



The Student Voice Report 2021



Introduction

In Spring 2021, With Insight Education commissioned a qualitative study to identify issues around inclusivity that black-heritage students were experiencing and give them the opportunity to voice their own solutions. We then hosted a roundtable to discuss how these solutions could be developed into tangible recommendations. The panel consisted of five current university students, all attending top third ranked universities from across the country, and Christine Kinnear, Founder and CEO of With Insight Education who chaired. Contributions to the conversation were also welcomed from a closed group of With Insight alumni. What followed was an honest, refreshing and productive conversation about what universities can do to better support and improve the experiences of their black-heritage students.

Their hope is that universities will authentically engage with their recommendations.



Don't Be Colour Blind

Actively aim to consider black-heritage people at every level in the university

Although appealing in a theoretical post-racial world, the panel felt that colour blind practices often led to feelings of isolation and harmed the very groups that they were designed to protect.

They expressed that it was very important to recognise a student's differences and the ways in which these might impact their experiences of the university.

Wary of promotional collateral that suggested a level of diversity not matched to reality, prospective students wanted universities to authentically improve representation throughout the admissions process so that they were provided with opportunities to meet university staff and students that mirror their own reality.

On a practical level this would involve tailoring open days and outreach programmes for black-heritage students.

This was considered fundamental to help pupils visualise themselves at university.

Colour blind practices were felt to inhibit representation amongst both students and staff. One example given was accommodation allocation with black-heritage students feeling very isolated when they were the only person of colour in their block. Another was the lack of representation in procurement policies meaning, for example, that the University neglected to offer Afro-Caribbean catering options.

Students felt that whilst well-intentioned, colour blind practices often fell short of their intended consequence because the majority of the time they were diversity and inclusion practices implemented by white staff and therefore through a white lens. One way our panellists felt that this could be improved upon was by diversity and inclusion practices being created and implemented with black-heritage staff members who would be able to draw upon their own lived experiences to create

Hear my voice

Make plans about us, with us

Another recommendation put forward was the need for universities to truly listen to and respect the voices of their black-heritage students.

It was suggested that universities should have regular discussions with their students in order to adopt a collaborative solution-based approach to improving the experiences of black-heritage students.

When discussing this recommendation a common experience amongst our panel was having their voices, or seeing another black-heritage student's concerns, disregarded by members of staff at their university. One panellist recounted that this led to her going in on herself and avoiding speaking out when she felt concerned or upset by something.

“Just seeing her voice silenced, seeing her not being validated in that moment made it awkward and especially difficult to raise concerns about my own university experience.”

Another issue raised in the roundtable was that often students have something to say but do not know what avenues they should use.

The solution proposed by the panel was that all universities should create a student committee of black-heritage students who can act as a buffer. The committee would work in collaboration with both the students and university staff to make sure that the students' voices are heard and to help the university to create real meaningful actions from this.

[On the importance of this committee] “so that they [black-heritage students] know that there is a group out there for them to talk to...that can relate to this problem.”

Students should be paid for their contribution

Students found it disheartening when universities relied heavily on their feedback and emotional labour without compensation.

Consequently, the panel stressed the importance of the universities paying the students on the committee for their time.

“I do think it is really interesting to hear about compensation, about actually allowing people to use these initiatives to develop their skills and careers from. I think it’s clearly needed.”

It is important to note that the panel did believe that there are some institutions who are already actively making these changes by working hand in hand with their black-heritage students to create positive change whilst also compensating them for their time. There was a general hope amongst the panel and the audience that this would eventually be adopted by all universities as part of their culture and strategy towards greater diversity and inclusion.

Engagement must be considerate and consistent to feel authentic

There was a real consensus amongst the panel and the audience that they have all been able to tell when their universities have not authentically taken on a diversity and inclusion project or not properly listened to their black-heritage students.

One recommendation to overcome this was consistency of contact. For example, holding monthly meetings between students and staff whereby students can give feedback to staff members about their experiences and continuously review and work together to make improvements. This was felt to be key in evidencing that the universities were committed long-term to making real and effective change for their black-heritage students.

Whilst an important part of creating change is acknowledging the negative experiences of students from under-represented groups, our panellists also felt that it was important for universities to celebrate the different cultures that make up their student body. The panel felt that this could be implemented through the introduction of Afro-Caribbean food as the majority of panellists only had the option to eat euro-centric food on campus. It was agreed by all that even small steps like this could make a positive impact - making black-heritage students feel seen and valued by their institutions rather than just tolerated.

“If you can't have anything to eat on campus that is something that you relate to...If you don't have spaces to practice, you know your traditions or segments of your culture on campus, then that will impact your day to day life.”

Implement a mentoring ladder

Offer subject specific black-heritage mentors

In the original research the students felt that a formalised system of mentoring throughout their university life would help to create an inclusive culture. A culture where first years could be helped to settle in and older years supported to succeed as they progress towards the world of work.

This was a popular idea amongst our panellists. They felt that more support in the transitional period from sixth form or college to first year would be beneficial. There was a particular enthusiasm for subject specific black-heritage mentors. This came from our panellists' previous experiences of having subject specific mentors that they did not feel they could connect to or relate with.

Panellists agreed that mentors should be paid for their time.

“There's often extreme demand for black-heritage mentors as they are so under-represented which is why it's an important point that it should be a paid role.”

Furthermore, students felt that if the mentor schemes were paid for, it would allow for them to have more structure and put a higher level of ownership onto universities for their successful delivery.



Reverse mentoring would be powerful

Another recommendation given to strengthen the relationships between black-heritage students and staff members at their universities was a reverse mentoring scheme whereby students mentor senior staff members.

It was felt that this would give staff members a better insight into students' experiences resulting in more empathy and, therefore, better relationships.

“Black students or under-represented student groups mentoring people who are in positions of power, so maybe that’s staff members or professors...having that more direct conversation with them about things like privilege and experiences in general...I think that would be helpful.”

Reduce Financial Barriers

Application and participation costs stifle potential

In the original research conducted, students were aware that financial constraints were a barrier to black-heritage students from economically challenged backgrounds participating in societies and applying for internships – all things that enhance the career prospects of students. The students felt that the provision of targeted grants and scholarships were a necessary ingredient in making leading universities more accessible to black-heritage students.

Money was a very important factor at every step of our panellists' university experiences.

A medical student on the panel described how she would not have been able to afford the hidden costs of applying to medical school if it had not been for the financial support of her school, highlighting the financial barriers that some students face before they even begin studying.

Many of the panellists said that without financial help from official bodies they would not have been able to afford to study at the universities they were at.

There were also concerns raised about those students who are unable to afford to join societies feeling excluded and isolated.

“At my university we have quite a lot of societies, but you have to pay quite a lot of money to be part of some of them. So even if you're part of that university you can't be part of the same experiences that other people are because of the financial burden of having to pay.”

The panel were aware that whilst these grants and bursaries are invaluable in the support they provide for students, at the core what is really needed is wider policy change as, without that, these grants are just a plaster and not a permanent fix.

“You know just by simply providing places or providing funding specifically for students of black backgrounds, would immediately solve a lot of problems that we have, which is less isolation and more representation. It would create a community of people that you can speak to that share your experiences. But my main concern would be that they won't fix the problem, it's just a patch. You're not going to actually address the more systemic biases.”

Key Reflections

Students wanted universities to prioritise setting up a structured, consistent forum for them to share their experiences and co-create solutions, emphasising the basic desire for black-heritage students to feel genuinely listened to by their universities.

Colour-blind practices cause feelings of isolation and exclusion. Students wanted universities to actively consider them in decision making right across the university spectrum including accommodation allocation and catering contracts.

There was unanimous support for the implementation of mentoring support from offer holder stage through to final year, with mentors being paid for their time.

For our panellists, considerate and thoughtful action equals authenticity, an equation which we encourage all universities to adopt when developing policies and planning initiatives.

In a time where big gestures are often the go-to method for institutions to prove they care, the students called for a stripped back approach. One whereby universities collaborate with their black-heritage students in a consistent, considerate and thoughtful way.

An underlying theme throughout the conversation was students feeling undervalued for the time and contribution that they made to improve diversity and inclusion at their university. They hoped for greater recognition for their input when their ideas were taken forward and felt that paid, structured roles would help to formalise their involvement.

PASSION LED US HERE

