Towards an Understanding of the BAME Undergraduate Degree Awarding Gap at the University of Edinburgh

Executive Summary

The University of Edinburgh is dedicated to ensuring the best opportunities for all its students. Through its Strategy 2030 it has developed a vision for the future that aims to, "foster a welcoming community" and to be "a place of transformation and self-improvement". However, for over 20 years undergraduate (UG) students from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background have faced a notable disparity in achieving successful degree outcomes (equivalent to a 1st or 2:1). Recent data from EDMARC continues to highlight this challenge, showing that on average, over a five-year period, a smaller percentage of BAME students achieved upper class honours degrees, (ranging from -0.9% to -18.1%) across all Schools. The persistence of the BAME awarding gap occurs, even when controlling for exam achievement prior to entry. The latest 2023 EDMARC report reveals that in the year 2021/2, 14.1% of undergraduate students and 64.5% of non-UK undergraduate entrants identified as coming from a BAME background. Hence this issue presents a significant concern for the University and indicates the need for fundamental change, within the university itself.

Funded by the Principal's Teaching Award Scheme, this project aimed to understand undergraduate BAME students' perspectives on the awarding gap and belonging at the university, and to devise an action plan for improvement. This involved a literature review, followed by the development of interview questions that was reviewed by BAME students, along with ethical approval, and finally conducting and analysing one hour long semi-structured interviews with thirteen BAME UK domiciled undergraduates from CMVM, CAHSS and CSE. Through this qualitative analysis, consistent patterns emerged that informed the study's core findings. These insights provide us with a basis for formulating a targeted action plan to effectively address and ultimately eliminate the awarding gap among BAME students at the University of Edinburgh.

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The analysis of interviews with BAME students revealed several interconnected themes, that shape their university experience. Predominant amongst these is a lack of belonging and a pervasive sense of isolation. The reasons for this are varied but include a lack of representation and engagement amongst both peers and teaching staff, as well as both overt and covert racism. In addition, while some students have discovered pockets of support, the ability to engage with support services is lacking. Below, we summarise the key themes, illustrated by extracts from the interviews with students.

1) Isolation and Belonging

The BAME students reported facing challenges in feeling a clear sense of belonging, that was a significant contributing factor in understanding their experience at the university. In the academic setting, a person's sense of personal and cultural identification is strongly associated with their sense of belonging.

> *"The first years sometimes find it hard to settle in and they find it hard to feel that sense of belonging."*
> *"I've always felt like I've not exactly belonged anywhere."*
> *"It can be hard to find a sense of community until you understand your identity,"*
> *"The way that I felt lonely is on like a greater scale of just like a foreigner in a new institution."*

The absence of a sense of belonging described by the students was directly linked to the lack of representation they experience in situations with a preponderance of white people.

> *"I'm the only black girl in all of my classes."*
> *"It's just intertwined so deeply, not having people that you identify with in a way beyond words is really isolating."*
> *"Most of the students are from private school backgrounds and they're mostly white."*
> *"Sometimes I'll just be the only person who's from a BAME background and I can feel a little bit isolated."*
> *"It's the least BAME place I know."*

The students also highlighted that this lack of a sense of belonging was detrimental in maintaining motivation, engagement, and achievement in their studies.

> *"Sometimes it feels like you have to work extra hard to prove yourself."*
> *"I was feeling very motivated, but then I think it's definitely gone downhill since then."*
> *"It's difficult when you're trying to make it in a subject where a lot of the people, they don't look like you."*

2) Engagement with Staff

Related to the sense of isolation arising from a lack of representation in the student body, the students also highlighted an even more acute absence of BAME representation amongst faculty, that contributes to a lack of a supportive and relatable academic atmosphere.

> *"All of my teachers are white, all of them, none of them are ethnic minorities."*
> *"I've only ever come across a couple of teachers or lecturers who are like non-white."*

> *"The amount of people of colour has just decreased and decreased and now it's the last few I guess."*
> *"I think if you have more lecturers of colour, it creates more of that community space for students of colour to come to that university."*

3) Racial Sensitivity and Education

Students described experiences of overt and covert racism that further undermine their sense of belonging. This highlights the need for comprehensive racial sensitivity training for both students and staff.

> *"A lot of people, especially here in Edinburgh, are so racist."*
> *"I've heard so many horrific stories about racial attacks and everything."*
> *"Constantly the teachers get our names mixed up and call me her name, especially when it's just one other ethnic minority."*
> *"Sometimes you can feel overlooked in a class as well, and that you're not really being heard."*

Students whose studies meant that they were working in professional settings, for example in hospitals, expressed anxiety around how BAME students are perceived in those environments and noted the challenges in dealing with racism in such settings.

> *"When I'm in the hospital I do get a bit anxious about introducing myself and what people will think about me."*

4) Institutional Support and Responsiveness

While support services are in place, their efficacy is undermined by a lack of awareness and accessibility, coupled with a perceived indifference towards racially motivated incidents.

> *"I did consider going to university services before but obviously I wasn't really sure how to access it."*
> *"And reaching out and asking for help is just something that's just so difficult."*
> *"I don't know whether it's worth flagging or not... I wouldn't want to burden someone with more of my problems."*
> *"I don't really know what the university is doing in terms of [anti-racism], to be honest."*

Students also noted that there are inadequacies in the current system for reporting discrimination.

> *"I usually find out about [racially motivated attacks] from other people posting it on their social media and it's never an official thing."*

Current initiatives, while well-intentioned, often fail to resonate on a personal level, suggesting a need for more individualized and impactful approaches.

> *"I think when a place isn't as diverse, it is about how you welcome minorities."*
> *"Like with the renaming of 40 Joyce Square... sometimes it's just performative."*

The findings indicate that the experiences of BAME students at this university are shaped by a variety of factors, such as support from the institution, representation, community involvement and how instances of racism are addressed. The university should take measures to engage with these issues and create a more welcoming atmosphere in which racism and exclusion in all its forms is no longer tolerated. This will transform the university into a stronghold of inclusivity, that not only appreciates diversity but also thrives on it, thus equipping graduates for an interconnected world.

To achieve this, we recommend that the university consider the following:

1. **Enhance Transition Support**
   Ensure that BAME students' transitions into academic life are supported with resources and communities that affirm their sense of belonging.

2. **Diversify the Staff**
   Strengthen the connection between students' identity and university culture by ensuring that the staff represents the diverse student body. The low representation of BAME staff and the need for role models can be addressed by targeted recruitment of BAME staff and the establishment of mentorship schemes.

3. **Nurture Inclusivity**
   Address the connection between a sense of belonging and experiences of microaggressions by fostering an environment that is not only diverse in numbers but also in spirit. By incorporating courses on racial sensitivity and unconscious bias along with ongoing refreshers to maintain awareness and empathy, we can foster a more inclusive environment.

4. **Amplify BAME voices.**
   Address feelings of invisibility and the need for advocacy by creating platforms where BAME students' voices are heard, and their presence is acknowledged.

5. **Build Community**
   Recognize the importance of social networks in enhancing well-being and integrate community-building activities within the university's fabric to support student success. For example, regularly organizing events that celebrate cultures as well as providing strong support for societies that promote diversity, will contribute to creating a vibrant and inclusive community.

6. **Create an Inclusive Curriculum**
   To tackle feelings of alienation and ensure that every student feels valued we suggest developing a curriculum that incorporates perspectives and experiences reflecting the multicultural student population.

7. **Have Regular Support Awareness Campaigns**
   It's important to launch an awareness campaign about support services to overcome the reported under-utilisation caused by lack of awareness.

8. **Respond Proactively to Racism**
   Ensure that the university's response to racial incidents is swift, visible, and effective, fostering an environment where discrimination is actively contested. Commit to policy reviews, surveys, and transparent reporting.