

Amplifying Black Voices, Northumbria University, Lorna Hibbert,
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What we did

Working with our academic partner Biddy Casselden, we were awarded £3,000 funding from the University's Access and Participation Plan for 2022/2023, where one of the themes was narrowing the degree awarding gap for Black students. At the centre of the project lies the recognition that the experiences and needs of Black students within our university community are unique and valuable in shaping our Library services. 6 students were recruited using an in person informal recruitment event which helped initiate belonging and ownership of the project for the students. The students worked in pairs on 4 different themes:

- Identifying barriers Black students might face and ways we might improve accessibility of our Library services.
- Carrying out research into reading list diversity.
- Creating a Black voices reading list and further diversifying the Library collection
- Creating a Black voices Podcast

The impact

The students benefited from participation in the project in many ways, the quotes below are taken directly from the student ambassadors:

- "Being a student ambassador has helped me gain a broader perspective on students' experiences and has been instrumental in developing my networking skills. Through interactions with students, academic staff, and library staff, I have enhanced my interpersonal abilities and strengthened my time-management and organizational skills."
- "Well, it opened a lot more doors for me. I have learnt so much. working within a team, reporting to a line manager, working on a survey, presentations and the friendships too."
- "I gained a much better perspective on how Black people see and feel the world."
- "Aside the financial benefits, I personally believe I have made some wonderful connections been a part of the project. My part of the project exposed me to wide range of literatures in computer and information science."

Barriers and challenges

The students started their work part way through Semester 2, which resulted in time constraints and the latter part of the project felt rushed and we couldn't explore fully some of the feedback from the student ambassadors and fully promote their outputs to the University. The feedback questions were delayed due to issues students had using survey software. Creating a web presence was not part of our original project plan and therefore has to be subsequently fitted into the work timeline of our Discovery and Access team. The challenges and barriers the student ambassadors faced are as follows:

- "It was quite challenging combining my academic commitments, personal responsibilities and my role as an ambassador."

- “One task that could be considered slightly tedious was analysing the reading lists, which occasionally required a considerable amount of time to complete.”
- “Limited technology tools.”
- “Being able to act upon every idea given.”

Evaluation

The project was successful and all the aims were met, including a web site to showcase their outputs: <https://library.northumbria.ac.uk/Amplifying-Black-Voices>

The profile of the Library was raised resulting in opportunities to collaborate with colleagues across the University. A theme that emerged from the project was a “sense of belonging”. In 2023/2024 we are focusing on the following themes, broadening out our definitions to recruit Black and Asian students:

- Further develop the Podcast to explore some of themes that emerged from the student feedback questions e.g. promotion of our existing EDI collections and reading lists
- Creating an Asian voices reading list
- Development of resources to support academic staff with diversifying their reading lists.
- Creation of videos to celebrate cultural diversity, inspired by the Human Library concept.
- Partnering with other EDI schemes, the Student’s Union and academic research groups

How others could benefit from this example

Make the most of any funding opportunities within your own institution relating to EDI or the ALN EDI innovation fund. Having monetary incentives for students in tough economic times will result in higher participation rates both for partnering with students and incentives for giving their feedback. Gift cards were given out at the initial informal recruitment event and for students filling in the feedback survey about their experiences using the Library. Partner with and talk to colleagues in HR, the students union and other student support services. Find out about any EDI related research taking place and seek opportunities to partner up with academic colleagues. Think Big! Ask for more money. We had to ask for additional funding part way through our project as it was difficult to forecast the spend not knowing how long it would take students to be familiar with their themes and then complete the work.