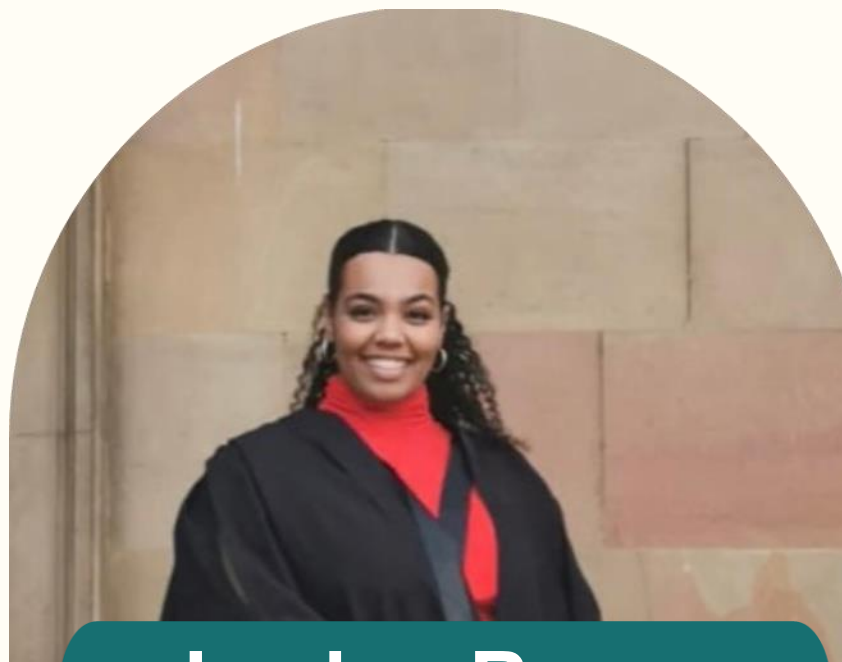




“What will you do with my voice?”

Reflecting on my experiences
of student engagement

Presentation by Jordan Byrne

**Jordan Byrne**

Research Assistant in Systemic Risks

Student Support (Residence) at a private UK HEI

Who am I?

Professional Experience

5+ years providing student support across all stages of the student lifecycle in HE (UK), along with additional experience working with students from the US

Graduate Taught Student at the University of Cambridge

- Programme: MPhil Education (Knowledge, Power, Politics)
- Topic: Black students placemaking experiences at 'elite' HEI's

A leaning towards interdisciplinarity

- BAsSc in Arts and Sciences (Cultures) from University College London
- UG Dissertation: *Sense of Belonging as an Approach to Closing the Black-White Awarding Gap*

Experiences (or intersections)

- First Gen Student
- Black Heritage (specifically Caribbean, 'Windrush' descended)
- Mature student (on entry to UG) with a non-traditional qualification

My experiences of evaluation

01

Prior to the University of Cambridge:

- Focus Groups
- Surveys
- Student-led research projects

02

2022 - Cycle 4 of the APP PAR Project

- Action Research
- Evaluation Survey

03

As a Graduate Researcher:

- Semi-structured Interviews
- Informal Conversations

04

Other Engagement Activities:

- Focus Groups
 - In College
 - Regulatory Bodies
- Engagement with Steering Groups
- Surveys

My experiences

As an object of evaluative research

01
Semi-mandatory: course and college evaluations, University surveys (NSS, Student Barometer, Athena Swan etc.)

02
Self-selecting: engagement with other researchers' studies as participant

As a partner in evaluative research

Formal: Participatory action research (APP PAR Project Cycle 4), Invited engagement with committees & working groups

Informal: Conversations with senior staff about direction of travel

As a researcher

Formal: designed and conducted my own research study about WP and HE (qualitative: reflective and ethnographic)

Informal: ongoing critical reflection of evaluative exercises using students

Harnessing Student Voice

Drawing from the TASO report on *Approaches to addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap* (Andrews et al., 2023):

- Harnessing the student voice is one of the 16 types of approaches to addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap
- It is defined as seeking out and using student feedback in organisational discussions and/or decisions
- It is not a common approach (N = <13 of those surveyed) despite universities needing to better understand their students
- When using this approach:
 - Consider how student voices are sought
 - Ensure students are involved in development and implementation
- Consider ethical aspects: the potential for harm (re-living or tokenism), adequacy of debrief support (beyond a checkbox exercise), expectation management (be realistic about the impact of the research)



Barriers and Burdens

- Students face the burden of representing the views of a group
- Some engage in evaluation activities as a form of activism
- There is a potential for the student voice to be distorted in analysis
- Findings are often used to support university policies and activities

Drawing from '*Transformative Approaches to Student Voice*' by Michael Fielding (2004). It is important to remember that:

- Research can undermine rather than enhance when employed to confirm already established ideas and beliefs
- Participants might speak on behalf of others (i.e., student officers speaking on behalf of students) giving way to inaccuracies in findings
- Participants experiences can be intersectional. This should be accounted for when using their views to represent just one part of their identity
- The dialogical nature of co-research requires significant student investment which is often not accounted for in remuneration or research credit

Informal Peer Interview *

Discussion with my student peer about their experiences of institutional student engagement in evaluative research:

“It just makes me feel uncomfortable”

“When I gave feedback, the researcher decided which part of my account was most important to suit their own agenda”

“Using my struggle for their gain”

“Win a gift card? I guess they might win the truth”

“I feel like I have to play down my experiences and be polite”

“I prefer helping student researchers as they genuinely want to know”

** Note that this interview with a peer was conducted to sense-check my own reflections on student engagement with evaluative research in preparation for this presentation and not ethically reviewed!*

Feedback on our engagement

When I asked the interviewee why they engaged with me despite expressing a reluctance to participate in student engagement activities at their institution, they said:

- “You care”
- “You’re the same ethnicity as me”
- “You’re actually asking for decent reasons”
- “You have no agenda that will harm me or the spaces that I occupy”
- “You are able to identify me correctly” (in this case, as Mixed-Black)

How **I** evaluate your evaluation activities

Objectives (?)

What are the aims and objectives of the research? (implicit and explicit)

What are the backgrounds of the researchers?

Who is running the research?

Does it seem to be reactive or is it responsive? (performative)

Wider Context(?)

Are there other activities that this research will support?

Is there an acknowledgement wider socio-historic context that this research is situated?

Is it for regulatory compliance or is it of genuine importance for the institution?

Benefits(?)

Are students seen as valuable co-creators in the process of change of which the research supports?

Do students get acknowledged for their participation, where possible compensated for their time?

Are they informed of their impact/next steps?

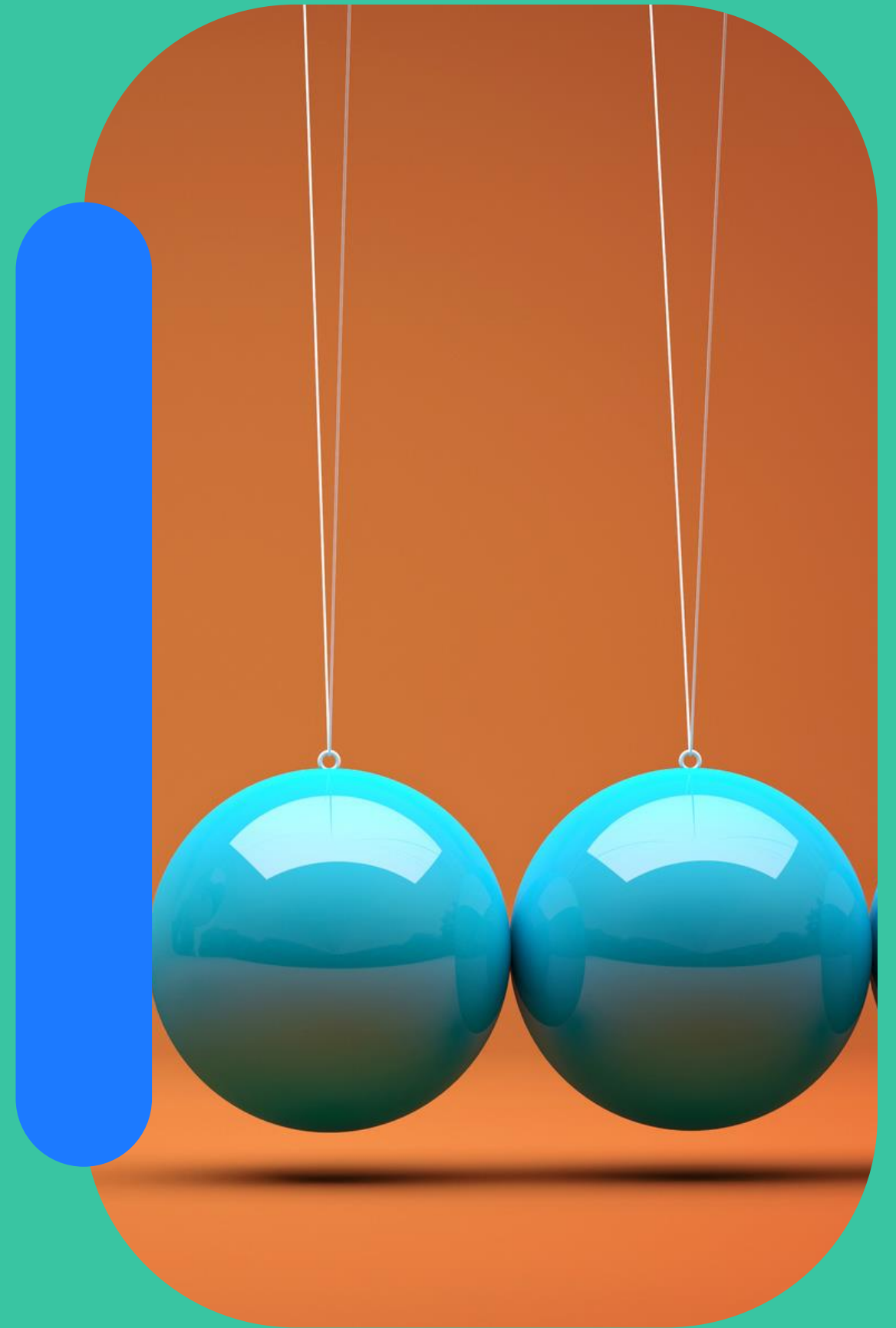
Other Reflections

Quantitative

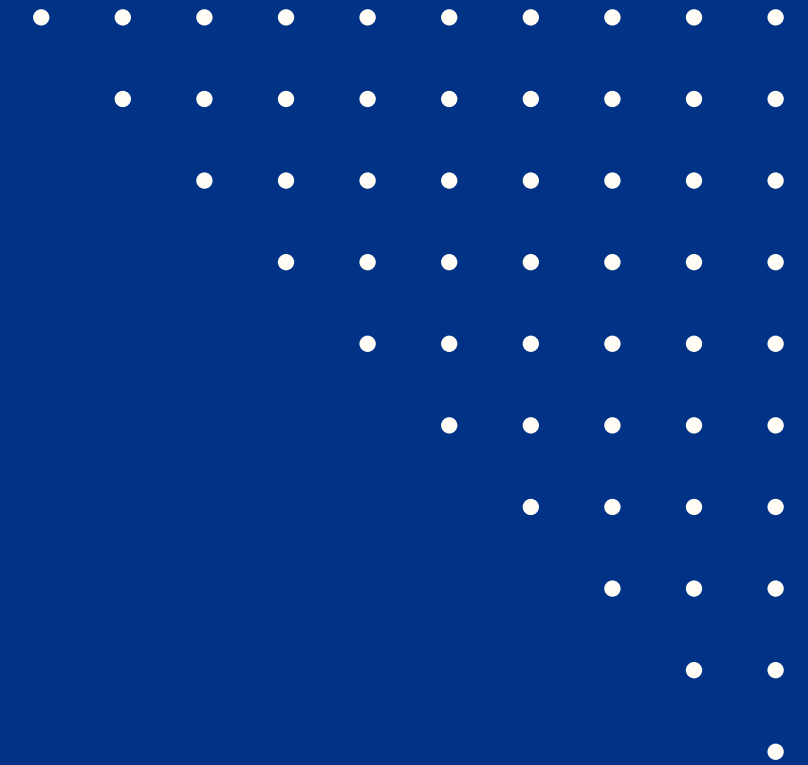
- Are the categories informed by culturally inclusive research or do they serve to reproduce inequity?
 - Example: (Dis)aggregation of ethnic groups to suit agendas
- Is this collection for regulatory purposes? I.e., will it only be used for calculating institutional impact + ROI or is it for real impact?

Qualitative

- Are students' voices being used to supplement already decided institutional narratives?
- How do institutions ensure that 'heavy' topics are appropriately compensated for/supported/acknowledged during research?



Thank You!



This presentation was created as part of a talk that highlighted various problems regarding engaging students in evaluation activities for the 'Evaluating Access & Participation Plans: Forum' in October 2023 at the University of Cambridge. These slides were updated in April 2024.

Want to get in touch?

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References:

Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities, *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295-311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000195236>

Andrews, S., Stephenson, J., Adefila, A., Cuthbert, K., Lee, S., Dodd, V., & Jones-Devitt., S. (2013). *Approaches to addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap*. Retrieved October 10, 2023, from <https://cdn.taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Approaches-to-addressing-the-ethnicity-degree-awarding-gap.pdf>