

## Race for equality: reflections of a students' union officer

**Howisha Penny**

*John Moores Students' Union, John Foster Building, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool L3 5UZ, UK*

Contact: [studentsunion@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:studentsunion@ljmu.ac.uk)

### Abstract

*It has been eight years since the publication of the National Union of Students' (NUS) Race for Equality, a report containing several sobering reflections on the BAME student experience in post-16 UK education. In 2018/19 many of the themes were revisited with the publication of a Universities UK and NUS report on the BAME attainment gap. In this viewpoint paper, a personal reflection is offered from the perspective of a students' union officer, drawing attention to the need to be willing to engage with untapped talent, and on the role a students' union can play in helping universities create more inclusive cultures and, consequently, more vibrant learning communities.*

### Keywords

equality; students' union; critical race theory; welfare; student engagement

*Please cite this paper as:*

Penny, H. (2019) 'Race for equality: reflections of a students' union officer', *Innovations in Practice*, 13 (1): 16-21



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings.

## Race for equality

Industry calculations indicate that Marvel Studios' 'Black Panther' grossed over \$1.3bn worldwide when released last year. The eager crowds that flocked to see the film followed widespread critical acclaim, with many highlighting the dazzling performances of a largely African American cast of actors. Film critic Odie Henderson, writing on RogerEbert.com, opined, "Starting this weekend, a lot of brown kids are going to be staring at this movie with a ... sense of awe and perception-changing wonder, because the main superhero, and almost everyone else, looks just like them. It was a long time coming, and it was worth the wait." Such poignant reflections coincided with the resurgence of black politicisation in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US.

Inevitably, a string of awards soon followed. At the Screen Actors Guild Awards, at which Black Panther won the Best Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture award, lead star Chadwick Boseman made an impassioned acceptance speech that contextualised the enormity of the achievement:

*All of us up here know – to be young, gifted and black – we all know what it's like to be told that there is not a place for you to be featured, yet you are young gifted and black. We know what it's like to be told there's not a screen for you to be featured on, a stage to be featured on. We know what it's like to be the tail and not the head. We know what it's like to be beneath and not above.*

As a female and BAME elected student officer, Boseman's reflections have a particular and strong resonance. Often, many of us arrive at university having negotiated several obstacles, and coming to university represents significant achievement: we come here in hope that our talents will be nurtured, refined, directed,

realised or discovered. Thus, the student expectation and experience has to be set in context. In this paper, I wish to provide an account of the initiatives we, as a students' union, have set in motion to inject an enhanced sense of BAME students' belonging and engagement at LJMU, and why this is so important.



## Where we are

First, it is worth noting, briefly, the socio-political context. In recent times, the Government has highlighted its desire to improve the social mobility of BAME students. For instance, *Success as a Knowledge Economy* noted that non-continuation rates for UK domiciled black students in university are much higher than for their white peers, and pledged to increase the number of all BAME students going to university by 20 per cent by 2020. Allied to this, there are concerns about attainment. It has not escaped the Office for Students (2018) attention that, at 82 per cent, white graduates had the highest proportion gaining a first or upper second class degree in 2016/17: this compares to just 60 per cent for black graduates, the group with the lowest proportion. Incidentally, for Asian graduates, the proportion gaining a first or upper second class degree was 72 per cent.

The National Union of Students (NUS) and Universities UK recently collaborated on research to explore how the BAME

attainment gap should be addressed, gathering evidence from 99 universities and students' unions, and six regional round table sessions with 160 attendees. In their subsequent report, *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities*, five steps that institutions should take improve BAME student outcomes are outlined:

- provide strong leadership
- have conversations about race and changing cultures
- develop racially diverse and inclusive environments
- get the evidence and analysing the data on the attainment gap
- understand what works

Thus, in explanation, there need to be an acknowledgment and understanding of the BAME attainment gap, and using data and evidence to facilitate open and honest conversations about potential causes and solutions. These conversations need to occur and reverberate across all levels of the university, with leadership taking a proactive approach and committing these into wider organisational policy and strategy, rather than this being seen as a separate, 'add on', activity.

Brokering honest dialogue between student representatives and university staff represents an important mechanism to tackle these complex issues. In fact, students' concerns with the black attainment gap and student engagement go back some way. For instance, the NUS's (2011) *Race for Equality* report included several sobering messages on teaching and learning practice that have persisted as sticking points. In the study, black students commented on the importance of receiving fair and balanced teaching, assessment and support. The study found that there was a significant minority who viewed the teaching and learning environment as 'cliquey', 'isolating',

and even 'hostile' or 'racist'. 42 per cent of respondents did not feel that the curriculum reflected issues of diversity, and a third stated feeling unable to bring their perspective as a black student to lectures, citing racial and cultural bias (NUS, 2011: 21):

*If you choose to do what are perceived as 'Black' subjects or you include 'Black' material as part of your work – you get lower grades for it because institutions don't value the work* (Black African respondent, HE)

*Not being able to express or hear [our] own experience in learning – especially with a discipline as subjective as English, being told 'you are wrong' at the slightest transgression from the norm, or for not conforming to 'group think', or for questioning the assumptions of other students and teachers. Is this not the process of learning? Questioning the deeply held sentiments and cultural beliefs, attitudes and ideologies of teachers can only lead to trouble, hostility, and behaviour verging at times upon gross professional misconduct. I felt that teachers were trying to fit me into a mould, and if I was resistant then they desired to 'correct' my way of looking at the world. Surely, they should be working with the diversity and different eyes, mind, and experiences that could bring to their discussion, and/or development of the research areas of the discipline?* (Mixed race respondent, HE).

There are striking similarities in these reflections and with Amanda Arbouin's (2018) account of ten UK domiciled African Caribbean graduates, who had experienced university education in the 1990s. In Arbouin's study, respondents felt disconnected from lecturers who 'did not look like them' or felt frustrated by a curriculum that was overtly Eurocentric, and there were even accounts of unequal treatment. As this column went to press, in March 2019, the NUS announced that it would be circulating a survey on the BAME

student experience to track how things had changed in the eight years since the publication of *Race for Equality*. It is worth noting the counsel from the last *Student Academic Experience Survey* which advised, “more must be done across the sector to understand the [academic experience] barriers at play for different ethnic groups” (Neves and Hillman, 2018: 7): clearly there are enormous structural and cultural issues that merit immediate and ongoing attention.

One cannot reflect on race in universities without acknowledging wider societal concerns. For instance, Housee (2018) notes the growing instances of discrimination following the 2016 EU referendum vote, and the NUS (2018) reported that one in three Muslim students had experienced some type of Islamophobic abuse or crime at their place of study: one in five had experienced verbal abuse in person. In autumn 2019, the Equality and Human Rights Commission will publish its findings and recommendations from its inquiry that investigated racial harassment in universities. Ahead of the Commission’s call for evidence, as reported by the BBC in December 2018, racism was considered a possible link between the lower qualifications achieved by BAME students, despite more entering higher education.

### **A partnership for positive change**

The John Moores Students’ Union (JMSU) strategy for 2017-20 set out a simple vision: to see that there were ‘happy’ and ‘confident’ students at LJMU.

Underpinning this vision are values that support an inclusive culture, and the Union’s overall mission is to “support and empower all LJMU students, connecting them to each other and the world around them.” We therefore take great care in our planning and operation of events such as Fresher’s Fair during induction, or of

particular activities and campaigns to ensure these are welcoming and inclusive to our diverse student body. Last year we celebrated Black History Month with a focal event ‘Embrace the Melanin’, that represented a timely opportunity to promote culture and share ideas via performance, music and a panel debate (‘Being Black in 2018’). In addition, we encourage students to get involved in our numerous societies to help them to feel a greater sense of belonging at LJMU. As well as creating a space for shared interests and social interactions, many of these specifically celebrate diversity (Afro-Caribbean Society, Chinese Student and Scholar Society, International Society, Islamic Society, to name just a few).

This narrative feeds into our wider conversations in the University. For instance, we have relished connecting our experiences, insights and knowledge on inclusivity at LJMU’s BAME Staff Network (launched in November 2018), as well as other forums, such as the LJMU’s Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group and the institutional Student Engagement Panel, which hosted workshops on ‘inclusivity’ and ‘respect’. This holistic and purposeful partnership bodes well for the future: recognising the key role that both the Students’ Union and the University has to play in creating and maintaining an inclusive culture, and ensuring BAME students have the best possible experience at LJMU.

At the same time, it is vital that our input is both passionate and informed. In 2018, JMSU was one of eight students’ unions in the UK selected to take part in a national project, co-ordinated by The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP), to develop a framework for inclusive student engagement, specifically in order to engage with and explore the experiences of BAME students. The timing of this work was

somewhat fortuitous, as JMSU had committed to introducing six Equality Representatives (including a BAME Equality Rep) in 2018/19. The key motivation for this was to give students an opportunity to represent their peers and to lead on the development of relevant projects and campaigns for underrepresented or disadvantaged groups. Already, the Equality Reps' input has injected a somewhat different dynamic into conversations with the University, introducing new perspectives and the voice of diverse, lived experiences into meetings, committees and project planning.

### Embracing talent

*Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.*

Nelson Mandela

I began this piece by focusing on talent – on being 'gifted and black' - as, all too often, much of that talent remains untapped. It is important that BAME students see in their representatives people they can identify with: they must have confidence that these individuals will passionately argue their cause. When I began my undergraduate study at LJMU, a female black president led the Students' Union, and I am all too aware of the positive impact this had on me. As we rebranded from LiverpoolSU to JMSU this academic year, it signalled a new purpose in how and what we do – with a renewed focus on student leadership and engagement in order to empower students and enact change. I am confident that the momentum built from the initiatives we have trialled in recent years will act as a spark that will bring more BAME students into representative roles. Our best chance of sustaining this success is to continue to evolve our thinking, to try new ideas, to consult and create equitable spaces for discussion – keeping in mind that the

specialists on understanding the BAME student experience are still, naturally enough, BAME students themselves.

- *Howisha Penny was JMSU's Vice-President Community Engagement. She served two years from 2017/18 and 2018/19. Howisha led JMSU's work on equality, diversity and inclusion, and student mental health and wellbeing.*
- *JMSU offers a wide range of activities, services and support to help LJMU students get the most of their time at university. This includes everything from the social side, to making sure students are content and happy in their course. The Union supports over a hundred student groups, giving all a fantastic opportunity to develop alongside their studies.*  
([www.jmsu.co.uk](http://www.jmsu.co.uk))

## References

Arbouin, A. (2018) *Black British Graduates: Untold Stories*, London: Trentham Books

Department for Business and Skills (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, (Cm 9258), retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/523546/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-web.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523546/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-web.pdf) (accessed April 2019)

Housee, S. (2018) *Speaking Out Against Racism in the University Space*, London: Trentham Books

NUS (2011) *Race for Equality: A Report on the Experiences of Black Students in Further and Higher Education*, London: National Union of Students

NUS (2018) *The Experience of Muslim Students in 2017/18*, London: National Union of Students

Office for Students (2018) 'Differences in student outcomes', retrieved from: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/ethnicity/> (accessed April 2019)

Universities UK and NUS (2019) *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: #ClosingtheGap*. London: Universities UK/National Union of Students