

Navigating my ethnic minority identity in higher education: a student reflection

Kiu Sum

University of Westminster, UK

Education is open for everyone, with the same opportunities to learn the skills and broaden the experiences that support their individual needs. Everyone, regardless of age or personal background, has a personal story of self-motivation, waiting to be told. We live in a society where expressing our feelings and emotions is now the norm and sharing our journeys with each other in this way really does sharpen and enhance our perceptions of ourselves and others. In doing so, we overcome our self-doubts and fears by bringing them into the open; we fully embrace our imperfections; we gain the courage to discover our own identities within a crowded space.

These days, society encourages us to display our thought processes, reasoning and understanding. Higher education (HE), therefore, offers innovative and engaging opportunities for students to define their own identity, assisting their intellectual development in an interactive environment that offers cohesive and more collaborative learning (Fisher *et al.*, 2018) through hybrid, blended and flipped classroom pedagogies. As I have myself experienced, it is the enhanced *interactivity* that makes learning more personal and effective and promotes the best quality of educational experience. However, if you happen to be an ethnic minority learner, caught up in the whirl of enthusiasm for ever more original learning and teaching environments, you may find yourself struggling to embrace your own identity (Cureton *et al.*, 2019).

Identity is, in the first instance, often shaped (Negrin, 2008) by our appearance – our colour and the way we present ourselves; yet behind the superficial layer of that appearance lies a complex set of beliefs, values and attitudes that properly represents and defines us. We are who we are, but – sometimes – saying ‘I am myself’ is simply not enough when we are trying to find common ground in a space where everyone else looks different and dresses differently from us, for we feel judged and our self-confidence and our perception of ourselves are accordingly affected. This is especially true in a HE environment.

As an ethnic minority student, I here reflect on the challenges (rather than describe the projects I undertook) that I perceived during my educational experience, using the Rolfe *et al.* (2001) reflective model, with its ‘What? So what? Now what?’ framework. This model prescribes the implications of intangible elements such as attitudes and feelings, enabling my personal reflection.

‘What?’

Despite being the odd one out for my appearance during my school years, I became accustomed to the dichotomy of growing up in a multi-cultural society and learning in a white-dominated educational environment. As I transitioned from one academic year to another, blending into the surroundings came to seem normal for me, for my identity was not often questioned. Perhaps I was young, naive, subconsciously unaware; or perhaps just fortunate to be in an educational environment where I was accepted for who I was, rather than being stigmatised, discriminated against or confronted on account of my appearance.

Uncertainty did lie ahead in my educational journey, as I tried to 'find myself' in new environments, but – within a diverse HE society where my appearance was far less striking – I felt positive about the recognisable benefits of eventually discovering my community.

University is an environment where learning occurs through different opportunities to develop skills and understanding (Lairo *et al.*, 2013; Yorke, 2006). Besides having to meet the never-ending deadlines, there is also a requirement, whatever the discipline, to learn independently in order to become well-rounded as a graduate. However, competition for the labour market is currently (and forever) fierce. The challenges are great, but it cannot be assumed that degree readiness automatically translates into employment readiness; nor is entry to an appropriate workplace level upon graduation automatic or guaranteed. Furthermore, I might ask, has the university been focusing more upon creating cohorts of skilled workers than upon proper curation of students' identities through an understanding of their individual development and experience (Daniels and Brooker, 2014)? Are all graduates equally able to identify and deploy their graduate attributes and are all of them indeed work-ready? Compared to their white counterparts, ethnic minority students, suffering inequities in terms of ethnicity, gender and social status, continue to fare less well in the job market (Birmingham *et al.*, 2020; Tholen and Brown, 2017). If having a HE degree is, on its own, simply not enough to succeed in an environment where inequalities still exist, how are such students to overcome the barriers standing in their way?

'So what?'

During my undergraduate years, I understood that it was important to develop my identity, build my strengths and identify and manage my weaknesses, as well as sustain my interests and career aspirations. I recalled from my school years the contrast between belonging and feeling recognised as different; as an undergraduate student, no longer the odd one out for my appearance in a diverse community, I for once felt connected with my HE surroundings. However, as I progressed through university, that sense of satisfaction and positive perception of my employability both fluctuated. Looking around, it was (and still is) hard to find in my subject area a role model with the same ethnicity as mine – and, in that, I was (and am) like most other minority students who lack role models from their own cultures (Dhanda, 2020). Within the same ecosystem, it feels very challenging to be compared against white counterparts who appear more privileged and high-achieving and seem to dominate with ease. Nevertheless, I recognised the importance of soft credentials at that moment when everyone in the same ecosystem attempts to project personal potential and competencies in addition to the degree qualification (Tomlinson, 2008). What once, when I was younger, seemed a gentle and civilised society becomes at this point a congested, competitive and cut-throat market as, all around you, your peers try to distinguish themselves through the same application process as yourself. Therefore, the 'So what?' aspect is of relative importance in how I perceive myself – the attitudes and beliefs that I depend on for survival and, perhaps more importantly, for personal success in our unpredictable society. Consequently, I never fail to draw on offered university opportunities that embrace who I am and my ethnic identity in order to carve out the person I aspire to be.

In terms of defining my future and aspirations through university, participation in student engagement activities certainly increased my sense of belonging. Furthermore, and corroborating previous studies, I can confirm that such activities do add value to the learning development of every individual, not only enriching university experiences shared with peers,

but also providing psychological benefit, strengthening resilience and enabling self-empowerment (Cook-Sather, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2019; Ntem and Cook-Sather, 2018). Indeed, these engagement opportunities empower participating students and nurture more rounded learners, but there is significant competition for them, especially for a BAME student. This time, fitting into university was not my primary focus – competing with like-minded students was: at stake, the very motivation to continue in academia.

Though the university milieu was white-dominated and though I found it hard to discover people who looked like me, I did acquire a sense of belonging and did gain inspiration and motivation at university, thanks to some role models – both (limited) non-white and (mainly) white – who opened my eyes to possibilities. Additionally, for me, the staff-student partnership (SSP) programme offered a space for staff and students from different backgrounds and experiences to collaborate on pedagogical projects that were, to them, meaningful and likely to have a positive impact. As might be expected, some group activities presented difficulties. However, I can confirm from my own experience that SSP projects, with their widening participation emphasis, do succeed in reaching those from ethnic minorities. For instance, the partnership provides insights into how various community members may look at the same topic, but do so through a different lens. Aside from my research into pedagogy, my SSP projects (topics such as student assessment feedback, industry opportunities and the use of technology) allowed me, relatively easily, to unwrap my identity without stigmatisation or discrimination. SSP thus had a profound influence on how I learnt to view myself within the HE system. Its benefits have translated into risk-taking: participating in projects, establishing student feedback across the multi-cultural community, representing those from a marginalised background and providing insights into how we might create a judgement-free university space to share challenges and thoughts. SSP has demonstrated the value of collaborative staff and student learning and teaching, placing partnership at the heart of strategies to deliver education of the best quality. A yet more significant step, I think, is the empowerment of students from those partnerships to facilitate the HE transformation of inequities and, in consequence, outcomes. SSP could, arguably, be said to have addressed those who are usually less engaged, encouraging them to become experts in the field through active and independent learning in projects that matter to them. However, Mercer-Mapstone *et al.* (2019) concluded that it is those who are the ‘super-engaged’ who derive the greatest benefit from the SSP. The challenge, of course, remains the inclusion of diversity (Mercer-Mapstone and Marie, 2019). A university degree provides the foundation instrument for throwing students into the labour market. But, university initiatives such as SSPs offer students that space to carve out their identity, break down barriers and develop the soft skills that will support their aspirations and successes.

As an indication of how the HE sector is more to me than just a name and of how I am much more to it than a mere number, I aver that the SSP community goes well beyond simply completing a pedagogical partnership project: it offers emotional, behavioural, cultural and social engagement, providing staff and students with a social place to address their wellbeing needs and generating conversations that transcend academic purposes and requirements. For me, it empowers me, with the support and guidance of others, to explore – beyond just the gaining of knowledge – the soft skills that inspire me. SSP has shown me ways to equip myself with lifelong personal development skills that are innovative and creative: how to be adaptable and more socially aware by proactively seeking out and

collaborating with diverse perspectives; how to navigate challenging and complex professional relationships effectively; how to acclimatise myself to an ever-evolving society; how to become more digitally literate; and how to be responsible for my learning, behaviour and wellbeing in the educational system. Having the means of connecting professionally with others, so as to share our perceived challenges, powerfully supports our academic journey together – as someone once said to me, “... together, we can go further”. University has, therefore, transformed how I perceive myself as I navigate through HE.

Accepting who I am as an ethnic minority student in HE has, however, been challenging at times. It has taken me a long time to figure out how best to grow a ‘thick skin’ and learn to be immune to any racial discrimination. Perhaps university was a way to find my identity; it has also, through many experiences, enabled me – subconsciously – to develop an effective defence wall so that I do not constantly have to look over my shoulder. There have been times when I’ve felt awkward, not known what to do and retired to my own space just to ‘live it out’; yet, through the SSP projects, I have learnt to establish such a sound personal network that being who I am matters less than sharing interests, for that is what shapes the way we collaborate with and contribute back to our communities.

‘Now what?’

By breaking down barriers to personal identity, SSPs have provided ways to shape student perceptions of HE and encouraged students to be proactive about voicing their thoughts. Though outwardly I may now look different, I still find it a constant challenge to determine who I am. University opportunities definitely enabled me to develop my identity. Thus far, my SSP experiences demonstrate that working collaboratively with others from different backgrounds enhances inclusivity and diversity within the HE ecosystem. Aside from engaging the less engaged, partnership also offers a two-way communication channel for sharing practices and experiences as individuals. Reflecting on my past challenges, I recognise how university experiences facilitated the process of carving out my identity. For any student, engagement is more than just participation – it requires activity, so that students invest themselves in something meaningful and make sense of their belonging. The HE sector is massive and students are, understandably, aware of their own insignificance as they do their best to deal with whatever their university journey presents them with, whether successes or challenges. The latter requires positivity and action, for they may seem like formidable barriers; it is hard to understand how to break them down without feeling overwhelmed; it is even harder for under-represented groups. Fortunately, SSPs offer powerful support.

The educational system is crowded and graduate opportunities are becoming more difficult for everyone. Though we are seeing our society slowly and sometimes painfully shifting to greater diversity, there is little doubt that conversations about ethnicity and the dynamics to empower students should continue to be influential in all HE institutional strategy and decision-making. HE institutions must become culturally diverse, not just in terms of the mix of students, but in the mutually inclusive ideals and actions that we are associating more and more with the twenty-first century: changing out-dated systems, having multi-ethnic role models, establishing institutional awareness of, sensitivity to and respect for individual identity and enabling it to be heard, properly perceiving under-represented groups and meeting their needs. To gain a degree is a basic requirement for entering the labour market, but that is not enough. Universities must establish initiatives, like those that I have

experienced, to add value to learning by encouraging the acquisition of soft skills and motivating students to become responsible for their own learning and contribute to the design and content of their own curricula. This more equitable ethos will support *all* students to aspire and achieve, especially those such as ethnic minority groups, who demonstrably have not previously enjoyed equal opportunity.

We want all students to enjoy education, rather than be constantly anxious about who they are in society. My identity is who I am and I cannot change my ethnicity. I hope other individuals like me will continue to embrace who they are and accept that we belong in our environment by effectively collaborating with others and making our voices heard.

Reference list

Birmingham, J., Nathwani, T. and Van Essen-Fishman, E.L. (2020) 'Higher education outcomes: How career satisfaction among graduates varies by ethnicity.' *ANALYST*. Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/files/Career-satisfaction-by-ethnicity-20200922.pdf> (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Cook-Sather, A. (2018) 'Listening to Equity-Seeking Perspectives: How Students' Experiences of Pedagogical Partnership Can Inform Wider Discussions of Student Success.' *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(5), 923-936. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07294360.2018.1457629> (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Cureton, D., Hughes, J. and Jones, J. (2019) 'Towards bridging the belongingness, progression and attainment gap for our BAME students.' *Higher Education Race Action Group (HERAG)*. Available at: <https://wlv.openrepository.com/handle/2436/622742> (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Daniels, J. and Brooker, J. (2014) 'Student identity development in higher education: Implications for graduate attributes and work-readiness.' *Educational Research*, 56(1), 65-76. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00131881.2013.874157> (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Dhanda, M. (2010) 'Understanding Disparities in Student Attainment: Black and minority ethnic students' experience.' University of Wolverhampton. Available at: <http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/equalopps/mdsummary.pdf> (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Fisher, R., Perényi, Á. and Birdthistle, N. (2018) 'The positive relationship between flipped and blended learning and student engagement, performance and satisfaction.' *Active Learning in Higher Education*. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1469787418801702> (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Lairio, M., Puukari, S. and Kouvo, A., (2013) 'Studying at university as part of student life and identity construction.' *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 57(2), 115-131. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00313831.2011.621973> (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Mercer-Mapstone, L., Islam, M. and Reid, T. (2019) 'Are we just engaging *the usual suspects*? Challenges in and practical strategies for supporting equity and diversity in student-staff partnership initiatives.' *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1-19. Available at: <https://winchester.elsevierpure.com/en/publications/are-we-just-engaging-the-usual-suspects-challenges-in-and-practic> (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Mercer-Mapstone, L. and Marie, J. (2019) 'Practical Guide: Scaling Up Student-Staff Partnership in Higher Education.' Institute for Academic Development: University of Edinburgh. Available at: http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/iad/Learning_teaching/Academic_teaching/Resources/Student_Engagement/MercerMapstoneMarie_Practical%20Guide_Scaling_up_student-staff_partnership.pdf (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Negrin, L. (2008) 'Appearance and identity.' In: *Appearance and Identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 9-32. Available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230617186_2 (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Ntem, A. and Cook-Sather, A. (2018) 'Resistances and Resiliencies in Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnership.' *International Journal for Students As Partners* 2(1), 82-96. Available at: <https://mulpress.mcmaster.ca/ijsap/article/view/3372> (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Rolfe, G., Freshwater, D. and Jasper, M. (2001) *Critical reflection in nursing and the helping professions: a user's guide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 9780333777954

Tholen, G. and Brown, P. (2017) 'Higher Education and the Myths of Graduate Employability.' In: Waller, R., Ingram, N. and Ward, M.R.M. (eds.), *Higher Education and Social Inequalities: University Admissions, Experiences and Outcomes*. Sociological Futures. Abingdon: Routledge. ISBN: 1138212881

Tomlinson, M. (2008) '*The degree is not enough*: students' perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability.' *British journal of sociology of education*, 29(1), 49-61. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01425690701737457> (Accessed: 2 November 2020).

Yorke, M. (2006) *Employability in higher education: what it is-what it is not* (Vol. 1). York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/hea-learning-employability_series_one.pdf (Accessed: 2 November 2020).