Students from Black and Asian minority ethnic backgrounds' experiences of higher education: A pilot study

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Rationale

- Eradicating the attainment gap between black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) and white students is a strategic priority for the University of Greenwich (2021).

- Students from BAME backgrounds studying within the public health portfolio achieve poorer outcomes than white counterparts *e.g* 18% difference in dissertation grades (2019-20).

- The dominance of BAME students participating in public health programmes suggests that they may not experience marginality in immediate peer groups in the same way as BAME students enrolled on other programmes with a white student majority, and their experience may be more nuanced than statistics suggest.

Method

Aim: to explore the barriers and enablers for students from BAME communities with regard to their learning experience

- A small qualitative pilot study with current students within the public health portfolio was carried out during 2021

- Ethical approval was gained from the Faculty of Education and Health Research Ethics Committee

- A small grant of £1000 was obtained from the University that enabled transcription of interviews and each participant to receive a £20 voucher

- Semi-Structured interviews via MSTeams were conducted and transcribed verbatim

- Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts

Interview questions

- Reflecting on your university experience to date, can you tell me about the aspects of your practical learning experience which you have found positive?

- Reflecting on your university experience to date, can you tell me about the aspects of your conceptual learning experience which you have found positive?

- What was it about these experiences that you found most helpful and why?

- Can you tell me about the negative aspects of your practical or conceptual learning experience?

- How do you think this has hindered your learning?

- Thinking about your experience to date, is there anything within the remit of the Public Health teaching team that you would like to see changed?

- Why do you think this would be beneficial?

- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about?

Findings

Three emergent themes have been identified;

- the role of the family

- the influence of peer groups and others on motivation

- independent study

- *As perhaps anticipated, the experienced of students in 2021 when this research took place was dominated by Covid – 19, which students repeatedly referred to despite this not featuring in any of the questions.*

- *It should be noted that this study is based on a programme where 97% of students are female. So, although this does shed some light on their specific experience, this is predominantly female experience. Caution should be exercised if viewing this simply from a BAME perspective. Males from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are not well represented here and further work to capture their experience is needed.*

Findings: The role of the family

Some students found it difficult to study at home because of their role as carer within the family

"Because someone like me, I have my whole family at home, and it is hard to do work with everybody at home. I've always preferred the library"

"(Blended learning) enabled me to attend all these seminars and lectures freely as a carer for my younger son, and obviously as a mum, as well"

"…to be a mature student wherein you have extra responsibility, for someone like me who has family back home, the best you can do is rather to just focus…"

Close-knit but extended family needs were often prioritized over university work *e.g.* the timing of when to start a family often coincided with attending univeristy.

Findings: The influence of peer groups and others on motivation

Views on the supportive nature of peers were mixed. Several students reported the negative impact peers had on their motivation. This was at odds with the high expectations they, and their families, had of their performance.

"With group presentations, there is so much room for not putting in effort because someone else could do it, and its hard for me not to do it because I don't want to fail."

"So, it was good having people with actual real-world experience actually doing the things that they are talking about. So, speak to students. And so, that was good and made it more easier to engage."

Any 'failings' were often not their responsibility but the fault of 'others'.

Students prefer any task to involve real people and relationships.

Findings: Independent study

Students appeared unprepared for the independent nature of university learning and found taking responsibility for their own learning problematic

"But with a virtual learning, you are doing it on your own – or what you can do is you can get your help, but you have to email people, you have to make appointments. Its just a longer process."

"It was difficult to ask someone for information...So, most of the time I found it difficult to reach out or to ask someone for assistance, so I would just leave it and return home."

Students appeared more comfortable with a traditional model of education *i.e.* delivered in the classroom and where one or two key members of staff are their 'go to' for everything.

Discussion

There is a juxtaposition between university culture of independent learning that leads to individual outcomes and the collective nature of almost all other areas of these students lives.

A culture of community effort, success, or failure is often students' experience when arriving at university and in their lives outside of HE.

These students are enrolled on a programme where the majority of their peers have similar lived experiences that they bring with them, so this juxtaposition of culture is created by more than a diversity of peer group.

It is the structures, expectations, and culture of HE in the UK that requires students to think and act differently if they are to succeed. This requires a level of epistemic agility that many undergraduate student are yet to develop and is not well recognised.

Conclusion

- Being a student from a BAME background can be an isolating experience, even when surrounded by peers from similar backgrounds. There is a level of vulnerability that is yet to be fully acknowledged. This comes from the intersectionality of gender, age, cultural backgrounds that operate via collectiveness, and the HE culture of independence.

- Measuring student outcomes (*i.e.* grade performance) using ethnicity alone is a blunt tool. This does not acknowledge the high context culture of the situation.

- Many students from BAME backgrounds have had an additional layer of hidden learning alongside their degree subject. More work needs to be done to acknowledge the actual lived experience of these students and to overcome any barriers.

A final thought….

"I value education very much but I was growing up coming from a war-torn country in Sierra Leone. There is little opportunity during my age, probably, for me to achieve what I have achieved now. But I was very determined to make it."

Thank you

References

University of Greenwich (2021), 'Module Analysis Dashboard 2019-20', Available at:

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