

## **To BAME or not to BAME? A critical reflection on the place of race and religion within 'student engagement'**

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The 2018 Change Agent Network Conference brought together over 200 delegates from over fifty institutions, with the combined theme of championing partnership in an age of change. Under this banner, participants delved into a wide variety of themes, including: digital capabilities, supporting innovation and partnership and researching effective engagement. However, amongst the sixty presentations, workshops and symposiums, only two papers looked explicitly at the experiences of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students and/or other minority student groups. This may indeed reflect the harsh reality that these groups still do not receive the attention that they deserve.

As a recent graduate now working within 'student engagement', I am passionate about looking at the place of race and religion in higher education (HE) and in particular its inequalities, which HE (and, by extension, student-engagement practices) is not immune from reproducing. This piece will therefore explore the theme of keeping student engagement and partnership relevant in an age of change; it will also consider 'inclusivity', in and out of the curriculum.

How can institutions ensure that their practices continue to be relevant to students? This is a question especially pertinent in relation to students from minority ethnic groups, given current real concerns about the BAME retention and attainment gap (Miller, 2016), which institutions may attempt to explain away by deficit models instead of adopting appropriate partnership methods.

Central to partnership is the co-creation of learning and teaching, where occurs true collaboration between students and staff to (re)create aspects of curricula or pedagogical approaches (Bovill *et al.*, 2015). However, in 'partnership', "all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, towards the latter" (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014, pp.6-7). Such phrasing – that suggests an inherent equality of access to partnership – is problematic. Whilst good spirited in nature and describing what should be strived for, it does not acknowledge HE environments that may in various ways hinder or prevent equal access and so can limit how BAME or religious students can immerse themselves in partnership opportunities.

An illustration of the latter may be found in the 'Sense of Belonging for Muslim Students' research – presented at CAN 2018 by myself and my co-researchers Tom Lowe and Gary Jones (2018) – which highlighted such significant barriers to these students' participation and acquisition of a sense of belonging as might derive from personal situations (e.g. having to commute to and from campus) or from institutional environments (e.g. a lack of available activities of interest to Muslim students or the absence of a centralised hub for Muslim students to meet each other). Though this exploration was more to do with social engagement, it suggests that these students – who could not find a place that reflected their identity – were less likely to get involved, with consequent adverse impact on their experience of and feelings about classrooms and/or learning environments, where they could not 'see themselves'.

At the conference, Bryson *et al.* (2018) raised this matter – the challenge to authentic partnership – in relation to student selection for partnership and to the achievement of inclusivity. Just who are the students being selected by staff? Who are voluntarily involving themselves? To what extent are they representative of (ethnic or religious) minority student views? It may be that certain HE structures do not appreciate the social capital brought in by diverse students; that those structures which discriminate – either covertly or openly – against the presence of such students do lead to the loss of inclusive environments which would enable partnership prospects for all students to thrive.

In the case of religious students in particular, since they are often excluded from conversations in HE as a whole, access and participation may be even more limited. For example, Weller and Hooley (2017, cited in Aune and Stevenson, 2017) note that academics are sometimes concerned about addressing religion within the curriculum or are uncertain about dealing with students who use religious doctrines in academic arguments.

So, what can institutions do to improve inclusion for BAME and religious students? It seems that, in the question of whether 'to BAME or not to BAME', it is always far more productive to acknowledge explicitly that students of colour and religion do – often simultaneously – face inequalities. To achieve genuine partnership across the student body, institutions must have 'seriousness' about such matters. Writing about black male student engagement in America, Harper (2009) states that committees dedicated to improving the academic status of these students is one collaborative partnership approach that institutions can take. This will enable staff and student champions from similar backgrounds to assess initiatives and to encourage participation in richer learning activities (e.g. internships or schemes for studying abroad).

Additionally, I believe staff should do more to engage with their diverse student bodies: making the first step to have a conversation is extremely powerful and sets the precedent for supportive learning environments and, consequently, for partnerships.

The formation of such committees and staff seriousness/commitment will truly enable better accountability and allow for authentic partnership. As a South-Asian Muslim student who commuted, I often felt that forms of engagement were not easily accessible – until I found that single first opportunity which allowed me to connect better with my institution. Usually, it is that one particular experience which provides students with a gateway into further forms of academic or social involvement. However, if that one experience is not provided or is discovered too late, students are robbed of the life-enriching opportunities universities offer. It is all too often that BAME and religious students bear the brunt of this atrocity.

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## Opinions

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