BAME Awarding Gap Case Study

Science of Bias Module, UCL Brain Sciences

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What did you do/who's involved?

I introduced a new Science of Bias module to bias train Psychology BSc students. The module draws together relevant topics in Psychology from genetics, evolution, social psychology, neuroscience, and organisational psychology to provide students with an alternate approach to typical unconscious bias training, which tends to be ineffective in challenging people's viewpoints. Experts within the department contributed lectures on each topic and students took part in the focus groups that formed the evidence base for the module.

The module looks at how people are treated differently because of a protected characteristic and asks how bias operates within a specific context. This shifts the focus from seeing bias as a problem within an individual that needs removing to looking at what we are doing to students that isn't allowing them to reach their potential, for example.

The module takes a problem-based learning approach and looks at real life situations where bias is relevant. There is a big focus on science communication in the assessment of students on the module, which provides them with real-world applied skills. Students give presentations about a particular problem as their formative assessment and make a media piece to explain the problem (eg. write a policy brief) as their summative assessment.

The success of the module has caused us as a department to rethink, restructure, and diversify our entire bachelors programme, including our programme diets and assessments. The Science of Bias module will be compulsory for second years across all degree programmes in the department from 2023. We will diversify our assessments to give students more real-world applied skills, such as science communication.

What evidence/rationale underpinned your choice?

Original inspiration came from a university in the Netherlands where they have an awarding gap greater than UCL's. They were concerned about how the backgrounds of their students was impacting interactions at the university, so they created a module to address the issues.

We undertook focus groups with students across the Brain Sciences Faculty, which brought up a lot of issues, one of which was belonging. Using the knowledge and data we gleaned from the focus groups we designed our own Science of Bias module.

What would you tell someone who is interested in doing something similar?

I think it is important for people to think about this as a culture change and that it may be time to stop doing things how you've typically done them. People can be uncomfortable about change, but it is necessary to get people to buy in to the idea of thinking differently about their curriculum. Change can't come from one person in a department or faculty, it is important that everyone is convinced about the value of diversity.

Any department or programme at UCL can create a module about bias and teach it within the discipline they are interested in. You can raise awareness about the subject of bias and highlight specific problems that are relevant to your discipline. Start a conversation, talk about it, and encourage people to think differently about their curriculum. People should look honestly at their disciplines and engage with the issues within their own modules.

I was pleasantly surprised at the buy-in from my department, and how the module itself played out. I was anticipating there being a focus on conversation topics in the module, whereas there was more of a focus on the science behind bias.

Every programme should create a more inclusive curriculum as a matter of principle

and staff should be given the time to commit to doing this. Creating the Science of Bias module took a great deal of work and commitment on my part.

What difference has this made to staff and students?

Student and staff feedback about the module has been very positive.

We hope that the module will have a positive impact on the students in that it will contribute to closing the awarding gap (we don't yet have the longitudinal data to show its impact). We also hope that these changes will allow us to continue to be a top department globally, competitive, and world leading.