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Critical reflections on the racialised hierarchies of an ethnically diverse staff-student scholarship project team

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Abstract

This case study article reports on the reflections of the authors who were part of a staff-student collaborative scholarship project investigating the learning experiences of Black distance-learning students. Although there is a growing body of research on the nature, experiences, power dynamics and benefits of staff-student collaborations in higher education contexts, there is much less discussion about how wider racialised hierarchies can influence such collaborations. The project discussed in this article consisted of an ethnically diverse team – including the authors of this piece who are a white male academic staff member and a female PhD student from a Black ethnic background. This case study offers a critically reflective account of the racialised hierarchy inherently present within our relationship. We briefly consider the ways in which the collaborative project was framed by potentially exploitative racialised hierarchies including the privileging of white staff members, before considering how we tried to mitigate these hierarchies by finding ways to involve and empower the ethnic minority student members of the team. These reflections might help those who are embarking upon ethnically diverse staff-student collaborations in higher education to ensure that ethnic minority students feel empowered and to help facilitate their role in promoting institutional change and disrupting exclusionary practice.

Keywords: staff-student collaboration; student-led research; empowerment; exploitation; Black students; racialised hierarchies.

Introduction

Collaborations between staff and students in higher education settings are becoming increasingly common, often part of a broader move to incorporate student representation into institutional decision making (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). This 'student voice' can range from consultation (such as student feedback on a module) to student-led projects and interventions (Matthews and Dollinger, 2022). There is a longer history of formal research collaborations between PhD students and their staff supervisors. Less common are collaborations that involve students – particularly undergraduates – in research and scholarship into teaching and learning (Allin, 2014), including those that examine students' learning experiences and the wider support and pastoral care students receive.

It is recognised that staff-student collaborations have the potential to offer useful skill development opportunities (Dickerson et al., 2016) and deeper insights into research questions concerned with student experiences (Brown, 2019). They have also been shown to have the potential to empower, involve and give a voice to under-represented and minoritised students within the institutions they are part of (Islam and Valente, 2021). That said, there is evidence that students who put themselves forward for such collaborations tend to be 'the usual suspects' from 'privileged social locations and identities who have the prior confidence or networks to self-select or be selected for involvement' (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021, p.229).

This lack of diversity mirrors a much wider experience of exclusion faced by many minoritised students in higher education. For example, there is a persistent, sector-wide awarding gap between white students and their ethnic minority peers, particularly those with Black heritage, including in distance-learning HE settings (Advance HE, 2021). Research shows that Black students are awarded lower grade degree classifications (Connor et al., 2004; Smith, 2017; McDuff et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020) and are more likely to leave programmes before their completion (e.g. Richardson, 2015; Ross et al., 2018; Tight, 2020). Disparities extend to distance-learning HE settings, as research conducted by Richardson (2012) notes an awarding gap in distance learning amongst ethnic minority students. Nguyen et al. (2020) analysed online learning analytics to discover that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students were less likely to complete, pass

or gain an excellent grade in comparison to white students, despite appearing to spend between 4-12% *more* time studying.

In light of these trends and increasing requirements from regulatory bodies to address awarding gaps between student populations, there has been renewed interest in attempts to scrutinise the learning experiences of Black students in higher education (HE) institutions (e.g. Osbourne et al., 2021). Research into the causes of the ethnic awarding gap has exposed deeply rooted institutional, structural and cultural racialised inequalities in HE in the UK (see, for example, Arday and Mirza, 2018). There is also increasing recognition, in this body of work, of the intersectional nature of inequalities related to higher education student experiences (Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano et al., 2002) and staff-student collaborations (Mercer-Mapstone, 2020), which recognises the complex interplay of factors including not only ethnicity, but also gender, disability, social class, age and other common socially significant categories.

Set within this institutional context, it is perhaps then not a surprise that staff-student collaborations tend to exclude ethnic minority students and can reinforce the elitist nature of higher education (Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2020). We might also assume that staff-student collaborations led by white staff that do involve ethnic minority students could be susceptible to being framed by the long-standing racialised hierarchies that exist in higher education and wider society (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021).

This case study article reports on the joint reflections of the authors on a staff-student collaborative project exploring the distance learning experiences of Black students. Jim is a white, male academic staff member (and was project lead), while Shannon is a female PhD student from a Black ethnic background (and was a student-researcher on the project). These reflections focus specifically on the racialised hierarchies present within their collaborative project. Although we recognise the intersectional nature of power hierarchies as noted earlier (particularly, in our case, gender relations), given the constraints placed on this short case study article, we have chosen to limit our reflections to issues of race and ethnicity to enable a deeper examination of this one particular nexus. We offer a critically reflective account of our collaboration with a particular focus on the racialised power dynamics inherently present within the project team. A short overview of

the staff-student project under examination is provided, outlining the practicalities involved in setting up and then undertaking the project. We then move on to offer some critical reflections on our experiences of collaborating on the project, noting particularly the importance of establishing mitigations to disrupt the racialised hierarchies that can frame such relationships. This involves a discussion of the hierarchical nature of our collaboration and how this created the possibility of exploitation – whether deliberately or unintentionally – and whether it was immediately felt or never recognised by students. Consideration here is paid to the racialised nature of the relationship and how this contributed to the power dynamic between us. We then explore how the project attempted to mitigate these exploitative possibilities and what we collectively did to try to ensure the students were empowered through the experience.

Project overview – a staff-student exploration of Black students' learning experiences in distance learning

Our institution has an established reputation for promoting social justice through open access to distance-learning education. In addition, it is often assumed that distance learning might promote a more equitable learning experience for minoritised students compared to 'brick' universities (i.e. where the predominant form of interaction between students and staff is in person and takes place on a physical campus). Evidence suggests, however, that persistent challenges associated with ensuring equitable outcomes for all students remain, while long-standing institutionalised practices that have led to discrimination against some student groups need addressing. Our project was part of an increasing body of institutional scholarship exploring issues associated with equality, diversity and inclusion, which has become a strategic priority. The university has an Access and Participation Plan (APP) as a condition of registration with the Office for Students (the regulatory body overseeing higher education in England) which contains a number of targets in relation to equitable student outcomes, including reducing the awarding gap between black and white students achieving a 'good' module pass (defined as receiving the equivalent of a first or upper-second class level) from 31.1% (2020/21) to 11.1% by 2024/25.

While there is an increasing amount of statistical data available on such awarding gaps, as an institution we continue to know very little about the actual learning experiences of Black students. The purpose of the project was therefore to create a student-led investigation to elicit a detailed, rich account of Black students' learning experiences, focusing on modules associated with one particular degree programme. The project team consisted of six staff members and two students – the latter will be referred to hereafter as 'student-researchers'. Of the staff team, there was one project lead and three core members, with two additional staff members taking a more distant role as critical friends to the project – one coming from a Black ethnic background with all others being white. The decision to adopt a staff-student collaborative approach to investigate the topic was largely due to the project lead, Jim, having previous experience conducting similar student-led projects at a 'brick' university and seeing the benefits of students being involved in research of this kind. In conducting these previous collaborative studies, Jim had drawn upon the principles of action research, participatory research and a wider post-colonialist theoretical standpoint that recognises the impact of historical ideas of 'race' and racism on individuals, interpersonal relationships and wider social structures (Hickling-Hudson et al., 2004) – all of which have informed the approach taken in the project discussed in this case study.

Once the staff team was assembled, internal funding was secured to appoint two student-researchers to the team. This funding enabled a fee to be attached to the student-researcher role. The fee paid was in line with existing rates for staff 'consultants' and was an important element of the project design, as will be discussed later. It is noted that student roles that are unpaid invariably privilege those in comfortable financial positions and can exclude large sections of the student body from the opportunity (Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2020).

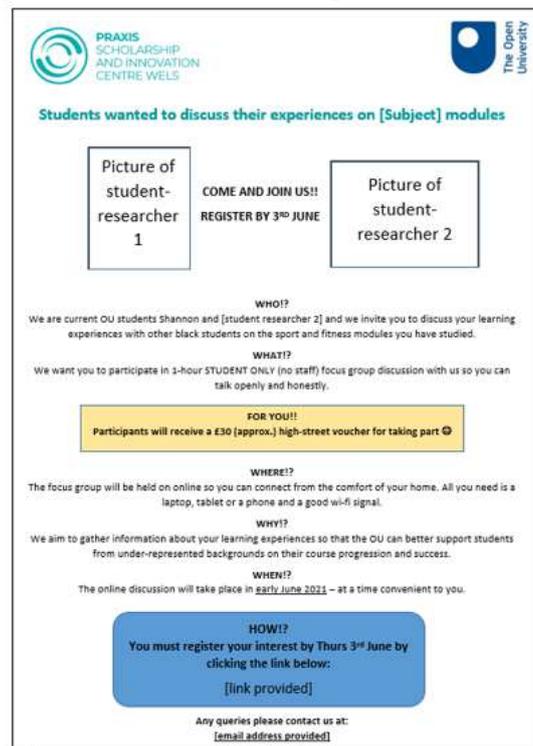
We co-created an expression of interest that was advertised via internal communication methods, including general emails, online notice boards and notifications on module sites, and we encouraged tutors to share information with their student groups. The requirements included a short statement showing how they met the devised selection criteria, which included lived experience of the impact of race and racism in higher education settings. The aim was to recruit students who could lead the data collection in a student-only space, and we felt students with such lived experience could help to create a

‘safe place’ for open discussions related to the learning experiences of students from Black ethnic backgrounds.

Following a competitive shortlisting process, an undergraduate student taking the same degree programme as the target participants and a postgraduate PhD researcher from a different faculty were recruited. It was felt that having two students on the team would reduce feelings of isolation and intimidation, while having a postgraduate work alongside an undergraduate might lead to opportunities for informal peer mentoring. Focus groups with Black students were then undertaken to find out more about their learning experiences, specifically related to their relationship with their tutor, other students and their connection to the module materials.

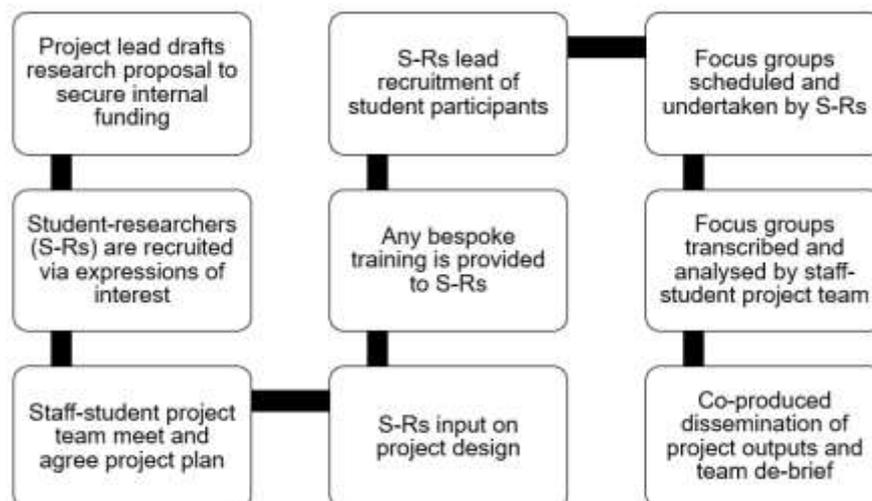
The target student sample – students who had disclosed having a Black ethnic background and having studied an OU module on the specific degree programme within the last year (approximately 90 students, around 3% of total cohort) – were contacted through an email message. The student researchers took a central role in this recruitment process, working with the team to design the email invitation and flyer (Figure 1) and also creating a short video of themselves ‘selling’ the project to potential participants.

Figure 1: Co-created recruitment flyer for student participants.



Two focus groups took place online in June 2021, containing three and four participants respectively (7 participants in total). The focus groups lasted around one and a half to two hours long and were facilitated by the student-researchers with no staff present. Transcriptions of the focus group conversations were generated by a third-party transcription company to enable some members of the research team – one of the student researchers and two staff members – to conduct thematic analysis on the transcripts produced. Each team member initially undertook their own individual analysis independently of each other, followed by a meeting to share findings and finalise and agree upon the core themes that emerged from the data. A summary of the overall process followed can be found in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Stages of the staff-student collaborative project.



Critical reflections on racialised hierarchies in staff-student projects

Having briefly outlined the project, we move on to offer some reflections on our personal experiences of working together – from the position of staff project lead, Jim, and student-researcher, Shannon. These reflections have been drawn from numerous informal conversations between us – both during and after the project. We have taken the agreed approach of open and honest dialogue with a willingness to challenge, be challenged and learn from each other’s experience. This reflective approach has been broadly informed by Gannon’s thesis of ‘radical hope’ (2020), which leans heavily on the critical work of Paulo Friere (1996) in considering the transformative potential of teaching and learning. Gannon

notes that adopting a critically reflective practice can pave the way towards 'fundamental, root-level transformation...in which a better future takes shape out of our...refusal to abide by the limitations of the present' (2020, p.5). The reflections that follow represent an iterative, collaborative writing process of 'write-edit-re-draft' and as such should be read as co-created reflections rather than individually written excerpts.

A hierarchy between us existed even before we began working together, which was outside our own control. By their very nature, student and staff relations contain an imbalance of power and a presumed hierarchy drawn from the traditional binary of student/teacher and didactic learning. There are also long-standing social hierarchies that exist across gendered and racialised lines which also shaped the initial power dynamic between us. As project lead, Jim also formally recruited Shannon onto the team via the aforementioned application process which also created an implicit hierarchy between them before the project began.

For a number of reasons, the nature and design of this project opened up the possibility of students being exploited – with the ultimate beneficiaries being the (predominantly white) staff team. Although there were multiple reasons for Jim to want to bring in students to help undertake the project, one was to ensure the data collection was an exclusively Black student space. In this respect, the student-researchers could be seen to be 'used' to meet an objective of the project which could not be met by the staff members themselves. There was certainly the potential for the student-researchers to feel that their specific lived experiences (which included being subjected to discrimination and exclusion) were being exploited to enable staff to meet their own research aims.

There are also wider ethical questions around who most benefits from a collaboration such as this one. While, as we discuss shortly, the student-researchers felt that they benefitted in multiple ways from taking part in the project, we did openly discuss the fact that it was really Jim, as the project lead, who had the most to obviously gain from it – in terms of potential career progression, professional kudos and taking overall credit for the work. The racialised dynamics of our relationships were at play here too – with the uncomfortable colonialist history of white people claiming achievements, benefits and rewards often

through the result of the labour and exploitation of racialised people being potentially mirrored here.

Similarly, the allocation of tasks could also have been a potential site of exploitation for students; in any project there are more interesting tasks than others, and who gets to do the 'donkey work' can often be informed by these implicit hierarchies. It can be easy for those in power to delegate jobs or tasks they deem not to require particular knowledge or expertise to others to complete. Again, we discussed together how this can be exacerbated by the racialised (and gendered) nature of a collaboration where, as was the case here, a white male is allocating tasks to a Black female.

Finally, the way that a student's time is recompensed also has the potential for exploitation; while staff receive a salary to cover their time and efforts, often students are asked to volunteer or are offered a small gift such as a voucher. We tackled this head on from the start by seeking funding to ensure that students received a fee for their time, following the guidelines for appointing paid consultants within the institution. This was to prove a consistently influential aspect of the project that served to reduce feelings of exploitation among the student-researchers and made them feel valued members of the team.

With these hierarchies in mind, it was important that we recognised and acknowledged the dynamics within our relationship – to be both conscious of them but also to actively find ways to disrupt and mitigate them. We noted that the onus was on the power holder – project lead Jim – to both acknowledge and find ways to reduce feelings of powerlessness and exploitation among the student team members. In this sense, the initial meetings and communication between us were important to set the tone and create trust between team members. Once the student-researchers were recruited, we held a meeting to discuss – at some length – the principles and expectations of the study. We negotiated and then agreed some key expectations for all team members and worked out some practicalities about our working relationship; this included the principle of flexibility to ensure student and staff time could be accommodated equitably wherever possible. Some meetings were held in the evenings, which required flexibility from staff, sometimes during the day when students were able to re-arrange their work schedules.

Students were encouraged to be seen as equal members of the project team, in an attempt to try to disrupt traditional staff-student power hierarchies, and encouraged to always contribute their views. Students were also invited to every meeting and included in all correspondence to try to ensure they had full involvement and were not seen as a separate group to the staff members. Even with this inclusive and flexible approach, it was not always possible for both student-researchers to engage fully with every meeting and activity. The student-researchers were in quite different circumstances; Shannon is a full-time PhD student and is the recipient of a studentship, whereas the undergraduate student-researcher was pursuing a self-funded undergraduate degree while working full-time. This contributed to them having different experiences relating to the depth of involvement and additional time they could commit to the project.

This also played a role in correspondence through email, where Shannon found that she was usually able to respond to emails relating to the project at a faster rate than her student colleague due to his additional work and family commitments. In this respect, considering and adapting to the personal circumstances of the students recruited for a collaborative project appears to be an important factor.

Embedded in the project design was an opportunity for the student-researchers to input on the research question/s and method adopted. We were keen to take a co-creative approach to the project as far as possible. In practice, however, there were a number of limitations that made this difficult. First, in order to secure funding for the project (to facilitate the recruitment of the student-researchers), the staff team were required to scope out the project in advance, meaning that a plan had already been established. When it came to discussing it with the student members of the team, there were limitations on what could actually be amended at that point.

Relatedly, there was inevitably some variation in knowledge, skills and experience among the team members. We tried to adopt an approach in which all team members brought their own expertise in different areas – we could learn from each other, rather than just the staff team ‘developing’ the students. Although Shannon had completed research methods training during her undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, the second student researcher had no substantive previous studies related to research methods. In this

respect, it was perhaps unrealistic to expect students with limited research experience to be able to contribute fully to discussions around research design, questions and methodological approach. It became apparent that the student-researchers were much better placed to meaningfully input on more practical issues such as where and how to recruit participants while also helping to shape the focus group schedule and style.

In light of this, it was agreed that some additional support to prepare to facilitate a focus group would be useful. As a result, one of the staff team with particular expertise in this area offered some informal training to the student-researchers. This took the form of a bespoke informal workshop on focus group methods, which was felt to be more appropriate than asking students to undertake readings or watching videos to learn about the method independently. This approach benefitted from Shannon's prior background in qualitative research training. Without this prior experience it may have been necessary to extend this skills support with additional resources such as further reading and the use of supplementary online material related to focus groups.

When it came to devising the focus group questions and schedule, Shannon was able to take a lead in shaping the wording and framing of questions in a way that made them more accessible to students and easier for them to understand and engage with. This approach to skill and expertise sharing helped to reduce the 'deficit' approach that can be associated with student – particularly Black student – interactions with staff. The deficit approach refers to the perception of minoritised groups as being inherently 'flawed' or 'lacking' appropriate educational skills or training that require 'fixing' before such students can achieve academically (Smit, 2012).

Once the data had been analysed, the team worked together to produce a set of recommendations for change, related specifically to how tutors can develop more trusting relationships with Black students and ways to encourage more peer support and communication between students to reduce feelings of isolation and lack of belonging among Black students in distance learning settings. Shannon played a central role in helping to shape these recommendations and also took part in a number of presentations where we disseminated the project findings. We tried to appear as a partnership of equals – as we have tried to do in writing this article, which we have both contributed to equitably.

Perhaps the most important feature of the project for Shannon was the empowerment she felt as a co-researcher in the project, as it allowed her to contribute towards wider institutional change to improve the learning experiences of Black students. A project like this can begin to shift the position of Black and other ethnic minority students – and indeed students who are often subjected to social hierarchies of many kinds – from the observed to the observers, from being identified as the source of the ‘problem’ in need of ‘fixing’ – in line with the aforementioned ‘deficit’ approach – to helping to shift the focus onto the institutionalised causes of persistent awarding gaps.

Conclusion

This case study has provided an example of a staff-student project that consisted of an ethnically diverse project team, designed to further the understanding of the learning experiences of Black distance learning students. The project has been presented as a case study to explore how staff-student collaborative research is often pre-framed by a number of established hierarchies which can be racialised in nature, particularly when white staff work together with ethnic minority students. This has the potential to create exploitative conditions that, without due consideration, can re-enforce rather than challenge wider exclusionary experiences for ethnic minority students.

We recommend that staff-student collaborations of this kind must recognise and carefully discuss these racialised power dynamics right at the beginning of any collaboration rather than simply ignore or downplay the influence of such hierarchies. Steps can then be taken to find ways to mitigate the potential exploitation that can occur, particularly with regard to who becomes the ultimate beneficiary of such collaborations (often white staff members). For our project, these mitigations included ensuring the full involvement of students throughout the project, paying a fee to students in line with regular consultancy rates, finding opportunities to share expertise, skills and experience between students and staff, and having students take a full role in disseminating recommendations across the institution.

All these mitigations have contributed to ethnic minority students feeling a sense of empowerment through their involvement in the project. They have also helped to facilitate

a project that has collected rich, authentic data and been shaped by team members who have lived experience of being Black students themselves. In a wider sense, the approach we have adopted appears to have the potential to help disrupt power hierarchies – in our case those informed by ‘race’ and racism – that are implicit in staff-student collaborations. In addition, we can claim that this approach can help to shift the position of Black students as passive ‘recipients’ of institutional discriminatory practice and exclusion, to being central actors in the wider movement to instigate the institutional changes that are needed to challenge the persistent awarding gaps between Black students and their peers.

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