# THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC STUDENTS WITH THE OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

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*"Everybody can be great… because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love"*

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

# ABSTRACT

## Introduction

The purpose of this research is to identify the barriers which prevent the Open University (OU) black and minority ethnic (BME) students from engaging with the OU Students Association, and how the Association can encourage more participation from the students. In doing so, this report presents the findings of a research study exploring the experiences of BME students with the OU Students Association and subsequently based on the results will outline a proposal as to how the Students Association should approach research into supporting BME students, and which areas should take priority. Hereinafter, OU Students Association, Students Association and Association will be used interchangeably, unless stated otherwise.

## The method

The approach included telephone interviews with OU BME students, and research by collecting relevant information from the OU Students magazine, blogs and stories on the Association website, and speaking with the Association staff members. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the findings.

## Research findings/results

Throughout the research the primary themes explored were contribution, self-esteem, experience, and connection. These themes are viewed as important in concluding the understandings of the participants' experience and motivation to volunteer with the Association.

## Discussion

The research included case studies to illustrate how the Association can improve the experience of the BME students, and moreover, how to encourage more participation from them.

## Recommendation

There were eight recommendations in total which the Association should take priority.

# KEYWORDS

- BME students

- Social engagement
- Volunteering
- Connection

## BACKGROUND

In the report 'Race for Equity', the National Union of Students (NUS) explores that from parliament to democratic structures within students' unions, BME students are still underrepresented across universities in the United Kingdom (UK) (NUS, 2014). The link between this underrepresentation and the disadvantage BME students face in education and beyond cannot be underestimated (NUS, 2014). They suggest that without proper representation from the BME community these issues, and others, are unlikely to be achieved by the students' unions, thus, better and more representation is key to addressing these problems (NUS, 2014, p. 3).

The Open University and the Students Association are committed to working in partnership to enhance the student experience and quality of teaching (OUSA, 2018a). The OU Students Association is a student union, within the definition of the Education Act 1994 and a registered charity, consists of elected student representatives who influence policy and decisions made at all levels of the OU based on the views and feedback from the students (OUSA, 2018b, p. 4). Their mission and vision are to be the community and voice for all OU students, to encourage a vibrant and active student community with open access and equal opportunity, to which all OU students feel a sense of belonging and where they are able to positively influence the student experience and engage and support each other.

The student voice is the thoughts, views and opinions of students on an educational journey. Most schools, colleges and Higher Education institutions in the UK have Student Voice, where students are consulted on their learning experience or debate issues that are affecting students (OUstudents, 2018a). The OU student voice is an integral part of ensuring learners receive an outstanding educational experience and that students feel empowered to be active in either making curriculum or institution wide change (OUstudents, 2018b). Nonetheless, student opinion is significant because it allows further development for a better study experience.

However, the Students Association has recognised that there is a lack of diversity among the OU volunteers and students who generally engage with the Association. There is an increase in negative comments about the lack of student diversity on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, therefore, this leads to the questions; do the Association celebrate diversity enough, and if not, how can the Association improve the current situation and create more opportunities for BME students?

## Why this project is important?

The project believes it is crucial that the BME OU students, on the same ground as non-BME OU students, should be able to access and engage in social and other activities that the Association offers, and accordingly, it believes that the Association plays an important role in increasing the feelings of belonging, connection and opportunities for BME students.

# METHOD

## Participants

An advertisement was published on the website; www.oustudent.com, seeking for OU BME students who would like to be interviewed for this project. The Research and Information Officer Pooja Sinha helped to schedule two telephone interviews with the students in advanced and subsequently the phone calls took place on November 26th and 28th. The participants were encouraged to share their journey and experience with the Association. Taking into account that this project involves solely 35 hours of research and writing in the course of 10 days from the Induction events which were held on November 21st – 22nd, there were merely two students who participate. Moreover, due to confidentiality reasons the phone calls were not recorded, and the participants' names will therefore not be mentioning in this report but rather be addressed as participant 26 and participant 28 based on the date the interview occurred.

## Approach

In order to address the issues arising in this research, the report focuses on identifying the themes within the participants' responses to the questions asked. Moreover, to accumulate greatest extent data as

possible, the participants were questioned seven open-ended questions in total which invited both participants to discuss generally their experiences and motivations for volunteering with the OU Students Association. Each interview lasted almost 20 – 40 minutes. During the interview, notes were being taken with the use of pen and paper. At the end of each interviews, it was necessary to classify the answers by using Microsoft excel document to prepare and create a coding hierarchy. A code provides a label that represents what passages of data are about, so they can be located (Bazeley, 2013, p. 128). In order words, coding helps to identify keywords or themes being used by the student participants. Throughout the analysis, the coding hierarchy was updated gradually to include new identified themes. Furthermore, the report also used the information derived from the OU Students magazine, the OU Students Association's Volunteering Research Project (2018), blogs and new stories on the Association's website and speaking with the Staff members. As a consequence of the nature of the study, the most appropriate of analysis would be a thematic analysis in order to identify the different factors from the experience of the students. Thematic analysis is a common method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

## RESEARCH FINDINGS - RESULTS

A research study 'Volunteering Research Project (2018)' from the OU Students Association suggests that time constraints are one of the most common reasons for not engaging in volunteering with the Association (Sinha, P., 2018, p. 31). The feedback from students who took the online survey shows that up to 28 per cent identified lack of spare time as a barrier for not engaging with the Association, whilst 25 per cent wanted to focus on their studies (Sinha, P., 2018, p. 31). Moreover, 16 per cent had family commitments whilst 22 per cent confirmed that work commitments were holding them back from involving. Furthermore, 25 per cent identified that they did not know where to look for regarding information about volunteering opportunities with the Association (Sinha, P., 2018, p. 32).

### Findings from OU BME student interviews

On being asked how the participants found the OU Students Association, participant 26 had been to the Association's Twitter page and had been taking part in conversations regularly. They said that they had first seen the advertisement for the BME Project through twitter. Participant 28 had received a letter by post from the

Association at the start of their OU study journey. This letter was an invitation to a social event, which was being held a day before the participant's module started. The participant said that their approach was:

*"It's only two hours of my time, and if I don't like it, it's no big loss"*

Participant 28

Moreover, the participant clarified that this letter was sent when the Association had regional branches. Active students within the regional branch had sent this invitation to new students. The participant reflected that this practice had been discontinued because of the cost of sending letters by post and that such communication from the Association had now moved to online platforms.

When questioned if the participants use the OU student forum such as the Association's website, or other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so forth to make contact with other fellow students; participant 26 responded that they use the OU Students Association website and that they visited the forums. When questioned about which forum they were referring to, they clarified that they had been using their module forums to keep in touch with fellow students rather than the Association forum. This is a common feedback from students which suggests that students often bookmark their module forums and access directly from there but in doing so, they may bypass Student Home, which is where a link to the Association is available.

Participant 28 answered that they had used forums when they started OU study and explained that before social media took over, forums were the main way for them to communicate with fellow students. The participant visited the forums daily and saved links to these forums on their Student Home page. At first, they did not post much and simply observed what other students were talking about, but over the years as they became more active within the Association they began to post more. Moreover, the participant also highlighted the importance of students saying 'hello' on online platforms, and that a simple greeting could often start different conversations between students, thus, the participant had been actively trying to support new students as they adjusted to OU study. Participant 28 also explained that they had a Facebook account, but they did not post much there

because the online safety was something that concerned them. They did recognise the need for social media but personally did not use it much.

On being asked if the forums reflected the racial diversity of the student population; participant 26 felt that racial diversity was reflected on the forums, whilst participant 28 thought that it was difficult to assess this. They were not sure how many students used the forums or what their ethnic background was. The fact that the forums or social media platforms are designed to be used by students, the participant felt that was an indication that everyone was welcome to join. The participant felt that exploring the student community was every individual's responsibility, however, the participant placed value on supporting fellow students who are unsure about how to engage and to encourage them to participate in the student community. They felt that OU students shared a common bond, including study-related activities such as preparing for TMAs.

*"In my role as a volunteer, I felt that the diversity of the student community was more evident in face-to-face meet-ups. I felt*

*that the lack of engagement of BME students was more evident online."*
Participant 28

They thought that language may not be the barrier to engagement, as English was the common medium of study for all OU students. The participant cited the fact the students in Europe engaged with the student community without language being a barrier. Moreover, they felt that regarding the BME student community, perhaps the Association was missing a trick – but they did not know what this barrier was.

When being asked if they felt their needs are met as BME OU students; participant 26 mentioned course catalogues and other OU publicity material and said that they were happy with the representativeness of such material. On the other hand, participant 28 recognised that the BME students were underrepresented and gave an example; they did not see many BME students or BME staff when attending meetings, however, they had never felt 'out of place' in such circumstances. The participant mentioned that they have seen more images of BME students in OU brochures and thought that this

was a recent move within the university to include images of diversity.

On asking how the OU Students Association can improve their work in order to meet the BME students' needs; participant 26 felt that the Open University was inclusive already, as well as the Association. However, participant 28 felt that there was room for improvement, especially in encouraging more BME students to come forward. They shared a personal story about the time when they had been elected as a representative within the student leadership team, they were told by a BME student that:

> *"It's good to see someone like us get elected"*
>
> Participant 28

Their reaction at that time had been to ask the student 'what stopped you?'. The participant was aware of ongoing work under Jiten Patel (Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the Open University). They had attended a conference as a BME speaker but mentioned that the language used was jargon-heavy, and that they had to google a lot of the terminology. Moreover, the participant was also aware of

students' initial hesitation to get involved but felt that once that hesitation had been overcome students could connect with each other. They gave own example, the participant said that while they had received a letter from the Association, they had to make the first move and attend the student meet-up. Furthermore, regarding representing the voice of BME students, the participant noted that the value that they had held while growing up was that colour did not matter and people had to simply 'get on' with things, therefore, they engaged in activities as an individual rather than as a BME student. They also suggested that in order to encourage participation from BME students, the Association needed to ask the OU for help. This could include both resources as well as statistics about the number of BME students at the OU and as a result this would help the Association to work collaboratively with the university to target the BME student community and identify the difficulties faced by BME students.

Throughout the coding analysis, a number of themes were explored. The underlying themes arose in this report include contribution, experience, self-esteem, and connection. These themes are viewed as

important in concluding the understandings of the participants' experience and motivation to volunteer with the Association.

### Contribution

The first theme identified was contribution which refers to the possibility to reach out to others who are in need, without asking anything in return. When asked the participants what made them decide to volunteer, both participants agreed that it was important to be able to give something back; to make a difference. Participant 26 had past experience of volunteering, but not with the Association. When asked if the participant would be interested to volunteer with the Association if there were opportunities available, the participant answered yes. They also mentioned that they were grateful for the services and support offered by the Association.

*"I would browse the website for volunteering opportunities around Christmas time".*

Participant 26

Participant 28 had experience of volunteering with the Association as well as volunteering with other organisations. They had been encouraged by their parents to volunteer and were therefore aware of volunteering from a young age:

*"My motivation for volunteering with the Association is that I value the advice and support received from fellow students when beginning my OU journey, and that I now want to 'give back' to the student community."*

Participant 28

Participant 28 explained also that they liked the flexibility of volunteering with the Association and gave the example of undertaking volunteering activities from home such as moderating online forums.

### Self-esteem

The next most commonly theme identified was self-esteem such as becoming more confident through volunteering. Participant 28 explained that their engagement with the Association had progressed with a parallel increase in confidence. Looking back on their personal experience, they had felt supported by the university, the staff team at

the Association and by other students. They thought that it had been a personal development journey as well, where they had gained confidence, for example, to speak up in meetings.

### Experience

To gain more experience was the third theme recognised. For instance, to obtain further experience whilst working with others. Both participants' answers were corresponded. Participant 28 also mentioned glitches such as having asked the wrong questions in meetings but said that they had used it as a leaning opportunity and used the experience to support other students.

### Connection

The last theme was making connection with others whilst volunteering. Volunteering allows you to connect with your community and it also helps you to interact with a diverse group of people, thus, when we experience a sense of connection; it improves not only our motivation but in addition happiness and health (Helpguide.org, 2018, p. 1)

*"I attended student meet-ups in Wales and Manchester and enjoyed meeting fellow OU students for a couple of hours. The meetings have helped me to improve personal developments, and I would like to continue attending these meetings."*

Participant 28

Participant 28 said they had also represented part-time students at a meeting organised by Higher Education Funding Council for England. They valued the opportunity that volunteering offered, such as speaking to politicians, OU staff, and networking with people. They felt that engaging in such activities with fellow students also takes off the pressure. Participant 26 had not attended any Association meet-ups or similar events before. They said they had not been aware and that they would look at the Association's website to find out more. They were interested to attend after Christmas.

## DISCUSSION

The findings as mentioned suggest that the barriers which prevent BME students from engaging with the Association are time restrained, the invisible links on the website to find volunteering

opportunities, but also the fact that BME students are underrepresented. It is clearly that there are rooms for improvements.

Many BME students may have other commitments such as family, work, disabilities and studies. They may not have time to volunteer. The Association can try to offer different volunteering activities which do not require a comparatively long period of time to complete these tasks and which suit the needs of the BME students. Moreover, the interesting question is how visible is the Association to the majority of students? Through the findings, it suggests that the information, activities and offers from the Association are not as visible as it should be to the students. For instance, participant 26 was not aware about the monthly local meet-ups, and participant 28 mentioned that the BME students are not engaging much on the forums online. Thus, this may lead to difficulties on how the Association's communication is reaching to the BME students. On the other hand, NUS argues that BME students' liberation and equality is about BME people organising themselves, as BME students and making decisions about their lives. It would therefore be impossible for a white student to represent BME students because no white student, although well-informed and sympathetic, can speak with the full authority of experience about issues of concern to BME students (NUS, 2014, p. 7). However, NUS states that white students can be involved in campaigning on issues of concern to BME students, but they must allow BME students to define their own priorities NUS, 2014, p. 7). Consequently, the most effective way to ensure BME underrepresentation is addressed is to ensure that this position is elected for, and by, BME students.

## Case studies of BME representation on different campus

Studies have shown that other UK universities have serious diversity problem as well (NUS, 2014, p. 2). This fact suggests that this is a common problem which the universities and the associations experience, and not only a challenge that the OU Students Association faces per se. However, how the OU Association can improve the current situation and engage more BME students and subsequently can meet their needs and voices – we need to take a look on how other successful universities have implemented BME representation on their campus.

For instance, an informal group of BME students produced a BME students' handbook as part of an awareness raising campaign to explain their needs at University of Cambridge (NUS, 2014, p. 5). The handbook helped involved many BME students through consultation and generated debate about what a BME Students' Officer would do (NUS, 2014, p. 5). Moreover, University of Sheffield Students' Union set-up a BME Students' Committee after an internal audit found that few BME students actively participated in the union's activities (NUS, 2014, p. 5). As a result, the Committee developed an autonomous forum where BME students could meet to determine what their needs and interests were at the University and how these could meet (NUS, 2014, p. 5). Furthermore, BME students at Goldsmith's College implemented BME representation by making the post of BME Students' Officer a full member of the union's decision-making executive – this helped to ensure permanent, accountable representation of BME students' interests in the union (NUS, 2014, p. 5). It is worth to note that each of the example mentioned above, there were BME students who took the matter in their own hands and implemented them on their campus. This confirms what participant 28 mentioned during their interview; it is every individual's responsibility to explore the student community,

however, there will be support given by the student community and Association.

These examples give extremely valuable recommendations how the OU Students Association can improve the involvement of the BME students at the Open University. The implications for the future might be that the Association make changes that do not suit the greatest number of BME students. Thus, it is important that the Association have to follow up this situation over time to ensure that the needs and voices of each BME students are met.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to identify the barriers which prevent OU BME students from engaging with the Association. The results showed that time retrained, lack of visibility of the information and underrepresentation are some the causes why BME students may not be engaging with the Students Association. The case studies indicate that Association can encourage more participation from the students if there was a BME representation.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The OU Students Association should implement a BME Students' Officer and a BME committee who can represent the BME students' needs and interests.

2. The OU Students Association should create an Online OU Adobe connect chats where all BME students can get in touch with one another, and where they can share their thoughts, needs and interests. If it is necessary, the Association can create an online chat where it is completely anonymous to join - in a way where the BME students can feel confident to share their needs and thoughts without feeling stressful.

3. The OU Students Association can arrange different meet-ups for BME students only – where they can get in touch face-to-face with each other (locally). This will help the BME students to feel a sense of belonging to the student community and perhaps will help them to engage more with the Association in general.

4. The OU Students Association can arrange different but fun meet-ups. For instance, an international meet-up (annually or semi-annually) with all OU students where international food and drinks will be served. As food always brings everyone together!

5. The OU Students Association and the Open University have to partner up and find a better way how to communicate with all the OU students in general, and not only BME students. The links and websites must be more visible and easier to access. Although, the Association no longer send letters to freshers, they have to come up with another effective way how to communicate with newbies before the module starts. In this case, the Association will have better possibilities to connect with BME students from the very beginning – and perhaps they will involve with the Association immediately.

6. The OU Students Association has to offer more volunteering opportunities which suit the needs and time of the BME students.

7. The OU Students Association can start a BME Studio – student led radio show run by BME students - where the BME students can share their volunteering experiences, interests, needs, study tips and more

with each other and maybe this can encourage other BME students to join.

8. The OU Students Association has to follow up this research and see if any improvements have been done and maybe has to face other new challenges.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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