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Reducing the Gap! Reciprocal Mentoring between Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Students and Senior Leaders at the University of Gloucestershire

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Keywords

Reciprocal Mentoring; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Higher Education; Attainment gap; Ethnicity.

Introduction

The attainment gap between students from a minority ethnic community and their white peers has long been identified and in need of attention. There is a mixed picture across the UK HEI landscape but it is a sector wide issue. A recent report by Universities UK and National Union of Students highlights significant gaps in attainment between white students and their black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) peers. It found that 81% of white students graduated with first and upper second class honours in 2017/18, compared to just 68% of BAME students (UK and NUS 2019). That's an attainment gap of 13%. There is consensus that whilst there are a complex and wide-ranging set of factors that can influence attainment, even when known factors are controlled for there remains significant gaps (Buckley-Irvine 2017, Berry 2011). The issue will not be solved by any single intervention and change in practice. Instead will require a multi-pronged approach with a variety of actions that may have small or large impacts in different areas.

This paper provides a summary of one such intervention, a pilot project and subsequent first year roll out of a Reciprocal Mentoring scheme. The scheme paired Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students with members of the University of Gloucestershire's Executive leadership team and/or other senior leaders in the organisation, in a reciprocal mentoring (dyadic) relationship. The pilot ran between October 2017 and June 2018 and included six mentoring partnerships. The subsequent roll out started in October 2018 and involved ten partnerships. From October 2019 we have ten partnerships and are looking to invite additional partners from January 2020. Increasingly our students have been involved in the development of the scheme, and, at their suggestion, the January implementation will target Level 4 students.

The scheme was one of three positive action measures as part of the Universities, 'Increasing Diversity Project', with Advance HE (formerly the Equality Challenge Unit). The University's BAME student population at this time was 12.6% and our staff profile only 6.5%. A review of our 2017 National Student Survey (NSS) data revealed that our home BAME students gave low scores across a number of areas and our attainment data showed a 35-percentage point gap between them and their white peers. This compared unfavourably to the national picture. Advance HE data for England from 2017/18 showed an attainment gap of 13%. 2015/16 showed a gap between the proportion of white students achieving a 1st or 2:1 classification for their degree (78.8%) compared to UK domiciled students from minority ethnic groups (63.2%) of 15.6 percentage points.

Anecdotal feedback from the Students' Union, and our formal student feedback channels, indicated that a proportion of BAME students were unhappy: they perceived they received less favourable treatment in aspects of their student experience. This was not always reflected in our data, but their experiences echoed sector research (Alexander 2015, Bhopal and Education 2014, NUS 2011).

Context

A successful reciprocal mentoring scheme had been observed at the law firm used by the University. The firm had shared an intervention they had put into place to increase the number of female partners and reduce their gender pay gap. Their scheme partnered female Associates with male Partners. It enabled the women to see what was required to become a Partner, but for the men it highlighted structural barriers to the women's career progression.

Removing these barriers enabled the firm to exceed their target of female Partners ahead of time.

Before embarking on the Reciprocal Mentoring pilot, some desk-based research was carried by way of a scan of relevant literature on forms of mentoring, and consultation with Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) professionals. A number of colleagues had experimented with reverse mentoring and were sceptical of the reciprocal benefit element. There was limited experience of any meaningful impact with the use of reverse mentoring schemes within the BME network. This concern is also noted in certain literature with a cautionary note that mentor schemes are high risk as frustration can result from failed partnerships (Burdett 2014). The pilot spent a long time exercised with this thought, especially from the perspective of the power balance that was going to be present in the relationships.

Mentoring is well established and recognised Learning and Development tool used in a wide variety of settings, for example see (Lankau and Scandura 2002, Payne and Huffman 2005). Mentoring arrangements can range from informal to formal Human Resource managed schemes in organisations. A formal scheme will have set objectives, managed processes, set timescales and clear structure (Burdett 2014). It usually involves an older, more experienced staff member, colleague or role model acting as an advisor to a less experienced, more junior member of staff, young person or colleague (CIPD 2018).

In the late 1990s Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric was widely cited as a pioneer of reverse mentoring (Harvey et al. 2009, Leh 2005). Reverse mentoring is where, largely in response to the rapid technological growth, newer, less-experienced staff, but technology able, mentor senior staff on the use of the internet and other technology tools (For example, see Jolin 2018). Burdett (2014) observed that, a successful reverse mentoring scheme had additional benefits for both parties. Going on to conclude that new models and ways of thinking about mentoring were supplementing the existing paradigm including the observations that mentoring relationships can have equal power. The reasons why junior partners enter into a reverse mentoring arrangement has been examined from a psychological perspective. Somewhat helpful, the analysis concluded that it was complex (Kaše, Saksida, and Mihelič 2019)!

Mentoring has been identified as a means to accelerate learning by passing on the tacit knowledge of an organisation, a department or sector (Harvey et al. 2009). This links to the fact that a deficit of cultural capital is often cited as a barrier for BAME students succeeding at university.

Dreher and Cox (1996) identified that career success can be supported by mentoring and this is more easily obtained (unsurprisingly) in an organisation dominated by white males if mentored by a white male. Mentors to raise aspirations have been seen as needing to come from similar backgrounds to fulfil the role modelling aspect of mentoring. This can be an issue with the lack of representation at senior levels (Kalra, Abel, and Esmail 2009).

The established literature on traditional mentoring and reverse mentoring commonly identified the information was dynamically shared and mentors and mentees were co-learners in the relationship (Harvey et al. 2009). The term 'reciprocal mentoring' was identified by Harvey et al. (2009) when investigating the competitive advantage that could be gained by having a reciprocal mentoring scheme for female global managers.

It has been recognised that even in traditional mentoring relationships there is reciprocal benefits to the mentor as well as the mentee (Murphy 2012, Cole 2015). The natural progression in the area of mentoring was to try and capitalise on this in *reciprocal mentoring*, whereby information, knowledge, advice and guidance is dynamically exchanged on a regular basis. For example, a junior member of staff advises a senior member of staff on issues affecting them and the senior member of staff passes on the wisdom and experience in terms of career progression.

There are still (October 2019) only thirty-nine peer reviewed articles with the phrase ‘reciprocal mentoring’ in the title compared to c. 45,000 with just mentoring. There are not many empirical studies on the impact of reverse mentoring (or reciprocal mentoring), which is likely to be because of the nature of the exchange of tacit knowledge. However, in a look at Proctor & Gamble’s ‘mentorUp’ scheme, researchers found that there were positive results and benefits to everyone involved in partnerships. Adding to the notion of reciprocal co creation of knowledge (Leh 2005).

The Project

The literature confirmed to the project team that a reciprocal mentoring scheme would support the desired objectives. The University’s Reciprocal Mentoring scheme involved volunteer senior leaders at the University being partnered with volunteer BAME students in a reciprocal mentoring arrangement. The objective was for our students to share their unique experiences of studying at the University and increase levels of cultural understanding within the decision makers at the University. The intended benefits to the student mentors included career advice and guidance from a senior leader, and the development of a range of employability skills such as mentoring, leadership and self-confidence. The planned benefits to the institution were senior leaders gaining a better understanding of the lived experiences of this group of under-represented students, which would subsequently (either directly or indirectly) help to improve student experiences, recruit more ethnically diverse students and reduce our attainment gap. The partnership gave our students a space for their voice to be heard by those who had authority to make changes. It recognised our students as ‘experts by experience’ (a phrase coined by the NHS) and valued as equal partners. They became our ‘consultants’ (Winstone and Parker 2018). The importance of having their voice heard is highlighted by Amatey Doku, (former President for Higher Education at the National Union of Students) comments that ‘a lot of work on the BME attainment gap points to a lack of “sense of belonging” at universities for BME students, and the effect that may have on students’ confidence to speak up about their educational experience should not be underestimated’ (HEPI 2019, 26)

In practice, the project was composed of three distinct parts – the recruitment of student and staff participants, training of partners, and the mentoring relationship itself. The pilot was set up for the mentoring relationship to last for six months, with monthly meetings (as a minimum). Recruitment of participants began in September 2017 with an aim to run the mentoring between January 2018 and June 2018. The pilot ran with six partnerships.

Recruitment

A selected group of senior leaders were approached on a one-to-one basis to assess interest and potential commitment. Having set out the objectives and outcomes for the pilot, six leaders volunteered. These included three members of the University Executive Committee.

The student partners were recruited via an email invitation for volunteers. Initially, this was a targeted group of BAME students known to be engaged with the University – the Afro Caribbean society and Student Ambassadors. This yielded a very poor response, with only 4 students expressing an interest. An email was then sent to all Level 5 and Level 6 BAME students (approximately 400) which generated nine positive responses. Places were allocated on a first come, first served basis. The students completed a short expression of interest form setting out why they wanted to participate and the learning they hoped to achieve from the relationship.

Training

All participants (students and senior leaders) were invited to a comprehensive training session. Given it was a mixed group session, there was some nervousness regarding the power balance in the relationships which could have undermined the purpose of the project. Understanding this, the session started with ‘a getting to know you exercise’, where participants were asked to bring an artefact that represented who they were and talk about it for 2-3 minutes. This had the effect of levelling the relationships, creating a focus on everyone as a person, and generating interest in each other.

Recognising that most senior leaders had probably experienced traditional mentoring and most students would not, time was spent explaining the difference between traditional and reciprocal mentoring. This was basic, declarative information to help them appreciate the value of reciprocal mentoring. Greater emphasis was placed on the reciprocity feature, as this was the part of the relationship that could bring about individual and institutional change.

Roll-out

Partners were directed to have an initial meeting to establish 1) if they could have an effective relationship and 2) agree parameters including appropriate language and scope of discussions. They were then encouraged to manage the relationship between themselves. A mechanism was put in place for either partner to raise concerns if they could not resolve an issue amongst themselves.

Mentoring Partnerships were asked to reflect on a meeting by meeting basis and were provided with template diary sheets to record on-going impact. At the end of the pilot period, semi-structured interviews were held with the senior leaders. The student group were invited to a facilitated feedback session and were also offered the opportunity for a one to one discussion if they felt they wanted to provide feedback in a confidential setting. The facilitated discussion with the student mentors followed the same semi-structured format as the senior leader interviews – what went well, what not so well, challenges experienced and impact.

Impact

Some of the intended outcomes, namely, having an impact on the employability skills of the student mentors and addressing the number of BAME students at the University were considered to be long term and difficult to identify causality. Therefore, an evaluation of the pilot focused on three aspects of the programme: 1) how did the scheme run from an operational point of view, 2) any immediate impact on the participating students' experiences, and 3) did the senior leaders gain any insight into the lived experience of BAME students. These three areas were selected to inform the viability of continuing the scheme. The evaluation focused on qualitative feedback as impact was expected to be individualistic, tacit and would need to be explored in discussion. At the end of the pilot period semi structured interviews were held with the senior leaders. The student group were invited to a facilitated feedback session and were also offered the opportunity for a one to one discussion if they felt they wanted to provide feedback in a confidential setting. The facilitated discussion with the student mentors followed the same semi structured format as the senior leader interviews – what went well, what went not so well, challenges experienced and impact.

Feedback received from the pilot group was overwhelmingly positive. All students and senior leaders talked in positive language about the experience and the impact on themselves. The only negative or neutral language was used to feedback on the paperwork and recruitment process. The students reported that they had all taken something specific away from the experience, ranging from academic advice (choosing to continue to study to Masters) or employability skills (time management, CV skills). Collectively, they felt the scheme was positive beyond the individual impact and were convinced it would improve the experience of future students.

Both partners needed to understand their role as teacher as well as learner. The pilot adopted a learner-centred approach that drew upon constructivist theories (for example see Piaget 2001). It didn't see either partner as a blank sheet of paper to be filled with information. Rather it provided a process of learning that required them to adjust their existing ways of thinking, or schemata, and challenged both to think in new ways. It provided a learning environment for both to develop a "deep approach" to learning (Marton and Saljo 1984/1997). The conversations helped our senior leaders identify and begin to understand issues previously invisible to them and recognise that the assumptions made about causal factors underlying student behaviour could be viewed in a different way. The students were able to surface and reflect on their behaviours and attitudes which proved very powerful for one student:

In my opinion, the term don't judge a book by its cover is exactly what I learnt whilst participating in this programme. My initial idea of x was that he was an upper class man who was born with a golden spoon. But like I said when I meet with x and we began to talk all disproved within 20 minutes of our conversation. What I'm trying to say is, this programme normalised x, and I would say myself. Two individuals who have labels attached on us from society, and in essence are treated differently due to those labels[]But this programme gave me the mic to be me, myself and for that I shall take this lesson and travel with it for the rest of my days.(Student Partner)

The immediacy of some of the learning of senior leaders and its impact on policy making was surprising. One senior leader made an immediate, operational change:

On the back of my discussion, we are recruiting an Events manager to make sure we [the students union] shape activities to engage BAME this group of students. For example, my mentee noted that nothing was done for Chinese New Year. (Senior Leader Partner)

Another senior leader identified the opportunity that the scheme gave was something unique:

I've certainly found them really helpful by enabling me to discuss every-day student life with someone from a different background to me. I feel more informed about student life, and about a WP perspective on the University. I don't think I could have gained that depth of experience in any other way (Senior Leader Partner).

A member of the University Executive described a new perspective that they had gained as a direct result of participating in the scheme:

I was taken with the fact that the student felt comfortable in the University but there was issues when stepping into the wider community. It raised the question of is there more we need to be doing within the community? This was a surprising perspective for me. (Senior Leader Partner)

Measuring the impact was a concern from the start. It was anticipated that learning for students, senior leaders and the institution would take time to manifest itself. Conversely, tangible impact on students was reported almost immediately. These ranged from securing internships and paid work in their chosen sector as a result of introductions to professional networks, to representing their family in court having gained the confidence in their voice. However, perhaps the greatest measure of impact was from the testimonials of those involved which led to the insistence of the Student's Union that the scheme continue into a full second cohort and the willingness of the Vice Chancellor and members of Council to be involved in the full rollout.

Full Roll-out

The second cohort ran from September 2018 to May 2019 with ten partners, including the Vice Chancellor and two members of Council. The scheme has continued, with an additional cohort in September 2019 with the intention that it becomes an ongoing offering in the medium term. The Scheme essentially followed the same structure as the pilot. Taking account of the feedback from both partners, a mid-year review was added in. This served as a workshop where partners came together and shared experiences of the relationships. With the involvement of the Vice Chancellor, equality, diversity and inclusion activity across the University has received a kick start, with signs of real cultural transformation emerging: A BAME Student/Staff Network has been supported and conversations around racial inequality are being had more frequently in formal and informal learning environments.

Lessons learned and Recommendations

The reciprocal mentoring scheme continues to evolve with each cohort in response to continual feedback and to manage the scheme on both a larger scale as well as embedding as a ‘business as usual’ activity. The recruitment of student mentors continues to be a challenge, with lower numbers than the number of senior leaders engaged in the scheme: There are currently 6 six leaders who are not able to be allocated a student partner. The reasons for this have been explored and current evidence suggests communication of the scheme’s benefits are not clear, playing into the social exchange theory narrative. This suggests that people will develop mentoring relationships if they perceived that the cost of doing so is less than the anticipated benefit (Murphy 2012). Participants’ passion and enthusiasm for the scheme was by far the most powerful recruitment tool. This was the case for both students and senior leaders. For future cohorts it is essential to engage previous student mentors to assist in the recruitment of the next cohort and hold briefing sessions to inform potential interested students about the scheme and its intended outcomes. A champion on University Executive Committee proved invaluable in encouraging participation at the highest level.

Attendance at the pre-scheme, training session has been identified as a positive experience for both students and senior leaders, both in terms of reducing anxiety of student partners and allowing the relationships to develop quickly into a meaningful activity. There was some uncertainty around exactly what the intended benefits were for the senior leaders (amongst the senior leaders) and this could have been clarified via full attendance at the training. Where practically possible, training would be mandatory before commencing the relationship. It is important to recognise that some students may require some initial coaching to fulfil the mentor role. Therefore, make senior leaders aware in the training that there may be a need to coach/direct the student mentors in the roles as mentors so they are confident and both partners get the most out of the experience.

During the pilot scheme, participants were provided with various paperwork to support the partnership. These included; a mentor contract, meeting diary sheets (to keep track of actions) and evaluation forms (to feedback on benefits). Partners found the supporting paperwork overly burdensome and often did not complete diary sheets. In the second cohort, the paperwork was rationalised but the importance of agreeing a mentor contract was still stressed to the participants. A mentor contract is common place in most formal mentoring arrangements and allows partners to define scope and boundaries of discussions and the relationship.

The participants all report personal benefits of participating in the scheme. However, for senior leaders this was always in terms of the development of personal knowledge and awareness of the lived experiences. Although this is a central outcome of the scheme it is vital to ensure that any Institutional learning from the scheme is captured, actioned and disseminated. A suggestion from one of the participants was to challenge each senior leader taking part to identify one tangible action they will enact as a result of their participation.

The experience of reciprocal mentoring at the University of Gloucestershire indicates that this method of engaging senior leaders and students from ethnic minority backgrounds is both productive for the institution and rewarding for the individuals involved. While the impact of

the scheme on key institutional performance measures is slow to be realised, the more immediate benefits of the scheme to the participants are sufficient justification to suggest a roll-out at other institutions would be equally beneficial.

Be the change you wish to see in the world (Mahatma Gandhi).

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Declaration of interest statement

Both authors are currently employees of the University of Gloucestershire

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