Exploring Black British Off-Campus student experiences at the LSE

Abigail Tshola, LSE Change Makers
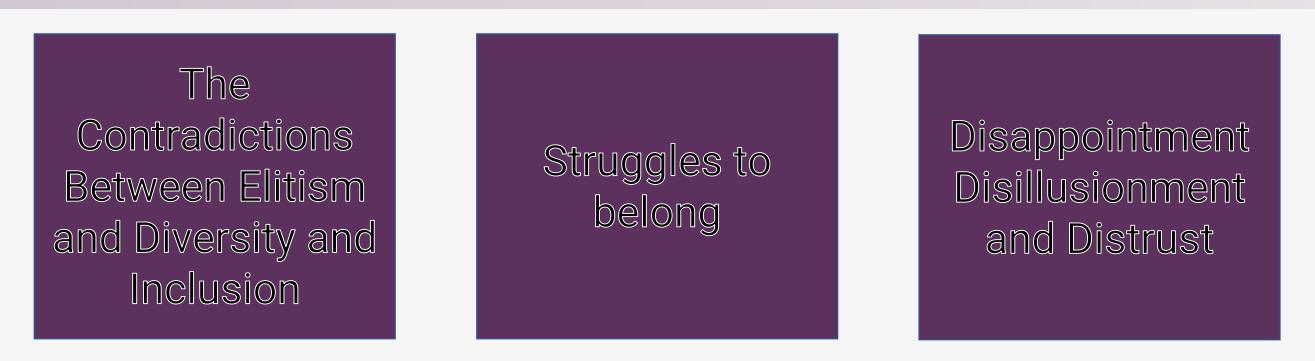
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LSE STUDENTS' UNION

Background

The LSE university prides itself on having a diverse and vibrant student body. The School houses students from over 140 countries. LSE is characterised by its international student body. It is no surprise, then, that inclusion and diversity are central to the LSE's 2030 Strategy. Yet, in 2019/20 Black British students constituted only 1.91% (a total of 159 Black British undergraduate and postgraduate students) of new entrants to the School. How, then, has the LSE addressed issues of inclusion for ethnic minorities from Britain, specifically Black British students living off-campus (BBOCS)?

Through exploring BBOCS' academic and social experiences at the School, this project raises important implications for existing diversity and inclusion initiatives at the School. This project also raises significant implications for current inner city BME (Black and minority ethnic) students – the targets of LSE Widening Participation schemes - attending state secondary schools and hoping to enter higher education institutions like the LSE.

Literature review

Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions have entered a "reflexive period" whereby the language of diversity and inclusion is invoked to demonstrate commitments toward establishing social, racial and economic equality (Arday, Branchu & Boliver, 2022, p. 20). Yet diversity and inclusion initiatives exist in stark contradiction to institutions' interest in maintaining elitism and exclusivity (Reay, 2018; Mirza, 2018). As my findings reveal, the elite nature of the LSE is what attracts prospective BBOCS and other students to apply to the School. However, elitism also produces forms of difference and exclusion, as BBOCS and other marginalised students enter the School. As Diane Reay (2018, p. 57) notes "[T]he paucity of BME students in elite HE means that the very few Black students who do make it to the elite universities have to confront social, psychological as well as academic challenges." In this way, diversity and inclusion initiatives, attempts to decolonise the curriculum and Widening Participation programmes are constrained by interests in preserving elitism and exclusivity (Mirza, 2018) .

The tension between diversity and inclusion and elitism means that there is "a troubling paradox of widening access and democratisation of higher education". Under these conditions, the inclusion of BBCOS and other marginalised categories serves to exacerbate these racial, economic and social differences. As Reay (2017, p. 121) notes "Growing diversity within the field of HE, rather than producing a more inclusive higher education, has resulted in a segregated and increasingly polarised system.". Despite moves toward diversity and inclusion, the Academy becomes a site of exclusion, violence and harm for marginalised students and ultimately precludes transformative change.

"[...] representation should not be down to a student's effort or a society's effort but rather be a School effort."

Methodology

I used snowballing sampling method and personal contacts to recruit participants for this project. Given that Black British and BBOCS constitute a small percentage of LSE's student population I was able to recruit five participants. I acknowledge the limitations of the number of participants selected for this project and hope to stimulate further research in this area.

All participants were undergraduate students, comprising of five BBOCS from different disciplinary programs (e.g. Sociology, Law, Anthropology, Social Policy). Each participant was born and raised in the UK and attended secondary and sixth forms in the UK.

I conducted five in-depth interviews which lasted between 60 – 90 minutes. I posed four research questions to structure my interview agenda. These questions were: *i) To what extent, if at all, do BBOCS feel included in student life ii) How far are existing procedures responsive to the needs of BBOCS? iii) How have BBOCS included themselves within LSE's community? iv) Do BBOCS think the school can support their sense of inclusion?* I then transcribed each interview using hematic analysis to extrapolate patterns and key findings and generate analytical themes.

Findings

Contradictions between Elitism and Diversity and Inclusion:

My participants expressed that they applied to the LSE because of it's status as one of the most elite universities in London. Participants understood the School's status to be reflective of it's diversity and inclusion of different people from different parts of the world. However my participants found that once they entered the School, there were deep-seated differences between these students and other students on campus. In other words, the diversity and inclusion did not always form a sense of community but worked to exacerbate differences related to race and class. The fact that they were off-campus was also a key area of difference and exclusion, however this intersects with race and class in important ways. For example, one participant pointed out how these differences manifested in terms of humour and recalls how some better-off students would make jokes about students in receipt of Student Finance loans.

The Contradictions Between Elitism and Diversity and Inclusion | Struggles to belong | Disappointment Disillusionment and Distrust

Struggles to belong:

Each participant described the extent to which they actively sought to establish friendships and connections due to their status as off-campus students. Additionally, each participants identified the African Caribbean Society (ACS) or similar societies as the place in which they made friendships and established networks. For my participants, the burden of facilitating a sense of community fell greatly on societies like the ACS and students themselves. Participants expressed frustration at the School and the Student Union for failing to actively work with ACS and other student led initiatives to establish a sense of community with Black British students at LSE. As one participant articulated "Real inclusion and representation should not be down to a student's effort or a society's effort but rather a School effort"

Disappointment, disillusionment and distrust:

Participants expressed suspicion at moves towards decolonising the curriculum in their department. They also expressed suspicion towards the language of diversity and inclusion and the Widening Participation they were apart of before entering the School. While participants articulated the importance of representation and diversity in curriculum, participants understood these moves towards diversity and inclusion as performative considering the invisibility and difference BBOCS experience at the School (Reay, 2018). Participants did not find the Off-campus support scheme as responding to the concerns of BBOCS. Participants also expressed concern in articulating experiences of exclusion and invisibility to teachers who are not Black and Black British. There is also a need to address the low levels of representation at staff level in the School (Ahmet & Howarth, 2016)

"The School doesn't listen to BBOCS or to anyone in general [...] because the University is a business, they will only listen to you once you have an idea that will enrich them, regardless of race "

Recommendations

- LSE, LSESU and LSE Life to work closely with the ACS and similar societies to alleviate the pressure of representation and events for Black British students
- LSESU to organise Black British events/seminars (i.e., during Black history month)
- Departmental and inter-departmental events/socials for Black British students (i.e., Research Dialogues where students are actively involved)
- Before entering the School, first year undergraduate students should submit surveys relating to their interests. The allocation of mentees to mentors should be based on mutual interests between mentors and mentees. This recommendation can be used for the Off-campus Support Scheme and Student Academic Mentor programmes.
- The School could provide immediate mechanisms for students to anonymously voice issues related to racism and provide a public forum where students and staff can talk about racial discrimination. Departments should have clear plans on how to address complaints and inform the complainants with follow up action taken within a prescribed timeline.
- Undergraduate and Graduate admissions criteria that are reflective of London's diversity.
- Add a TQARO Survey to explore BME and off-campus experience.

References

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Acknowledgements