

Project 4: Mentoring

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	✓
	Disability/Mental Health	
Topic <i>The broad educational point that impacts student performance/ attainment gaps</i>	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	✓
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
Specific research question	To what extent are Black British students adequately supported by mentors or mentoring networks at Cambridge?	
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2. Executive summary:
<p>The aim of this research project was to investigate whether Black British students in Cambridge are provided with adequate academic mentors, and whether mentors were considered by students to be a useful educational strategy to narrow the attainment gap. We conducted interviews with our co-researchers and disseminated a survey to members of the Cambridge African and Caribbean Society asking about the formal and informal mentoring currently experienced by other Black British students, and their perceptions of their value in Cambridge, where there were a range of other non-Black student specific support and mentoring schemes, such as College ‘families’. We found that most Black students in our sample had not been mentored by another Black student, nor had engaged as a mentor themselves, though the majority recognised that Black student-student mentoring could be very valuable for a range of academic, peer support and social reasons. However, there were some concerns about the undue burden this mentoring put on students. Regarding staff-student mentoring, students believed that staff generally were supportive but Faculties were not always equipped to deal with the specific academic or welfare needs of Black students, which could have an impact on their academic performance, for instance where students were not supported to follow their research interests, particularly when these interests touched on topics related to race.</p>

3. Rationale:

We decided to pursue this project due to a comment which came up frequently in the co-researcher forums in the discussions about the reasons for the attainment gap for Black British students, and was also common in conversations amongst students outside of this project: that Black students often feel isolated in their Faculties or Colleges and do not feel that they have adequate academic mentors and role models to encourage them in their studies.

This led us to consider whether Black students believed that they received adequate academic guidance from staff members such as their DOSs, supervisors and lecturers in the first place - and if they did not, who else these students might turn to for support.

The research focus was also inspired by the project team noticing a tendency of Black students acting as academic mentors for each other, in schemes such as the one facilitated by relevant student societies that offer newer students the opportunity to be paired with a more senior student. We wanted to interrogate the upsides and limitations of this practice.

Our results indicate that, whilst there was a general agreement from our respondents that there is a need for mentoring schemes that support the specific needs of Black British students, they have had diverse experiences of the types of academic support already available to Cambridge students. We interpreted this as meaning that different Faculties and Colleges support Black students with varying levels of success and that, therefore, more targeted research needs to be done within subjects/disciplines to understand what kind of support works best, or how support might be improved in ways that better support the academic and welfare needs of Black students in Cambridge.

Students have filled in the gaps in the available support system by participating in informal mentoring activities. These peer support schemes are valuable – but the project team noted that this informal work can be a burden on other students. For this reason, they believe that a formalised and resourced mentoring scheme for Black students by staff would take some of the burden of mentoring off students themselves by making more strategic use of the existing Race and Equality Champion networks across the university and within Schools, and extend these to offer targeted support to Black students. We feel that this will be a practical way of narrowing the attainment gap and improving the educational experience of Black students.

4. Existing evidence

We were not able to access research that explicitly addressed the topic of academic mentoring and Black British students, particularly by staff members. The literature we did find was from the United States, which tends to emphasise that students who have mentors found that they had a significant impact on both their confidence and in their academic performance. For example, Kendricks, Nedunuri, and Arment (2013) report on a programme which included various activities relating to personal and professional development for BAME scholars, out of all these activities the research found that “each year mentoring was consistently rated as having the largest impact on their academic performance” (p.38). Furthermore, Fries-Britt and Snider (2015) argue that “connections to

campus agents like faculty and staff are the strongest predictors of success among college students in general” (see also Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and they explore the barriers minority ethnic students may experience in predominantly white institutions and argue “Mentoring can be an effective strategy to combat many of these challenges” (p.3).

In the UK higher education sector we found that there is some precedent for academic mentoring schemes at other institutions in response to identified attainment gaps for BAME students.

Student academic mentoring programmes

- The University of Hertfordshire supports a central peer mentoring programme: <https://www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/outreach-and-widening-participation/mentoring>. In addition, it has a well-developed student-staff partnership programme with a focus on narrowing the attainment gaps for BAME students by supporting the BAME Student Advocate Programme. This programme involves 4 student partners working with central university units, as well as school based student ‘advocates’. The student advocates are compensated for the time and are given development training in unconscious bias, public speaking, working in committees and curriculum critiquing. In this way, the student advocates’ roles moved from “representation to advocacy”.
- SOAS University of London developed a number of educational interventions in response to the publication of the report *Degrees of racism: A qualitative investigation into ethnicity attainment gaps at SOAS* (SOAS, 2016). One of these interventions involved the development of a BAME mentoring programme in which staff from BAME backgrounds mentor students from BAME backgrounds

Staff academic mentoring programmes

- The University of Portsmouth has showcased their ‘personal tutors’ programmes at recent *Closing the BAME the Attainment Gap conferences* sponsored by Universities UK and Advance HE (2019 and 2020). This Raising Awareness and Aspiration project was developed in partnership with the University of Sheffield and King’s College London and involved the development of a personal tutoring platform which enables all personal tutors to connect with their personal tutees, with a specific focus on personally welcoming all BAME students, as well as mentoring of tutors by Senior Tutors about the attainment gap issues in different courses of study.

Overall, however, we found it difficult to find examples and research that compared the differences in value of the staff-student and student-student academic mentoring schemes in the UK, which became the focus of our research project. The difficulty we experienced in finding examples of mentoring schemes that would be suitable in a Cambridge context, and which would address the needs of Black British students in particular, made our research even more important to us.

References

- Universities UK (2019) Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Attainment at UK Universities <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-closing-the-gap.pdf>
- Fries-Britt, S., & Snider, J. (2015). Mentoring outside the line: The importance of authenticity, transparency, and vulnerability in effective mentoring relationships. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2015(171), 3-11.

- Kendrick, K., Nedunuri, K. V., & Arment, A. R. (2013). Minority student perceptions of the impact of mentoring to enhance academic performance in STEM disciplines. *Journal of STEM Education: Innovations and Research*, 14(2).
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research (Vol. 2)*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- SOAS (2016) *Degrees of racism: A qualitative investigation into ethnicity attainment gaps at SOAS* <https://soasunion.org/liberation/attainmentgaps/>

5. Generation of evidence

We started the project with a group discussion about our (and our co-researchers') experience of Black student-student mentoring schemes, and of the variety of existing Cambridge staff-student mentoring available in Colleges and Faculties. Following these discussions we narrowed down the focus of the project and devised a series of questions to be circulated via an online survey to the black student community in Cambridge. We also decided to follow up with some more in-depth interviews with volunteer student co-researchers using the same questions used in the survey, but with more opportunity for depth and reflection.

- Survey: overall there were 36 respondents to the survey.
- Interviews: 6 interviews were carried out with fellow student co-researchers

The questions were centred around 2 central themes:

1. Student-student mentoring between Black students: the experience of mentoring from other students and what students believed were the strengths and limitations of the practice
2. Staff-student academic mentoring: whether students felt supported in their Faculties by academic staff and whether or not students believed that having an academic staff trained in providing the needs for black students could have a positive impact.

6. Small project research findings

1. Student-student mentoring between Black students

Overall, we found that majority of student respondents had not received mentoring from another Black student, nor been a mentor. However, the majority of respondents also recognised that having mentorship networks amongst Black students was or would be useful. Some comments explained their recognition of the value of Black student peer mentoring:

- *"This because when white people are able to have access to academic mentorship from supervisors and people who have years of experience in the field, it naturally puts black people as having a disadvantage. Other students are in a similar boat and may not fully*

grasp concepts or have the ability of hindsight which can help develop their fellow black students”

- *“Yea, non-BME students often aren't aware of the race-related struggles that black students have to incur on a daily basis, on top of the stresses of Tripos and generally being at Cambridge.”*

A number of hesitations were noted to the student-student or peer mentoring activities amongst Black students:

- *“There might be very few students who have studied your subject”*
- *“Black students tend to prefer to stay around other ethnic students to help them settle in and feel welcomed here in Cambridge. However, due to the very small proportion of these students, it is likely to be more difficult for Black students to get guidance from other students, particularly those who are also Black”*

Some respondents noted the time burden on students to contribute: :

- *“It's not necessarily a bad thing, but it takes time away from what we should be getting as part of the course. We should be able to have content tailored to our interests and the fact we must depend on someone else is unfair and is more time consuming for us!*
- *“Unfairly places the burden on students and allows faculties to elide responsibility of making the content more objectively accessible”*
- *“We all have existing pressures and time constraints. Mentoring someone consistently on top of this (as well as e mentoring many of us give to year 12/13 students) would be a lot”*
- *“ I don't think it's fair that we the students have to take on all these responsibilities and burdens for free”*

There was a call for more support from the University to train or otherwise resource the currently informal network of Black student peer mentoring:

- *“It wouldn't be fair on the mentor to feel like whether or not they continue to provide support will affect how their mentees do, as the mentor should be supported by the University, and the mentees should feel able to turn to alternative formal forms of support if the mentor is no longer willing or able to continue providing academic mentorship”*
- *“There is no official structure for such a programme so it's hard to know where to help and how much. Black students are themselves going through a lot and mentoring someone else when you, yourself are having a hard time is a lot to take on. Especially since these black students haven't been given any training to support and mentor another student.”*

2. Staff-student academic mentoring for Black students

The good news was that 78% of Black student respondents to the survey felt that they are adequately supported by staff at Cambridge. However, majority of students (69%) were either unsure (31.58%) or disagreed with (36.84%) the statement that their Faculty was equipped to accommodate the academic needs of Black students. Thus, while staff are generally supportive, when it comes to meeting the specific needs of black students, there is less or inconsistent support. This is concerning in light of the black attainment gap.

Some students who felt as if they'd had no staff academic mentoring felt that they had not been able to always pursue their academic interests:

- *“Currently, every paper that I take is compulsory so I have not yet been readily given the option to pursue my academic interests. In spite of this, I would have found it helpful to have an academic mentor to show me the possibilities within the subjects that I find difficult or uninteresting. I would have liked to speak to someone who could give me perspective in order to persevere in the topics that I don't enjoy but must take. This is especially important as there are very few people in the years above who even take my subject”*
- *“I don't have [access to a mentor], so there's little guidance or focus on the things I find interesting and how to access those”*
- *“They could help me overcome my insecurities about tackling predominantly white narratives and ways of thinking and refine my own methods of understanding and analysing the work”*

Others found themselves unable to do dissertation topics pertaining to race, for example:

- *“My interests are often challenged with hostility which is a shame. But I'm fortunate enough to have a DoS who fights my corner and have had some supervisors who are the same”*
- *“I came in to university with an interest in exploring race in the law and it's not something I have been able to discuss at all so far. I'd like to do my dissertation on this topic but I don't know any supervisors or faculty members who can steer me in the right direction”*

Role-modelling and shared experiences

Responses placed emphasis in terms of an individual who could understand experiences and difficulties:

- *“You do not know what you are missing if you have never had it. However, by not having a mentor, it makes it harder for me to envision myself as an academic and I don't see myself becoming one, particularly at Cambridge. Not being able to see people who look like me does discourage me and creates the environment that I am not welcome or even have a place here. So having a mentor who just actually understands the difficulties would be extremely helpful”.*
- *“I would just have restored faith in academia and an extra push from someone who is in the field. It would reassure me that I have a place here”.*
- *“It would be nice to speak to someone who can validate the experience of feeling socially isolated at times and who can see the possible link between that experience and being Black British*
- *“It would be nice to speak to someone who can validate the experience of feeling socially isolated at times and who can see the possible link between that experience and being Black British”.*
- *“I feel that having support from someone who understands your background would be more beneficial. Especially in later years when I would have the chance to study politics in a broader sense”.*

Concerns about student-deficit approaches

A few respondents were concerned about the specificity of the support for Black students, and of the impression this might give:

- *“There may not always be this sort of structure especially when you get to the workplace for example so the independence element may not be developed. It also can promote the mentality of not being able to support yourself as a black student without outside help”*

There were varying comments about whether the support should be academic or welfare related, and if it was academic, whether it would only be valuable if it was discipline specific:

- *“On the academic side, I don't particularly see the value in having mentors. But that is mainly because I am not entirely aware of the differing needs of Black British students in an academic sense. Outside of academics, there is definitely need for tutors or mentors specialised in this area, but I'm not convinced that the academic needs and facilities differ based on the race of the individual”*
- *“In STEM, the benefit would be more pastoral than academic”*
- *“I think this would be beneficial only if there was one catered to each subject therefore they could understand the academic needs of that particular subject”*

In summary, despite some concerns about how mentoring schemes that targeted Black students would be resourced or perceived, there seemed to be general agreement with the sentiment expressed by one respondent:

- *“This would be extremely useful in helping to settle in new Black students with Cambridge work and the lifestyle here. Also, it would help current Black students feel more confident about their academic performance and feel like we have the ability to be level with non-Black students”*

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

Our findings indicated a variety of experience of mentoring amongst the Black student population at Cambridge. This suggests some inconsistencies amongst Faculties and Colleges in supporting Black students, and also that Black students have different needs that may be discipline specific. This indicates a need for further research with a larger sample, headed by individual Faculties, into whether their Black student cohort are supported in their academic interests, or are provided with appropriate academic support.

Generally, there was a widespread recognition of the value of more opportunities staff-student mentoring being provided for Black students (preferably discipline-specific).

Despite the perceived value of informal Black student-student mentoring, our results suggested that there is a need to take the burden of mentoring off students and to make more use of the Equality and Diversity Unit's network of Race Champions and School Equality Advocates to have more of a focus on addressing the needs of Black students and further investigating the reasons for the attainment gaps, as well as developing appropriate discipline-specific educational interventions.

8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. That the current Black student-student mentoring schemes coordinated by student societies be provided with resourcing, professional training and development opportunities for Black student mentors
2. That the University further develop the existing network of Race and Equality Champions or BAME staff to include training and guidance on issues relating to the Black attainment gaps and to encourage and support staff academic mentors of Black students across the collegiate University
3. That Schools and/or Faculties build on the existing School Equality Network (that currently focuses on gender) to nominate, resource and train staff to mentor Black students in order to better meet their discipline-specific academic and pastoral needs