Collaboration and co-production with Black, Asian and minority ethnic students: working in partnership with our students to inform and deliver access and participation practice

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Abstract In recent years, the topic of UK-domiciled undergraduate students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds not accessing, succeeding and progressing as well as their White peers in Higher Education (HE) has gained increased policy and media attention. Institutions are required to address gaps amongst student groups that are underrepresented within HE, including students from BAME backgrounds, through their Office for Students' (OfS) regulated Access and Participation Plan (APP). This paper offers specific examples of how Edge Hill University, a university in North West England, has begun to approach this work in the new regulatory environment. APPs now place an increased emphasis upon research informed practice, student engagement, consultation, and evaluation. This innovative practice article provides a detailed example of genuine collaboration and co-production with students to develop and deliver APP work, and extends an earlier presentation delivered at the March 2021 Open University Access Participation and Success International Biennial Conference. In this article, the authors outline the development of a new Diversity Access Programme and a BAME Student Advisory Panel. The paper offers a reflective account of how APP leads, Widening Participation (WP) practitioners, evaluators and students can work together effectively in partnership to design and deliver WP initiatives.

Keywords Widening participation; access and participation; co-production; collaboration; ethnicity; student voice

Introduction

In recent years, the topic of UK-domiciled undergraduate students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds not accessing, succeeding, and progressing as well as their White peers in Higher Education (HE) has gained increased policy and media attention. The Office for Students (OfS), which regulates English institutions, states that 'there are significant equality gaps between different ethnic groups in terms of access, success and progression in HE. The extent of these gaps varies depending on ethnic group and stage of the student lifecycle' (OfS, 2020a). The National Union of Students, and Universities UK (NUS and UUK, 2019) also note how a student's race and ethnicity can significantly affect their degree outcomes in their report '#closingthehegap' which recommends how the sector can work towards tackling these disparities.

Institutions are required to address gaps amongst student groups that are underrepresented within HE, including students from BAME backgrounds, through their OfS's regulated Access and Participation Plan (APP). Edge Hill University, a campus university in North West England, is one of many institutions across the country with targets set within their APP focused upon ethnicity. This paper provides an account of a number of new approaches adopted by the University that aim to reduce these gaps and enhance support for BAME students across the student lifecycle.

This paper offers specific examples of how the University has approached this work in the new regulatory environment that places an emphasis upon research-informed practice, student engagement, consultation, and evaluation. This paper, co-written by an APP lead with an academic background in social geography, and a Widening Participation (WP) practitioner with experience of working with multiple WP groups, contributes to the WP literature by providing a detailed example of genuine collaboration and co-production with students to develop and deliver APP work.

The focus group research conducted by the University outlined in this article gathered in-depth qualitative narratives with broad themes that covered the whole student lifecycle. Discussing all the findings in-depth is not within the scope of this article. Instead, it outlines how the focus group findings shaped the direction of our work *with* our BAME students at the University in the year since the research was conducted. It specifically outlines the development of a new Diversity Access Programme and BAME Student Advisory Panel, of which several participants in the initial focus groups are now members.

The authors argue that the innovative practice presented in this article comes from not only involving students in the primary qualitative research stage of our work, but also extending and continuing our relationship with them to develop and deliver our practice with them, too. The authors recommend moving beyond student consultation, towards a model of working *with* students to keep the important (and, at times, difficult) conversations going, to continually improve our practice and learn from our students.

Taking a positive action and theory of change approach

The need for evidence in WP practice is recognised now more than ever before. It is also increasingly accepted that drawing upon mixed methods data is necessary to develop a more robust evidence base when designing and evaluating initiatives (Thiele et al., 2018). APPs require institutions to take an intersectional approach to assessing their student data. Regarding BAME data, institutions are encouraged to disaggregate this data to ethnic group to understand any

intersectional differentials (OfS, 2019). Whilst this approach is important and can indicate particular patterns and trends to assist with strategic planning, numerical data can only tell us part of the story – we need to 'rebalance the gaze' and talk to our students to have a more nuanced understanding of their experiences (Shaw et al., 2017: 49).

When beginning to plan our work to support our ethnicity- focused APP targets, we acknowledged that a bold positive action approach was required. We needed to have a robust evidence base to design impactful WP initiatives that can respond directly to issues or concerns raised by our current BAME students. In a HE setting, positive action 'refers to steps that HEIs and colleges can take to encourage people from different groups in order to overcome historic disadvantage, or low participation education, training and welfare' (Advance HE, 2021). In the context of the APP, a positive action approach is encouraged when appropriate (Stevenson et al., 2019). The authors of this paper recognise that whilst understanding the national policy context surrounding BAME students' experiences, and intersectionally analysing our disaggregated student data are vital steps towards understanding our current position, they do not replace the important knowledge gained from speaking with our own BAME students about their everyday, lived experiences at the University.

We chose to begin our positive action approach by hosting focus group discussions with our students on campus. We explicitly advertised the opportunity for students who identified as Black, Asian and minority ethnic to discuss their experiences. This approach was successful, with over 60 students asking to participate in less than 24 hours. By taking a positive action approach and being explicit with our BAME students about our need to understand their experiences, we were able to ask the difficult questions to which we needed answers.

The focus group discussions took place in person, and we offered a morning, lunchtime, and twilight session to which students could sign up, to allow them to choose a suitable time to attend. Refreshments were available, and the students were offered a shopping voucher as a token of appreciation for their time and partnership. The refreshments were made available half an hour before the focus group discussion started, which gave the participants sufficient time to enter the room, meet the focus group facilitators (the authors of this paper), and talk with other focus group participants before the focus group discussion began. This approach appeared to relax the participants and resulted in the focus group discussions being informal, semi-structured conversations, as planned. We began the focus group discussion with a brief overview and introduction of the APP agenda and screened the OfS video intended for student audiences and which outlines how students can help to address inequalities in HE (OfS, 2020b). This context setting was important, as it appeared to help students understand what the focus group aimed to understand and why, as well as how they could help. Importantly, it also clearly demonstrated how disparities in HE are a national challenge, rather than these issues being unique to *their* University. This introduction helped the group to remain tightly focused on the topic at hand, rather than allowing the conversations to expand into wider university-related topics, which is often the case in a focus group format.

The focus group schedule of questions was designed to align with the sector recommendations regarding the planning of WP initiatives. We noted the 'Theory of Change' way of working, a programme theory and evaluation tool (Thomas, 2020), which is encouraged by both the OfS, and the associated 'What Works?' centre *Transforming Access and Student Outcomes* (TASO, 2021), and the focus group format was designed with this structure in mind. We designed a focus group schedule which asked our students about the challenges and issues they experience (the current situation), what their ideal university would be (aims), what changes they would like to see (outcomes), how they think we could achieve this (activities) and what they think may be stopping us from getting there (assumptions). This approach worked in practice and yielded some extremely useful insights. The open-ended nature of the question phrasing meant that the students certainly dominated the focus group discussions, with the facilitators only needing to step in occasionally to move the topic on to the next theme.

This approach enabled us to use the analysed responses to each of these themes to populate the University's Theory of Change inspired APP Initiative Planning Document when planning a new Access Programme. This document probes the initiative leads to ensure that they are designing programmes based on a robust understanding of the evidence and research informing their practice (which must include student consultation), and that there are achievable and testable links between the input(s) and the expected output(s) and impact(s).

When each of the three focus group discussions ended, the facilitators talked the students through a number of PowerPoint slides. The purpose of this was to outline the planned next steps for this work, the other projects that were already being established, and the ways in which students could continue to be involved now and in the future, if they wished to. We did not want the students to leave the focus group not knowing what would happen next after they had provided us with such insightful, personal, and honest information. All focus group participants gave signed consent for us to update them as our work progresses, and to inform them about future opportunities to work together. We believe this transparent approach to the University's work in this area helped to foster positive working relationships with our students and resulted in our partnership approach improving further over time.

Developing our co-produced and co-delivered Diversity Access Programme

A key finding from the three focus group discussions was the extent to which our BAME student community wanted

to talk with us and their peers. For example, one student expressed that she would like to see the University 'doing more things like this'. Another asked: 'Is this the first one of these focus groups focused on this subject?' and a student added that 'there could be more platforms for us to speak out about things as well'. The students who engaged in the focus group discussions welcomed the opportunity to discuss their experiences in this forum.

Following detailed thematic analysis of the three focus group transcripts, it became apparent that the significance of both pre- arrival expectations of a university and a student's pre-arrival experiences of that university are vital to a student's decision making. This finding helped to inform the creation of the University's new Diversity Access Programme – a programme specifically for Year 12 (aged 16-17 year olds) Black, Asian and minority ethnic students to help us achieve our APP target to increase the number of BAME students studying at the University.

Access programmes are designed to give prospective students a head start to their HE journey and can offer them a smoother transition into the next step of their education. The sustained programme allows for changing students' 'perceptions of effective learning behavior to enhance high-quality interaction with peers and faculty, their sense of belonging, and academic performance' (Van Herpen et al., 2020: 862).

Whilst it has been noted that around ten per cent of HE providers have begun to provide long-term/sustained outreach activities for BAME students to improve access and awareness of HE opportunities (OfS, 2019), there is limited evidence on what works when supporting this student group. Using the University's Initiative Planning Document for APP activity, each of the Diversity Access Programme's five events responds directly to an issue raised in our focus group research with current BAME students, or secondary research from the sector. It has been argued that 'students as partners is a concept which interweaves through many other debates, including assessment and feedback, employability, flexible pedagogies, internationalisation, linking teaching and research, and retention and success' (Healey et al., 2014: 7). The authors suggest that including current students as partners in pre-entry WP work (particularly the design and evaluation thereof) is perhaps a route that has been underutilised by WP practitioners to date. However, it is a route that can provide valuable insights into our own students' pre-arrival experiences and expectations, and that can guide us to engage in evidence-informed practice. A summary of the programme's structure, and how each session is evidence informed is provided below.

Session 1 entitled 'Your perceptions of HE' gives students an introduction to HE and our role models (current students) who co-deliver the programme. We use an interactive platform alongside a presentation to allow students to anonymously post their perceptions, concerns or questions about HE – together with our role models, we respond to these posts. This event was designed in direct response to our focus group research which revealed that several of our BAME students had preconceptions about studying at a North West University, and we wanted to alleviate those concerns through the programme. Our role models could provide important reflections on their personal, lived experiences to prospective students.

Session 2 entitled 'University Q & A' explores the broader university experience in more depth. We start the day with an accommodation themed 'virtual escape room', and then provide examples of real experiences of how our current students use student support facilities available on campus, their experience of accommodation, and how they engage with various aspects of student life. This event was developed in response to literature that argues that BAME students are less likely to live away from home (Smith, 2018; Maguire and Morris, 2018) and are less likely to access student support services (Panesar, 2017). We therefore wanted our current students to discuss their experiences of these facilities and services with prospective students, to give students on the programme the opportunity to raise any concerns they may have.

Session 3 'Routes into HE and Support' was planned to take place on a Saturday so that parents, carers and supporters are also able to attend. The event aims to allow parents and carers to explore the University a little more and offer more detailed insight into the wide variety of student support that is available once a student begins their course. The students also attend and take part in optional sessions that further showcase the student support on offer. This event was designed in response to literature that suggests that parental influence on university choice can be particularly prevalent amongst BAME communities (Kauser et al., 2021; Ivy, 2010).

Session 4 is a guaranteed place at the University's annual Summer Residential. Our focus group research highlighted that students' perceptions of the university community can be a key influential factor in their decision making. Attendance at this event will ensure that students on the Diversity Access Programme have the opportunity to engage with a wide range of students from various backgrounds, and that the programme has subject-specific components. At this summer school, our students engage with subject tasters to help support their university research and help them make an informed decision about which course to take.

The final event 'Next steps and transitions' brings the programme to a close and offers the students advice on how to begin and/or submit their UCAS applications and make the most of Year 13 (aged 17-18) in preparation for starting university. We return to discuss the topics put forward by the students in the first event (perceptions or concerns about HE, as well as any questions) to ensure that we have covered – and hopefully alleviated – any of the concerns raised.

By taking this rigorous approach to evidence-informed programme design, we hope to be able to contribute to the sector's understanding of effective practice in supporting BAME students into HE.

Co-design and co-delivery with our Diversity Access Programme role models

Following the success of our focus group discussions with on- course students, the first event of the Diversity Access Programme was designed to echo a focus group format. The aim was for the first event to be a conversation with purpose, and to inform the baseline stage of our mixed methods evaluation approach (Pickering, 2021).

This first event was created in direct response to literature and our own research that indicated that students from particular ethnic backgrounds may not consider certain courses or universities due to cultural reasons (Gibbons and Vignoles, 2012). Our focus group research highlighted that students' perceptions of the university community can be a key influential factor in their decision making. We found that there was a pre-arrival perception about the diversity of the North West of England, with several students indicating that the geographical location of the University has resulted in certain communities perceiving it as 'White'. Comments included:

> 'You know, people see here as a "White" university.'
> 'I think a lot of Black students just avoid generally Liverpool, and all those universities that side because of diversity
> … they choose to go to Manchester.'
> 'I knew that coming to the North West of England that I would be in situations where it was mostly White people.'

It was apparent that several of the focus group participants were actively 'avoiding' or knew of others who had been avoiding the region due to the perception of the lack of diversity. Ball et al. (2010) have previously argued that the 'ethnic mix' of an institution can be one factor that prospective students consider, and which influences their choice in terms of which provider to choose. Our research echoed Ball et al.'s findings, with several of our current students confirming that this had been a factor in their decision making.

Due to this preconception of the North West region, participants expressed how important it was to meet and engage with current BAME students prior to their arrival. It was apparent that prospective students meeting students like them had been an influential factor in their choice of university. For example, one student described their experience at a university Open Day as follows:

> 'You hear from someone who is an ethnic minority themselves that it's good here, and you can ask that person some questions whilst being shown around, like I felt more comfortable being shown around by an ethnic minority.'

This key finding was expanded upon by two focus group participants who are themselves student guides at the University. They reflected upon their positive experiences of being an ethnic minority student guide when giving a campus tour to a prospective student and their family:

> 'When I did a campus tour with one family at the weekend, they were Pakistani. And the daughter of the family literally said to me, "I don't know if I'd be comfortable here; there's not many people that look like me", and I said no, well first of all, look, I'm here!'
> 'I had a group who I think were Indian Hindu, and I was showing them around … I got asked what's it like being on campus and being Asian? I gave them my honest feedback, obviously being positive because you're representing the University, but they really appreciated that, I could see that it was really important to them as well, to be able to ask that direct a question and to get an honest answer.'

As a sense of belonging is arguably achieved by having a meaningful experience that can make the student feel that they would be a member of one or more communities at the University (Christie et al., 2014; Tinto, 1993; Walton and Brady, 2017), the University's new Diversity Access Programme was designed to help ensure that prospective students and their supporters had meaningful interactions with current BAME students. To achieve this, our current BAME students co-deliver the programme's content. We recruited current BAME students as 'role models' to provide prospective students with true insight into student life, and reassurance about their lived experiences at the University.

We advertised this paid role model opportunity University wide, but also flagged the opportunity directly with our focus group participants who had opted into being updated on our progress. We informed the students about how this programme and the role model position was being created due to their earlier work with us. Several of our recruited role models are students who took part in our initial focus group research, closing the gap between feedback and action and continuing our partnership with these students.

Our role models were introduced to the programme content and were given the opportunity to ask questions, provide feedback or suggest changes. As the programme had already been designed using student insights, limited changes were made. Our role models were given the appropriate training and co-delivered the programme (online, due to the pandemic), facilitated workshops, partook in Q & A sessions, delivered a 'student experience' talk to share their experiences of the University, and worked with young people and their families to help them make informed decisions about the University.

Mixed methods programme evaluation

Our Diversity Access Programme is newly developed and is in its first year of delivery. We are therefore treating the programme as a pilot to explore and test how best to support prospective students and their families from BAME communities into HE. As there is limited evidence of what works for this specific student group, we ensured that comprehensive mixed methods evaluation was developed as part of the programme, starting with its design (via our Theory of Change Initiative Planning Document) so that we can truly evaluate what works, for whom and in what circumstances (Formby et al., 2020).

The evaluation includes pre and post-programme surveys; activity-based focus group discussions with prospective students (Pickering, 2021); an activity-based focus group session with parents, carers and supporters; and the option for students to journal throughout the programme. The students who opted to journal were sent a pack of materials which included a notebook, stationery, and sticky notes. A small set of reflective questions or prompts for each programme event was also provided to support the writing of journal entries. The journals will be collected for analysis at the end of the programme and will then be sent back to each student as a memento. We will also be evaluating the impact of the programme on our student role models, as we acknowledge that being involved in the co-delivery of this programme may have a notable impact upon our own students, too, particularly regarding enhancing their sense of belonging at the University. We will also seek further feedback and insights from the role models on how they think we could improve the programme delivery next year too, to continue our partnership and collaborative approach when working with them.

Establishing our BAME Student Advisory Panel

In addition to our primary and secondary mixed methods research to better understand our BAME students' experiences, and establishing the pilot Diversity Access Programme, we acknowledge that continuing to learn from the invaluable insights provided by our students is vital to the success of our ongoing work. To enable us to continue to collaborate and co-produce effectively with our students, we established the first in a series of APP student advisory panels.

The aim of the panel is to move beyond student consultation to the ongoing co-production of action with our students, to allow students to inform the strategic direction and operational delivery of our APP work, and to ensure that action across the institution is aligned to student needs. The first student panel that we have created is our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Panel.

Importantly, the panel is informed about the University's APP, and the ethnicity-focused targets (both access and the awarding gap), our institutional data, and the national agenda surrounding these issues, including the Black and White awarding gap within the English HE sector. Being informed enables the panel to provide critical advice, guidance and views to staff working directly on the APP, and various colleagues across the institution, who attend the panel to seek feedback and engagement in a variety of areas, including Chaplaincy; and Human Resources regarding equality, diversity and inclusion matters, careers and much more.

We acknowledge the power dynamics of a student–staff partnership (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2019) and strive for this to be a genuine partnership between the students and University. In doing so, our students decided on the name of the student panel, how often and when we meet, set agenda items, and suggest which services or staff from the University should attend the panel. Moreover, time is built into each meeting for students to raise any other issues or topics at the end of each meeting. The panel has been in place for one academic year, and the positive outcomes for the University and panel members are already visible.

Conclusion

This innovative practice article provides a detailed example of genuine collaboration and co-production with students to develop and deliver APP work to support Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in the new APP regulatory environment, with an increased emphasis upon research-informed practice, student engagement, consultation, and evaluation. This article has outlined two key ways in which the University has initially sought to involve students in the design and delivery of its APP work – a new Diversity Access Programme and the creation of a series of APP student advisory panels.

Though we acknowledge that our work is still in its infancy, to date, we have learnt that genuine collaboration, co-production and partnership with our students is allowing us to have important conversations about race, ethnicity, higher education and the access and participation agenda that can result in real change. The authors would like to recommend that although 'student engagement and consultation' is considered effective practice by the OfS in delivering the APP, going one step further by co-producing and partnering with students when appropriate is key to successful and genuine student engagement in the APP.

Further recommendations include taking a positive action approach and being bold and honest with students about

the APP, for example being open about your University's APP data and targets, the sector-wide APP agenda, and national equality gaps. Keeping the conversation going is also paramount to a successful partnership. By regularly updating students on progress, new initiatives, ideas and how they can both feedback or get involved has helped us to foster an ongoing partnership that goes further than consultation and has already started to result in the co-production of APP actions across the student lifecycle from access to progression. To date, this has included a WP-focused alumni panel, students producing content for staff training toolkits, and students partnering with various staff across multiple services within the University to recommend how we can be more diverse and inclusive in our offer.

The authors hope this reflective account of how APP leads, evaluators, WP practitioners and students can work effectively to design and deliver WP initiatives is useful to others working in the sector.

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