



Workshop report: Ethnic Minorities' Perceptions of Studying and Working in York

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Summary

York St John University is committed to promoting ethnic diversity amongst our student and staff population. In order to better understand the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people of studying and working in York, Catalyst funding was obtained to run a pump-priming workshop on 11 January.

The workshop sought to gather the views and experiences of participants on the attractions and barriers for ethnic minorities to studying and working in York, and how we can best research this area.

The workshop attracted 32 participants from a range of public, private and third sector organisations based in and around York, including BME, faith and refugee groups, Make it York, North Yorkshire Police, City of York Council, and staff, students and alumni (British and non-British) from both universities.

Building upon the workshop, the organisers are proposing collaborative research that seeks to identify and illustrate the times, spaces and contact points in which BME people have encountered comfort or conflict.

Report

Background to the workshop

York St John University is committed to a diverse and culturally rich community, and has a strategic objective to promote ethnic diversity amongst our student and staff population. We all benefit from the unique insights and experiences that individuals with diverse identities and backgrounds bring, and equally students, staff and visitors should feel supported, included and valued for who they are and what they bring to the University. However we face significant challenges in this respect. We wish to understand better what perceptions Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people have of working and studying in York. Through building on existing research, putting ethnic minorities at the heart of further research, and developing a collaborative approach across the city, we aim to address under-representation of BME students, employees and their families, and build stronger communities in York.

A note on terminology¹

Language is constantly changing and people use different terms around race and ethnicity. We believe that 'race' is a social construct without biological merit. It has historically been used to categorise different groups of people based on perceived physical differences, and to justify domination and subordination.

We adopted the term 'ethnic minorities' from the Equality and Human Rights Commission². White British people are a majority ethnic group in York and England, but Black ethnic groups and many ethnic minorities in the UK are a majority ethnic group in other countries. We also recognise the diversity within and amongst ethnic groups, and that they all have individual experiences.

We also believe it is important to recognise 'White Privilege' in our research. To reference Peggy McIntosh in her 1988 Opinion Piece on White Privilege and Male Privilege³:

As White people, we see people of our race widely represented around us and on the media; we have more opportunities and credibility, without the need to justify our actions; if we are late, use bad language or wear shabby clothes then this won't be attributed to our race; and we will not be asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

The workshop

Keynote speakers were Dr Janaka Jayawickrama, Lecturer in Community Wellbeing and Programme Leader MSc in International Humanitarian Affairs, University of York, and Hauwa Aliyu Ahmadu who recently graduated from York St John with an English Literature degree. Janaka spoke about the importance of mutual respect and discourse which form the basis for friendship, while Hauwa talked about developing a sense of belonging as a student at York St John by getting involved with projects.

In the first session, we asked participants: what attracts BME people to studying and working in York, and what are the barriers? This discussion yielded many issues, but the lack of diversity in York is in itself a barrier alongside the limited economic opportunities, the significant cost of living in York and the loneliness that many BME people experience. There are few opportunities for White British children and adults to learn about, and appreciate, diversity in culture and values and the contribution that many BME people have made to our society in the past and now. This reinforces prejudice, unfriendliness and exclusion.

The second session focused on defining the research questions and considering who to involve with the research, and how. Leadership as well as a collaborative approach were mentioned as essential for engaging BME communities. The research needs to be clear about the purpose as well as the limitations of impact. The impact of research will be greater if key decision-makers from the city and BME communities are involved with the research from the start. They need to have a shared vision about what sort of city York wants to be, and champion this vision. Lessons should be drawn from previous research.

¹ This note was presented at the start of the workshop

² <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/britain-fairer>

³ <http://www.collegeart.org/pdf/diversity/white-privilege-and-male-privilege.pdf>

The research needs to draw out 'what works' in attracting and retaining BME people to study and work in York.

Professor Sebastian Kim delivered the closing address in which he celebrated the richness of experience and dialogue when people with diverse backgrounds live, study and work together, and highlighted the importance of connecting research with people's real-lived experiences.

Developing a collaborative research proposal

Building on the workshop, the researchers wish to develop research that aims to better understand the factors contributing to the under-representation of BME people, using YSJU as a case study initially. Through a literature review, interviews and focus groups, the research will identify the **contact** points (in time and space) in which BME students and staff have encountered **comfort** or **conflict**. The output would be an outward-facing, Open Access, interactive web resource illustrating ethnic minorities' experiences with comfort and conflict at contact points along their route to and experience in York. The focus on the YSJU community would help to keep the first stage manageable, however we anticipate that the local community will be involved in the research (e.g. through an advisory group) so that this resource can form the basis for further collaborative research among BME communities in York and wider Yorkshire, and help inform collaborative actions across the city to build stronger communities.

Evaluation

An evaluation was conducted afterwards with a form enclosed with the meeting pack and an online survey. These were completed by 15 participants. We also encouraged participants to post their reflections on the workshop on a cardboard Tree of Life in the room.

People welcomed the opportunity to meet people from different roles and backgrounds, and to discuss sensitive issues in an open safe place. Poor acoustics and the lack of a roving microphone made plenary discussion difficult, however most discussions took place in smaller groups.

Many appreciated the diversity in the room in terms of representation of organisations and age groups, and the rich networking opportunities that this offered. Some people perceived the event to be academic/international dominated even though the majority of participants were not academics and many of the BME people were British or had lived in the UK for a long time.

The organisers deliberately held back from pre-defining the focus of the research and research questions in order to allow maximum deliberation and freedom. Although some participants did not feel comfortable with this approach and would have preferred more defined purpose and questions, others enjoyed the space to help shape the research.

Overall, the diversity of views captured by the event, the opening of meaningful dialogues across the city and the high level of engagement from participants showed that this research project warrants further development.