

BME student experience with placements and the placement system in Sheffield Business School

Evaluated and conducted by: Sabiyah Rafiq
Facilitated by: SBS Employability Team
11/04/2019

NOTE

It is important to note that for the sake of this study the term "BME" has been used. It must be acknowledged that this term can be seen as limiting and controversial amongst individuals from ethnic backgrounds and can be perceived as a "convenient label placed on minority ethnic groups of people, rather than identities with which people have chosen to identify" and that people of colour have individualised identities which are not homogenised (Advanced HE).

1. INTRODUCTION

This report reviews the findings from a research study looking at students from BME backgrounds and their engagement and experience with placements and the placement system in Sheffield Business School. Previously, quantitative data was gathered looking at the number of BME students who had taken a placement over the course of two years from 2016- 2018 in the department of FABS, where BME representation was high. The data found that there was a significant gap between BME students and their white counterparts, where the percentage of white students in 2017/18 who had taken a placement was at 48%, whereas, the number of BME students who had taken a placement was significantly lower at 29%. In 2017, the percentage of white students who had graduated and had taken a placement was at 57% whereas the number of BME students was at 22%. In 2016, this was again lower, where only 22% of BME graduates had taken a placement compared to the 61% of white graduates. Similar to these findings there is an evident gap of engagement with placements in SBS and across the University between BME students and their white counterparts. Thus, this research was conducted to:

- identify where the key challenges and issues lay with the placement system for BME students in SBS
- evaluate the support systems and structures in place
- understand and capture the student voice and experience
- look at the best ways to promote and increase BME engagement with placements

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1.1. Methods:

The methodological approach taken in this study was a qualitative approach in the form of two methods; semi-structured focus groups and an open-ended questionnaire. The study was solely opened to **home** SBS BME students living in England. In order to map the journey of experiences of these students with the placement system, students from level three to graduate level who had or had not taken a placement/were or were not considering a placement were invited to attend a focus group via email. The study aimed to engage up to forty students by offering £20 Amazon vouchers as a form of incentive. As a result, four focus groups were conducted:

- Focus group 1: Level 3 and level 4 students- opened to all students.
- Focus group 2: Level 5 students-opened to all students.
- Focus group 3: Level 6 students -opened to strictly students who took a placement year.
- Focus group 4: Level 6 and post level 6 students-opened to strictly students who did not take a placement year.

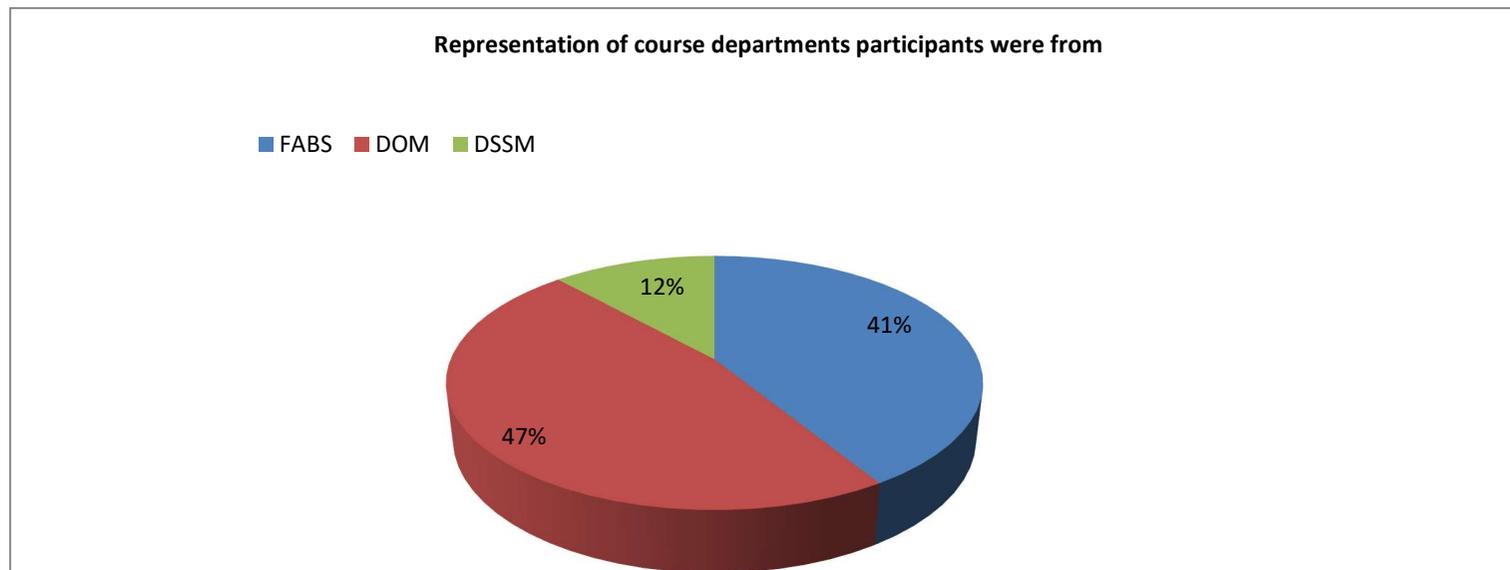
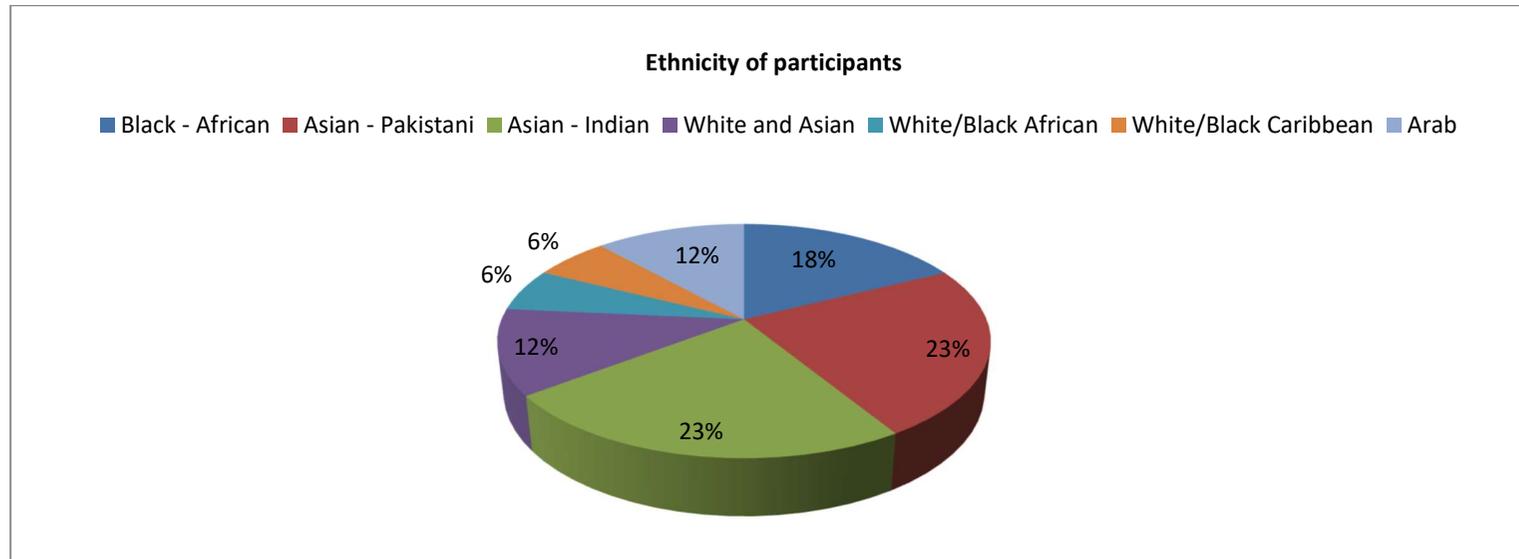
In the focus groups the students were asked a series of ten-eleven questions (please refer to appendix 1). These questions involved looking at the sense of belonging students had prior to placements, their views on placement support services and exploring their experiences as a whole through their placement journey. For each focus group, questions were slightly altered and reworded to meet the suitability and level of knowledge of the students. For example, students in level three to four were asked general questions surrounding their knowledge and interest in placements, whereas five to seven were asked more in-depth questions surrounding the placement process and their experiences.

For students who could not attend the focus groups, but wanted to participate in the research, the questions were uploaded into a Google Form (please refer to appendix 1.)

2.1.2. Representation:

17 students participated in the research- 13 participated in the focus groups whilst 4 completed the Google Form questionnaires.

Below is a breakdown of the representation of the participants in terms of ethnicity, faculty departments and courses.



Participants who took part in the study were specifically from the following courses below:

Course
BA HON BUSINESS AND MARKETING
BA HON BUSINESS STUDIES
BA HON FINANCE AND BANKING
BA HON MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS & ADVERTISING
BA HON ACCOUNTING AND FINANCE
BA HON BUSINESS AND ENTERPRISE MANAGEMENT
BA HON BUSINESS ECONOMICS
BSC HON FOOD AND NUTRITION
BA HON BUSINESS AND HUMAN RESOURCE MNGMNT
EXTENDED DEGREE IN BUSINESS
BSC HON INTERNATIONAL HOSPITALITY BUSINESS MGT

2.1.3: Limitations:

The percentage of participants who took part in the study was small and therefore, the sample size was limited in capturing a wider range of BME experiences. However, for qualitative research purposes the sample size was suitable in gaining in-depth insights into the experiences and challenges students faced. Furthermore, as the sample size was smaller there were limitations in the representation of the students from all SBS courses. **Please refer to the table above to see the sandwich courses which are not listed and where further research may need to be conducted.**

5. FINDINGS

5.1.1 Sense of belonging and diversity:

In this research the concept of sense of belonging and diversity was explored to evaluate if such factors were affecting BME student engagement with undertaking placements. It has been explored that “academic preparedness and student motivation contribute to poorer rates of continuation and completion” as does a “lack of integration into an institution” (2019, Thomas). Therefore, students were asked how they felt they “belonged” in SBS prior to considering or undertaking a placement. Across the year groups there was a mixed response. A few BME students (particularly first year students) expressed that they had a positive connection and experience with SBS:

“My connection with SBS and the University overall has been positive. I have always received the support when I needed it.” [Level 4 student considering a placement.]

“I was fortunate enough to have a very positive experience with both the University and SBS. I felt valued by certain members of staff.” [SBS non placement graduate.]

However, recurrently the issue of being the only ethnic minority and the lack of diversity in seminars was commonly brought up within focus groups. This greatly impacted the manner in which students felt they belonged, and it was evident that there was a level and sense of disparity between BME students and their white counterparts, which ultimately influenced their perceptions on placements:

“First year and second year I always felt like I stuck out like a sore thumb. I kept myself to myself. It did impact it (choosing to take a placement.) Everybody felt comfortable with each other and everyone was friends, so every time it was group work I just wanted it to be over with.” [Level 7 non placement student.]

“There are no ethnic minority lecturers in food except for _____. If you can see that in your lectures, you’re expecting it at placement. I had already mentally prepared myself to fight and to be heard and not to be disrespected.” [Level 6 placement student.]

“Sometimes being the only ethnic minority it’s hard sometimes to make friends. So like always everyone has their little groups and there’s just me and I’m floating and I come in and do what I need to. If I did have questions who the hell would I ask? Who would I go to?” [Level 6 placement student.]

5.1.2. Perceptions of placements:

Although statistically the level of BME engagement with placements is evidently lower, the focus groups and questionnaires highlighted that the BME students were aware and knowledgeable of the benefits and value of placements. For BME students who were particularly keen on gaining a placement, they strongly believed that doing a placement year would enhance their employability skills and develop their personal and professional growth:

"I am extremely excited to do a placement year. I would like to find a role that is very hands on and will allow me to understand theory through application." [Level 4 student considering placement.]

"I think a year out is a good detox. Two years in this environment is too much." [Level 5 student considering placement.]

"It's a trial year you can work out what you want to do." [Level 6 placement student.]

However, for the BME students who were aware of the benefits but were not interested in doing a placement, their responses indicated a lack of cultural capital of placements:

"I'll be honest with you, coming from a Pakistani background I've always put pressure on myself not my family. I always wanted to get things done by a certain age. The more years you waste the slower you'll be... I think that's a societal impact, but it's also a cultural impact. Because I took a gap year, that already put me behind a year, so I thought that I didn't have a choice to do a placement year. I'm the first to go to uni from my family so I didn't really know what my boundaries were, I always thought you can't move out, you can't go here, you can't do this... coz I didn't know. But if I pushed for it I would have got it 100%." [Level 7 non placement student.]

"I always thought it was a waste of a year. I always thought I could get experience other ways." [SBS non placement graduate.]

For level six students who had undertaken a placement their perceptions and outlook on placements differed greatly after taking a placement. For some, the experience had been greatly beneficial in developing their employability skills and sense of responsibility, regardless of the challenges they faced:

"At the start they didn't give a lot of responsibility but that was coz of other placement students. I wanted more responsibility and my manager gave me that. I asked for it. They created a job position coz of my work." [Level 6 placement student.]

"We led a consultancy project. We had the CEO in the room and they've taken that (the project) on. It was such a great experience." [Level 6 placement student.]

However, some BME placement students expressed that they were not challenged enough or had to push to gain the experience they required, as employers failed to truly value their capability and skillset:

“We didn’t get much responsibility. We weren’t allowed to talk to clients.” [Level 6 placement student.]

“I weaselled my way into bigger opportunities. I got a mix bag.” [Level 6 placement student.]

5.1.3. Overt and covert racism

During the focus groups, students openly shared stories and scenarios where they faced covert and overt racism whilst either seeking a placement or on placement. Students shared stories of how they were racially abused, stereotyped, faced microaggressions and dealt with their racial identity within a workplace or at interview stages and the impact this had on them:

“There was a culture of being sort of like... racist, Islamophobic... and it was just... it was normal. But to hear it you’re just a bit taken aback. “[Level 6 placement student.]

“I think in terms of ethnic minorities it was just my location. It’s in the middle of nowhere. I was miserable. I didn’t think people had met black people before, but then I go to _____ and everyone’s staring at me.” [Level 6 placement student.]

“This guy he used the N word on me and he denied it. And I’m just like your letting it go. It isn’t about me, your normalising it so he’s gonna go out there. I have not experienced that behaviour in the 22 years of my life. You see it on Tv and think that doesn’t happen here, but for it to happen to you, it’s a humbling experience, like... that’s how people actually see me.” [Level 6 placement student.]

“I went to this interview they kept asking me if I could move away coz I was Asian.” [Level 5 student considering placement.]

“My experience was different, I’m used to being the only mixed race person in the room and it doesn’t phase me. Either I’m the whitest person in the room or the darkest person in the room. My mum who is black Caribbean has prepared me to deal with those experiences, to learn how to negotiate those experiences.” [Level 6 placement student.]

5.1.4 Trust and cultural competence in support services

Students were asked about their views surrounding the support services SBS and the University offered. This included views on the placement support team such as PETS, the careers service and academics. In general, students praised the support they had received by careers and academics:

“I believe that they (academics) are encouraging us to work hard now to increase our chances of getting our choice of placement.” [Level 4 student considering placement.]

“Careers are sick. They were happy to help me with interviews. They are always there.” [Level 5 student considering placement.]

However, students, particularly those who had faced racial incidents expressed that they had a lack of trust and faith in support services to handle racial incidents and expressed that staff, either on placement or at University were not equipped with the skills or training to deal with such incidents and therefore would not report such incidents again:

“I don’t think University know how to deal with these things (racial incidents). I don’t think they know what to do or how to deal with it. Because for me when I went to my tutor and I said, look I know they don’t mean it but being referred to as a coloured girl is not funny, if I go to the HR team which is composed of the same people, with that same culture, what am I going to get out of that situation? If I go to my manager she’d be like that’s what I call you, what do you want me to do? Coz it’s easy to go to my manager... oh er “Rob” shouted at me and I didn’t appreciate it, she’d respond to that, but if I said “Rob” called me the coloured girl she’d just be like I don’t know what you want me to do... making me feel uncomfortable. I can’t imagine other girls going to that place, going through that who don’t have my personality. It’s horrible. There’s nothing against my academic adviser, but they need that training, coz I know uni always go on about how they want to make things better for black minority students but.... I don’t know... ” [Level 6 placement student.]

“Like when I had my situation, the HR team told me and he was honest that he hadn’t dealt with that situation before. They didn’t have a procedure in place to deal with the situation so he had to research. His research was just to talk about it and I was like your offering me counselling I don’t want that.” [Level 6 placement student.]

As well as the failure of staff being able to competently handle racial incidents, the issue of University staff being culturally competent and aware of different student needs was expressed. Students felt that staff were not wholly aware that their needs were different to their white counterparts and therefore, staff did not acknowledge they required extra support and encouragement:

“There needs to be a BME placement support tutor coz don’t get me wrong the lady in employability she was great, but I know I need ten times more work than my course mates for my CV to stand out, and I need someone who understands that. I don’t need someone telling me

that my CV looks just as good as anyone else when I know my CV needs to look ten times better than everyone else for them to even look at them.” [Level 6 placement student.]

“I excluded myself from any placement discussion. Like I said a majority of the cohort were white, their parents were educated, and I just didn’t think it was my reality. I just think if someone from my background or any other BME background explained that to me I would've perceived it all differently. It’s like... it’s like the cultural... the societal norm... where if I came across someone who has dealt with it and where im from it would've been a different story. I mean even if one of my academic tutor was BME it would have made a difference 100%. Coz they (academics) only spoke from one angle and I always felt that I am different from you and that is a fact. I’m not even trying to exclude myself; I am brown, I am a muslim, I am a woman.... my background and norms are completely different. [Level 7 non placement student.]

“My friend was not open to placement opportunities because her family wanted her home. Some people need to express how their culture fits around their lives and talk to someone openly.” [Level 5 student considering placement.]

“For me personally I initially did want too (apply for placement), but once I changed my mind to not, I think only one to one help could of persuaded me to apply again” [Level 6 non placement student.]

5.1.5 Perceptions on alternative routes to placements

Students were asked if alternative routes to placements would be more likely to engage BME students who may not be able to undertake placements. Many expressed that the routes such as summer internships, work shadowing and short-term placements such Business in Practice would be great for students who couldn’t undertake placements:

“Business in Practice, switching a year out to do a placement, I think stuff like that would be great-even work shadowing. Makes it a lot more accessible-there wouldn’t be any reasons a person couldn’t do that”. [Level 5 student considering a placement.]

“It isn't as easy as we all imagine it to be when finding placement in Sheffield. Many students may struggle to leave the city due to family commitments. Maybe for other students, it would have been the help to find local placements, or possibly summer internships rather than a full year out.”[Level 6 non placement student.]

*“Maybe provide students with placements at university if that is the field that they look to enter at some point in the future.”
[SBS non placement graduate.]*

6. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- From the above findings it is clear that the issues and challenges lay between how the University handles and deals with the different needs of BME students. BME students in the study showcased an interest in pursuing placements, however, due to a lack of targeted support and a greater awareness of their needs, some were prevented from taking a placement in the long term and some struggled whilst on placement.
- For those students who expressed the choice in not taking a placement for reasons such as locality and family commitments, or due to a lack of cultural capital surrounding placements, could have been supported via alternative solutions and encouragement. It was evident students required prompts and support to fully consider the impact of their choice and decision in not considering a placement.
- Furthermore, the cultural competence and training of staff in dealing and supporting students who face racism and discrimination is a cause for attention and concern. Students independently dealt with negative experiences and failed to have full faith in the reporting system at the University and simply “withstood” the racial abuse and microaggressions they faced.
- The lack of action and consequences employers face for such acts was also a concern. Students expressed that dealing with such employers would not be an issue today, as the implications of being an employer with such an image would be negatively consequential. .
- Inclusive practice in seminars and building connections with students from different backgrounds is another area to be improved. By building and improving such relations, students are less than likely to isolate themselves and more likely to engage with opportunities such as placements.

For each of the challenges listed above, the following recommendations were put forth by students involved in the study to support and encourage BME students with the placement process in the future:

- SBS to have a variety of BME role models to support and encourage BME students with placements and the system.

- All placement staff to be trained to deal with racial incidents on placements and to be culturally competent in handling student needs and concerns.
- Offering alternatives to long term placements for students who cannot commit to full time placements and moving away.
- Regular contact and personal check-ups on placement students to ensure issues are dealt with early on.
- Build rapport with students in first and second year so students can fully trust and share experiences and concerns with staff.
- Creating an inclusive classroom and experience to promote sense of belonging.
- Better BME representation of placement reps.
- An accurate and honest depiction of placements and what to expect as a BME student.

7. BME AMBASSADOR SOCIETY

Prior to the study, in talks with the previous dean of the faculty, talks of setting up a BME Ambassador Society was discussed. Students in the research were asked how they felt about the society- a majority felt it was a positive idea, particularly those who found it hard to interact with their peers. This could be another medium and solution to support BME students with the placement process:

“YES - it’s so important to recognise BME students and the challenges we face due to being who we are. It’s important that we are seen as valued and can come together to establish something positive and help one another!” [SBS Graduate.]

“I think that’s a good idea. I’m on the committee of a society and there is nothing more annoying than them throwing things which don’t relate to all cohort of students” [Level 6 placement student.]

“I think that would be sick. I find it hard to interact with other students. [Level 5 student.]

“Yes I think it’s a good idea and a specific thing that will be useful for CV’s.” [Level 4 student.]

References

Advanced HE (n.d.) *Use of Language: Race and Ethnicity* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/using-data-and-evidence/use-language-race-ethnicity/> [Accessed February 2019]

Thomas, L. 2016. Developing Inclusive Learning to Improve the Engagement, Belonging, Retention, and Success of Students from Diverse Backgrounds. *Widening Higher Education Participation*. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780081002131000093> [Accessed February 2019]

Appendix 1

L4/ 5 Placement Questions:

1. What is your connection like with SBS and the University so far ? (e.g. attendance, staff.)
2. Have you heard about doing a placement year? What do you know so far?
3. Would you want to do a placement? Why, and what would be the right placement opportunity for you?
4. Which companies would you like to work for?
5. Are you aware of the support available to you in finding more about placement opportunities?
6. Would you use these support services?
7. Do you feel confident about applying for placement opportunities in the future? If not- why?
8. Do you have any other doubts or concerns about doing a placement? Have you spoken to someone about this?
9. What support do you feel students need with placements?
10. What do you think of the idea of short term placements?
11. What do you think of the idea of having a BME ambassador society? Would you want to volunteer?

L6-Placement Student Questions:

1. What is your connection like with SBS and the University? (e.g. attendance, experience in seminars.)
2. What prompted you to take a placement?
3. What kind of factors did you take into consideration when choosing a placement? e.g. location, pay, home commitments.

4. Did you have any worries or doubts before going on placement? (e.g. home commitments, work, location of placement.) How did staff support you to overcome this?
5. How did you find the application process of applying for a placement?
6. Overall, what were your experiences like on placements? Both positive and negative.
7. What were your strongest achievements and success points?
8. Did you feel happy and comfortable within the work space? How did that make you feel?
9. If something was to go wrong on placement did you feel comfortable speaking to your mentors at work? Or the staff at the University? Would you report things?
10. Would you recommend a placement to other students?
11. What changes could be made to improve the placement services?
12. Why do you think students don't engage as much with placements?
13. External question: What do you think of the idea of having a BME ambassador society?

L6-Graduate Non Placement Questions

1. What was your connection like with SBS and the University? (E.g. attendance, experience.)
2. What prompted you to not take a placement?
3. Did you have any concerns or doubts about doing a placement? (e.g. home commitments, work, location of placement.)
4. Did you speak to someone about these concerns? If not- why?

5. Did you access any of the support services offered to students for placements? (e.g. careers service, speaking to employability tutors.) How did you find this support?
6. What would have persuaded you to do a placement?
7. What challenges do you feel students face when applying for placements?
8. If students had to undertake short term placements- do you feel they would still face the above challenges?
9. What can we do to support other students with the placement process?
10. External question: The University is looking at creating an Ambassador Society for BME students. Do you think this society would be beneficial for students?