

Breaking barriers: using mentoring to transform representation, identity and marginalisation in black higher education students

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Introduction

SOAS University of London has established itself as a centre for African Studies in the United Kingdom (UK), with relevantly specialist programmes of study and library resources. Though it has long espoused the core values of inclusivity and cultural freedom of expression, the success of students of colour at the institution has been adversely affected by a combination of barriers, identified as: student difficulties in accessing support, lack of accountability and the culture of a racially exclusive learning and teaching environment – this latter noted as deriving from a lack of ethnically diverse representation among the staff and student body (SOAS Students' Union, 2016).

In 2016, SOAS Students' Union commissioned the 'Degrees of Racism' report, to investigate the institutional factors contributing to the ethnicity degree-awarding gap and, on the basis of qualitative data, to determine appropriate ways of addressing these factors. Through exploring students' lived experiences, the research found that the confidence, motivation and engagement of students of colour often suffered on account of racial exclusion and discrimination in the learning and teaching environment at SOAS (SOAS Students' Union, 2016).

SOAS has responded to the call from many within the institution to make decolonisation the fundamental philosophy underpinning all its decision-making and activities. Leading on African studies as it does, it has now made many bold public statements about inclusivity and decolonisation, primarily because it recognises that black excellence and scholarship are implicit in and central to its reputation as the foremost United Kingdom (UK) centre for its specialism. While there is still more that it can do to address discriminatory injustice, its adoption of the agenda for decolonising itself has been a radical and certainly appropriate step towards ridding itself completely of racial inequity and prejudice.

A significant element of any sincere attempt to decolonise SOAS is recognition that, within the very broad and no longer acceptable category of 'black, Asian and minority ethnic' (BAME) students, black students are a discrete and entire category, with unique characteristics, social and learning needs. Since addressing black student needs requires a completely inclusive approach, to this end, after a series of unsuccessful attempts at reducing the degree-awarding gap, the 'Breaking Barriers' (BB) mentorship scheme was designed and subsequently revamped. BB recognises the need to present black students with visual manifestations of their goals and to provide mentoring unrestricted by cultural difference – this latter with the inevitable attendant consequences of limited perspectives and insurmountable barriers to success in and beyond higher education (HE).

Marginalisation of black students and thus the need for partnerships

It is not news that research has explored and substantiated the existence of institutional racism in HE in the UK (Advance HE, 2020). Research has delved into how university

experiences variously affect students according to their racial and cultural backgrounds, with commensurate inequalities – in terms of access, retention and success (Bopal *et al.*, 2016; Modood and Shiner, 2002; Law *et al.*, 2004; Pilkington, 2013; Ajibade, 2020) – that have been shown to have a negative impact upon black students inside the classroom, within the university and beyond completion of their courses, when they face unfair challenge in securing places on further research programmes or employment appropriate to their skills. This is in itself problematic, but any comparison with the educational outcomes achieved by their white counterparts confirms the marginalisation of black students and, therefore, the urgent need for genuine equity in their HE experiences (National Equality Panel, 2010).

There is also plentiful research and retention evidence to show that black students – particularly in white institutions – struggle at every stage of HE, from the point of initial access to eventual attainment or success (Ajibade, 2020; Allen, 2017). Access to university is a challenge for black students, in large part because of the socio-economic inequalities that place many black students into ‘widening participation’ (WP) categories. This continues to be the case, even though much policy, regulatory and fiscal support has been put in place to achieve WP. The research suggests that students are also less likely to stay in university when they are inadequately assimilated into the university environment and consequently fail to engage effectively with it. In terms of attainment, degree classification inequalities are more likely for black Caribbean students than for other ethnicities (ECU, 2011; Boliver, 2013; Allen, 2017).

There is some indication that BAME students are more likely to be extrinsically motivated – by course reputation or future career – while white students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated – by, say, interest in the subject and personal development (Griffin, 2013). Allen (2017) found that black students would prefer the psychological and spiritual wellbeing they experience in black universities to the resources on offer to them in white universities. At SOAS, BB has proved helpful in addressing isolation and facilitating integration into the institutional environment by providing external stimuli.

Also, black students have few staff representatives of their own backgrounds. According to HESA 2018/19 data on academic staff with known ethnicity, 17% were black and minority ethnic (BME), an increase of 1% from 2017/18. Among non-academic staff with known ethnicity, 12% were BME, the same as for 2017/18. Of these values, 8% were black students and 1.9% were black staff, none of whom were in senior management positions (HESA, 2020). Historically, black people have had to work significantly harder – and for fewer opportunities – than other racial groups; social-science and economic research confirms that black students and their families are doing more with less (Mason, 1997; Modood and Shiner, 2002).

Mentorship is a partnership

According to Tinto (1993), a student less integrated into university is more likely to withdraw; certainly, retention of students is major issue for HE. However, mentorship programmes have demonstrated their effectiveness in retaining students (Griffin, 2013) and, though their application at SOAS as a specific means of addressing various characteristics of subjects is fairly recent, the initiative has already shown results in developing student resilience, improving retention and reducing degree-awarding gaps. Though new to SOAS, the same is not the case in HE more widely, where mentoring programmes have paired staff and

students on the basis of inter-ethnicity, black ethnicity and even of gender groupings (Griffin, 2013; Koch and Zahedi, 2019). The feedback from students and staff corroborates research findings that interaction with faculty and social systems plays a critical role in black student experiences and retention.

Despite the differences that exist in rationales for mentoring, BB has already confirmed a finding in common with other programmes: that mentoring relationships require a more experienced mentor to be a guide and support mechanism for a less experienced mentee and thus to be able to provide the mentee with relevant support and advice. Two common types of mentorship found in HE settings are: 1) informal relationships that form over time and 2) relationships created by a third party (Risner *et al.*, 2020; Wanberg, Welsh and Hezlett, 2003). BB is the latter, allowing up to two black students to be matched with a black member of staff through the institution's Retention Department. As with most formal mentoring approaches, BB includes workshop programmes aimed at supporting both mentors and mentees in their professional and personal development.

Representation and identity for black students

Why should black students be mentored by black staff? It may seem obvious because of the wealth of research on representation in education. However, there is a deeper and much more complex rationale for black students' being mentored by black staff. Cultural alignment has been shown to be influential in the forming of a bond between black members of the SOAS community, where shared understanding is just as important as collaborative cultural learning (Ajibade, 2020). We should note that culture has positive impact upon educational attainment and should be used as an aid to student learning. Yet, despite research suggesting the value of cultural inclusivity, HE institutions in the UK have failed to embed cultural variety effectively into their curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and support.

Culture is also extremely valuable in creating learning partnerships, because shared understanding of behavioural traits, communication styles and gender roles is an element that can contribute to student success (Nagel, 1994; Feinberg, 2019). Culture shock has been found to be a barrier in black student attainment (Ajibade, 2020). Essentially, characteristics of race include immediate demonstrable elements (e.g., skin colour), but can also include shared ethnicities and shared histories that form cultural elements (e.g., diction, responses to micro-aggressions). Dissecting cultural impact on education, though achieving it may be a major feat, should be done in any environment where partnerships with black students are being considered. It is not as easy as partnering black students with black staff, but to do so is a start. Understanding the similarities and differences within the black community will guide institutions in supporting the learning journey of black students.

Culture aside, Pinnock (2008) found both a lack of adequate awareness of the needs of non-traditional students and evidence of under-developed student support systems in UK universities. Institutional racism, indirect discrimination and lack of culturally inclusive financial advice are all significant and genuine barriers that black students face, even as early as the point of access to HE (Connor, Tyers, Modood and Hillage, 2004; Feinberg, 2019). While such matters need to be tackled by those responsible for HE provision, it should be emphasised that achieving measurable positive outcomes takes time, during which the lives, education and finances of students are likely to suffer. Black students are

calling for 'counterspaces': spaces that allow for validation and for the opportunity to "*critique one's interconnected self and group identity*" (Keels, 2020).

Origins of 'Breaking Barriers'

The 'Degrees of Racism' report highlighted that, as reflected in the quantitative data, the experiences of students of colour were not monolithic. External studies and SOAS' own data reflect that students of the African and Caribbean diaspora (black students) repeatedly suffer the largest degree-awarding gap and non-continuation figures, even amongst the 'BAME' category (HESA, 2020). The pervasiveness of anti-blackness in HE was the argued source of the under-representation, in which negative stereotypes pertaining to black people and their cultures hindered their ability to navigate and excel in HE. SOAS students pointed out that, though they were aware of the disproportionate lack of black academics teaching in universities within the UK, they had higher expectations of an institution specialising in African Studies (SOAS, 2018). Indeed, in 2017-18, three per cent of academic staff identified as black and there was only one black female professor. Students felt exceptional disappointment and frustration about this issue in the light of the School's marketing and open days, which over-emphasised the diversity of staff. They connected this to their poorer mental health, their more limited engagement with their studies and their reduced desire to continue their degrees (SOAS, 2018).

As a result, a key recommendation from the report was that a formal mentoring scheme should be established at SOAS – for students of colour mentored by SOAS staff of colour – the rationale behind which being that these staff members, as clear role models for the students and as empathetic mentors with first-hand experience of navigating academia and dealing with institutional racism, were likely to be best placed to serve as guides. In 2017, this project proposal was submitted to the Attainment Gap Working Group, in which it was agreed that, as the gap was the most significant for black students, the scheme would focus on partnerships between staff of colour and black students. The Breaking Barriers Mentoring Scheme was born.

What is 'Breaking Barriers'?

The Breaking Barriers Mentoring Scheme aims to build partnerships between black staff and students, in order to enhance the experience of black students and effect culture change.

The initial format of the scheme saw an academic or professional services staff member who was also a person of colour paired with a black undergraduate or masters student. According to the mentee's preference, the pair met monthly or fortnightly, for the mentee to check in and work on an action plan targeted at developing personal confidence in navigating HE.

The objectives of the mentoring scheme are:

1. to help support black students to feel more connected to SOAS;
2. to help develop personal and academic confidence;
3. to support students to recognise and deal with Institutional racism;
4. to allow mentors to share their experiences and progression from university to the workplace.

In addition to the core partnerships of Breaking Barriers, workshops are held to tackle the objectives of the scheme.

In three years of the scheme at SOAS, fifty black students have been mentored by over thirty staff.

Monitoring and evaluation methodology

In the effort to continue to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of Breaking Barriers, a mixed-method approach obtains qualitative and quantitative data. Each year, all students are surveyed before and after the scheme; they also complete a mid-point questionnaire. As a sample, thirty per cent of the mentees are invited for further interview, which enables us to glean an in-depth understanding of their experiences on the scheme. All mentors are surveyed at the formal end of the scheme and they attend a focus group to feed back their experiences. Key success indicators on a short-term process level include: the number of successful matches of mentees and mentors; the number of mentees who have successfully developed an action plan; and the number of mentees who have been able to develop regular contact with their mentors.

More pertinent to the future success of the programme have been the medium- to long-term success indicators, reflective of a behavioural change. These include: mentees reporting that the programme has increased their academic and personal self-confidence and that they have achieved at least one of their action plan objectives; the share of mentees with better attendance/retention rates, improved educational performance and an enhanced feeling of belonging to the institution.

More recently, the better to evaluate the effectiveness of the scheme, the objectives have been aligned with Nerupi, a praxis-based framework – for designing widening participation (WP) activities and capturing their impact – widely used in UK HE for measuring the effectiveness of access for students from WP backgrounds (Hayton, 2019). Monitoring of the scheme will also incorporate a skills audit, by which mentees can track their progress in accordance with the framework.

I found it incredibly powerful being mentored by a black woman who had understood what it was like to navigate professional and academic spaces whilst experiencing racism, sexism and misogyny. I felt able to talk candidly about my experiences at the university, and she gave me great advice. She checked in regularly with me.

My mentor and I got on great. It was uncanny the amount of things we had in common and from day one I felt very comfortable disclosing personal topics with her. She was super supportive in helping me transition from PG to the workplace, helping me with job applications and sending me opportunities.

I chose Adj as my mentor because we are close in age and have similar interests, but she is further along the career and academic path than me. My mentor really tried to keep up communication with me - when we sat down she gave me lots of practical advice about my next steps

Taiwo is so lovely! He really helped me with regards to working out my action plan for the next stage after my post graduate. He was really invested in my success and seemed genuinely proud when positive things happened.

Keni was definitely invested in my progress and was really helpful in helping me in my masters and career options. We organised mock interviews to prepare me for this interview I had, I found it really helpful

Figure 1. Screenshot of student responses to post-scheme survey

Impact observations and key themes

Within SOAS, there has been a high level of belief and involvement in Breaking Barriers and agreement that it should continue to run. The response of both mentees and mentors to opportunities in which they could come together as part of a wider community has been extremely positive. That doesn't mean the way has been easy: engagement with students prior to their becoming participants has proved challenging for data protection reasons; additionally, since no wide-spread cultural connectivity has existed among black students, it has been hard to market the scheme by word of mouth. In accordance with 'What Works' (Thomas, 2012), it has become clear to us that the earlier students can be involved in the scheme the more likely it becomes that they will see and embrace it as an intrinsic part of university provision and thus engage well with it. Certainly, our experience shows that, though necessary, the many rounds of communication prevented any launching of the scheme earlier than November.

"Having low numbers of BAME staff has been identified as limiting an institution's capability to address the attainment gap. It can mean that BAME staff become overburdened with the responsibility of acting as role models and mentors, and this can also create a perception that the responsibility for addressing the attainment gap and related issues does not fall to other members of staff" (NUS, UUK 2018). While staff engagement has been strong throughout this endeavour, it is now waning. There is, for both coordination and mentorship, a critical labour cost that the institution does not effectively factor into its workload allocation. To achieve a nuanced level of partnership with a student is time-consuming; it requires an often unquantifiable commitment; the rewards of creating such a partnership are similarly difficult to quantify. That the staff at SOAS have sought without hesitation to achieve such a high quality of partnership is impressive; now it is essential that there is a matching institutional reflection on the value of formally making space to allow such collaborations to continue to flourish. Making space requires physical, human and monetary resources – not empty words, however glowing – and to make a concrete commitment to it is the only certain way to establish race equality, decolonise education and end the marginalisation of black students.

During the matching process, a few mentees asked specifically for black mentors, not other non-black staff of colour. When asked further about this, most answered that they wanted a mentor with a cultural background similar to their own and pointed to the existence of anti-black feeling in other non-black communities of colour. This supports the literature that explains that to be attuned to cultural nuance is critical to the establishing of appropriate reciprocal relationships in the mentoring of black students. This impact feedback also feeds forward into the need for a stronger matching process that takes into consideration wider skills and demographics; as the programme evolves and gathers more data, the matching process should also evolve. In line with the feedback from students, the scheme will prioritise black staff as mentors in order to address the specific issue of anti-black attitudes in education.

Impact of partnership for identity and representation

In the context of the current global conversation about black lives and, in HE, of expressed concerns about marginalisation and lack of representation, with a concomitant demand for more spaces for black staff and students to communicate, the SOAS 'Black Staff and

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Student Forum' creates a space for collaboration and provides a platform for the online expression of black experience on campus. The forum launched in November 2020 and saw attendance and participation from black staff and students from a wide array of disciplines, levels and departments.

Staff and students were able to discuss issues they were facing at work or in the classroom and, most importantly, to come together to celebrate and 'uphold the A' (Africa) in SOAS. The forum consists of a monthly live discussion as well as a continuous online chat, via MS Teams, to encourage frequent conversation and commentary on matters that affect black staff and students. The forum has already been recognised by the Pro-director as a critical black electronic data interchange (EDI) space and both staff and students have expressed their gratitude for and relief at being able to see the others who are like them.

Regular discussions are also held in the form of a round table, resulting in the development of workshops for the mentees on topics such as self-confidence and entitlement. In January 2019, there was a round-table discussion on the 'Black Student Experience', exploring anti-blackness in academic spaces, practical solutions to tackle the degree-awarding gap and other issues concerning the experience of Afro-Caribbean students at university. The event served as a space for staff and students to express their views/experiences, take part in important discussion and help inform the scheme's future work. Mentees regularly express their appreciation for this programme:

"The roundtable was an incredible opportunity to meet other people of colour on campus in an academic context. The atmosphere was so positive and supportive. Full of laughter and empowerment. As a student this is invaluable, and I cannot thank you enough for creating this space on campus for us.... I hope this project exists for the students to come." – Mentee

Mentors likewise have made frequent positive comments about the mentoring scheme:

"I had a really positive experience with my mentee, we met over ten times in the 6 month period, and it's been great to see her development. She is currently applying for a fantastic job as a result of her increased confidence and she notes the mentoring scheme as a key factor." – Mentor

The ultimate consideration for any scheme like BB is that, in a world now characterised by violence against black people, anti-black trauma and racial health inequities (as highlighted by the coronavirus pandemic), black students need – and will continue to need – careful nurturing to enable them to navigate HE.

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