Supporting Black, Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) students during the COVID-19 crisis.

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Introduction:

The Coronavirus COVID-19 crisis has had a major disruptive impact on the normal ways in which we deliver education and learning for our diverse student body. There is a popular assertion that COVID-19 does not discriminate between individuals and we are all affected by it in one way or another! This is partially true, but at the same time there is strong evidence of disproportionate levels of infection in BAME communities. For instance a study by the *Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre* revealed that 35% of patients infected by the virus were non-white, which is nearly triple the 13% proportion in the UK population as a whole (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/07/bame-groups-hit-harder-covid-19-than-white-people-uk#maincontent)

One of the main changes to the delivery of higher education has been the wholesale shifting of teaching and assessment to online modes. Despite the constraints, Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) have a duty of care to all their students as well as to ensure equity and fairness in the delivery of teaching and learning. Against the background of a well-established evidence base of the existence of gaps in continuation and attainment at higher education for underrepresented groups of students, even when taking into account a student's entry grades or qualifications, all HEI's are mandated by the *Office for Students* to address equity issues by developing specific targets and action strategies known as an 'access and participation plans' or 'access agreements'. (https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-register/search-for-access-and-participation-plans/#/AccessPlans/)

This 6 point guide is designed to support academic and support staff to provide inclusive responses in these difficult times which, though focussing specifically on BAME students, will be relevant for all students. It is not designed to be prescriptive, but to encourage reflective thinking and action.

1. **Impact of financial hardship:**

Issue: Our actions are determined by many factors, with material resources being one of the most significant. We know that rates of poverty amongst BAME communities is double that of white people (see for example https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-ethnicity-labour-market). Given their socio economic status, BAME students are more likely to be vulnerable to the economic fallout triggered by COVID-19 and, amongst other things, this may adversely impact their ability to engage with and complete coursework and assessment tasks. Because of the shame that can be associated with financial hardship, some students may well be reluctant to reveal their situation or access financial support.

Solution: Within the agreed interim arrangements, staff should be as flexible and sympathetic as possible to students and we should not question the sincerity of students making demands for flexibility or extra support. Any contact with students should be done with the utmost sensitivity and a staff should show willingness to develop flexible and creative solutions to specific circumstances. Moreover, staff should be aware of any facilities/schemes that are available for students in financial hardship and provide relevant information to students. In this regard it is important that Students' Unions as well as HEI's to reach out to provide some additional support or at least highlight existing support. Here is an illustration of a site created by Coventry University Students Union offering a wide range of advice for students on COVID-19 related issues. https://www.cusu.org/covid19/. Given the dynamic situation it is important that advice pages are regularly updated.

2. **Health Inequality:**

Issues: Though the coronavirus has little respect for ethnic or national differences, we know that BAME communities, due to a range of factors, such as housing conditions, environment, immigration status, access to information, income inequality and general levels of stress, are more likely to experience poorer physical and mental health and suffer more adversely as a consequence. Despite making up just 13% of the UK population, over 35% of all patients critically ill with COVID-19 were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. There are many reasons for this disparity, though key ones are disproportionately high conditions that increase vulnerability to the virus, such as diabetes and heart disease, poor and cramped occupation housing conditions and higher likelihood of working in occupations, such as the care sector, transport and food retail and therefore an increased risk of infection. There is considerable research that student participation and academic performance is impacted by physical and mental health problems and for sure these problems will be amplified by the COVID-19 crisis.

Solution: Though staff can do little to remedy structural health inequalities, the key thing is to be as supportive and sensitive to difficulties a student may experience, which may or may not be disclosed. One should avoid labelling or deficit explanations. One needs to be aware that some students may well be managing a range health conditions, which may impact at any one moment their capacity to engage in learning and assessment. Moreover, generally speaking, BAME students are more likely to have closer ties with extended family networks and therefore may feel more emotionally attached to illness and bereavement amongst within their kinship networks.

3. **Digital Divide:**

Issue: One of the benefits of campus based learning is that students get roughly the same learning experience. Almost overnight, in order to enforce 'social distancing' measures COVID-19, has placed unprecedented restrictions on how staff and students, live and travel. But this raises the issue how one is able to safely self-isolate where one is living in overcrowded conditions, or if one is made homeless? Then there is the issue of having suitable and reliable equipment and broadband facilitates to access online learning. The Office for National Statistics, in a report '*Exploring the UK's digital divide*' dated 4th March

2019 found that though these had narrowed over the past 10 years, disparities across regions, household income and ethnicity.
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04
Moreover, given the widespread closure of social spaces (cafes, libraries, community hubs) to access internet, one can safely assume that for less privileged students, the pre-existing structural digital divide is likely to have been compounded.

Solution: Given the absolute reliance that students will have on online learning, HEI's must offer each student an assessment of their needs and provide or facilitate the provision of appropriate equipment (Tablets, lap-tops). Though most students nowdays use 4G mobile devices, for some homebased students, of which BAME students contribute a significant proportion, access to home broadband will also be important and therefore advice and support regarding broadband access. Creative solutions might involve doing deals with 4G Mobile and broadband providers to offer subsidised contracts. Though a last resort option, where there problems in delivery of online materials, such as poor internet and 4G connectivity, it might be appropriate be to post digital resources out to students on memory sticks.

Though many HEI's have 24 hour IT support, this should be massively expanded to enable students to access almost all the services they may normally access on campus, including learning support, technical assistance, pastoral care and financial guidance and support.
In this regard HEI's should provide simple guidance notes and training for all staff on the transitioning to effective online delivery.

4. Racial harassment and hate:

Issue: There is emerging evidence that the reporting and misinformation surrounding the Coronavirus outbreak is compounding existing racial stereotypes, especially against those students who may be perceived to be 'outsiders' such as some international students. For example, there is evidence of Chinese Students wearing facemasks being harassed and worse. During the Brexit debate we saw a rise in hate crimes and there is evidence that BAME students, especially international students are more vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse.

Solution: Ensuring safe learning spaces is one of the responsibilities of teaching and tutoring staff, and, just like a classroom, staff need to be vigilant about hate speech and aggressive behaviour and apply commensurate sanctions. During one-to-one tutorials/supervision sessions, staff should build trust and confidence with students to enable them to express how they are feeling generally, but to share any experiences of race hate. Staff should be in a position to access or use appropriate resources/contacts to report hate incidents. A good example of such a tool can be seen at Coventry University at the following link.
https://www.coventry.ac.uk/study-at-coventry/student-support/case-reporting-system/hate-crime/

5. Unconscious bias

Issue: There is a large body of evidence confirming that BAME students face a variety of conscious and unconscious discriminatory practices in traditional classrooms. For instance, BAME students behaviour is more likely to be rated harshly compared to similar behaviour of white students, staff tend to express more positive and neutral speech toward white students than toward BAME students. And in terms of assessment, BAME students are consistently given lower marks and less favourable feedback than their white counterparts. Though this is an under researched area, evidence suggests these biases are/can be replicated online.

Solutions: We need to assume we not only have the capacity to be biased, but despite our intellectual capabilities, we do practice unconscious bias. So the trick is to try to design this out and one of the benefits of online learning spaces is that we can step back and really develop, design, implement, and evaluate strategies for promoting equitable learning environments. Some of this will be time consuming, but we can for instance, collect real-time data/feedback, which if done sensitively, can empower students too. A good way to enable this is to create anonymous discussion forums.

Unconscious bias results from exposure to negative stereotypes. One way of counteracting this is to ensure that the selection of the range of digitally delivered content does not end up erasing BAME subjects, denying them agency or pathologizing them.

6. Sense of Belonging

Issue: There is a growing body of evidence that student sense of belonging has a direct impact on student attainment and success. Academic life and university processes can be challenging for all of us, but if you come from a background attending university was what 'others' did, then making the transition can be particularly daunting. In contrast to class based learning, online environments radically change the way we perceive each other and therefore presents its own unique challenges. However, there is evidence that done well, online environments can actually reduce anxiety and disrupt stereotypical impressions. Moreover, with asynchronous learning, it allows students greater flexibility which can be more responsive to cultural differences. However, just as class based learning requires students to 'perform' certain things, so too will be the case with online learning. For example, online discussion groups may be inhibiting for students for whom English is not their first language, or they may simply not be familiar with some of the technology.

Solution: The key to creating inclusive learning environments is to reduce student anxiety and, for non-traditional students, the effects of an 'imposter syndrome' or a feeling of less worth, being an outsider and harbouring doubts about one's ability. Creating a culture of belonging takes place at various levels, but in terms of online delivery of learning a few practical things one can do is: Use of non-threatening ice-breaker activities; encouraging all students to share thoughts in a non-judgemental way; establish some ground rules and involve students in establishing these; avoid and confront micro-aggressions and practice and promote micro-affirmations in online interactions; careful use of terminology, such as awareness of colloquial language, academic jargon and cultural context of metaphors; capture lectures rather than rely on power point slides and/or notes.

Conclusion

Though it is premature to be able to make a true assessment of the true impact of the COVID-19 crisis, we know enough from a range of existing and new data sources that historically marginalised sections of the population, including those from a BAME background, are likely to experience higher levels of disadvantage. Many of the issues relating to addressing disparities in BAME retention, such as unconscious bias, sense of alienation from the institution, structural disadvantage and managing to balance home, work and university pressures, will not change because of the virus, but perhaps will be brought into much sharper focus over the weeks and months to come. And so in the short term, HEI's have both a moral and some may argue financial obligation towards ensuring that ALL students, but especially the most vulnerable, are provided with the appropriate levels and kinds of practical, emotional and intellectual support.

In the mid to long term, we must find ways to moving from crisis management to stabilisation and growth. There can be no doubt that the COVID-19 crisis has created a sense of fear, which brings forth emotions related with anqiety, uncertainty, panic, anger, self-preservation and victimisation. Though, under the circumstances, these emotions are understandable, we know that they are not conducive to effective learning. So the great responsibility on staff is to move the agenda from fear to adaptation and ultimately growth. This will require high levels of emotional intelligence, creative thinking, flexibility, tolerance and empathy. Students make substantial emotional and financial inverstments in their education and the inevitable uncertainty generated by the COVI-19 coupled is likely to make students feel vulnerable and insecure. It is therefore even more incumbent on HEI's to work twice as hard at humanising every singe encounter we have with students, whether that is in an online discussion forum, or anwering emails and telephone calls.