

Project 3: Black Student Advisory Hub

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	✓
	Disability/Mental Health student	
Topic	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	✓
Specific research question	Would Black British students and staff at Cambridge benefit from a centralised means of educational support, such as an Advisory Hub?	
Student co-researchers	Tyra Amofah-Akardom, undergraduate Education	
	Bobby Mugo, undergraduate, History and Politics	
	Folu Ogunyeye, undergraduate, Human, Social and Political Science	

2. Executive summary:
<p>This project explored student perceptions of the value of a centralised support network or “Advisor Hub” that would provide both pastoral and academic support for specifically Black British students. To our minds, this was the most direct and impactful way to address the concerns about Black students sense of belonging and the attainment gaps, while also providing an opportunity for staff to engage with or find opportunities for professional development in the ways that they could more effectively support their Black British students. We conducted our research by sending out a survey through streams that interact with Black students the most – namely, the African-Caribbean Society (ACS). We asked the student respondents about the support systems that Black students currently use and whether or not they believe they would benefit from this Advisory Hub if it were to be resourced and realised within Cambridge. The findings of the project indicate that an Advisory Hub would be of value to students and staff interested in more effectively supporting their students, but that care would need to be taken in the development and resourcing of such a Hub, so as not to over-burden student and staff volunteers, and to avoid potential hostility or resistance to dedicated support for Black students.</p>

3. Rationale
<p>There are two main reasons that we decided that having such a Hub would be an interesting proposal to make to address the attainment gap between Black students and their counterparts. The first thing that we addressed and highlighted when discussing the issues within Cambridge is the fragmented nature of the University due to the different colleges and faculties. We identified that this creates issues for all students, but particularly Black students, in terms of locating support that addressed their particular needs and perspectives. We also identified that some places more so than others in Cambridge have such a lack of diversity that systems to support Black students in particular may not even exist to begin with. When discussing the idea of a Hub, we decided what we would want such a Hub to encompass, and we identified that not only is academic support important, but also pastoral support which we recognise has a significant impact on academic performance. All three of us who worked on this project have experience in some form of welfare work: Tyra is currently a CUSU Welfare</p>

and Rights Part-Time Executive, Folu is the outgoing ACS Welfare Officer and Bobby is the incoming ACS Welfare Officer. We understand that having issues outside of the academic that arise and persist throughout studying at university can affect the way in which a student performs.

4. Existing evidence

As we started this project, we researched other competitive universities in the UK higher education sector to see if there are any models of a specifically Black Student Advisory Hub. We failed to find an example in the UK, with the primary issue we came across was the categorisation of racial groups as BAME rather than just Black students, who have the most issues with attainment gaps at Cambridge. BAME includes so many other ethnicities that such a broad focus would obscure the particular academic and welfare issues experienced by Black students at this University. We decided to look at examples in North America, and found the most desirable template from Dalhousie University in Canada. They have what they call a Black Student Advising Centre, where they not only have help that they can refer Black students to in terms of their academics, but also point them to places where they can find societies and clubs to connect with people, and also where they can find support in terms of their academics and funding. They also have a calendar where they post events that may be of interest to Black students. The Dalhousie Black Student Advising Centre has a strong web presence in the University and is staffed by a Black Student Advisor and a Community Outreach and Transition to University Coordinator.

The Dalhousie Black Student Advising Centre: https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/communities/black-student-advising.html

We thought that this would be the most desirable model to replicate in the Cambridge context as it highlights the significance of pastoral support in providing students with a fulfilled university experience, but also considers things that we didn't, such as providing financial support for Black students.

5. Generation of evidence

There were three stages in the data collection for this project.

Stage one: focus group discussion with the other Black British student co-researchers in the APP PAR project, in order to identify the places where our student peers looked for academic and pastoral support, and what they found missing, hard to locate, or inappropriate for their specific needs. This discussion formalised our interest in proposing a specifically Black Student Advisory Hub. We discussed how, while this might be resources intensive for the university, it would have an immediate impact. We also discussed the need for more than just student support networks, but for a Hub that could coordinate teaching staff professional development around race issues in educational contexts. While staff allies exist in different Faculties and Colleges, we understand that there are challenges to the exchange of ideas and resources to support Black students, or to consider how critical race theory can inform different disciplinary interests.

Stage two: In order to collect a broader range of Black student perspectives for our project, we sent out a survey through the African and Caribbean Society, which included a range of closed and open questions about the support systems that students currently use and their opinion about the proposed Black Students Advisory Hub. The survey received 36 responses, from students in 16 different disciplines across STEM and Arts/Humanities subjects. While the number of responses is limited, the patterns that emerged in responses from across the collegiate University has been helpful in providing an insight into current student perspectives.

Stage three: the project team met with the Head of the Equality and Diversity Unit to discuss the role of Race & Equality Champions and School Equality Champions, and how the proposal for a Black Advisory Hub would dovetail with the recommended actions in the Race Equality Charter action plan. This discussion informed our understanding that an Advisory Hub would be of value to both students and staff within Cambridge, and could be a way of coordinating and supporting other student and staff-facing initiatives to narrow the attainment gap (such as the proposal to resource and support student mentoring schemes and an anti-racist glossary).

6. Small project research findings: Please describe new evidence and findings

What kinds of support do Black students currently access and value

We started by asking students to tell us where they sought and received support, and how satisfied they were with this support.

Satisfaction with pastoral care and wellbeing support from the University and Colleges:

- 0% of participants were very satisfied
- 50% of participants stated they were satisfied
- 20% of participants were unsure/indifferent
- 20% of participants were unsatisfied
- 10% of participants were very unsatisfied

This shows that generally speaking, there is a significant enough dissatisfaction with the support systems currently provided from Cambridge

Satisfaction with University/college/CUSU support on issues related to race:

- 0% of participants were very satisfied
- 10% of participants stated they were satisfied
- 50% of participants were unsure/indifferent
- 30% of participants were unsatisfied
- 10% of participants were very unsatisfied

This shows that generally speaking, more students are indifferent and unsatisfied with the way the University reacts to issues relating to race in particular

Would an Academic Advisory Hub be useful for students:

- 40% of survey respondents think it would be useful
- 33% of participants think it could potentially be useful

We conclude that in general, the response is positive. Some supportive comment include:

- *“Creates a network of both black undergraduates and post-graduates which would provide a value resource for everyone. Also by seeing black post-grads would provide us with a vision of where we could be.”*
- *“Yes - having a space we can turn to specifically for us would be a safe haven and would save us a lot of emotional turmoil trying to find people who will fight for us”*
- *“It would allow Black students, as a distinct minority here in Cambridge, to have a safe space where support (pastorally/academically) can be given in times of need outside of other current College/University support systems*

Of the respondents who did not respond positively to the proposal, we identified that there was some apprehension that a specifically Black resource would attract hostility from other students:

- *“it sounds like an amazing idea theoretically but I’m apprehensive of how this would sort of segregate black students from the rest of the student body”*
- *“it would be likely to get a hostile response from certain white students which would potentially negatively affect us even more”*

Would an Academic Advisory Hub be useful for staff:

- 50% of participants think it would be useful
- 21% of participants think it could potentially be useful
- 0% of participants think it wouldn’t be useful

Slightly more respondents found a value in the Advisory Hub for staff than for students:

- *“Staff may be able to handle things related to Black students a lot better which will make our experiences far more comfortable”*
- *“People from different departments who may not otherwise interact with each other, now have the opportunity to do so.”*
- *“This would be particularly useful for Black staff for the same reasons as for students but also for many non-Black staff, where they can be educated about how to best support Black students. It also allows for connections to be made between Black students and staff, which will provide more opportunity for Black students.”*
- *“I think such a hub would potential be more useful for Careers and professional development than academics”*

We conclude that students are keen for staff to access resources, training and professional development that would enable them to better support their Black students. In this way, the Advisory Hub would help Black students by providing staff with opportunities to support students, across disciplines and across the University, in both Colleges and Faculties, and in professional services units, like Counselling.

As a final note, at the 24 February Forum for the APP PAR group, we presented our proposal for an Advisory Hub to support Black students and staff. Student co-researchers as well as invited senior staff from across the collegiate University provided feedback, some of which is collated below:

- *“The fragmented nature of Cambridge is an issue for black students – this makes the Hub really important”*
- *Online hub to start is pragmatic – physical hub would be difficult to have permanently but maybe weekly or monthly? “*
- *“Pointing out the impact that negative responses to initiatives for black students could have (e.g. hostility) is really important – thank you”*
- *“Good luck – I hope you get the hub running.”*

7. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes.

The main outcomes we identified is that Black students are currently more likely to gravitate towards outside support for their wellbeing or academic performance, than to the current University services, relying particularly on friend and family networks. This suggests that there has to be some form of modification when it comes to the systems in place to ensure that Black students are more comfortable using them if they need to.

The dissatisfaction that student expressed in relation to the University services is also a red flag that needs to be addressed. In term of the Advisory Hub, the apprehension about hostility from white students is also a concern, and shows that extra sensitivity has to be taken with this project. The same way that student representatives from the BME Campaign and the ACS were consulted for this broader APP PAR project is the same way that it would be beneficial for Black students to be involved in the building and maintaining of the Advisory Hub. This will mean resources and care that the students will not be overburdened. The same is true for staff engagement with the building of an Advisory Hub. The lack of representation of Black people here must be taken into account, and they must be consulted in order to come to solutions. While there are challenges in developing and maintaining a BAME staff network across the collegiate university, with the burden falling on BAME staff to advise both students and other staff members, a paid coordinating role in the Advisory Hub, for at least one staff member, would lessen this burden.

Whilst numbers of Black students are still small in this University, the level of enthusiasm in response to our project is a great starting point for working towards an Advisory Hub. The Black experience is not homogeneous but having a place where unconscious bias and racism and can be challenged and people can come for support is vital. The Hub would be a way to bring together varying opinions and challenge this issue which is ultimately never going to have a quick fix. It would also provide a coordinating centre for some of the other related initiatives to address the Black British students' attainment gap at Cambridge.

8. RECOMMENDED ACTION

1. That an online Black Student and Staff Advisory Hub be resourced and developed
This is a short term aim, that will meant the collation of information about existing services and events that support Black students could be located in one place.
2. That a physical space in Cambridge be dedicated to a Black Student and Staff Advisory Hub
This is a long term aim, that there would be a place for face-to-face interactions and support by people trained in issues that impact black British students, including pastoral, academic and financial. It would not necessarily have to be open permanently, but perhaps once a week. It should have staff with dedicated workload, rather than relying on volunteers.