**Inclusive curriculum and BAME student advocacy in a business school: reflections on three years of inclusive module reviews**

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**Abstract** This article presents a case study of BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) student advocacy and its impact upon the curriculum of a large business school within a post-92 UK university. Learning from the University of Birmingham’s (2017) ‘BME Ambassador Scheme’ and the ‘Curriculum Consultants’ model at Kingston University (2017), a programme of BAME Student Advocates was established in 2018 across this university, to raise issues of race equity with staff in positions of power. The scheme has grown from 10 BAME Student Advocates in 2018 to 14 in 2020, offering student advocacy on many aspects of university life, including employability services, the learning environment, academic skills workshops, student community and belonging, and the undergraduate curriculum. The role-holder is employed by the central Student Success Team, and partners with a senior member of staff in each academic school (and several other business functions) to collaborate on specific race equity objectives each year. One recurring aspect of the role involves offering diverse student perspectives on module content, delivery and assessment to achieve a more inclusive curriculum design for programmes with the largest awarding gaps. This article reflects upon the outcomes and lessons learned through conducting 24 such module reviews over a three-year period within a business school and proposes potential future developments.

**Key words** inclusive curriculum; Black, Asian and minority ethnic; business school; higher education; decolonising; awarding gap

**Introduction**

Since 2018, three students have undertaken the paid role of BAME Student Advocate within a large business school at a post-92 UK university, supporting module leaders to review their content, delivery and assessments in line with the University’s inclusive curriculum expectations. Modules have been identified using a value-added metric at programme level which measures degree awarding data for Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and white students against contextualised benchmarks. Subject Heads have enabled the BAME Student Advocates to conduct a review of modules with larger awarding differentials between these racialised groups and to meet with the relevant module leaders to discuss possible adaptations aimed at increasing inclusion. At the outset, Advocates received training in public speaking (to build confidence in liaising with staff), interpreting value-added data, national and institutional awarding gaps, learning and teaching terminology and use of an inclusive curriculum checklist. They also received ongoing support from a nominated member of the university’s central Widening Access and Student Success team.

**Reflections and Key Learning**

Through reflection and innovation the Business School in this case study has developed and extended inclusive learning and teaching provision year-on-year since 2018, without ‘reinventing the wheel’ (McMaster, 2021: 31). The efficiency with which the module review process has been established and embedded within this large Business School has enabled its success. Positive feedback from academic colleagues on insights shared and the fact that more module leaders have engaged in the reviews each year has increased confidence amongst the BAME Student Advocates in leading the review process. Now, in the fourth year since the project’s inception, the learning loop has been further closed through the BAME Student Advocate revisiting modules two years after they were first reviewed, to evaluate the impact of the module review process with module leaders.

Some key learning points highlighted by the BAME Student Advocates across the last three years include a requirement for module reviews to be firmly founded upon the ideals of curriculum decolonisation, and an acceptance that rethinking traditional forms of knowledge requires patience, introspection and the need to view content through a new lens. If teaching staff only understand their own way of ‘making sense of the world’, they will not be well-placed to design learning activities and assessments which enable other perspectives and ways of viewing the world to be valued (Jarvis and Graham, 2015: 9). It is the work of the BAME Student Advocate to enable broader perspectives to be considered within the curriculum, bringing their own lived experiences and observations to such discussions. It is a delicate area of work presenting a challenge to normalcy, so there is skill required in working empathetically with tutors. The two most recent Advocates identified that diversifying the names used in case studies, faces shown in videos and images, and authors added to reading lists represented keen efforts to diversify materials and resources; however, a deeper reflection on thoughts and assumptions underlying knowledge was required if students from diverse heritages are to be not only represented, but included and valued in the (virtual or physical) learning space.

One of the Advocates engaged in just such an ‘unpicking’ of western Eurocentric perspectives when discussing the concept of culture shock with a module leader. He found that the images used to introduce the discussion of culture shock showed white tourists visiting developing nations. In challenging the subliminal message communicated by these images, the Advocate used his own experience as an international student from an African nation to highlight the movement of African and Asian tourists within their own continents and across different continents, explaining that this also causes culture shock for people from the global south just as it does for European and US tourists. In so doing, the common western perception of residents in developing nations being the objects of culture shock, rather than the subjects too, was foregrounded and addressed. The BAME Student Advocate’s perspective was invaluable to the rethinking of this visual reference for both the tutor and other white colleagues who, whilst being well-travelled and cognisant of intra-African tourism, had been unaware of the Eurocentric assumptions being reinforced by these images.

Whilst not all module content provides for such rich debate and discussion, particularly those which are quantitative or restricted by Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies’ (PSRB) requirements, the advocates found that small changes are still valuable if they provide students with a path to question, share and discuss their own insights and perspectives with other students and tutors. In this way, university becomes a place of learning which values the experiences and perspectives of both students and teachers (hooks, 1994). Additionally, tutors can take the decolonising agenda to their corporate regulatory bodies, who may control the given learning objectives or professional standards upon which students are judged (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013). One module review highlighted the need for such feedback to PSRBs when the module leader explained that, despite wishing to, she was unable to include more globalised case studies due to PSRB constraints limiting her teaching to US and European regulatory frameworks only. The BAME Student Advocate suggested a way around this might be to profile companies with headquarters in the global south which also offer services adhering to western standards and practices within the US and Europe. In this way, corporate multinational businesses based in Africa and Asia could be examined within the module without transgressing PSRB parameters.

In another module review it was observed that no images of ‘real’ people were used in the lecture slides. Instead, whenever visualising a point about workplace practices, blank, faceless icons of people were used in place of photos. The BAME Student Advocate raised this with the module leader and a discussion ensued which surfaced the tutor’s concerns about misrepresentation and a preference to avoid identifying gender, race or age in imagery used. The Advocate responded with equal concerns over erasure of identity through not having any form of BAME (or other protected characteristic) visual representation on module slides; this could potentially contribute to a discrepancy between students’ own identity and that of people portrayed as successful in their field, a factor shown to impact student engagement (Destin, 2019: 1076). The Advocate later reflected that some tutors are seemingly more comfortable with subconsciously avoiding the discourse of race than addressing and discussing it.

This example highlights how crucial it is for universities to seek the perspectives, thoughts and experiences of staff from minoritised groups (including paid BAME Student Advocates) when designing curricula, to ensure they fully serve their diverse student communities (Universities UK, 2020). Yet this alone is no panacea for decolonising the curriculum, as staff of colour may be equally exposed and susceptible to Eurocentric world views on curriculum subject matter as their white counterparts (Cartwright and Cartwright, 2020: 535), and further in-depth analysis of the impact of historical power relations is essential if we are to move from ‘diversifying’ to ‘decolonising’

One of the key benefits of the BAME Student Advocate programme over the past three years has been the range of perspectives brought to the role by the three different role-holders. Various genders, ages, ethnicities, nationalities and levels of study (undergraduate or postgraduate) have been represented by the Advocates across those three years, bringing a richness to the role which would otherwise not have been possible had just one person been permanently in post. It is important to avoid overgeneralising students’ experiences, as no two cases are the same within and across minority ethnic groups (Wong et al., 2020). However, these one-year casual staff positions enable new perspectives and insights to be brought to the curriculum over time, as students of differing ages, genders, ethnicities and cultural heritages assume the role annually. Through intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989), race, class and gender compound to create unique disadvantages for those with differing and multiple minoritised identities (Verma, 2021: 207) and, whilst not fixed homogenous categories, create very different realities for people’s lived experiences (Morrison, 2012: 119). Each additional year of student advocacy brings further unique perspectives on the content of taught modules.

**Future Developments**

The first three years of inclusive module reviewing have focused on offering easy-to-implement suggestions, almost as an entry-level toolkit for inclusivity. In the next year, we would like to move from diversifying content and resources to decolonising thought (epistemologies), accepted canons of knowledge and methods of learning and teaching. Higher education is a system based on the promotion of western thought and Eurocentric values (Small, 2012). Decolonising these epistemologies will take deeper reflection beyond reviewing reading lists and imagery on slides and will require module tutors to identify avenues to introduce issues of race and power to existing content and engender compassionate discussions of such between all participants in the learning and teaching environment. A decolonising approach to the curriculum is an essential element of flexible pedagogy (Matheson and Sutcliffe, 2017) which encourages students to challenge received wisdom and practice. This will require introspection and consideration of personal histories and privileges amongst academic (and professional) staff, to appreciate how different experiences amongst the student body – both home-domiciled and international – result in learners viewing the same content, ideas and concepts through very different lenses.

By developing our own critical consciousness (Freire, 2017) academic tutors can begin the conversation in class around the impact of race and existing structures in society. The role of the BAME Student Advocate may need to push into the territory of debating anti-hegemonic education (hooks, 1994) and changing the way both tutors and students think, speak and write about their subject disciplines. This will necessitate open conversation about the concept of ‘racial disadvantage’ (McDuff et al., 2018), and how it has impacted current academic discourse in the field of Business and Management. Through consulting with BAME Student Advocates in module review meetings, tutors can develop their own awareness of ‘patterns of privileged knowledge’ (McDuff et al., 2020: 91) in their subject area which may serve to advantage some students over others, and co-create content, assessments and methods of delivery to directly address this imbalance and represent a wider range of perspectives (Universities UK, 2020: 34).

A further possible development of the BAME Student Advocate programme in the coming year would be for this Business School to extend the module review process beyond programmes with the largest differential outcomes between BAME and white students, to include those programmes which have already closed their awarding gaps. Such programmes could still benefit from bringing diverse voices to traditional knowledge and pedagogy to enhance the learning experience for a globalised and racially diverse student body. The collective efforts of all staff and students, perhaps led by the next BAME Student Advocate in 2021–22, may enable the formation of a group of students and tutors as anti-racist supporters of a decolonised curriculum, holding all members of the School accountable for change through research-informed dialogue which both supports and challenges intellectual thought (Arday et al., 2021: 310).

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