

A critical dialogue reflecting on the potentials of black, Asian and minority ethnic student-staff partnerships

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2020 may have been dominated by a pandemic, but, in summer, following the murder of George Floyd, the year also served up some tough conversations about racial equality; these moved beyond words and realised tangible change for racially minoritised groups. This important and timely special issue of the *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change* serves as a call to action to those working within higher education (HE) – to promote equality by placing centre stage the needs and knowledge of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students and staff.

This piece offers a reflective account of the potentials of partnership work within HE, specifically from the perspectives of two individuals immersed in a powerful BAME student-staff partnership. Our paper takes inspiration from the Mercer-Mapstone and Mercer (2017) dialogue which, from a feminist perspective, excellently deconstructs partnership, highlighting its transformational and liberating power. Our – complementary – dialogue instead views partnership activity through the lens of race.

The context of our partnership – the University of Winchester's 'Asian' degree-awarding gap

Inequality is systemic in human society, including United Kingdom (UK) HE; one pertinent example is the persistent, sector-wide degree-awarding gap experienced by BAME students, who are thirteen per cent less likely to graduate with an upper-second or first-class honours degree than their white peers (Universities UK and National Union of Students, 2019). Of course, every institution is diverse, both in the people who make it up and the array of experiences they bring with them. Elimination of such a gap must therefore depend upon carefully considered strategies tailored to individual needs (Stevenson *et al.*, 2019). In 2017/18, the University of Winchester's disaggregated data evidencing the institution's BAME degree-awarding gap revealed a thirty-two percentage point difference between UK-domiciled Asian students and white students in the gaining of a 'good degree'.

Such a large and statistically significant gap brought together the Centre for Student Engagement and Department of Widening Participation to investigate the reasons for it. Thus came about a qualitative research project integrating one of the University's student-staff partnership schemes: the Winchester Research Apprenticeship Programme (WRAP), details of which may be found in Bohnacker-Bruce (2019). This scheme was invaluable to the running and success of a project which ultimately sought to understand the lived experiences of the institution's Asian students. Two student research partners were recruited for the project (Isabella Valente and Zuni Khan) and this reflective piece offers a unique insight into the experiences of Maisha Islam (staff partner) and Isabella Valente (student partner). A full report of findings and institutional recommendations has now been published (Islam, 2021), yet this piece aims to encourage further BAME student-staff partnerships across the HE sector.

The potentials of partnership – ameliorating inequalities in higher education

Literature on partnership can often offer an idealistic version of what it espouses and of its potentials. For example, if we take partnership to mean a “*collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, though not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation or analysis*” (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten, 2014, pp.6-7), we acknowledge its radical and transformative nature within HE systems – especially those which position students as (passive) consumers. We see this evidenced particularly by students’ testimonials of partnership work, the impact of which includes: broadening understanding of teaching and learning (Garcia, Noguera and Cortada-Pujol, 2018), giving students the power to transform negative situations (Alison, 2017), building a network with similar others (Pelnar *et al.*, 2020) and gaining skills and enhancing employability (Borsos *et al.*, 2014).

Though, as we may readily observe, having students working in partnership with staff re-imagines the traditional dichotomy between them, to what extent can it ameliorate inequalities within HE? Or is partnership another system which succumbs to reproducing inequality? Authors have written about the challenges of implementing partnership, where a notable and relevant difficulty is inadequate consideration of the needs of under-represented students and staff in such work. Often, such opportunities/schemes are not directed towards meeting the interests of under-represented students, but do work for those students already privileged (Felten *et al.*, 2013; Glazzard, 2017; Mercer-Mapstone, Islam and Reid, 2019). Furthermore, barriers to BAME student engagement also exist, such as the lack of a sense of belonging, personal familial and financial concerns, and cultural differences (Smith, 2018). However, it is evident that, when directed towards social justice aims, student-staff partnership work can produce meaningful outcomes. In specific relation to degree-awarding gaps, the use of BAME students as research assistants or representatives greatly improves institutional ability to understand and counter systemic issues concerning race and ethnicity (Claridge, Stone and Ussher, 2018; Tatsi and Darby, 2018). Partnership thus becomes essential as a means of enabling BAME students to voice and resolve their concerns, as well as being important to restoring their sense of belonging (NUS, 2019).

This piece aims to corroborate as well as contribute to literature in this area – for we do not often hear accounts of partnership by a member of staff and a student who both have BAME backgrounds – in order to demonstrate the potential of such a partnership and advocate for its continued/increased use.

Reflections on our partnership – a critical dialogue

Maisha: So, Isabella, let’s start off with brief introductions and how we got involved in this research. In my role as Student Engagement Research and Projects Officer, I was delighted to be leading a project that related to the university’s degree-awarding gap and to have this as my first formal experience of being a *staff* member in a partnership project.

Isabella: At the time of this project, I was a third-year History student. I saw the advertisement for a student partner to join this project looking into the Asian student experience and I immediately applied – it made me feel represented as I hadn’t heard of anything like this before! At the time of seeing the advertisement, my (Indian) housemate

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and I were experiencing racial harassment by fellow students in our accommodation. Obviously, this unpleasant experience in our final year caused issues for us, what with living and seeing them (and their friends) on campus. This really didn't help my sense of belonging. I also believed my grades would be badly affected, evident in my having to ask for extensions for three assignments, including my dissertation, while this was being investigated. I strongly believe that had I not been involved in this unfortunate circumstance I would have received higher grades, on a par with my previous assignments. The project/role really appealed to me then, as very fitting for the situation I was in. When I saw you, Maisha, in the interview, I felt even more comfortable and at ease as I was speaking to you, a BAME member of staff. I would have been reluctant to discuss certain issues, including the above, had you not been there.

Maisha: Thank you for sharing this, Isabella. You have taken your experience and spun it into a form of empowerment. I really appreciate how you found the interview process to be enjoyable and I'm glad that our very first meeting was able to spark comfort and that it resonated well with you. One of the highlighted criticisms of partnership work is that, often, partnerships are self-selected and then attract students already engaged or more privileged (Bryson, 2014; Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2019). I was delighted to hear in your interview that the advertisement was an opportunity that you saw for “*someone like me*” – I wonder how many opportunities (academic or extra-curricular) offered by universities are ones that BAME students see as ‘something for me’...

Isabella: Another example could be the University of Coventry's introduction of ethnically diverse study support assistants, which gained significant engagement from BAME and international students (Lawrence and White, 2010). This initiative, along with our research project, highlights the important role of BAME staff members.

Maisha: Yes! I remember inviting a South-Asian lecturer to our first meeting to show you and Zuni that there are individuals like us in HE. I also wanted to provide a strong welcome, as I know BAME students don't often feel this sense of belonging, by giving you both personalised briefing packs, your own notebook and USB. I wanted to ensure you felt valued and welcomed from the outset!

Moving to the research itself, did you find your own assumptions were challenged? Especially, being a student at the time?

Isabella: During the focus groups, I was surprised by the largely positive opinions that students had, as they contrasted with my own. The finding that stood out the most was that most students felt welcome and a part of the university, despite being under-represented in many ways (for example, a lack of diverse events celebrating their cultures). I was really pleased to hear this, yet I found it difficult to understand because of my own experiences ...

Maisha: I think we both felt this sensation of straddling the dichotomies of ‘insider-outsider’. In a similar vein, despite the level of familiarity and similarity I felt with focus group participants (that is, also being South-Asian and three years out of my undergraduate student experience), I was made aware of the blind side of conducting ‘insider’ research. For example, the high level of importance some students placed on their family meant that they were taking on board significant caring responsibilities. However, not one student described

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this as a burden; rather, there was a strong willingness to drive their parents to hospital appointments and act as translators when accessing social services, for example.

Isabella: Yes, it was very interesting to hear how dedicated students were to their families. One student mentioned intentionally choosing the closest university as it meant being able to live at home and care for her parents. Smith's (2018) research found that BAME students tended to be commuter students and linked this fact to the degree-awarding gap, as student engagement tended to be lower when this was the case.

Maisha: So, when I first started my undergraduate degree in Sociology, my father was diagnosed with bowel cancer. If I had no timetabled lectures, I would be at home studying, while at the same time providing some level of care for my father or doing my weekend retail job. However, I too never saw this as a burden, nor consciously thought it could harm my academic participation, and so I never reached out for support from my university; I simply 'got on with it', as did some of our focus-group participants. It was definitely a 'light bulb' moment for me that other students like me might be experiencing the same now.

Isabella: Sharing these thoughts, it reinforces to me that having a BAME member of staff made the experience a lot more comfortable and welcoming. If there hadn't been a BAME staff partner, the experience would have been completely different. I would not be comfortable enough to engage in conversations about race and religion. You being a recent graduate and younger in age also enabled us to create a stronger partnership. I wasn't nervous about asking questions when feeling unsure about the project and even felt comfortable discussing my ongoing issues related to my flatmates.

Maisha: In a lot of ways our partnership embodied the principles mentioned by Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten (2014), whose seminal definition of student-staff partnership includes three principles: respect, reciprocity and responsibility. I entered the project seeking knowledge about our Asian students' experiences and I did not expect to gain so much from you and Zuni. For example, I found myself respecting your thoughts, following the first focus group we all took responsibility in running. In our de-brief, both of you enlightened me as to how I could have better led the focus group to ensure it was relevant to our project aims. Taking this on board meant the second focus group was much more focused. From our continued conversations and the relationship built, I continue to learn so much from your insights into race through a student perspective. For example, you mentioned your undergraduate dissertation (which focused on Iranian history) being met with indifference and deemed 'irrelevant' by your peers. This reinforces to me how much work needs to be done – hearing your own accounts adds so much context to the issue of BAME degree-awarding gaps.

Isabella: You taught me a lot too and allowed me to give my opinions confidently without shutting me down. We each built on what the other said throughout the project and had an ethos of 'creating change together' in relation to the issues facing Asian students (Mercer-Mapstone and Marie, 2019, p.9).

Maisha: Isabella, I have found this experience of partnership to be extremely fruitful and being able to collaborate with you further has been an honour and a pleasure. To conclude our critical dialogue, what recommendations would you want to offer the sector that will further support BAME student-staff partnerships?

Isabella: Thank you, it has been delightful working with you. You've given me a great opportunity throughout this project to now. If issues related to race are being investigated, it's important that the research team members represent diverse backgrounds. I couldn't imagine doing this project with anyone else – it would not have been the same. Having a BAME member of staff is necessary. You also kindly sent a letter confirming my participation and that will be useful when applying for my graduate roles. Receiving that letter also illustrated that my involvement was formally recognised, as it was signed by two senior members of staff. I highly recommend similar avenues where student partners' efforts can be acknowledged. Maisha, what recommendations would you make for interrogating BAME degree-awarding gaps?

Maisha: In an oxymoronic way, our partnership has made me realise the inadequacies of the term 'BAME'. Personally, I have no aversion to it as a term; it can encourage a feeling of membership among those in the groups it includes. However, when writing up the project's findings, I consciously wrote the term 'Asian' *with* inverted commas. We had a heterogeneous sample of students, all with contexts unique to their various backgrounds and ethnicities which could/should not be embraced by the single term 'Asian'. Though our aim was to disaggregate the term 'BAME', we argue that even the 'A' in 'BAME' warrants further subdivision; the same can also be said of the other letters.

Isabella: I am not entirely comfortable with the term 'BAME' myself – and especially the 'A'. When I applied for the role, I asked myself if I was even 'Asian' enough to apply. I don't know where I stand with terminology like 'BAME' as I am mixed-race. I do not have one group and therefore I struggle to define myself within that term – one which is used for such a large group of people who come from so many different backgrounds.

Maisha: Exactly! What you describe is a really common feeling (Panesar, 2017). My more tangible recommendations, however, would include this one: funding of projects that target the degree-awarding gap is vital, to make them sustainable while actively aligning them to meaningful, social justice aims. To have deliberately structured this particular partnership with a focus upon 'Asian' students and a better serving/understanding of their needs, and the ethnicities included within this group, is where our empowerment as 'BAME' individuals lies and where the potentials of partnership for under-represented groups are particularly highlighted. That we did do that demonstrates the equitable nature partnership work can have. Moreover, partnership should not be limited to single and finite instances where staff partners (who generally hold more of the power) can use their role to widen impact; our partnership has been imbued with opportunities – from presenting the findings of our project to the University's Assistant Vice-Chancellor to being accepted at a national student engagement conference – and even to co-writing this article together after the formal conclusion of the project.

Conclusion

Our dialogue is indicative of how partnership supports the creation of brave spaces through genuine engagement, hearing the voices of those often not heard and exemplifying the complexities of wrestling through states of inclusion-exclusion and belonging-alienation as traditionally "*marginalised others*" (Cook-Sather, 2016). Nevertheless, we emphasise how our shared passion for this area has enabled mutual growth and gain (both academically and personally). Whilst there were clear benefits emanating from our partnership – and we thus

advocate for more opportunities to bring BAME students and staff together, we also caveat by saying the burden should not be placed solely on BAME students and staff to 'fix' degree-awarding gaps (HEPI, 2019: Doku). Instead, where there is an institution-wide approach, driven by strong leadership, an informed analysis of data and a genuine shift in culture, that is where we can accelerate progress in this area (UUK and NUS, 2019): BAME student-staff partnerships should thus be *one* central prong in a multi-pronged approach to equitable inclusivity and effective redressal.

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