Reverse pedagogy: a citizens' assembly approach to the black, Asian and minority ethnic awarding gap

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Aims, ambitions and project design

Top-down committee-based deliberation tends to mishear or misunderstand people's experiences, especially if the people deliberating are relevantly different from the people having the experiences – for example, a male-dominated medical profession making decisions about women's healthcare (Espírito-Santo, Freire and Serra-Silva, 2020). Conversely, directly democratic methods (such as referendums) do not easily facilitate evidence-based policymaking, especially if the evidence is contrary to people's expectations (Kenny, 2020). In the case of awarding gaps, we at the University of Hertfordshire (UH) have these two features. On one side, policy must be evidence-based; on the other, the senior management and senior academics are, with few exceptions, white. Thus we have a classic situation in which the members of the body tasked with formulating and implementing policy are different in the relevant respect from the people the policy is intended to help.

The project described in this case study took a bottom-up approach to the black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) awarding gap; that is, the gap between grades awarded to white and BAME students after controlling for prior educational attainment, economic disadvantage and other explanatory factors aside from institutional racism and implicit bias. 'Awarding gap' is now the preferred term, because the previous expression, 'attainment gap', suggests a deficit in the students rather than a fault in the institution (Wong *et al.*, 2020; Adebanjo and Corcos, 2020; Ono-George, 2019). The aim was to create the right conditions for students to lead the conversation and shape the recommendations. Knowledge is power – students were therefore provided with the same information as senior management at UH. The project's ambition was to combine student experience and structured research to assess current policies and guide future policymaking directed at the BAME awarding gap.

    i. *The citizens' assembly methodology*

We adopted the 'citizens' assembly' framework as closely as possible. It is a form of deliberative democracy (Stadelmann-Steffen and Dermont, 2015) which enables citizens not only to influence decision makers but also to become informed decision-makers themselves (Teorell, 2006, p.791). It is an opportunity for citizens to gain insight into current policies and to develop new solutions to long-standing collective problems.

The citizens' assembly follows a three-step process of learning, deliberation and decision-making, supported by impartial facilitators – often referred to as an 'independent advisory group', an IAG (Involve, 2020).

We built our model in line with the three-step method. An assembly such as this should be properly informed about the issue at hand. What the assembly learns is then debated between and during learning sessions in a period of deliberation. On completion of the

learning and deliberation periods, the assembly is expected, without interference from the IAG, to write up its findings and recommendations.

Citizens' assemblies are a good way of gathering alternative perspectives from those who often have the benefit of lived experience of an issue. However, not only is it often difficult to recruit a diverse set of participants, but they can lack the scope of representation that a voting system allows for (Stadelmann-Steffen and Dermont, *op.cit.*).

In the event, we had to depart from the pure citizens' assembly model, in that we had to extend the writing-up process beyond the timetabled sessions and give the students more support than the model conventionally allows. (See below for further discussion.)

ii. *The context of our citizens' assembly*

In keeping with the citizens' assembly method, in which the group is supposed to be made up of 50-150 culturally and socially diverse people, we wished to recruit students at every level of study and from across the university; and, rather than seeking BAME students specifically, we aimed to form a culturally and cognitively mixed group. Not knowing how many students would be keen to volunteer for our study and being aware that recruitment is often a weakness of the methodology (Braithwaite and Godbold, 2020), we planned for the lower end of that numerical range. We e-mailed relevant interest groups such as student societies and student representatives and put posters up around the campus.

In the end, the project recruited about twenty students altogether and not all of them attended every session. That the majority of the students recruited were from BAME backgrounds meant that our assembly wasn't as varied as we would have liked. Furthermore, as so many of our recruits were BAME advocates – a paid position open to UH students from black, mixed and ethnic minority backgrounds (Barefoot and Boons, 2019) – most of them were already familiar with many of the issues related to the awarding gap.

We structured our assembly as a series of four meetings, each of which lasted two hours, with the first half of the session devoted to the delivery of factual information regarding the awarding gap. The assembly used the same datasets and PowerPoint slides as the management at UH, thus according participants the same level of epistemic privilege as those responsible for policymaking. The second half of these sessions was allocated to group discussion of the information just presented. Spacing the meetings at fortnightly intervals gave participants time for reflection and deliberation. The final session was dedicated to writing up the assembly's findings, unassisted by the facilitators.

The four sessions were as follows:

- **What is a citizens' assembly?** We (the authors of this case study) introduced students to the methodology of the project, providing some background information about the awarding gap as well as access to a shared OneDrive folder containing research and data. We encouraged the students to read materials in the folder throughout the duration of the project, as well as to add further information sources to it (though none, in fact, did so),
- **What does the data say?** Nathan Ghann, a UH expert on awarding-gap data, presented the group with BAME-specific gap data.

- **What has been done?** Nathan Ghann described the initiatives currently in place at UH to reduce the BAME awarding gap.
- **What is to be done?** This final session was for group members to write up their proposals to reduce the BAME gap. In order that they would offer a rationale for their proposals and show the connections they had made between research and lived experience, we asked them to identify the needs driving their policy suggestions (to jog their memories, we provided them with a short document outlining their own previous discussions, but, aside from this single intervention, we encouraged them to write their ideas without facilitator interference).

Student voice – what they said in their initial write-up

We hoped that our group's write-up would comprise fully justified proposals relating to present and future policies. This turned out to be quite a challenge for our students. Only six of them turned up to the final writing-up session, where the methodology required them to produce a comprehensive document, representative of the entire assembly, and to do this unaided by the facilitators.

In order to complete the project, the writing space was extended beyond the final session, thus breaking with the usual citizens' assembly custom which requires the write-up to be conducted under controlled conditions, with all members present. Ideally, the final document should present itself as a unified voice which expresses the views of the entire assembly. It should be uninfluenced by the views of facilitators and should be a fully argued document which could be presented for dissemination beyond the assembly.

These are the exact contents of the document they produced:

1. Parents understanding student experience:
   - Came to campus
2. Peer/Group mentoring:
   - University life navigation
   - ACADEMIC MENTORING: Pairing based on individuals backgrounds to make things less intimidating
3. Everyone talking to Dean (meet the Dean event)
   - Too filtered down, too many layers, non-accessible
4. Student awareness
   - Open campus debates
   - Book section -> to bring BAME & non- BAME students together
   - Address/framing attainment conveying message because it can get political and emotional (CLARIFICATION)
   - When students are told about the awarding gap, understanding how to deal with negative response [blame, demotivation]
   - A more personable approach; breaking the misconceptions of what the attainment gap/awarding gap is.
5. Alternative skills from GCSE, A LEVEL + BTEC
   - Support into the transition [study skills course] for everyone in the uni. Make it interesting and not like how schools do it.
6. Staff bias:
   - Staff & student engagement

- Biases
- Accountability for staff's training.
- Blind Marking as a standard across the university
- Staff talking about themselves, so they are more personable to students
- Orientation to address anxieties that students feel [staff-student 'speed meeting' each other to reduce bias] and meeting someone of a different background to you and mix with different people [social activities inside and outside class]
- Ensure more interactions between students and staff members; enough interactions to form true, unbiased views or opinions that encourage staff/students to write up feedback, whether positive or negative… Plausible enough to act on when needed.

7. Support for placements and work experience
    - Different criteria of work for different courses (can't fully rely on Careers because they can't tailor job experiences to each and every student looking for placement)
    - Maybe prepare contact lists that students can refer to for self-applications for placements.

8. BAME isn't blanketed -> minorities within minorities,
    - for instance, there are extremely different culture between Korean and Japanese among the category of Asian! There needs to be understanding of cultures within the BAME community, to break some misconceptions and ignorance

9. Cohesion in accommodation
    - Current situation is students being very divided/clique-y
    - Discrimination amongst on-campus students
    - Recommendation: uniting activities (i.e. SU celebrating festivities at the Oval, Club & Societies planning events and inviting all)
    - Cross-cultural interaction through neighbours

10. Unconscious bias training for all
    - The discussions about bias will allow for more confident about

11. **'0-tolerance policy'** when it comes to racial discrimination (ENFORCEMENT & AWARENESS)
    - Currently in place under Equality Office
    - Bring to light issues like COVID-19 racism cases; support those whose families affect and study abroad
    - More support for those who have been discriminated against, as well as the accountability for those who act negatively

12. Food
    - International students can't get the taste of home
    - Restaurants: PRICEY / DON'T TASTE LIKE ORIGINAL / Good effort for Street Food on Tour but make it authentic
    - Corner shops: DON'T SELL INTERNATIONAL GOODS (only American goods)

Clarifying their findings

> i. *What we think they had in mind and why*

The original ambition was that the students would identify precise recommendations using both lived experience and educational theory. Evidently, from the list they generated, their proposals are not all clear and there is little apparent engagement with scholarship. Having listened to the conversations during the course of the project, we could interpret some of their responses. For the rest, we had to re-engage with them, after the group had dispersed, in order to establish fuller answers. The students were happy to develop their ideas. We wrote up paragraphs that expressed what we thought they meant to say in their answers and showed these to the participants. Exchange of emails and conversations to check that we were not putting words in their mouths enabled us to draw the following points out of the resulting text (full text available on request[1]):

1. Families don't always understand the demands that university makes on students.
2. Peer mentoring can be a source of shame and stigma unless it is normalised and perhaps ethnically sorted. Students feel more confident and comfortable being mentored by people with whom they have cultural commonalities.
3. BAME advocates value one-to-one meetings with deans and others – e.g. Office of the Vice Chancellor – with the authority to drive change. This stems from a worry that student voice gets lost and doesn't always reach the people able to implement change. There is also a difference in timescales between staff and students. Staff tend to plan for the next academic year and the university writes strategy for five years, while students expect to see change much more quickly.
4. BAME students worry that the awarding gap may become another source of stigma.
5. Language relating to issues affecting BAME students and the awarding gap matters greatly: over the course of these sessions, the students adopted by consensus the change from 'attainment gap' to the more appropriate 'awarding gap'.
6. Not everyone comes in with A levels. Transition from prior study needs more support, though this support should not target or highlight BAME students specifically.
7. Unconscious bias training and racism education must be for all, including students and professional staff and regardless of their ethnic and racial background.
8. More consideration ought to be put into the nature of bias training. The university should not rely on online tutorials for combating deeply rooted biases.
9. Blind marking should be standard across the university. Assessments which cannot accommodate this should consider how to make marking more rigorously fair when it comes to avoiding unconscious bias.
10. Staff and students need to get to know each other as people. Staff need to drop their guards and show vulnerability.
11. Careers support isn't working for BAME students. They want to know which firms and sectors will welcome them. More exposure to professional role models is needed if they are to feel inspired and empowered.
12. BAME is an umbrella, not a bucket. Needs are diverse. Racism between different ethnic minority groups can also occur.
13. On-campus housing can be a place where students suffer exclusion and discrimination, because there is little or no staff presence to police culturally

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insensitive or racist behaviour. Efforts for inclusivity must reach beyond the confines of the classroom.
14. Students don't know how to report racism within the university or what happens if they do. There should be procedures to protect students who need to make a report.
15. The heart of home is the kitchen. Access to familiar cuisine would go a long way to making students feel at home. They should not have to go to the effort of sourcing foods they want to eat. If their white counterparts can easily access foods which make them feel culturally included, BAME students should be given the same affordance.

ii. *Some immediate ways the university can respond to their requests*

Some of these are familiar, some unsurprising. Others suggest effective and relatively inexpensive action that universities could take quickly. For example, students' families are welcomed to campus during the admissions process, but no further contact is made with them in most cases until graduation. Our participants, many of whom are commuting students living in multi-generational households headed by non-graduates, told us that their families often did not understand how time-consuming and tiring full-time study can be, especially around assessment times. Consequently, they would find themselves expected to participate in family life at times that conflicted with their studies. It would not be difficult for universities to supply students with materials to help them explain the demands of their studies to their families. We might seek ways to include parents in the life of the university without violating the students' autonomy. Opportunities for parents to see a little of the university experience of their children could lead both to an increase in understanding of and improved home support for BAME students.

Another relatively straightforward change would be to extend unconscious bias and anti-racism training to all staff and students, including professional staff who are often gatekeepers to resources that students need. Focus on the awarding gap may draw attention to assessment and classroom practices, but the true racial character of the university shows itself in behaviour in halls of residence when no staff are present or in the reaction of a catering manager when asked to provide a wider range of ethnic foods. It was a consistent theme in the comments of our participants that marginalisation happens throughout the university experience, not just in and around the classroom.

Finally, the discussion about how to report instances of racism and what happens when a report is made revealed pervasive anxieties that a complainant might be victimised by friends and colleagues of the accused, that the staff would close ranks or that the complainant might be identified as a troublemaker. Again, this is something that universities could address quickly at relatively little cost.

iii. *Critical engagement with their views*

The purpose of this study was to provide an opportunity for students to have an informed say about issues relating to the BAME awarding gap. As is the usual custom with citizen assembly reports, our students' findings are intended to be presented to institutional governance and those who do the policymaking. We have therefore aimed to present their views as faithfully as possible.

Though some of the participants' proposals are impractical, the problems they identified and sought to solve are nonetheless real. In a few instances, the students seem to be calling for something that already exists, but this, too, is informative, since it suggests that there is, at least, a communication problem. For example, even though UH already has special careers events for BAME students, featuring employers who identify as welcoming to BAME graduates, news of this opportunity did not seem to have reached our informants (this information was not included in the briefing they received in session three).

Problems and limitations

The students were volunteers and committed to the aims of the project. This was especially evident when we approached the students after the fourth meeting to ask them to elaborate their list of points (box above). Nevertheless, there were some shortcomings:

i. *Not enough students participated*

Citizens' assemblies aim to recruit a large and diverse body of people. We advertised this project widely in the university through BAME Advocates, student societies, Student Community Organisers and email lists. Posters went up around the campus. Even so, we recruited no more than twenty students altogether.

ii. *The student turnout wasn't consistent from week to week*

Not having the same students every week meant that students didn't gel as a group, which in turn limited the level to which participants were able to engage with the theory presented to them.

iii. *Student-participants didn't reflect the diverse social and ethnic population of the university*

The participants were already BAME advocates or involved/invested in the issues discussed. We had one male postgraduate student of Chinese origin who also happened to be an international student. While his experience offered a unique perspective, we had to rely on his contributions to represent both Chinese and international students – regardless of their ethnic origin and gender – across the university.

iv. *Not enough critical engagement*

Owing to the limited number of participants and the lack of diversity within the group, there was not enough disagreement. While the members of the group worked well to develop ideas together, there was little critical examination of emerging views. Moreover, they did not refer to the research reports in the common folder, preferring rather to rely on their own experience. This may have been one reason why they didn't critically assess which current BAME awarding-gap initiatives work well and why this might be. Feedback from students on previous efforts, as well as efforts which still could be made, would have enhanced the report.

v. *We didn't set aside enough time to understand the managerial documents*

In the third session of the project *'What Has Been Done?'*, students were given an informationally rich handout designed for management, academic and organisational

dissemination, with forty-two boxes labelled with abbreviations. Since time for unpacking the boxes was limited, students struggled to engage with current UH strategies. Consequently, we didn't get the hoped-for detailed critical commentary on current UH initiatives.

   vi. *The final document produced by the assembly was a bare list*

The final document was terse and failed to justify suggestions by identifying a need. We rescued the project by writing paragraphs to express what we thought the bullet-points meant and then by asking the students whether we had caught their meaning.

How to carry the project forward

While there were shortcomings in the project's design, we think it is worth running it again. Here are some improvements we'd like to make:

   i. Student participants should be paid for their time, as recommended in the joint Universities UK/National Union of Students report *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at Universities: #ClosingTheGap* (May 2019, p.58). Apart from respecting students' time, this would have permitted us to insist on engagement with existing written research.

   ii. More time should have been given to understanding existing research and policy.

   iii. Wider outreach and advertising, including teaching intranet sites and social media, might have recruited more students and a greater diversity.

   iv. A report template that invites identification of needs, solutions and evidence might have helped students to structure their thoughts.

   v. We ought to have supplied the students with samples of the sort of document we want them to write.

   vi. Fuller records of discussions held during the first three sessions would have better supported the final session, dedicated to writing.

   vii. Feedback from UH management on the students' proposals during the life of the project would have been a helpful reality check. Some of the students' suggestions are more feasible than others and they deserve to hear the reactions of management to their ideas.

Conclusion

Racism is both structural and experiential. Statistical analysis, for example of module outcomes, can reveal structure, but is silent on the experiential aspect. At the same time, recording students' personal stories is no more than a first step and we cannot devise anti-racist policy simply by asking the students what we ought to do. They do not have the professional experience of education or the systematic overview necessary to answer that question. Somehow, student experience and policymaking expertise must be brought together. We believe that, in spite of its shortcomings, this project achieved enough to demonstrate proof of concept for the citizens' assembly approach in this context. The

practical suggestions listed in section three of this paper show that it can deliver workable policies.

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