

An introduction to this special issue of the Journal of Educational Initiative, Partnership and Change

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This issue contains fourteen articles that explore the experiences, the creativity and the highs and lows of staff and students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups who are working in partnership to improve the quality of higher education. It specifically seeks to open up difficult conversations that have hitherto been largely neglected within the field of staff-student partnerships. These conversations are different and hard – the scholarship here exposes emotion, passion, care and fragility; they deal with shifts in perspective; they reverberate with the traces of movements and their splinters. The writing is creative and mirrors a dynamic and fluctuating use of language. At the core is the recognition that underneath the habitual usage of well-worn expressions – ‘equality’, ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusivity’ – lie systemic biases, racial discrimination and under-representation. As editors, we recognise the intrinsic contradiction of using the acronym ‘BAME’. Though this term is well established across the sector to describe the varied experiences of people from diverse backgrounds, it serves to marginalise many within our diverse higher education community. For some, it’s a convenient (and originally well-intended) catch-all term, the use of which helps to identify complex inequalities between minority groups and the white majority. For others, it’s cold officialese that obscures their lived reality as individuals from specific communities, individuals with particular needs and challenges. To persist in using language that fails to embrace their unique individualities is to disregard and exclude them even further.

Many of the articles seek to examine ways of developing and implementing inclusive curricula through student engagement in co-designing, co-delivering and co-provisioning content. Through their work, the authors unpack the complexity of barriers to the furthering of social diversity and inclusivity and so encourage the next generation of global leaders to create change. Within the framing of the tensions and balances of power, there is also joy in the writing. The authors provide insights into how opportunities may be enabled, thus opening the rusted doors of the academy so that students and staff may reach their potential regardless of their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. This issue’s articles should serve to encourage and inspire the student partnership and engagement community, for they certainly expose some of the sector’s embedded historical barriers to a properly inclusive and equitable educational experience. They pinpoint the conditions that may enable institutions to change narratives steeped in traditional institutional practice; they interrogate the curriculum and reveal ‘awarding gaps’; they address some of the many challenges faced by ethnic minority staff and students that prevent their equal participation in partnership activities and hinder institutional change. We hope that these articles – identifying as they do the key elements of partnerships and their benefits within the context of the conversation about race, cultural differences and equalities – will reinvigorate constructive debate and lead both to pedagogical practices that embrace everyone and to innovative partnerships that empower minority ethnic students as agents of change.

The following article summaries outline a striking range of partnership experiences that demonstrate the authors' determination to address the many challenging issues that matter to them personally and professionally.

In a project designed to address the BAME awarding gap at the University of Hertfordshire, Brendan Larvor and Joanna Ahlberg adopted the citizens' assembly method of empowering the student voice to apply lived experience to institutional strategy. The logic of enabling representatives of minority groups to make informed recommendations to the predominantly white senior management at this university is undeniably sound if policy and practice are to combat racism and achieve inclusivity. The authors chart the progress of the project with engaging honesty about the various limitations which prevented adherence to the usual conventions of the citizens' assembly process. In particular, that the participants faced much challenge in the writing up of their recommendations document – thus requiring the authors to seek elucidation of the ideas therein in with further, post-assembly, engagement with the students – is a striking indication of why higher education institutions need to enhance the means by which the student voice may be heard and acted upon. The re-worked document offers some suggestions of immediate value to the university and the whole exercise has indicated to the authors possible ways of taking the project forward.

Productive student-staff partnerships – as portrayed in the work of Rhoda Akua Ameyaa, Alison Cook-Sather, Kirtee Ramo and Hurum Tofa at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania – value all participants and encourage dialogue conducive to mutual understanding in the joint effort to revise pedagogical practices and resources to make them equitable and inclusive. Cook-Sather's 'Summer Pedagogical Partnership Program' enabled a group of BAME undergraduate students at a particularly traumatic time for them (the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter uprisings) to research 'trauma-informed', anti-racist and equitable approaches to hybrid and remote teaching and learning'. Their engagement with staff, both in their own institutions and beyond, fitted them with the language to voice their own lived experiences, so that staff would better understand their perspectives and implement recommended and agreed changes. Quotations from the three students' autoethnographic accounts of these partnerships open the case study and provide a stunningly personal summary of the empowering nature of such collaborations and their challenge to structural racism in higher education institutions.

Fatema Khatun, Amanda French and Rob Smith present findings from a participatory pilot research project at Birmingham City University. The project focused on BAME students, exploring how their unique identities informed their experience of teaching and learning in higher education and, consequently, producing both a richer and more differentiated understanding of that experience. The research team used 'identity boxes' to create a safe space in which students from BAME backgrounds would find it easier to discuss and explore with staff and other students their personal sense of embodiment – in other words, a 'differential higher education space'. The three fascinating identity boxes selected illustrate clearly how the student sharers and interpreters of their own chosen artefacts effectively challenged the historically homogenised higher education space – with its barriers to a sense of belonging by under-represented groups – by enabling the articulation and conceptualisation of identity by these students on their own terms. Thus the research itself challenges the stubbornly hierarchical and racialised higher education systems that fail to

acknowledge the complex range of individuality within today's very diverse, heterogeneous student population.

A particularly striking subheading in the case study of Melanie-Marie Haywood and Adwoa Darko of SOAS University of London is 'Mentoring is a partnership'. This institution's 'Breaking Barriers' is a deliberate strategic effort, a scheme to build mentoring partnerships between black students and black staff, in the context of the SOAS degree-awarding gap and a commitment to decolonising the curriculum. It aims to support black students to feel more connected to SOAS, to improve their personal and academic confidence, to help them to recognise and deal with institutional racism and to allow mentors to share their own journeys to employment. The authors make clear the institution's willingness to support 'Breaking Barriers' and, indeed, to embracing broader initiatives to counter the marginalisation of black students, but they are also unequivocal in both their underlining of the challenges still to be faced and seeking further commitment by SOAS, for, if the scheme is to continue to flourish (allowing for nuanced collaborative relationships within the partnerships), then physical, human and monetary resources must be forthcoming.

In 2020, the Northumbria University 'Student Inclusion Team' – dedicated to improving the success of the institution's under-represented students – established an internship scheme to support those students (because they had little relevant work experience) to engage in paid employment. Authors Lynette Shotton, Emily Parkin, Aiman Abu Aatay, Rick Hayman offer an insight into the findings of the work of one intern, a self-identified BAME student, which focuses on 'exploring the nuanced experiences that people of colour face in terms of access and participation' in higher education. The themes of belonging, identity, racism and financial difficulties figure largely and – as do some other papers in this issue of the JEIPC – this student's voice draws attention to the particular challenges of language and cultural differences which adversely affect BAME student outcomes. This study highlights the intersectional challenges experienced by BAME students and it is reassuring to note that the authors confirm that there is now an organisational commitment to 'explore, understand and respond more effectively' to them.

The damaging impact of COVID-19 upon BAME groups has been nowhere more evident than in healthcare, as this issue confirms. The case study of Shanaz Pottinger, Ada Hui, Julia Carson Little, Seema Chavda, Patricia Orbih and Stacy Johnson, of the School of Health Sciences, University of Nottingham, is a particularly thought-provoking insight into how universities and healthcare organisations may not only support the psychological wellbeing of healthcare students in their study and frontline settings, but also give them opportunities to speak freely, develop partnerships with staff, co-produce their own therapeutic forum space and, ultimately, act as agents of change to the institutions in which they work. Nottingham University provides us with a splendid example of one such approach: a virtual, weekly drop-in 'wobble room', staffed by four BAME sponsors (each with a professional background in nursing, mental health or psychology) and specifically for BAME students. There are positive implications for the future: recognition of the importance of normalising psychological care for frontline workers; a strengthening of the existing equality, diversity and inclusion offering of the institution; better BAME representation – not only internally, but in healthcare more widely, for some of these students are now viewing themselves as future healthcare leaders.

Authors Louise Davis, Mohammed Sahir, Melissa O'Conner-Smith, Victoria Seun Sajowa, Semhar Abraha, Nivedita Rebbapragada, Irekanmi Soda, Mohit Sembi, Ashika Morar, Lamia Abusheba and Jody-Ann Miller, of the University of Warwick Medical School, present their case study of a student-staff partnership set up to review, change and decolonise medical case-based learning (CBL). The identified institutional degree-awarding gap between BAME students and their white counterparts led to a review of curriculum content and – to make the practice of CBL sessions more equally supportive of BAME participants – active race awareness training for both staff and students. Empowering the students in the partnership to act as agents of change, bringing their rich relevant experience and authoritative perspectives to bear upon pedagogies historically written and established by white medical school staff, enabled productively critical examination of the detail of medical cases included in the learning. The paper makes clear the impeccable logic of the partnership, which will continue, for it is clear that inclusive representation within the cases is appreciated by students and will not only enhance their own attainment but also help to train practitioners well for the diversity of patients they will go on to treat.

At the University of Bristol Medical School, the implementation of a new curriculum centred on case-based learning has happily provided an opportunity for staff and students to set in train new, inclusive and decolonised teaching, with implications for the degree-awarding gap, the building for all of a sense of belonging and, ultimately, proper representation by NHS of the UK's very diverse population. In this case study of their shared journey towards a decolonised curriculum, Samya Sarfaraz and Joseph Hartland reveal, respectively from student and staff perspectives, some very personal experiences and the beliefs acquired from those experiences. What grabs the reader's attention is their clear message about individual identity and voice: every one of us self-identifies in complex, intersecting ways – according to such aspects as gender, religion, culture, skin colour, race – and there is an absolute necessity for our unique voice to be listened to and accommodated in those organisations to which we belong. The authors recognise the importance of allyship and of institutional willingness to embrace diversity and each provides a set of lessons for our consideration. They conclude with the telling comment that, in their context, decolonisation goes far beyond just diversifying images within dermatology; it is radical cultural change at the deepest level, to which the personal stories of those who have been advocates for it must be allowed to contribute.

A lack of racial inclusion within the School of Pharmacy at the University of Nottingham led to a project designed to promote it. Adanna Anthony-Okeke, Nicole Baddoo, Helen Boardman, Rhonda Arike Fynn-Famodun, Rita George, Osarumen Anne Irorere, Ruth Osoba, Kene'h Oweh, Gautam Paul and Vanorld Vanderpuye explain in their case study how this was achieved. It will not be surprising to learn from them that pharmacy is just as illustrative of the degree-awarding gap as the rest of higher education, nor that under-representation in pharmacy – whether in education or the workplace – was one of the key reasons for this project. Here, students set about decolonising the MPharm curriculum, by, for example, including 1) skin tones other than white for signs and symptoms of a wide range of conditions and 2) diseases particularly afflicting black and minority ethnic groups. The students' conclusions and recommendations led to changes enacted by the pharmacy education staff, who were subsequently surveyed to evaluate impact. A conference brought black healthcare workers and students together to discuss practical measures to increase representation and create opportunities for partnerships with black-run pharmacies. Now

students are aiming to take their achievements into inner-city schools in Nottingham. There are very clear indications here that healthcare in general and pharmacy in particular will, thanks to efforts like these, be better fitted to serve the very diverse community of the United Kingdom.

Sheilabye Sobrany, Georgina Cox, Jezelle Simon Miller, Elisheba Gardner, Gina Awoko Higginbottom are, respectively, healthcare academic and student healthcare academic members of parallel race equality, diversity and inclusivity networks at Middlesex University; their case study presents the 'lived experiences of black and minority ethnic (BME) staff and students when forming networks'. These networks were established because of concerns expressed by students on the BSc Nursing degree programme that they had fared less well than their white peers in degree outcomes and that they had perceived racism and negative discrimination towards their BME lecturers. Networking, partnership and change agency by both students and staff with shared experiences of challenges faced in their training have led to significant improvements within and beyond the institution. This paper astonishes the reader by the sheer number of achievements and awards that the networks have so far accomplished; significantly, the networks have gone a long way towards meeting student expectations and addressing their anxieties, by creating safe spaces for discussion and collaboration and making strategic approaches to the raising of awareness of race equality and diversity, with considerable potential positive impact on health care and higher education generally.

Jo Hall, Vedrana Velickovic and Vy Rajapillai, of the University of Brighton, reflect on the challenges and successes of a 2018-2020 student-staff work-in-partnership project (originally the 'Curriculum Advisers Scheme', now redeveloped as the 'Inclusive Practice Partnerships Scheme') in the School of Humanities. It has now been extended to all the institution's academic schools. The case study charts the stages of the project to decolonise the curriculum, from building resources to the establishment by a BAME student-staff group of a related blog – 'DeCol' – and the holding of a student-led panel discussion event with an invited external speaker and staff. It became clear to the authors from students' sharing of personal stories of the negative impact on them of a white, Eurocentric curriculum that students should take ownership of the decolonising process and act as co-drivers of change to it. The voice of students comes clearly through quotations from the blog, a space open to all past and current students and thus a means of perpetuating that voice; the institution, meanwhile, has committed in its strategic plan to inclusive practice and race equity through such initiatives as the scheme depicted here. And so this, yet another indication that universities are responding to the need to be fit for purpose, confirms the power of inclusive student-staff collaboration.

To close the employability outcomes gap between BAME students and their white counterparts, St Mary's University, Twickenham, devised the 'Be SMART' project, a student-staff co-creation approach involving mentoring, internships and skills workshops; it focused upon three themes affecting BAME students – identity and employability, sense of belonging and graduate capital. In this case study, Obi Oputa and Iain Cross outline the pedagogy of the project which, they say, greatly benefited from the BAME identity of its leadership team (whose members were able to share how their own identity had affected their careers and professional development) as it enabled authentic and engaging conversations with students in co-creating their project experience. The study provides a detailed evaluation of the

project, whose participants 'reported significant improvements in their self-confidence'; the data indicate acquisition of professional-level skills, a stronger sense of belonging to St Mary's, enhancement of peer networks and greater likelihood of engagement with the institution's careers service. The authors emphasise the importance of carefully planned promotion of such an intervention, especially via existing BAME networks.

Our guest editor Kiu Sum (University of Westminster) offers her own telling experiences in the 'Student voice' section of this issue. She emphasises the matter of identity, with all the complexity that involves, and honestly and frankly uses her own educational development to demonstrate the challenges thrown up during her quest – especially as an ethnic minority individual in higher education – to find a community. Though she generally found that she did not 'stick out' in her diverse undergraduate environment, she was aware of a lack of role models from her own ethnicity and, at the time of completion of her first degree, *acutely* aware of the competitive employment world around her, in which white peers seemed to flourish and dominate easily. Never had it been so obvious that having a degree alone was not enough to be work-ready: social capital, key soft skills and, emphatically, the self-assurance that comes with absolute reliance on identity were also vital. At every opportunity, therefore, she took up student engagement activities, especially student-staff partnerships (SSPs), for she was motivated to continue in academia. Her ringing endorsement of SSPs does not deflect the reader from a disturbing sense of the fact that she has had to manage and deal with racial discrimination, which makes it the more imperative that higher education institutions continue to be ever more culturally diverse in the sense of changing their reactionary systems, being sensitive to and caring for students' unique identities, having representative role models, giving under-represented groups voice and adequately meeting their needs.

Further encouragement of BAME staff-student partnerships across higher education comes from the 'student voice' piece by Maisha Islam (University of Winchester) and Isabella Valente (King's College London). This very interesting paper is unusual in presenting the voices of a BAME student and a BAME member of staff, in dialogue together. The conversation certainly draws attention to key experiences that each had had – such as direct racial harassment on campus or being a carer as well as a student – and to the fact that a natural bonding arose through mutual recognition of similarities of feelings about being Asian. Isabella, particularly, felt much more comfortable about opening up to someone else with a BAME background and of a not too dissimilar age. Their discussion illustrates the significant power of mutual respect and reciprocity in creating an equitable relationship; it also – and this has been noted elsewhere in this issue – makes the point that 'BAME' is an inadequate and constraining umbrella term that fails to identify unique racial and cultural backgrounds; it certainly doesn't adequately represent Isabella's mixed heritage. Maisha makes a significant concluding comment: *"To have deliberately structured this particular partnership with a focus upon 'Asian' students and a better serving/understanding of their needs, and the ethnicities included within this Group, is where our empowerment as 'BAME' individuals lies and where the potentials of partnership for under-represented groups are particularly highlighted. That we did do that demonstrates the equitable nature partnership work can have."*

Editorial

In our post-truth era, peppered with division and self-seeking, we hope that these articles, supported by evidence and motivated by a vision for inclusion, will inspire you to draw freely upon the riches of scholarship and personal stories evident here and, in turn, to develop your confidence in sharing and seeking possible solutions to the barriers faced by under-represented groups in the academy and your own institutions. Whether you are from a minority community or not, we hope this introduction to the articles in this issue will provide you with a foretaste of their stimulating content and encourage you to read further.