differences; hence, other facets need more exploration to assess whether they have impact on achievement. A synthesis of more extensive US literature by Stevenson and Whelan (2013) confirms that analysis of BME factors for under-achievement is too often simplified, when it is clearly complex and multi-factorial. According to Mountford-Zimdars et al (2015) one key factor concerns exploring approaches that instil confidence. They argue that this might be productive in encouraging belonging, which is one of the key indicators for successful engagement, by all students, in Higher Education (HE), as evidenced in the work of Thomas (2012). SHU has already used co-design processes when working with in-work, part-time students and these have been introduced in some subject disciplines' peer-assisted learning initiatives as techniques for building both student confidence and self-esteem.

The project intended to use the institutionally-gleaned evidence concerning achievement data and pedagogic approaches, alongside the wider BME literature, as a basis to proceed. Colleagues from two directorates – namely, Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research (STEER), which has 'responsibility for supporting the overarching drive for a transformative student experience through use of evidence-based research to identify and develop effective practices' and the Learning Enhancement and Development team (LEAD), which 'plays a key role in driving innovation in the academic portfolio and in academic practice' – came together to construct a set of evidence-informed interventions which, it was hoped, would make a difference.

Project design

As the call for engagement with the REACT project - principally offering tangible support concerning the concept known as the 'hard to reach' - came out around the same time SHU was grappling with the above issues, the team put together, as part of an expression of interest in REACT, what it hoped was a relevant and robust process and waited to see if it would be successful. The team was delighted at the subsequent selection of its submitted project, now entitled 'Creation and Confidence: BME students as academic partners'.

Anticipated project outcomes:

- evidence-based insights into the use of co-design processes and peer-assisted learning as possible conduits of confidence-building for and belonging of BME students;
- development of a scalable approach to building confidence for and fostering belonging of all students;

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- raised awareness of the need to think differently about explanations for BME underachievement;

The overarching research objective was: To examine whether co-design and peer-learning approaches make any positive differences to the confidence levels of BME students and, by inference, enhance longer-term belonging. This would be achieved by introducing either a co-design process or peer-learning process to specific cohorts for a full academic year, with relevant training and support being provided to the course/module/peer support teams undertaking this work.

A range of subsidiary questions was to be addressed by the project:

- To what extent does a co-design approach enhance confidence in BME students?
- To what extent does a peer-learning approach enhance confidence in BME students?
- To what extent does a co-design approach enhance belonging in BME students?
- To what extent does a peer learning approach enhance belonging in BME students?
- How might the efficacy of both approaches be compared?
- What potential do these approaches have for influencing attainment levels of BME students?

At the first national REACT project workshop, the team was asked to articulate concerns, fears and hopes. At the time, these comprised:

- ensuring the nomenclature 'hard to reach' - and therefore the potential for an individualised focus - does not obfuscate further significant issues relating to institutional and attitudinal barriers;
- identifying and selecting appropriate participants sensitively and ethically, bearing in mind the need to avoid adding notions of otherness/victimhood/deficit;
- maintaining project stability and impact by developing effective contingency and process evaluation plans at the outset;
- ensuring that this activity aligns with and complements strategic activities elsewhere in the University;
- guaranteeing that the project team develops appropriate exit strategies for this project which ensure that it is sustainable, scalable and impactful in the longer-term;
- discovering some compelling evidence concerning the efficacy of the proposed interventions; hopefully knowing that some approach(es) can make a positive difference to BME students' confidence, sense of belonging and overall success.

In order to maximise the opportunity for an effective evaluation of the efficacy of the interventions, the team set out to establish baseline information, using the following:

- institutionally-collated data which facilitated the identification of relevant cohorts of UG students (ideally Level 5) in which the BME attainment gap is pronounced;
- a validated tool to measure the perceived confidence levels of volunteer participants as part of the pre-intervention testing stage, following a process of guidance and informed consent (to be administered by paid student researchers, hopefully recruited from the SHU BME Forum);
- a checklist for engagement, which would be used to establish pre-engagement levels prior to co-design introduction, informed by relevant literature;
- a short survey of perceived levels of peer support within identified cohorts, as part of the peer-learning process;
- Level 4 results' profiles, used to assess any possible shift in attainment levels which might occur at the end of the (Level 5) project.

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Although it was anticipated that nascent outcomes might, when emerging from the proposed process, be slippery and, to some extent, unpredictable, the team constructed the following plan for effective monitoring and evaluation:

- Dependent on agreed duration, mid-term and project end-point survey measurements will comprise: perceived confidence levels of all participants; levels of student engagement for those undertaking the co-design route; perceived levels of peer-support; cohort achievement profiles at L5 and L6;
- Focus groups will be held with staff, all student participants from each route and those students identifying as BME, to discuss the efficacy of interventions, confidence levels, perceived belonging impact, unintended consequences, exit strategies and possible escalation. The continuing work will be reported regularly to the BME Forum and the BME Experience and Success Steering Group for advice and guidance;
- The majority of the data, which is essentially mixed-method, will be collected by the BME student researchers, who will also be supported by staff from the Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research Directorate alongside colleagues from the Learning Enhancement and Development team.

The team designed what was hoped to be an effective dissemination process, linked to each anticipated outcome, as detailed in Table 1. below:

Anticipated project outcome	Proposed outputs	Short to mid-term impact measures	Longer-term impact measures
Evidence-based insights into the use of co-design processes and peer learning as possible conduits of confidence building for and belonging of BME students	Project reports and scholarly articles concerning the impact of both initiatives	Recognition of the impact of specific interventions on 'hard to reach' students and plan for further development and implementation	Embedding of relevant approaches within a range of courses by a) publications and knowledge exchange opportunities b) the level of adoption of co-design principles and/or peer-learning techniques within the wider University
Development of a scalable approach to confidence building for and fostering belonging of all students	Findings which might detail any changes in perceived levels of confidence and self-esteem of BME participants	The team endeavoured to measure this outcome by a) perceived confidence levels reported by participants b) level of adoption within faculties, post-project	Spread and adoption of identified confidence-building pedagogic processes with all students
Raised awareness of the need to think differently about	A refreshment of the University's Student Success	Reconceptualisation of the current Retention and	Changes in pedagogic practice at SHU, measured

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explanations of BME underachievement	Framework policy as informed by project findings	Student Success Framework in light of project findings and greater cultural awareness	by a) assessing readiness of course and module teams to take up of co-design processes and peer-learning approaches at departmental, faculty and institutional level b) policy change around pedagogic practice
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The team felt assured that it had also identified key audiences for this work, including: SHU decision-makers at all levels, as this had been prioritised within the University; national audiences linked to the REACT network and beyond, depending on outcomes; various policy-making bodies committed to this area, including the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, National Union of Students (NUS), Equality Challenge Unit, Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), and the Runnymede Trust.

The team obtained ethical approval for the project and identified areas within the provision in which evidence indicated there were attainment gaps which might need urgent strategic attention. Informed by the evidence base, which was quite compelling, the team approached faculty leaders and specific course leaders sensitively to see if we could work in partnership to broker some interventions, either peer-learning or co-creation, which, whilst beneficial to all students, might have considerable impact upon their BME participants. We were confident that our project team had the right infrastructure to succeed, as it comprised: highly experienced and well respected teachers with strong faculty and disciplinary links; researchers - including dedicated student researchers - with a great skills mix for covering the proposed methodology; professional services staff with significant understanding of student support aspects. It was predominantly 'white' as a group, despite the best intentions. It had been intended to recruit all of the student researchers from BME backgrounds, but few came forward, despite the team's having worked with the student-led BME Forum to influence possible interest and recruitment. However, the project had received very positive feedback from senior decision-makers within the University; from the BME Forum who had informed the project design and possible outcomes and from REACT colleagues at the initial national workshop. The team was really keen to get going by developing some exciting interventions that it believed would, at least, make a significant difference to the lived experience of all students, including those from a BME background, and, at best, might influence attainment, too.

The reality of implementation

The various challenges encountered during this project meant that the team ended up redefining the success criteria and outcomes of this work. These challenges included difficulties of securing a sample of students within those courses identified as having high attainment gaps. This was predominantly owing to demonstrable anxiety displayed by academic staff and resultant barriers which impeded the progress of the anticipated interventions. Possible samples were selected, based on an analysis of course-level data which highlighted significant attainment gaps in some areas of the institution. Academic contacts were approached sensitively and an Appreciative Inquiry approach – which deliberately starts by looking at strengths in order to build confidence – was adopted; however, despite using this approach to stimulate involvement without blame, the team was

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unable to secure the necessary commitment and aligned thinking to undertake the proposed interventions. Discussions about the evidence, despite being methodologically robust and defensible, inevitably turned to several repeating facets:

- There was an absolute resistance to going beyond deficit explanations for the attainment gap. BME students were defined as having obvious skills gaps, such as reading skills or lack of active engagement which - once addressed within the students themselves – would, it was felt, improve the situation. Anecdotal evidence and hearsay about what was required to address deficits in these kinds of students were offered unreservedly as possible solutions. This is consistent with the discourse about 'critical whiteness' in which the norm of 'whiteness' is so invisible that it renders everything else as 'other' without social actors' even noticing. Without such awareness, it then becomes compelling and inevitable to offer deficit explanations embodied in difference;
- Academic staff were not prepared to broker small-scale curricular changes concerned with introducing peer-learning or co-design - even though resources to support these initiatives were offered by the project team – citing such other personal priorities as their having sovereignty and pressure of work, which made their involvement in effecting changes untenable. This was representative of a cultural environment in which the BME attainment gap either wasn't viewed as problematic - for example, the statistical evidence was received with great scepticism - or, it was just too difficult and therefore too risky to try in a results-oriented climate;
- Although the University had identified the BME attainment gap as worthy of further attention, the institution was also undergoing significant senior leadership change at the same time; overt strategic leverage had therefore not been established fully at the project's inception, which made gaining traction quite problematic within faculties and departments. This is consistent with many change management theories in which senior leadership buy-in is an absolute imperative in achieving sustainable and significant change.

Staff were prepared primarily to engage only in skills-deficit approaches, which conflicted with what recent literature and evidence indicates as being effective. The project team also reflected that, if such skills-deficit interventions had been implemented out of convenience, when it had already been apprised of more telling literature about possible effective strategies, the whole project would have been rendered unethical. The team concluded collectively that it had misjudged the 'institutional readiness' of the institution and considered how the failure to engage staff effectively could still result in a meaningful project.

How the project changed

In acknowledgement of this situation, the project was redefined to focus on awareness-raising and confidence-building within the staff group across all levels of the institution; this is now viewed as a positive, if unintended, outcome. This project now focused attention on the creation of a BME Development Plan for the institution, based upon:

- the reflections of the REACT project team on the issue of 'institutional readiness';
- a synopsis of key publications, trends and summary of work to date, drawing on literature and evidence review covering sector-wide work, SHU data and institutional interventions;
- a critique of the Equality Charter Unit (ECU) Race Equality Charter (REC) award holder submissions and action plans;
- a review of three-year trend analyses of SHU Faculty BME undergraduate attainment reports;

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- a recommendation that this accumulation of evidence should be used to position the University to sign-up at the earliest opportunity to producing an ECU REC submission.

The BME Development Plan was launched at a conference in November 2016. The conference was hosted by Sheffield Hallam and supported by colleagues from the REACT initiative. The aims of the conference were:

- to develop a shared understanding of the degree classification attainment gap between the institution's White UK students and UK students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups;
- to launch the Sheffield Hallam University BME Development Plan;
- to facilitate workshops to explore the impact of using peer learning and curriculum co-design to enhance student retention and attainment, as well as an opportunity to learn about the experiences of some UK BME students.

Lessons learned and further questions

If taking success as purely achievement of aims and outcomes, then this project has been a failure with only one outcome - viz. 'Raised awareness of the need to think differently about explanations of BME underachievement' - addressed to any extent. Yet the learning from examining this outcome - and from trying to implement this project in its entirety - has yielded considerable learning which is hopefully of value to the wider sector:

- It is imperative to consider institutional readiness, regardless of the presentation of any compelling evidence which may, or may not, hold sway or sovereignty. Several models could have been used at the project's inception, such as the well-respected and often utilised Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1983), used initially to influence health behaviours, in which stages of change are broken down into: pre-contemplation; contemplation; preparation; action; maintenance;
- Responses from academic staff within the University signified their being at pre-contemplation stage and the project could have used techniques to work with staff to: validate the lack of readiness; encourage re-evaluation of current behaviour; stimulate self-exploration rather than immediate action; explain and personalise risks of doing nothing;
- The project team failed to recognise the impact that 'Critical Whiteness' has on institutional actions. A detailed critique of this concept is beyond the scope of this case study; however, the starting point for Critical Whiteness via Critical Race Theory literature (Rollock and Gillborn, 2011) concerns: making the invisible norm of whiteness 'visible' by including white staff and students in the dynamics of race; challenging whiteness through non-white knowledge; unlearning whiteness through exposure to the effects of whiteness and by making white detachment uncomfortable. Within this project, whiteness was not problematised within the design phase explicitly; hence, this possibly encouraged BME deficit explanations from staff who did not see whiteness as in any way pivotal to this debate, or in being a conduit for taking wider action;
- In researching the background to the project's context quite extensively, the project team had a level of prior immersion not present in the wider academic staff base. It would have been useful to have recognised the significance of this raised awareness through immersion, rather than feeling incredulous at times when staff failed to understand and be motivated to act.

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This has led to understanding that in work of this nature, there are probably clear questions to address before inception:

- Has the institutional readiness to engage in a challenging project been considered and are suitable change management processes in place at the outset?
- What techniques will the project adopt to encourage recognition concerning any lack of readiness and to stimulate a re-evaluation of existing behaviours and attitudes?
- How can the notion of 'critical whiteness' be introduced constructively at project start?
- How will researcher immersion be handled in relation to attributing explanations for wider non-engagement?

Conclusions

Although this case study documents considerable failure concerning the achievement of some of the project aims – which, arguably, with hindsight and considerable learning were always going to be unachievable - there has been some significant learning in respect of the emotional labour experienced whilst trying to effect change within a resistant culture. In a re-framing of this project, rather than its original title - 'Creation and Confidence: BME students as academic partners' - there might be one more apt in its recognition that there have been some very positive developments and enlightening lessons: 'Creation and Confidence: recognising the invisibility of 'whiteness' as a conduit of BME disadvantage'. Ironically, it is only now, following a process of frustration and disappointment, that the University is in a position to begin cautiously to address such matters: the REACT initiative offered a very small step in making significant progress. In essence, being part of an externally-validated programme gave the project team the impetus to find time and space to begin to ask some difficult institution-wide questions drawn from the experience of both covert and, at times, overt resistance; some of which didn't appear problematic until the project tried to go beyond deficit explanations. The shift to now being able to hold the 'difficult conversations' as a direct result of the REACT project cannot be underestimated. The journey of turning conversation into action is just beginning, but as a marker of genuine cultural change rather than tokenistic gesture.

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