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Submission title
Lived Experiences of B.A.M.E. Students Uncovered Through Reflective Diaries

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Abstract

Persistent awarding gaps are evidence of continued structural race inequality in HE. Quantitative data that demonstrate institutional and national awarding gaps, connect with our cognitive selves. Here, we inform our work to close award gaps while at the same time gathering evidence that evokes our *affective* consciences. First year undergraduates maintained reflective diaries during their first term at university, providing first hand accounts of the lived experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E.) students. Analysis highlights negative influences on sense of belonging, identity safety, and engagement with curricula (e.g. racist attitudes, absence of anti-racism, home and family circumstances, lack of representation in curricula). Positive influences include diversity awareness-raising learning activities, friendship groups, and social learning. Outputs comprise eight themed videos of narrated diary extracts. These authentic narratives provide compelling, impactful insights that, if used in staff development, may evoke an affective response that promotes action planning for race equality.

Keywords

Student Voice; Lived Experience; B.A.M.E.; Decolonising; Award Gap

Context

Multiple recent global events have once again shone a light on racial inequality and injustice (e.g. the felling of statues - Cecil Rhodes in Cape Town and Colston in Bristol, the murder of George Floyd, and the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement). In the UK, race inequality has been further highlighted in the post-Brexit growth of nationalism (Official statistics, 2020a), the unequal impact of Covid-19 in socio-economically disadvantaged Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E.) communities (Office for National Statistics, 2020b), and in higher education (HE), the persistent awarding gaps between white and non-white students (Universities UK and NUS, 2019).

There have been significant efforts to close awarding gaps and eliminate racism in HE for some time but they have not been entirely successful. This failure to close gaps can be partly attributed to the complex, multi-faceted nature of the problem. However, it is also because HEIs have not managed to get to the root of the factors influencing students' sense of belonging. This is compounded by the fundamental issue of the 'whiteness' of our curricula, together with colour-blindness and tokenism, and the inconsistent application of inclusive teaching practices (Arday *et al.*, 2022).

The recent events described above have accelerated both the need for, and the desire, to see real, lasting advancement and success once and for all. One response to this has been the plethora of decolonising the curriculum initiatives that have emerged across the sector. Decolonising obliges us to identify and acknowledge the impact of colonialism upon perceived knowledge, pedagogical strategies and learning (Arshad, 2021a, 2021b). Further, it requires us to reflect upon, and address the legacy of disadvantage, injustice and racism, and seeks to re-balance and enrich learning in HE by integrating a much wider range of perspectives in what we teach, how we teach, and the wider learning environment in which we teach (Liyanage, 2020). There can be no doubt that this colonial legacy continues to contribute to race inequality through persistent award gaps. In response to unequivocal numerical evidence of award gaps, the Office for Students has now tasked UK universities with eliminating those award gaps by 2030 (OfS, 2019). It is in this wider context that this resource is presented.

Closing award gaps means that we need to take a transformational approach to our curricula *and* to the wider non-academic experiences that our university provides students (Unite Students, 2022). This means listening to our students (Brown, 2020). When their perspectives - from inside and outside of the classroom – are integrated, they can strengthen curricula (Shay, 2016). Through the B.A.M.E Student Diary Project, we aimed to capture insights into the daily, lived experience of university life for B.A.M.E. students. These will provide rich personal testimonies evoking an affective response that complements the cognitive response to quantitative data. Authentic narratives from this community have a crucial role in engaging the wider academic community in tackling racial inequality and transforming our curricula to achieve genuine equity and equality for our students.

Data from McMaster (2020) for 2019-20 shows that almost a quarter of Home students in UKHEIs identify as B.A.M.E. and across the sector, there is a 13% gap in the proportion of 'good honours' awards for white and B.A.M.E. students (68% and 81% for B.A.M.E. and white students respectively). This resource has been produced in a STEM-based Faculty at a large, modern university in the north of England that has a typical intake of 35% B.A.M.E. students, around 10% higher than the sector average (MMU, 2021). The overall award gap between white and non-white students in 2020-21 stands at about 14%, around 3% higher than the sector average. However, this masks variations within the B.A.M.E. student body; for example, our award gap for Asian students is larger than the sector, but for Black students, is a little smaller. The sector is employing a range of strategies to close awarding gaps, and these include efforts to decolonise curricula. (e.g. see resources at https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/professional-services/uta/reducing-awarding-gaps).

Description

Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of the project was to inform and support our measures to close the award gap between white and non-white students. Specific objectives were to:

1. Use reflective student diaries to gain insights into the lived experience at university of students from B.A.M.E. backgrounds.
2. Identify and evaluate key influences on students' sense of belonging, identity safety, experience of university life, and engagement with curricula.
3. Determine specific measures that can be put in place to help decolonise our curricula.
4. Create a bank of video resources, using narrated student diary extracts, that will inform and support measures to close award gaps.

Contributors and Participants

The B.A.M.E. Student Diary Project was led by Theresa Nicholson as part of a series of actions proposed and supported by the Faculty of Science and Engineering Narrowing the Award Gap Task Group, chaired by Fiona Saunders. Project assistance was provided through an MMU-funded Graduate Internship (Ashton Greenwood) and the project obtained full ethical approval. Other project costs were funded via a University Teaching Academy (UTA) Scholarship of Teaching and Learning award to Theresa Nicholson. Project participants comprised fourteen diary students and four individuals who narrated the video resources (three B.A.M.E. Student Ambassadors, and a final year Natural Sciences student). Videos were filmed by Ben Davies from UTA.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach, using a solicited text-based respondent diary (Meth, 2003). While there are some weaknesses in this approach, it is a useful tool for capturing the rhythms and lived experiences of day-to-day life (Latham, 2014). Fourteen first-year undergraduate students from three departments in the Faculty of Science and Engineering (Table 1) responded to an open call for participants in the B.A.M.E. Student Diary Project.

Gender	*n*	Age	*n*	Origin	n
Male	2	18-21	12	Britain	8
Female	12	>21	2	Europe	1
				Asia	3
Disability	*n*	**Discipline**	*n*	Africa	1
Yes	5	Natural Sciences	3	n/a	1
No	9	Computing and Maths	2	Home	13
		Life Sciences	9	International	1

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of student participants

Gift vouchers were offered as an incentive. Students were asked to submit six weekly diary entries during their first term at university, between October and December 2021. Some general, non-prescriptive guidance was given on content and length. For their final diary, participants were asked to add any thoughts and observations on decolonising the curriculum. Diary entries were submitted via MS Forms, and the text collated and coded using NVivo to identify emerging themes. These themes were used as the basis for eight scripts compiled from diary extracts which were then narrated and filmed to produce the bank of video resources.

Results

Key over-arching themes emerging from the data are outlined below.

Theme 1: Being seen as 'other'

Students reflected on the personal impact of racial inequality on making them feel marginalised, left out, and 'other'. They also expressed real upset when discovering the existence of an award gap as a direct consequence of societal and institutional structural racism. That said, some students had a very positive experience and felt a sense of safety and belonging at university:

> The colour of my skin hasn't.... affected the way I have learnt. The fact that other people have to deal with racism or backward thinking is saddening and I am glad I chose a university that I feel safe walking around.

Theme 2: Identity safety

Students reflected on how the university environment influences their sense of identity safety (of feeling valued, welcomed, and supported, with their stigmatised social identity not a barrier to success - Davies *et al.,* 2005, p278). Contributory factors cited included seeing others like themselves on their course;

> I didn't anticipate how few people of colour would be on my course – it's pure euphoria seeing a person of colour on my course because it's so rare!,

formal and informal personal support from friendship groups, and the value of working and learning together.

Theme 3: Family, home and cultural difference

Students reflected on cultural differences around religious festivals and practices (particularly relevant given the timing of the project in the run-up to Christmas) and contrasted the way that Christmas is protected, compared with celebrations such as Eid and Diwali, which for some, coincided with exams. Conversely, they were grateful for the university provision of a large prayer room on-campus:

> Being able to pray Friday Prayers today while at University, instead of travelling to a local mosque, is such a positive.

Many reflected on cultural differences in home and family life, and the ways that these impact upon independence, social life, commuting, part-time work, expectations, and lack of openness about mental health.

Theme 4: Decolonising the curriculum

Key ideas that emerged from students' final diary, when they were asked to include thoughts and observations on decolonising the curriculum, are:

a) *Process of decolonising:* The process needs to be more than just re-arranging things; it needs to be comprehensive and long-term, beginning with transforming mind-sets and cultural awareness.

b) *Becoming informed:* Alongside their peers, students want to learn *about* colonialism and race inequality within the context of their own disciplines.

c) *Dialogue:* Open and honest dialogue is needed, even if this means hearing from those with offensive ideologies. Unconscious bias training should be provided for students, and race inequality and decolonising need to be tackled through staff-student partnership.

d) *Role models and representation:* Exposure to role models within teaching teams will help raise students' aspirations. They want to be reflected in curricula and hear about contributors to their discipline from different backgrounds, including role models:

   Decolonising…. could be done by promoting research papers by people from different backgrounds, reconstructing the curriculum to learn about other cultures and traditions.

e) *Integration and community:* Group learning activities can help facilitate sense of belonging, community-building, and socialisation. Students want more opportunities for group learning in groups of different sizes and membership as a way of increasing diversity awareness:

   The high point of this week was doing a practical as a group. This helped me develop my skills of working with other people and taking account of other people's ideas and perspectives.

f) *Cultural and diversity awareness:* Students want there to be wider awareness of cultural difference around food and drink, and religious festivals. This could be achieved within curricula or through the wider university environment (e.g. eating outlets, diversity festivals, calendar celebrations).

Impact

Outcomes

The reflective diaries of these fourteen students, coming from a variety of backgrounds (Table 1), reveal a range of personal experiences and perspectives on racial inequality and feelings of 'otherness'. Some of these experiences of 'otherness' are derived from racist attitudes and microaggressions. In this respect, the diaries show a strong recognition of the value of friendships, community-building, social learning, and raising diversity awareness for realising identity safety. However, feelings of exclusion may be compounded where there is a real or perceived absence of anti-racism, i.e. a passive approach from individuals and the university. A lack of representation in curricula and an absence of role models within teaching teams also compound the sense of 'otherness'. Students may also feel marginalised by default because of home, family and cultural circumstances and differences. Examples include:

- Lack of wider recognition and awareness of important religious and/or cultural events and inability to fully engage with these because of conflicts with the academic calendar, while at the same time, feeling detached from national cultural events such as Christmas and Easter.
- Feeling unable or unwilling to access mental health services provided by the university because of cultural attitudes and the fear of stigmatisation (Arday *et al.* 2022).
- Challenges around socialisation because of practical constraints (e.g. parental restrictions on independence, paid employment with family business, commuting travel time).

Conversely, one student commented on the value of being able to use the university prayer room *instead of having to travel* to a local mosque. Without the prayer room, this student might have had to choose between attending Friday prayers off-campus, or attending a class. This example demonstrates that universities can find solutions for non-academic barriers that when implemented, can potentially enhance belonging and engagement in the academic programme.

Diary extracts were grouped around eight thematic areas to create scripts for video recording. Without changing meaning, minor edits were applied to otherwise *verbatim* written content to improve fluency in the spoken word. Videos were narrated by Anita Nessa, Neisha Woolrich-Fraser, Zoe Ka-Ncube, and Ajeet Samra (students and B.A.M.E. Ambassadors at Manchester Met) to preserve authors' anonymity.

Impacts and Application to Practice

The video diary extracts have been integrated into our online Decolonising the Curriculum Online Toolkit and will also support wider activity to close our awarding gap. There is sector-wide acknowledgment that award gaps persist (Universities UK and NUS, 2019; OfS 2019) and there is now an imperative on universities to close that gap (OfS 2019). Much data exists to support the existence of the gap, and the data are shocking. Nevertheless, there are numerous competing demands on academics' time, and regardless of 'shock factor', numerical evidence is factual but very dry. Conversely, the video diary extracts provide authentic, powerful and impactful stories of the daily lived experience of B.A.M.E. students that evoke the affective domain. They present compelling evidence of direct and indirect, deliberate and unconscious, personal and structural inequality. Video links and brief descriptions are given below.

VIDEO 1: **Where Am I? Being inspired by, and represented in, the curriculum** [2:19]

Students speak about the importance of seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum, and being exposed to role models who inspire and motivate them. We also see hear students develop greater understanding of other cultures through diversity in the classroom.

VIDEO 2: **Building Confidence and Community: ….and the role of extra-curricular activity** [2:07]

Students reflect on their experience of engaging with extra-curricular activities; the opportunities this brings for widening experience and skills, broadening career aspirations, making new friendships, and increasing their sense of belonging to the university community.

VIDEO 3: **Being 'Other': Experiences of racism and marginalisation** [2:56]

Students reveal the impact of personal experiences of racial inequality and marginalisation. They also make observations about the behaviours of some B.A.M.E. staff, and about university culture.

VIDEO 4: **Identity Safety: Feeling safe and supported at university** [2:10]

Students reflect on factors that influence their perception of identity safety at university and the important role of formal and informal personal support.

VIDEO 5: **Decolonising: Why and What? Tackling the legacy of colonialism in curricula** [2:30]

Students share their views on why decolonising the curriculum is needed. They recommend measures to ensure decolonising is successful, both in terms of specific curriculum enhancements and the process of decolonising.

VIDEO 6: **Safety in Numbers: Working and socialising together** [2:13]

Students share their experiences of working and socialising together for mutual support, peer learning, and identity safety. They express a desire for mechanisms to be integrated into curricula to facilitate socialisation and community-building.

VIDEO 7: **Don't They Know It's NOT Christmas? The impact of cultural difference** [2:30]

Here, students reflect on the impact of cultural differences around religious festivals and practices, and around food and drink.

VIDEO 8: **That's Life! The stuff of home and family** [2:14]

Students share experiences of home life and family circumstances. They speak about the often hidden impacts on study, of external challenges such as parental control, finance, accommodation, cultural traditions, and mental ill-health.

FULL PLAYLIST**: B.A.M.E. Student Diary Project**

Reflection on Lessons Learned and Next Steps

The diary project outcomes will certainly support our decolonising and award gap work. However, an unexpected outcome was the empowering experience the diary-keeping proved to be for some of the student participants, a phenomenon this has been observed by others using comparable methods (Meth, 2003):

> I appreciate this Diary Project opportunity a lot... I feel like many of us with ethnic backgrounds have something which bothers us on a day-to-day basis but never really speak out about it. To be given this opportunity... helped me speak out... helped my mental health.

Another expressed a desire for a similar opportunity to be made available for others to benefit from, as a means of raising awareness of daily struggles and "giving the university an opportunity to combat racism".

The project had cost implications and was time-consuming to administer, but its value and benefits for our curricula, our academic staff and institution, and above all, for its students, far surpasses any associated cost.

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