

researching the experience of BAME CAREER PRACTITIONERS



Gill Frigerio, Associate Professor at the Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Warwick, outlines how a study can be shaped from a growing and shared awareness of a professional problem. With input from **Doreen Thompson-Addo**, Careers Consultant at Royal Holloway, University of London, and **Marni McArthur**, a postgraduate student on the MA in CEIGHE, this account sets out the dynamics of researching with and for people in the complex and political real world contexts in which we operate.



In 2018, I heard Professor Jacqueline Stevenson carefully lay out the stark truth about the attainment gap between white and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students in UK higher education. She charted the responses from the sector and was merciless about the handwringing and excuses she had heard from sector leaders. It took a white academic speaking to a largely white audience to get this issue up the agenda at Warwick, despite consistent advocacy from black staff and students.

THE POSTGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

Much of the discussion across the sector (such as *Closing the Gap*, UUK/NUS, 2019) has focused on full time undergraduate students. This got me wondering about the experiences of our BAME students

on postgraduate professional development programmes and, for the most part, working in the career development sector. I became increasingly aware that the career development spaces I occupy were predominantly white, yet couldn't find much data or research on racial diversity amongst practitioners. In line with the NUS/UUK report recommendation that we need to facilitate conversations about race, an idea for a project emerged.

CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION

Internal funding for pedagogical research requires collaboration across departments, so I invited our medical school (who had already taken steps in this area) and teacher education colleagues to join me in shaping a project. We established research questions to explore the BAME postgraduate student experience in each area and how these compare to their wider experiences in their professional contexts. In light of this, we posed questions about how experiences of pedagogy at Warwick could be improved, whilst also aiming to have something of relevance to say to the profession as a whole. The project was funded and student researchers recruited.

“ THIS RESEARCH CAN PROVIDE A STIMULUS TO IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE AND THE CAREERS PROFESSION ”

BASIS FOR CHANGE

The project steering group knows that there are practitioners awaiting our findings, ready to discuss them with us and use them as a basis for change. We think this gives us the best chance of creating something of impact that will contribute to the diversity of our profession and support BAME practitioners.



“As soon as I read about this research project I knew I wanted to be involved as a student researcher. I have had an ongoing interest in finding out what others experience within the career development sector, and how they perceive themselves as practitioners more broadly – within their own services and institutions, and with student client groups during professional practice.

I have often reflected on my own experience as a BAME career practitioner and postgraduate student and have additionally noted a distinct culture shift in how higher education as a sector responds to an ever diversifying student body. There certainly feels to me that there is a need for our experiences to be shared and contributed, but also for research like this to stimulate wider discussion within services and across the sector.

We are still at the planning stage, but will soon be setting up student focus groups. We feel privileged to be able to access a student body who are active in applying their student experience to their professional practice. Results of the research should provide some small scale qualitative data, which can be utilised by all career practitioners to enhance working relationships within their own teams as well as with their clients and other institutional stakeholders.”

Marni McArthur,

Student researcher (postgraduate student, MA in Careers, Education, Information and Guidance in Higher Education)

The features of this project highlight some significant points about practitioner research:

- Begin with a real world problem
- Recognise whose voices are needed and where the power imbalances lie
- Refine your questions
- Take a pragmatic approach to securing the resource and backing needed
- Prepare the ground for your findings, sensitising everyone that you want to engage

If you are interested in this topic, and particularly the career and professional development of BAME staff in our sector, do get in touch with any of us.

“As a black woman fairly new to higher education careers education, and having recently completed a postgraduate careers qualification at Warwick alongside various practice roles, I was keen to find out more about this research.

When I was accepted to study for the Postgraduate Certificate in Career Development and Coaching at the University of Warwick, I asked myself questions that this research project will explore. Would I be the only black person on the course? Would I feel confident enough to bring up experiences and examples based on race? Would the study materials reflect a diverse range of educators? Would the delivery be inclusive?

This research can provide a stimulus to important conversations about race and the careers profession, adding to existing conversations taking place in areas like academic teaching (e.g. ‘decolonising’ the curriculum), widening participation, closing the attainment gap and the student experience.

Are students more inclined to use the careers service if the staffing and service delivery are more inclusive? What impact could this have on graduate outcomes? These questions arose from a Black History Month focus group I was involved in, focusing on BAME student engagement with the careers service. Feedback suggested that race does matter to students when it comes to engagement, from how workshops are delivered and who attends employer events, to who they want to book a careers consultant appointment with.”

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