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Give me a hand, and I will thrive: How personalised mentorship is helping Black students progression

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Abstract

This paper examines personalised mentorship's disruptive role in enabling Black students' progression in the academy and industry. It focuses on the Accomplished Study Program in Research Excellence (ASPIRE), a unique intervention and an innovative approach designed to provide mentorship and well-being to Black and Black heritage students and improve their graduate outcomes and access to doctoral study. Drawing from the evaluation data of the first cohort of the programme and the broader literature on the attainment gap and underrepresentation of Black students in higher education, the paper examines the extent to which participation in ASPIRE leads to improved work-readiness of Black students to access doctoral level study and acquire jobs in the industry through personalised mentorship.

Introduction

Offering academic and career guidance to students is a common practice that positively influences their decisions both in career and academics (Scandura, 1992). This is useful, especially if the required knowledge is filled by a mentor who is an achiever in the domain and

has vast experience. The knowledge sharing could be in career, academics, and professional development. (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006).

However, knowledge-sharing information and guidance are not often readily available to all students in higher education, or where it is available, it is not easily accessible. This can be time-consuming and involve considerable resources that may be expended in the process. While this may have some seeming benefits, such as improving the learning and research skills of the individual, it often can potentially mean that the student will make some mistakes, which can be avoided if they had a mentor to put them through.

Mentoring is quite different from tutoring. According to Yamamoto (1988), the former helps the student achieve self-defined goals using a hand-holding approach from the tutors, while the latter defines the learning objectives for the student, which they need to achieve through a process of independent learning. Mentoring is an interpersonal relationship in which a more experienced or skilled person (mentor) intentionally guides, supports, and counsels a less experienced or skilled person (mentee) (Johnson, 2016). The primary focus of this relationship, most of the time, is the mentee. However, mentors can also benefit from such a relationship (Malin & Hackman, 2018).

Mentoring is a long-term relationship-based process focusing on holistic development, personal growth, and career guidance. Mentors serve as role models, offering support, advice and sharing their experiences. Mentoring aims to empower mentees and foster their self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Finding the right mentor becomes more challenging for students from an ethnic minority background such as Black, Asian or Ethnic minority origins (Bunce, King, Saran, & Talib, 2021). Such students can be found to suffer from a dual identity challenge syndrome. The first is that they may need to fit into the culture of the broader educational community. The second is the need for more mentors to put them through within their domain of study. This can harm the attainment of such students in terms of their degree award, attainment, and progression.

This paper examines how personalised mentorship is helping Black students progression to doctoral studies and graduate employment through the Accomplished Study Programme in Research Excellence (ASPIRE), an OFS-funded programme targeted at Black and Mixed-Black heritage students in the UK.

Wider context of the ASPIRE project

According to Office for Students (OFS, 2021), there was an awarding gap of 22.1% points (full-time) and 35.7% points (part-time) between Black and White undergraduates. However, in Advance HE's latest equality in higher education statistical report (Aldercotte, 2022), the Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) awarding gap for 1st and 2:1 degrees is slowly closing. Also, the overall representation of individuals identifying as Black, Asian and minority ethnic has increased from 8.6% of all staff in 2003-04 to 16.3% of all staff in 2020-21 (Aldercotte, 2022).

Despite these successes, BAME students continue to be more likely to be disengaged, isolated, and less motivated than white students and have the feeling of not belonging in the university (Bunce, King, Saran, & Talib, 2021). Hence, less inclination to achieve full potential. Among the different ethnic groups broadly classified as BAME, that is, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic group, the percentage points of attainment gap is much wider for Black students. For example, a recent report shows that the attainment gap between Black and White students has reduced by about six percentage points since 2017, which is an improvement, but the gap remained high at about 17% in 2021. While the attainment gap between White students and Asian, Mixed, and other students is about 6%, 2.5%, and 8.2%, respectively (OFS, 2021).

Hence, Black students are more disadvantaged regarding the attainment gap than other groups of BAME students. Reasons for the attainment gap between BAME students and White students in UK Universities are multifaceted and complex. This gap remains significant after controlling for structural factors such as entry requirement, age and discipline (OFS, 2022). The gap also persists when controlling for individual differences; subject studied and prior attainment (Advance HE, 2020).

Studies have attempted to find the cause of the attainment gap. Smith's (2012) study contributes to the discourse on the use of 'disadvantage' discourse in explaining differences in attainment and its effects on teaching and learning. The study explores how thinking in university frames minority students as lacking the necessary academic, cultural, and moral resources to succeed (Smith, 2012). This produces a 'deficit thinking' model, which neglects structural issues. The paper argues that deficit thinking ignores the effects of external systemic factors such as

inequality in resources and oppressive policies and encourages institutions to focus on their under-preparedness to meet the needs of a diverse student body. (Smith, 2012).

Other studies attribute the gap to psychological needs influenced by external factors and the environment. According to Wong et al. (2021), students ascribe the attainment gap to a lack of willingness to integrate into the university system, a lack of initiatives, and poor academic English skills by BAME students. Similarly, Bunce et al. (2021) examined the explanations for the attainment gap with self-determination theory which proposes that when students feel fulfilled by their psychological needs, relatedness, competence, and autonomy, they are more likely to achieve their full potential.

These psychological needs show that BAME students lacked support to achieve their university ambitions due to cultural and background differences, accent and skin colour, lack of diversity on campus, pressure to act in an acceptable way in the White society, and lack of confidence in expressing ideas. Those who felt fulfilled in any of the needs did so due to their connection with a few open-minded, supportive and warm non-BAME lecturers and positive feedback. Greaves et al. (2021), consistently find that Black students felt the need to change themselves, such as how they talk or dress, otherwise known as ‘code-switching’, to fit in and often turn to groups with similar ethnicities, such as university societies, where they could relate better to solve problems. These structural barriers potentially result in isolation, withdrawal, and the feeling of not belonging, which could negatively affect their academic performance.

The explanations given for the existence of the attainment gap and acting on recommendations from previous studies would possibly provide the way forward in closing the gap between BAME students and White students in universities. For example, Wong et al. (2021) suggest the need for targeted support for BAME students so they can utilise the various opportunities provided by higher education. Bunce et al. (2021) highlight the importance of building rapport and trust with students through personal contacts and creating a support system for international BAME students. Also, the study of Greaves et al (2021), suggests a more to more staff diversity in terms of ethnicity.

Applying these recommendations would be a step towards the right direction in closing the attainment gap in UK universities, but this will require a long-time commitment on the part of all stakeholders, such as BAME and non-BAME students, staff, universities and policymakers.

Also, there is no one size fit all to addressing the attainment gap due to its complexity. Hence, there is a need for more studies on strategies to be adopted to close the attainment gap and assess the implemented strategies.

Until the gap is closed, under-attainment in the university by BAME students will continue to serve as a barrier to social mobility for achieving high status. According to the report of OFS (2020), the progression rate of students taking up a skilled job or undertaking graduate study six months after graduating is higher for White students compared to Black students, with a gap of 4.7 percentage points. Therefore, the under-attainment by Black students in the first degree has a negative impact on the likelihood that they will get into postgraduate degrees due to their inability to meet entry requirements (Richardson, 2015). Consequently, Black students are underrepresented in graduate courses, particularly in PhD and teacher training programmes.

What is ASPIRE?

Accomplished Study Program in Research Excellence (ASPIRE) is an innovative tripartite program led by Sheffield Hallam University in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University and Advance HE. Funded by the OFS, the program came into being in response to the call on funding competition to increase access and participation for Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in the postgraduate research study (OFS, 2021).

The broken pipeline report (2019) points out that the Black awarding gap is a major contributing factor to the under-representation of Black students at the postgraduate and doctoral levels. Whilst the proportion of academic staff in UK universities has increased in recent years. There is still a 22.1% point for full-time students and 35.7% for part-time students between Black and White undergraduate (OFS, 2020).

Interestingly, out of the 20,000 fully funded studentships awarded by the UK research councils between 2016 – 2018 for PGRs, only 240 representing 1.2%, were awarded to Black and Mixed-Black heritage PGRs (UTHE UK, 2019). As of 2021, only 155, representing 1% out of

23,000 of UK university professors, are black (Coughlan, 2021). For this inequality to disappear, there need to be more concentrated efforts at supporting and mentoring Black students towards PGR.

These statistics motivated the ASPIRE team to develop a high-impact targeted mentorship program called ASPIRE to change the narratives for Black and Mixed-Black heritage students in the UK through personalised mentorships.

How is ASPIRE helping Black students progression?

ASPIRE aims to provide access to an excellent, personalised mentorship programme designed to enhance Black students' academic, social and network capital to create a pathway into doctoral-level studies and the industry. ASPIRE is designed by Black academics for Black students, which suggests that the lived experience of these Black students is factored into the programme design. Each student is allocated a Black mentor who works with them to support them throughout the six months duration of the mentorship programme.

The allocated mentors are Black academics who are Early Career Researchers. Early Career Researchers in this regard are academics who are within five years of post PhD completion.

During the first ASPIRE (2022) cohort, 30 black students were supported through personalised mentorships delivered by Black academics. The resulting impact on these Black scholars reveals that ASPIRE had significantly improved their academic experience and work readiness. At the end of the first cohort, as evidenced at a showcase event, which gave the scholars the opportunity to share their ASPIRE journey through poetry, affirmation banners and other artefacts they created as part of the ASPIRE programme, it was clear that the scholars had flourished, growing in both confidence and self-belief. The scholars emphasised that they now see themselves as tenacious, brave, courageous and resilient.

The ASPIRE programme has also improved the participating scholars' future study or career prospects. The survey data collected at the start of the programme indicated that scholars lacked confidence and rated their skills as lesser than their peers (significantly lower than the control group). However, by the end of the programme, all the scholars who were interviewed and

those who completed the post-survey indicated that they were either applying for doctoral study or graduate employment. Five of the scholars have already started their PhD programs. Two other scholars secured full-time graduate employment, and another scholar have also now started PGC in Chemistry.

Conclusion

Drawing from the evaluation data of the first cohort of ASPIRE programme and the broader literature on attainment gaps in higher education, this paper has examined the extent to which the programme is disruptive in enabling the progression of Black students in the academy and industry. The ASPIRE programme has provided participating scholars with the support and skills needed to progress in academia and the industry. This is evidenced in the responses of the scholars in the first cohort, who emphasise the positive impact of the individualised mentorship programme on their academic journey. Although, at this stage, we lack the quantitative data to support this finding, our data indicates the ASPIRE programme is improving scholars' future study or career prospects.

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