

Be SMART: a black, Asian and minority ethnic staff-student partnership to enhance graduate employability

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Abstract

This case study explores 'Be SMART', a black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) staff-student collaboration to enhance graduate employability, piloted at St Mary's University, Twickenham. It provides a novel insight into how students, staff and external organisations working in partnership can successfully engage BAME students in enhancing their employability skills and experiences. Be SMART offered BAME students the opportunity to access mentoring, leadership and professionalism workshops and also flexible paid internships. We explore the impact of Be SMART by means of a questionnaire and a series of semi-structured interviews with participants. Our findings show that participants, who widely reported significant improvements in their self-confidence, acquired a range of professional-level skills from their engagement. They also developed a stronger sense of belonging to the University, enhanced their peer network and were subsequently more likely to engage with the Careers Service. Our case study critically explores the success factors of Be SMART to facilitate wider uptake of BAME-targeted, co-created employability initiatives in United Kingdom higher education.

1. Introduction

The employability outcomes for black, Asian or minority ethnic¹ (BAME) students are lower than for their white peers in United Kingdom (UK) higher education (HE). There is, throughout the sector, an increased emphasis on reducing this gap, driven by major policy initiatives by the Office for Students (OfS) – including the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) and Access and Participation Plan (APP). It is widely reported in the literature that BAME students are less 'engaged' with their university and feel less sense of belonging than their white peers and are consequently at higher risk of withdrawing from their studies (Thomas *et al.*, 2012). BAME students also see few role models from a BAME background at university, which can limit institutional abilities to address the attainment gap effectively and unfairly burden BAME staff with the responsibility to do so (UUK, 2019).

St Mary's University, Twickenham, in south-west London, UK, devised Be SMART, an intervention targeted at closing the employability outcome gap for BAME students. Staff in Employability Services and students co-created the project, with current and graduate students taking on the role of 'consultants' (Bovill *et al.*, 2015) in its design and implementation. The outcomes suggest that the project had a significant and transformational impact on BAME students' approach to employability.

2. Organisation and context

St Mary's University is a small (c. 5000 students) university with a Catholic foundation. Its institutional strategy, Vision 2025, describes it as "*an inclusive Catholic University seeking to*

¹See <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/students#ethnicity> for an explanation of the definition of BAME as adopted by the Higher Education Statistics Agency in the UK

develop the whole person” and adds that “*all our students will be motivated to fulfil their potential*” with graduates “*swiftly entering into rewarding careers... committed to our values and lifelong learning*”. Around 64% of students are drawn from a widening participation (WP) background and one third of the total student population is from a BAME background. The University’s commitment to inclusivity in teaching and learning is a major driving force behind the development of the St Mary’s Curriculum Framework, which articulates how inclusive teaching practices support positive graduate outcomes. A new Employability Strategy, launched in 2019, outlines approaches to enhancing those outcomes by addressing the short- and long-term challenges facing under-represented student groups.

During 2019, within this institutional context, the Be SMART project (<https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/employers/smart.aspx>) was developed to tackle the specific inequalities that St Mary’s BAME graduates’ experience in their efforts to secure graduate roles and employment; it is evidence of and a product of the University’s strategic focus on BAME student outcomes. It therefore supports the University’s mission and values and also meets the requirements of the APP. The project was developed primarily by the lead author, supported by the Head of St Mary’s Employability Service and with contributions from the careers team and Widening Participation team in the Centre for Teaching Excellence and Student Success: hereafter referred to as ‘the Be SMART team’.

3. Specifications of the project

The Be SMART project sought to mitigate the inequalities that BAME students experience when attempting to secure employment in professional roles. It adopted a clear student-staff co-creation approach in which students acted as consultants, “*sharing and discussing valuable perspectives*” (Bovill *et al.*, 2015). It was clear to the project leadership team that the success of Be SMART would depend on the way it captured the authentic, lived experience of BAME students. The approach to student partnership was organic, in that it grew as the Be SMART team gained, for example, new understandings of BAME student experiences and encountered unforeseen circumstances, not least of which was the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, students provided consultancy, as experts on the unique challenges faced by BAME students in developing and managing their careers, offering suggestions for possible ways to address those challenges. Later in the project, members of the Afro-Caribbean Society acted as consultants for the advertising of the project, for previous attempts at BAME-targeted interventions had indicated the importance of effective promotion to successfully engage students. Student participants, alongside employers, were later consulted on how to manage internships remotely during the pandemic.

Be SMART aimed to equip students with:

- i. the skills, experience, cultural capital and networks that would help them mitigate some of the inequalities they would experience as students and graduates;
- ii. self-esteem, confidence and positive self-identification as BAME individuals to manage systemic disadvantages and biases.

This happened in the form of a) mentoring, b) internships and c) leadership and professionalism workshops. All these drew on external expertise from a diverse range of industries. These worked as follows:

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a. Mentoring: Students were partnered with professionals and met up at least once a month for six months to receive support on achieving personal professional objectives, to accrue cultural capital and to expand their professional networks.

b. Internships (thirty hours' paid experience): participants could arrange their working hours around existing commitments.

c. Workshops: Four workshops, delivered by the Careers Service and external facilitators, were designed to: help participants develop leadership skills and etiquette to navigate professional settings; create spaces for discussion of topics related to race and identity in a professional setting. The pandemic severely disrupted these workshops.

Participants were recruited through campus posters, the virtual learning environment (VLE) and social media platforms. BAME staff were encouraged to promote the project and BAME societies (such as the Afro-Caribbean Society) were asked to promote the project. Weekly information sessions took place during the recruitment phase. There were 41 applicants to the project; following a selection process, 28 (68%) participated in it. Mentors were recruited in partnership with National Mentoring Consortium and via personal contacts, and internship providers were recruited directly by the project leadership team. Training for mentors and mentees took place in November 2019 before the project was formally launched in December 2019. Mentoring, internships and workshops took place from January to July 2020, concluding later than anticipated because of operational challenges around the pandemic. The project was supported by funding allocated for WP activities.

4. The pedagogy and practice of Be SMART

The project's pedagogy was informed by the intersection of the BAME identity of students and the Be SMART team's ambition for their employability. It was developed with reference to a) sector-wide data on BAME student outcomes and St Mary's APP and TEF submissions and b) the literature on BAME students' graduate employment; it focused upon three emergent themes relating to BAME students: identity and employability (Jackson, 2016), sense of belonging (Trowler, 2019; Thomas, 2012) and graduate capital (Tomlinson, 2017). One-to-one consultations with students provided narratives to influence the project design. Overall, the project was grounded in the personal and professional experiences and identities of BAME students and sought ways of enriching these.

The project's design acknowledged the multiple ways through which race influences students' experience of HE, including their identity, self-esteem and relationships with academic and support staff. The challenges experienced by BAME students and professionals also directly informed the design of internships, mentoring and leadership and professionalism workshops. For example, the internships were deliberately flexible to better accommodate students' existing education, work and family commitments and the workshops specifically addressed resilience and 'leveraging your difference'.

The promotion of Be SMART framed the project around the benefits of participation. Non-BAME academics were encouraged to promote it to their students as a complement to the promotion directed at BAME students by student societies, student leaders and academic and professional service 'role models'. An important feature of the project promotion was

understanding the use of physical spaces on campus by BAME students, societies and clubs. For example, in the campus refectory, BAME students tended to gather in one area and so this was targeted with advertising about Be SMART; the project team also went there to promote the project directly to BAME students.

The shared BAME identity of the project leadership team was a powerfully positive influence on the project's pedagogy, enabling authentic and engaging conversations with students in co-creating their project experience; for example, discussions about mentor and internship choices, the overcoming of personal barriers to engagement and how to respond to the COVID-19 challenge. Team members could also reflect authentically about their own BAME identity and its effects on their careers and professional development, thereby providing the opportunity for students to 'author' (Kreber, 2010) their own journey through the project. For example, they noted how, as first-generation immigrants or first-in-family to go to university, they had struggled with the transition to a professional career, primarily because of lack of work experience, professional networks and careers guidance. They reflected on how discrimination and stereotyping during their education and career had impacted their own career development, self-esteem and positive self-identity, and noted how professional BAME role models would have helped them navigate the structural, social, cultural and educational factors which perpetuate inequalities.

5. Project evaluation

The St Mary's University Ethics Committee approved our research methodology. The evaluation of the project took place between October and November 2020, in two stages. First, we sent all Be SMART participants an online questionnaire about the project which consisted of eleven Likert scale and open-text questions. The responses were summed by category where necessary for analysis. We interviewed six project participants for about 30 minutes using a semi-structured, pre-prepared format. We audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed these interviews thematically. The interviewees were anonymised by the second author prior to analysis by both authors, due to the lead author's role in the project and the small sample size which would make it possible to identify participants based only on their gender. The key themes that emerged provided the structure for the project evaluation: i) motivation to participate; ii) development of employability skills; iii) increased self-confidence; iv) impact on career planning; v) sense of belonging.

5.1. Motivations to participate in Be SMART

The survey revealed that students' participation in Be SMART and reasons for engaging in it were primarily associated with its BAME focus, career development opportunity and the programme's content (figure 1). During the interviews, three students referred to the importance of internships for their intended careers and the competitiveness of these professions. Most of the interviewees explicitly noted that the targeting of Be SMART at BAME students had encouraged them to participate. Student 2 commented that the BAME focus was "*really, really helpful... it felt like St Mary's really understood how some of their students felt*". Students were also motivated by the opportunity to improve their access to professional networks that to BAME students seemed exclusionary: "*I really wanted to get ahead... [it was] a good way to gain access...*" (Student 5). The opportunity to be mentored and participate in internships was widely mentioned. Student 2 added the importance of accessing BAME role models:

“We [BAME students] don’t have connections in the industry we want to get into... one thing I loved about [it] was I was able to see people who are like me, and then they’re quite successful.”

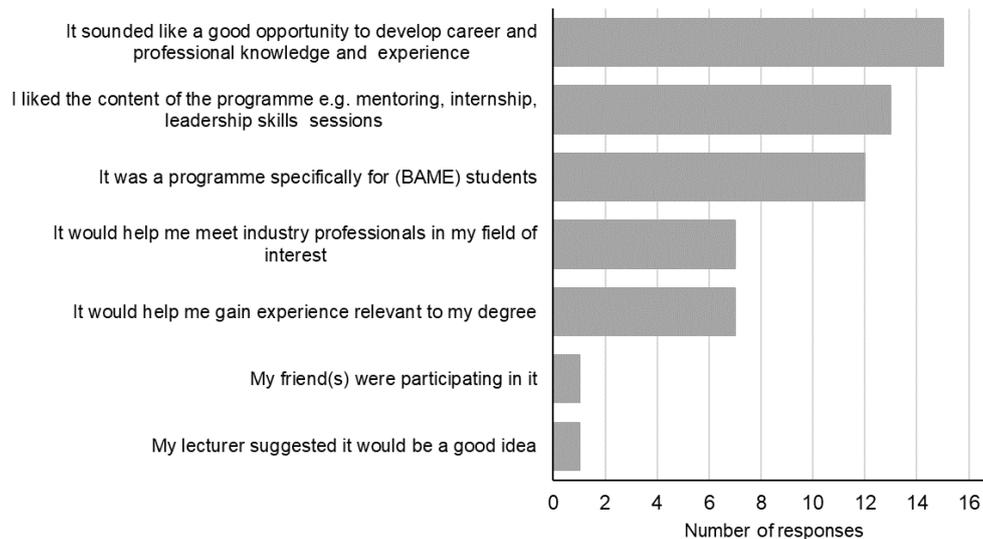


Figure 1: Responses to the survey question ‘What was the reason for you wanting to participate in Be SMART?’. Respondents were able to choose as many options as they wanted. A total of 56 responses were given.

5.2. Development of employability skills

Students reflected widely on how Be SMART developed their employability skills, particularly self-management, career management and communication (figure 2). During the interviews, students elaborated particularly on the theme of communication. Students frequently mentioned administration skills and one student reflected specifically on the importance of the internship at an organisation they now worked for: *“I learned a lot of office skills through the internship.... that’s what got me hired.”* Student 4 noted the value of developing an understanding of the importance of the tone and style of communication and of personal posture in their communication. Student 5 referred to the importance of communications in collaborative work and elaborated on the skill to be self-motivated and to *“get people’s attention”*. Student 2 framed their skills development around leadership, again reflecting on communications:

“When they say leader, it doesn’t have to mean you know, you have to be at the top of the of the pole. It just means how you conduct yourself.”

Student 2 noted that the workshop focusing on leadership had provided an opportunity to define their own leadership style and *“learn the kind of leadership style...that’s most comfortable to me”*. They had clearly identified the importance of leadership and had considered how they would develop their professional identity as a BAME leader, and explained the importance of the relationship between power, reward and motivation that leadership roles expose, as a result of the workshop.

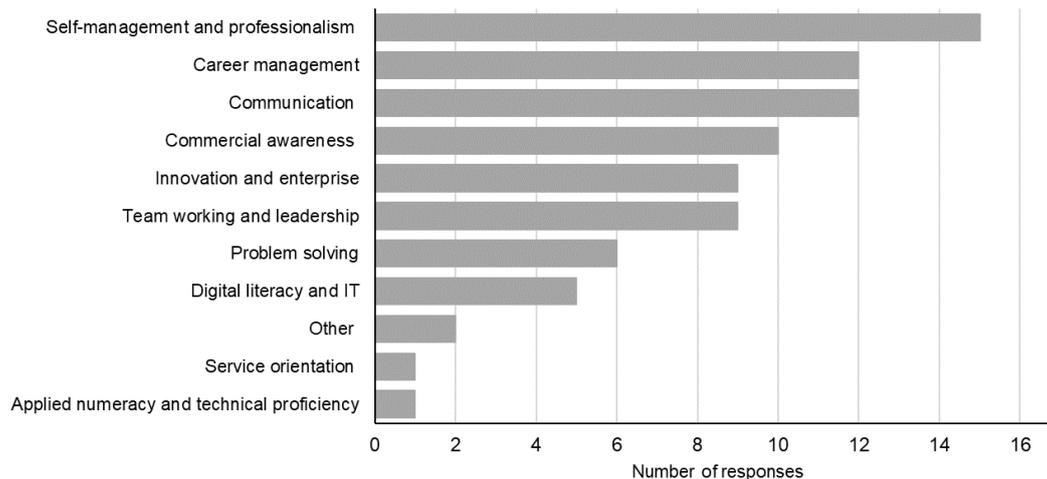


Figure 2: Responses to the survey question ‘What five outcomes did you feel you developed the most as a result of taking part in the Be SMART programme?’

5.3. Increase in self-confidence

Participants widely associated their involvement in the project with an increase in confidence and students widely agreed that this positively impacted their views of themselves as BAME students (table 2). After Be SMART, three quarters of students rated their confidence as either ‘very confident’ or ‘fairly confident’ and all those who selected ‘very confident’ said that Be SMART had contributed ‘very much’ to this feeling. Nearly all interviewees mentioned increased confidence. For example, Student 3 described gaining “*more confidence in myself... [I have become] a more rounded person as a whole*”. Student 6 related confidence specifically to their BAME identity:

“In terms of being a BAME student... it’s just my, like, my confidence and sense... I can apply for anything... it’s boosted my confidence.”

Students 4 and 5 also pointed to their confidence in applying for jobs after participating in Be SMART. Student 3 specifically elaborated on the “*massive*” importance of the mentoring, through which they had improved the quality of their curriculum vitae and also their confidence about applying for jobs, saying it was “*a really important part [of Be SMART] for me*”. Student 1 further suggested that they had developed new-found confidence in professional networking and could now, because of the mentoring, “*just start a conversation with somebody who could help [my career]*”. Student 5 later returned to the theme of confidence when discussing their mentoring, highlighting how they built confidence from learning from “*mistakes*” whilst on placement: “*I really learnt from that...and that made me feel more confident.*”

5.4. Impact on career planning

The theme of confidence was also evident in the increased self-efficacy that interviewees noted, evidenced by their approach to taking up and creating new opportunities and adopting a more proactive and planned approach to career development. One student referred to the way Be SMART made them feel “*quite capable*” and not “*outside of [my] realm, [but] something that I actually do*”. Not all internships were directly related to students’

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intended careers, but had benefits in opening up new career options that they had previously been unaware of. For example, Student 3 was “*a bit sceptical*” about their internship, but “*put [their] mind to it...and really enjoyed it!*” giving them a “*more positive attitude*” to considering new options. Student 2 self-reflected on the development of their own “*initiative*”:

“I think because of Be SMART, I have taken a lot more initiative with my plans for the future. I actually teamed up with my friend... [we have] our own side business selling designs.”

Student 1 pointed to the positive impact on their long-term career planning, saying that Be SMART gave them a “*more organisational mindset... I [need to] do this, that and that to get this career goal*”. This theme also developed in the context of participants’ BAME identities. For example, Student 4 referred to their self-worth and the positive influence of Be SMART on their belief in “*going to the top*”. Student 2 found legitimacy from their participation and said that this had enabled them to overcome a “*kind of impostor syndrome type of thing*”. The positive impact of the project was summarised succinctly by Student 4: “*being a black [person] doesn’t...prevent me from getting work experience*”. Students reported a range of positive steps they intended to take after completing the Be SMART project to progress their career, which highlighted the importance of relevant work experience, developing professional behaviours and a committed and resilient mindset to career development (table 1).

Table 1: Selected open-text survey responses to the question ‘What actions will you take with regard to your career progression as a result of participating in Be SMART?’

<i>[There is] competition out there, therefore I have to do something that will make me outstand out from others through mentorship, attending valuable event that will help me develop professionally...</i>
<i>I’m definitely more open to help with my career from the career service. It’s very easy to feel overwhelmed and by yourself after you graduate and so I’ll be dropping in to the careers service whenever I feel like I’ve hit a dead end in applying for further study</i>
<i>Be SMART taught me to take responsibility for committing myself ... and not giving up when things got hard.</i>
<i>I am a lot more confident after completing the Be SMART programme and now feel ready to apply for my postgraduate degree</i>
<i>Once I’ve completed my studies, I will look for internship work with football clubs and steadily work my way up to a full-time job.</i>
<i>Better networking and how to conduct myself in professional environment</i>
<i>The Be SMART programme exposed me to a career in sustainability which I never would have thought about or experienced - because of this it is something I have looked into more and more.</i>
<i>I have and will continue to study online courses that teaches specific information related to my field of interest. I have completed online marketing</i>

<i>courses to develop the knowledge I gained during my Be SMART internship.</i>
<i>My mentor encouraged me to try everything. Because of her encouragement I don't feel lost or confused. I just feel like I need to try everything first. Which I think is a better way of looking at it.</i>
<i>Trying to make a good impression on my work experience team in order to use their links or join their company.</i>
<i>Look for more tailored work experience that will help me get into the consulting or regulation sector.</i>
<i>I won't limit myself and subsequently will put myself out there relentlessly to reach my career goals.</i>

5.5. Sense of belonging

Be SMART participants clearly felt a greater sense of belonging (Trowler, 2019) to both the Careers Service and the University (table 2). A clear sense of engagement, inclusion and being valued emerged when discussing their relationship with the University, with students referring to feeling “*more part of the University*”; more “*accepted...[with] more a community feel*”. A positive impact of the project was the significantly improved engagement of BAME students with the Careers Service (table 2) – and recognition of the value careers consultations could bring to their professional development. Students connected this with a sense of support and personal commitment from the Careers team to see their progression: “*I've created a relationship with them... I feel like they only want to see me progress.*” (Student 4).

Table 2: Survey responses to statements

Statement	% responses (n)				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree
Participating in the Be SMART programme has helped strengthen the connection between me and St Mary's	0 (0)	5 (1)	26 (5)	26 (5)	42 (8)
Being part of the Be SMART programme improved my relationship with the Careers team	0 (0)	5 (1)	21 (4)	32 (6)	42 (8)
Taking part in Be SMART has had a positive impact on how I view myself as a BAME student	0 (0)	0 (0)	32 (6)	53 (10)	16 (3)
It made a positive difference to me that Be SMART partnered with BAME employers, mentors and trainers	0 (0)	0 (0)	32 (6)	42 (8)	26 (3)

Students pointed to the importance of the BAME identity of people involved in the Be SMART project (table 2). They also highlighted the connection they felt with their BAME peers who engaged both with the project and with the project leadership team. Student 1

described their connection with other BAME students as “*something to relate to*”, while Student 2 highlighted the “*authentic and genuine*” feeling they got from the BAME project leadership. Student 6 also referred clearly to the theme of authenticity, evidence of the importance of BAME mentors:

“they themselves being BAME in... different industries... they understand the differences or pressures or, like, barriers that might be there”

Co-creating the project with BAME staff and mentors enhanced participants’ sense of connection to the project. The ability of staff and mentors to speak authentically about the challenges that BAME professionals face increased the impact of the Be SMART project.

6. Lessons learnt and conclusions

The experience of running Be SMART points towards the importance of co-creation with BAME students as a fundamental approach for success. Student consultations enabled the experience of participating in Be SMART to be closely tailored to individual students’ lived experience of university and career development, therefore overcoming the challenges that might lead to withdrawal from the project. This was iterative and the constant reshaping and evolution of co-created solutions facilitated students’ continuing engagement with Be SMART. In other words, co-creation through consultation provided staff with the opportunity to meet students in their own emotional spaces where their real experiences of BAME identity and their challenges relating to career development could be openly discussed, understood and responded to meaningfully. Physical spaces also played an important role in recruiting and engaging participants; our decision to meet BAME students in specific locations such as social events, clubs and recreational areas was instrumental in gaining their engagement and commitment.

Participants thought that the framing of Be SMART as a targeted BAME initiative was a very valuable feature of its design and implementation and one with which they could readily identify. The project team based the advertising for and communications about the project on the evidence of its benefits for participants, in terms of skills, experiences and opportunities. They took care to avoid any use of the deficit model to frame BAME employability; the challenges of BAME identity were confronted clearly but from an authentic and positive perspective by BAME mentors and project leaders. Throughout the project – as an intentional part of its design from the first – feedback was collected from participants through consultation. Doing so helped the final project evaluation but also fostered a culture and practice of continuous monitoring, evaluation and refinement of practices. The experience of Be SMART suggests that tying participant evaluation into milestones in the project – for example, authorising internship payments at the point of induction – is a robust means of collating this feedback.

The project made use of existing institutional BAME networks to gain traction and engagement and to create a meaningful and authentic experience for participating students. The BAME identity of mentors and project leadership as role models clearly resonated positively with students. For similar projects, we recommend that, where these networks do not exist, support is put in place to identify and develop them; we also suggest that appropriate role models are visible and involved.

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The project was designed and carefully situated within the specific institutional context of St Mary's University, which provided a nuanced understanding of the metrics relating to BAME students and the chance to reflect specific challenges and opportunities. Efforts to introduce similar projects elsewhere should be mindful of local context in terms of student metrics, formal and informal BAME networks and the practices of careers and employability services. It is also important to find effective institutional mechanisms for funding similar projects and to ensure that the project is woven into staff workload and priorities, so that it is not seen as an additional burden.

Whilst students who participated in Be SMART gained significant advantages in terms of their career development, sense of belonging and self-esteem, it is right to question why a large proportion of BAME students at the University did not participate, aside from those who applied but were unsuccessful (typically because they were international students, which posed restrictions on the use of WP funding). It is reasonable to assume that some BAME students were unaware of the project and its potential benefits, simply by not seeing the advertising. A possible, more profound, explanation is that persistent feeling of lack of connectedness and sense of belonging that BAME students feel in universities, evident in the pre-Be SMART reflections presented here and revealed in the evaluation of a different project (conducted in 2017) at St Mary's, and in sector-wide reviews (Thomas *et al.*, 2012). Such a sense of alienation drives disengagement: academics and university professional services embody an institution's values, mission and 'feel'. If few BAME staff are visible or if BAME students feel excluded through behaviours, policies or practices, those students are likely not to engage fully with the institution. The nature of 'engagement', however, remains contested: Trowler (2019) cautions against assumptions that students' integration with an institution is the same for all students. She argues that some students cannot, or do not wish to, 'assimilate' in the same, traditional way, which therefore risks continuing exclusion and disengagement. Be SMART demonstrates that co-created BAME-targeted initiatives can help address this by recognising and responding to the specific challenges faced by BAME students. Furthermore, the consultancy approach enabled bespoke solutions for individual students to be implemented, so as to support their engagement and success in the project.

This case study shows that, whilst data about BAME students is an important element in the rationale for this and other BAME-targeted initiatives, students' lived experiences and those of BAME professionals must be used to co-create the design and practice of the project. Through consultation with students, their real-life stories supported authentic engagement with the project, stimulated student interest and inspired students and a range of organisations to participate in and contribute to the project. All were instrumental to the success of Be SMART. The positive impact on BAME students' approaches to employability and ambitions for their professional careers would not have been possible without recognition of the diverse lived experiences of BAME students, mentors and project leaders. Our case study clearly demonstrates the value of using staff-student partnerships to drive the design of employability-focused engagement projects and points to the significant potential value in scaling up similar approaches across institutions.

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