

Engaging students to support inclusive cultural change

Case study 6 – BAME Student Advocates

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University of Hertfordshire

1. About the project

The Collaborative Development Fund supports the development of our members by addressing key sector challenges together, through a series of innovative projects. Topics are co-created with the sector and projects aim to highlight different approaches, in different contexts, to support members to understand how practice might be learned from and applied. Awards are made based on the expertise of teams and the evidence and the relevance to sector-wide practice from an open call for submissions.

Working collaboratively across six University Alliance universities in England, this project, led by Kingston University, explores the key attributes of student engagement programmes which support meaningful, far-reaching, and sustained transformation to a more inclusive higher education,

Research indicates that students who actively engage with their university through not only their academic curricula, but also co-curricular activities are less likely to drop out and more likely to achieve better outcomes (Thomas, 2012). However, not all university students engage with their institutions to the same degree. These groups include mature students and those who are first generation to higher education, students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as those from lower socio-economic households.

This case study forms part of a project that aims to surface the work of various student engagement programmes in six higher education institutions in England which have been developed to support inclusivity in their universities.

1.1 Summary section

This case study surfaces an initiative that universities may wish to consider. It was designed by the University of Hertfordshire with the intention of helping to better understand how to transform and enable inclusive cultures and ways of working in higher education through a programme which ensures that the experiences of our Black, Asian and minority ethnic students are heard and understood at the highest institutional level and race equality is advanced through partnership working.

1.2 Name of programme and university

BAME Student Advocates, University of Hertfordshire

1.3 What is the programme trying to achieve?

The programme was developed as a strand of the institutional response to addressing the awarding gap between students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and students from white backgrounds. It ensures the experiences of our Black, Asian and minority ethnic students are understood in the institution and race equality is advanced through partnership working. The specific objectives for the Advocates are:

- + to work with staff in academic schools to critique teaching and assessment materials to improve the inclusivity of their curricula
- + to work with staff in professional units to improve the inclusivity of their materials and resources
- + to support the careful dissemination of data associated with the Black, Asian and minority ethnic awarding gap to students
- + to create safe spaces so that Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in the Schools can voice their concerns, seek guidance and support, and share their experiences of studying at UH
- + to facilitate dialogue with staff members so that the issues which may be faced by Black, Asian and minority ethnic students can be addressed
- + to lead and organise events relating to race equality for students (e.g., Black, Asian and minority ethnic Careers Event)
- + to promote race equality and be role models for other Black, Asian and minority ethnic students.

1.4 Who is involved?

Launched in October 2018, the initiative was proposed by the BAME Student Success Working Group (BAMESSWG) which included student and staff representatives. A student member of the group, Cage Boons, suggested that the University employ Black, Asian and minority ethnic students to lead change and engage more students in the discourse around the awarding gap.

The programme is part of the institutional commitment to reducing the Black, Asian and minority ethnic awarding gap. It is managed by the Student Success Team within the Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre and the Deputy Director of LTIC is the strategic lead, and chair of the BAMESSWG which oversees the programme. The work of the programme is included within BAMESSWG reports to the Education and Student Experience Committee and Academic Board, as well as within updates to Race Equality Charter Mark Self-Assessment Team meetings.

The Programme Lead is the Deputy Head of Widening Access and Student Success and the Student Success Officers line manage the BAME Student Advocates, facilitating recruitment and training, overseeing their day-to-day activities, providing ongoing support and guidance, and liaising with other University key contacts. A Learning and Teaching Specialist supports the induction and developmental training of the Advocates and an E-Learning technology developer supports the technical aspects of events and resource creation.

There are now 13 advocates employed. Any student can apply, but applications are actively encouraged from students from a variety of different cultures and backgrounds.

1.5 Impacts and achievements

1.5.1 Participants on the programme

The confidence of our BAME Student Advocates grows during their roles and this is particularly evident in their in-depth and nuanced discussions of race equity. Their skills in data analysis and the communication of sensitive data also develops during their tenure. Since launching the programme in 2018 a number of our BAME Student Advocates have continued race equity work following graduation, including: as postgraduates initiating and leading student–staff partnership race equity schemes at other institutions; publishing articles in *WonkHE* and *Times Higher Education*, challenging institutional racism in HE; appearing in vlogs for *Advance HE*; speaking at sector-wide policy meetings and Black History Month events; and working in graduate roles as Diversity and Inclusion Officers.

Through the programme we've also seen the empowerment of the wider Black, Asian and minority ethnic student body through, for example, increased confidence to speak up and contribute in teaching sessions, increased numbers of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students standing as programme representatives and school community organisers (SCOs)

Case study 6 – BAME Student Advocates

University of Hertfordshire

and increased numbers of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students standing for election as Hertfordshire Students' Union (HSU) officers.

1.5.2 Institution

The programme was launched as a pilot project with one year's funding. However, its value was recognised by the University's executive team which has led to an ongoing commitment to fully fund the programme as part of our Widening Access and Student Success (WASS) work and features within the University's Access and Participation Plan.

The work of the Advocates is firmly embedded in the governance of the University (see below), including in the Institutional Action Plan for BAME Student Success.

Given their positive impact, the number of Advocates employed has been increased as a response to requests from departments that wanted 'their own' advocate. The number of hours that each Advocate works has also been increased due to increased demand.

The programme has increased the frequency and quality of conversations about race and enabled a better understanding of BAME students' experiences within the University. Institutional culture has shifted in relation to its understanding of, and commitment to, race equality, stimulating change across a range of institutional activities including recruitment processes, module assessment and design, and prompted reflections on the use of terminology (such as "BAME").

The impact of particular initiatives is measured through institutional data such as value-added data, module referrals, degree attainment and continuation rates. Since 2018, the awarding gap has reduced by eight percentage points.

1.6 Quotes

"Working as a BAME Student Advocate has been an exciting venture. Seeing staff implement some of my suggestions and explaining the work that I do to students has been rewarding. I highly recommend this role to any student looking to make a positive change at the University of Hertfordshire". – Vivian Umмосo-Iме, BSc Adult Nursing, (Hons) 2nd year

"I would say my experience was informative. The knowledge of the awarding gap brought interest in engaging with students on how to improve students' experience. This motivated me to explore the available resources and programmes offered by the University to support students" – Eva Thuo, BA (Hons) Early Childhood Education, 3rd year

"I want to say so much as the BAME Advocate programme is the reason I am at UH today. Instant impact when you are involved in this programme through effective and worthwhile outcomes towards bridging the awarding gap. Finally, the series of training I received in public speaking and use of digital tools for organising and running events doubled my employability chances." – Chikelue Chike-Obuekwe, Learning Technologist, Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre, University of Hertfordshire

1.7 This case study exemplifies the following toolkit attributes:

Intentional

The programme did not replace an existing student engagement programme but was informed by an institutional commitment to better understand the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in order to advance race equity and reduce the degree awarding gap.

Co-created

The programme was initially proposed by a student member of the BAME Student Success Working Group, Cage Boons, who suggested that the University employ Black, Asian and minority ethnic students to lead change and engage more students in the discourse about the awarding gap. It was subsequently co-designed with Cage, working with Hertfordshire Students' Union (HSU).

Embedded

The programme is embedded into the University's work in support of access and participation and is funded from the WASS budget. The funding does not require an annual case to be made and the Advocates are supported by personnel on permanent contracts. Reporting on the Advocate work is completed through the University's committee structure and the BAME Institutional Action Plan provides a further mechanism for reporting and sharing the work undertaken. The programme is also represented (by an Advocate member) at the Pro-Vice Chancellor's Student Advisory Group and Advocates sit on various other committees and groups (such as the Strategic Business Units' Equality, Diversity and Inclusion teams and the Race Equality Charter Mark Self-Assessment team) to represent the views and voice of the Black, Asian and minority ethnic student population. An Advocate is also aligned with the Students' Union (HSU) and a HSU representative participates in the recruitment process.



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