

The Race and Ethnicity Hub

Challenging Times: Barriers to access for BAME people

Stephen Burnley:

[GLITCHY NOISES]

And this presentation grew out of an esteemed project and also based on our Commonwealth Scholarship scheme students. Like all these events, it's a huge team effort. Loads of people have taken part, not least are our admin team and our supporters.

But two people in particular I'll mention are Sinead, who is hoping to join us today. I'm not sure you're with us yet. Sinead, who is one of our ALs in Dublin. And she was co-investigator on the Esteemed Project I'll be talking about. And secondly, I'd like to thank Suresh, who I know is here, who is looking after big Commonwealth Scholarship scheme at the moment.

So, thank you to both of you for your contributions.

And what I'd like to do this morning is to say a few words about the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme and even a few about our environmental management program. A bit about why we take part in this scheme and what we knew when we started on the scheme.

And then, we had the right idea-- well, why don't we ask the students how it's going? Which led to the STEM project.

And then, I want to present a few results about what we've learned from the students, some of the ALs and from our support people, and to finish by looking at, what should we do next? I think it's appropriate that this is the end of Black History Month in that time, perhaps looking forward rather than backwards.

So just to remind anyone who's not aware of it-- a bit about the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme. It's run by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, which is part of the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office. Until relatively recently, it was part of the Department for International Development.

We'll have to see how things have changed under the new ownership. It does seem to be talking an awful lot more about promoting British interests and slightly less about supporting Commonwealth members. But we'll have to see what happens.

But under the Scholarship scheme, they provide bursaries for students in Commonwealth countries to take distance-learning master's degrees at UK universities. And the bursaries are extremely generous. They cover all the students' fees, but they also help fund us through providing the cost of recruiting the students and providing additional support, such as extra tutorials, some of the ALs, and also funds for members of the module teams to go out to run face-to-face tutorials in the country. So, if any of you don't have Commonwealth Scholarship students at the moment, which is probably most of you, do take a look, do talk to Suresh and myself. And it's a great thing to be involved in.

I won't say too much about the Environmental Management MSc. But perhaps I'll make one point. And that is that graduates have to be proficient across the board. So that means they need to understand the maths, the science, and the technology behind environmental management. But they also need to be proficient in the softer skills-- communication, consensus building, and taking environmental decisions.

So, it's quite tough as a course. And it challenges all students, regardless of their background.

So that's the MSc. And I don't know if I'd hinted at this, but I'd just like to suggest why we take part in the scheme in the Engineering and Innovation School.

We first joined it because our former colleagues in development management, who now move to FASS school said it was such a good thing. We feel very strongly that if the OU is really open to people, places, methods, and ideas and wants to improve the environment globally, we need to be beyond this small island off the edge of, and, to spread the wings further.

Taking part in the scheme helps us develop as teachers, as researchers, as scholars. I used to think I knew quite a lot about solid waste management until one of the FASS people organized a study tour to Uganda which I was able to visit. And suddenly I woke up, and I was strolling around the Kampala landfill site. And that visit has coloured my views of how we should be working immeasurably. And it was such an eye opener.

I'd be lying if I was saying student numbers weren't an important feature. But if you have an MSc program and you've got 10 more students suddenly to host, it does wonderful things for convincing the powers that be to keep the program going. And lastly, this is a bit of hindsight, but I hope you find, as the talk continues, how wonderful our students are what a privilege it is to work with them and help them. So that's why I would take part in the scheme.

Well, what did we know when we started with the scheme? Not a huge amount. We knew that the students are all graduates, and the selection process is very competitive. So, the students are generally very strong and keen people.

But on the downside, we were aware they have no experience at all of the UK scholarship traditions. So, we suspected there could be issues with critical analysis and academic practice. And that's about all we knew. So clearly there was quite a lot that we didn't know.

Then, we had the bright idea after running the project for a couple of years that we should ask the students and those working with them, how it was going and what we could do better. Unfortunately, we won some funding from the STEM scheme, the faculty's scholarship project scheme to do various things.

And they were relatively simple tasks at first sight. We looked at the student performance statistics, we interviewed two of our wonderful team of ALs. we attended a student focus group meeting. And Sinead carried out some very detailed, in-depth interviews with five of our students. And the rest of the talk is based on the findings from this STEM subject.

So firstly, some numbers in a graph, I have to show my engineering background! And this chart shows how the five groups of students have performed to date. If we look at our first group who started in 2015, we were given 11 scholarships. Seven of them now have soundly graduated with their MScs.

One is still studying her final research module, and one decided to stop up the postgraduate diploma stage. This particular person already had a PhD and felt that they wouldn't learn a huge amount from the research phase. And unfortunately, two of the students had to leave after failing a couple of modules.

The year later we got a smaller number of students. And of that seven, five of them are still studying or have obtained their MScs. 2017-- we were given a large number of students again. And of course, none of them have graduated yet, but 10 of them are still studying. Two unfortunately have left us. The 2019 group-- five students still are studying. And 2020-- we have 11 students who started the first module two days ago, and they're all with us.

So, on balance, it looks as though the students are doing pretty well. And we can try and compare their performance with that of the UK peers. Of course, with modules rather than qualification registration, it's not always easy to teach students out at the start of their postgraduate journey with us. But in autumn 2015, we had nine students who started their first module who declared that they were working towards the environmental management

qualification. We had the 11 Commonwealth Scholars and one other student from outside the UK or the EU.

And if you look at the bottom line we see, of the home students, only a third of them have obtained their qualification or are actively studying compared to the rest of the world students, mainly the Commonwealth Scholars. And we can see that 83% of that first cohort are either studying or have obtained their MSc.

So, you might wonder, well, performance like that-- if all our home students matched it, I think our managers would be extremely pleased, and we wouldn't be worried. But we felt that we could still learn a lot to understand how the students were faring. So, the next stages we set up the focus group.

Now, the original plan with this was that Sinead would run the focus group the day after one of the tutorials in Nairobi. And about two minutes into it, it became very clear that the students wanted to run the focus group. So, we thankfully said, OK, go ahead. And Sinead and I sat at the back with our notepads and let the students get on.

And I'm so pleased we did this. The students had just finished a module where consensus building and generating ideas was one of the key features. So, they wanted to practice their skills. And I'm sure by letting them get on we got an awful lot more information than we would have done.

And it was quite eye opening what they told us. Firstly, some of the students told us that they would typically spend three to five hours on the single journey to Nairobi to attend a tutorial or the day school. Now, that really surprised me and demonstrated the commitment these people have. It made us realize that once the students are there, we need to take account of the fact that some of them have done almost a day's work before they even get there. And we need to make sure the experience is really worthwhile for them.

The second thing-- several of the students commented that they had problems with childcare or with getting time off work. We can help with the latter situation-- the time off work-- by providing letters to student's employers to remind them that they are studying, and they do need to attend these sessions. When it came to childcare, I think the students were half hoping that we could perhaps give them funds to pay for care, which of course unfortunately we can't do.

But moving on, the students were overjoyed with the quality and timeliness of their TMA feedback. The idea of getting feedback on their assignments within two weeks of submitting them was very new to them compared to their previous full-time study. And the students also

pointed out the ability to have extensions to the TMA was extremely important to enable them to keep up with the studies.

When it comes to keeping up, the students commented about issues relating to time zones. When we were in a whole group tutorial at, say, seven PM in the UK, that translates to 10 PM for the Commonwealth Scholars. Not surprisingly, at that time in the evening, aren't at their freshest and best. So, we need to take that into account.

One thing they told us, which did rather worry us slightly, is that the students say some of them felt uncomfortable with the tone of the tutorials and the whole module as well. Basically, they found that a lot of the home students, who of course are all native English speakers, were very quick to jump in and to share their views in the adversarial cut and thrust of academic debate that we have here.

And lots of the Commonwealth Scholars were uncomfortable with this. They like to take their time and slowly come to a consensus working as a group as a whole rather than to challenge each other. So, I think that was an important learning.

And we've made two changes to that. With many thanks to our ALs, we've been able to offer tutorials at a time to suit the Commonwealth Scholars. Even one of our tutors who is happy to run sessions at 6:00 AM UK time, which is when the Commonwealth Scholars really liked them. We also have forum, which is just available to the Commonwealth Scholars, but that isn't used very much.

So, moving on, another focus group finding was the students found that critical analysis of material and reflecting on their learning were new skills to them. The idea that you could take a journal paper published by Professor Smith and say what was wrong with it was rather alien to them. The fact that it was published by an eminent professor as far as they were concerned meant it couldn't be challenged. So that's something we've had to work on.

We found unfortunately that bad academic does practice. So, it does happen. And I use the phrase "bad academic practice" rather than "plagiarism" because it isn't plagiarism in the students are attempting to pass off other people's work is that. It's bad practice in that their quotes are far too long, or their quotes aren't identified his quotes.

And exploring this in more detail, we found that it was-- the fact that the students were often working in their second language and when time pressures were on them, they tended to just copy chunks to try and add something. Again, another area we need to think about, and are doing.

Some of the other findings some of the focus group was really interesting and an eye opener to us given the OU status in the UK. Because in Kenya and many African countries, distance-learning is looked down on. There are a lot of for-profit universities around who are basically just trying to get as much money as they can and disregarding the standards.

Also, the OU is just not widely recognized. And so that's something we need to think about a bit more. But on the positive side, the students found us to be friendlier and more nurturing than their previous universities. And bearing in mind, most of their previous study was done full time on a campus. On the practical point, the students said they would find a student ID card helpful because that would give them access to academic and government libraries. And that's something we're looking into.

And finally, they said, can we do graduation ceremonies for them? Very important for two reasons. Firstly, to share their celebrations with their families but also to provide evidence of their qualifications because apparently anyone who seeks public office in Kenya, their opposition and opponents-- the first thing they do is challenge their academic qualifications.

And it's so easy these days to forge an impressive-looking degree certificate. It's much more difficult to forge a photograph of them in academic dress shaking hands with someone in different academic dress, and particularly if it's from a European University, if they're shaking hands with a white person. So that was something the students asked for and something, as you will see later, we were very pleased to provide them with.

So that was the focus groups. Now, the next stage was done almost entirely by Sinead. And what we did was to organize a set of one-to-one interviews. These lasted for an hour to an hour and a half in total.

And the two people-- they found a comfortable area in our meeting room, some relaxed chairs. They sat down and chatted. And they used all sorts of tools to help explore their issues-- imagery, metaphors. And their also quite a bit of artwork involved, which I'll be pleased to show you in a moment.

Here's a word cloud of some of the commonly used words in the interviews. I think one of the most interesting things is there was an absence of words, at least in the top few, relating to their studies. We didn't hear them talking about TMAs or the internet or tutors. There was no significant difference between male and female students. Bearing in mind there were five in total, that's not surprising.

But some of the words they used, I think, were very interesting. They talked about study of course. But they talked about change in the context of making change in their communities, in

their country, about being active and acting to make change. So again, I think this is a real strong indication of the students committedness to their studies and their real noble aims of studying.

Well, some of the interview transcripts-- Sinead and I both picked out top positive comments-- we did this independently-- and then we produced a top 10 between us. And I'd like to share some of their positive comments with us.

One of the students noted the work is even better because all the modules are relevant to my work. And that's an important point, both from attracting students and attracting funding from the scheme. Because we're seeing our students can benefit from day one. And here's a student saying the same thing.

The students were so supportive of each other. And this one of them said, we have some discussion groups on WhatsApp. We share a lot about concepts we're not clear on. So again, this idea of the nurturing community they've built. I have to say it was really interesting, our induction day, about setting up WhatsApp.

So, I did my talk to the students and then said, it would be really useful if you wanted to set up some kind of self-help group using WhatsApp or whatever. One of the students looked at me and smiled and said, Stephen, we've already done it. And while I was talking, they'd sent down the list of mobile phone numbers and virtually all of them had signed up for it.

Thirdly, I mentioned about academic practice. And one student took it as a positive that they'd been found to have plagiarized. And the student said, I was not aware of plagiarizing. Yes, really. I didn't know sometimes I used to plagiarize unintentionally. And the students said, I had to be penalized several times. Now, I think that's wonderful, both to us and to our academic conduct officer who was able to waggle the stick in front of the student, and the student found this positive.

Finally, I mentioned the wide scope of the program. And as one student put it, it's not just narrowing to environment but also other aspects like economics, socio-- there's that opportunity. So, they really welcomed the opportunity to look at the whole breadth of the environment.

So those are some positive things the students had to share with us. Of course, there were negative things. And the first of our points refers to the activated sludge process which, for the non-environmental engineers among you, it's a way of treating sewage. And I'm sure if there's any questions, Suresh can field them afterwards.

But the point is, the student would say, we don't have such units in Kenya. So, they basically said it's difficult for them to understand it because they haven't got the opportunity to see the plants in practice. Of course, they probably don't appreciate-- most of our UK students can't just turn up at a sewage treatment works and look down the process. I think they did raise an important point about making sure that we include technology, which is relevant to the global South, while still talking about activated sludge. Because of course, our graduates are expected to understand that.

The second point relates to the forums and tutorials where the students had more participation from a section from Europe, so not like someone who just feels like, why should I post, and I can't identify with. So, this is the issue of the students feeling a bit uncomfortable in the tutorials.

Now, the final point is one of those things which I think is going to stick with me throughout my academic career. And although this is negative, it's not negative about the Open University.

But this female student said, I don't study at home. I don't have electricity in the house. I have to go outside and study in church. This person is no longer working.

And it turned out that her church was the only place she could go and sit quietly and study. And the convention was no one would come up to her and say, oh, what are you doing? And I think this is particularly important for the women students because if they're at home, their role is to prepare the family meals, put the children to bed, do the housework. And then, if there's any time left, they can start studying. So, this space to study was a very important finding, I think.

So those are some of our negative comments throughout some of the interviews. But I think, like all students, there were several paradoxes identified. I know we all feel good and bad at different times, and our Commonwealth Scholars are no different.

One student talked about having dreams and visions saying, we don't know how to take the next step. So, they can see this wonderful future but perhaps aren't always totally convinced about how they can get there. And someone said they feel great, but then they talked about communications problem and said that they have to be really keen to understand our writing style. And that's something I'll come back to in a moment.

And the third point was a student who, like many of our home students, had to take a study break. So, she ended up as the only Kenyan student in a cohort in a particular module. And she found that she was on her own and had to be independent, which was so unlike the group atmosphere that the students had generated. So that was another paradoxical finding.

Well, I mentioned metaphors. And Sinead, my co-investigator-- again, I don't know if you're with us. I hope you are-- is an extremely talented artist. And she was able to produce some metaphors based on what the students had said and their artwork, which I'll share with you. There's no statistical validity to these comments, but I think the stories are just so worth sharing.

One student described herself as a fighting student. And there we have the person coming out of Africa with the boxing gloves on, not literally fighting. But she talked about things like not giving up and the struggle, having to battle with social injustice and battle with gender injustice. So, there we have the fighting student.

One student talked about missing a word, which prompted Sinead to think about jigsaw puzzles. And the student said that, in an online tutorial or even working to some text, if it was just one word they didn't understand, particularly a technical term, they missed that word. And then, they lost the thread and couldn't work out where all the pieces fit together. So, this student felt they were missing a word, which is something which I think we can and are starting to take into account.

Another metaphor was a student felt that there was this Open University test tube that they were in. But in order to understand the issues properly, this student had to get out of the test tube. And, as they put it, they had to leave the test tube and then to YouTube to understand what our module materials were about. So they felt the need for more practical examples and ideally for study tools, visits to sites and so on, which again is something I'll come back to later.

And our fourth metaphor was a student who felt that they had to find their way and that it was more than just a question of right or wrong but what we were giving them was almost a moral compass. And this student described themselves as a child who was following the Open University down this path and wondering whether they were going to end up.

And it was either they or another student who puts it so articulately. And this person said, with this master's degree, we've been given a huge mountain to climb. But the Open University has provided us with a lift to get up the mountain. And again, I thought that was so wonderful.

So those are some of the results of the one-to-one interviews. To get more detail, look out for our esteemed report, which should be appearing on the website, hopefully in the not too distant future. And that means basically when I get my finger out and complete it.

So, moving on to summarize some of the barriers to successful study that the students helped us to identify-- well, firstly was what I called the Kenyan issues-- time zones, travel to the

tutorials, internet access. High-speed broadband is not widely available and it's comparatively very expensive. And even electricity isn't a given at home.

The language issue-- all the students had taken degrees in English. But it was still-- for many of them, it was their second language. Academic traditions-- the idea, yes, it's right to criticize work done by others, however eminent they are. Academic practice-- mentioned a few times.

The relevance of material, making sure that it does apply throughout the globe.

Support networks were a bit of a barrier in some respects. The students really supported each other. But some of them-- their families didn't really support them. We had one gentleman student whose father was a schoolteacher. And it wasn't until he donned his cap and gown at the end that his father thought he really was taking a degree because it was distance-learning and it was this foreign University.

Employers-- as I said, their support was more than paper and less on the ground in some cases. The students need facilities and space to study. We're starting to look into providing places in Nairobi, which is great for the students there but not for those who are five hours journey away.

Contacting the student support team-- students have difficulty with the telephone and email issues. And we did find that sometimes if the student appeared to be absent and wasn't getting back, it wasn't they'd ducked out, it wasn't lack of interest, it was just lack of ability to get in to share. So that needs to be thought about. And finally, the status of students-- we do need to help them establish that they are Bonafede students.

So those are some of the barriers. And I'm pleased to say we have taken steps to overcome them. And this is the "we" in respect of the team within the School of Engineering and Innovation. We're continuing to set assignment questions which allow the students to go on their own situation. So we will say to them, rather than review the UK's environment strategy, we're saying, find a country of interest to yourselves, get the strategy, and review it.

We're starting to simplify the way students interact with the support team. And basically, what we're putting in place at the moment is that, if it's an academic matter, they'll contact their tutor. If it's anything else, they will contact our school support people who will then act as a triage to their enquiry, possibly involve AL, possibly to one of the module team or possibly to a named person within the student support team who is aware of the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme.

We are starting to set up an alumni group. Now we've got half a dozen graduates out there in country to help provide support and hopefully to do things like host site visits in the future. We

started-- I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone forward then. We're starting to try and remember to adjust the timing and the pace of the online tutorials. We found that what the students like-- they like a short space of time interacting with the tutor and then maybe 20 minutes or so to reflect on their own and then to get together for another bite size. And that's something which ALs are starting to investigate.

The pace of the day schools-- we're always tempted-- or rather, I'm always tempted to cram as much teaching as I can into a day school. Given that these people may have traveled five hours to get there, we need to slow it down and build in, here's a bit of teaching, here's 20 minutes for some food and drink, because many of them are hungry, and to relax, to talk to their peers, and to reflect and to let the learning sink in.

We're starting to provide additional study skills material and support for academic practice to the students at the start of the module and throughout. We're also starting to make more use of WhatsApp. The students are great fans of WhatsApp because they can use that almost anywhere in the country, whereas a lot of them can't access the internet for significant times.

And also, we're encouraging the new students to participate with the OpenLearn preparation material. There's a batched open course called something like, "Are You Ready for Postgraduate Study?" And we then encourage students to engage with that.

So those are some of the things we've done. But what else do we still need to do? Well, I've mentioned the alumni group. That needs to be got off the ground. Once that's happening, hopefully it will be easier to organize site visits. We need to look into more about places to study. Of course, at the moment with the lockdown, that's perhaps on the back burner, but we simply need to do it when normality returns. And finally, there's the issue of the ID cards.

So that's what we've done. But what does the University as a whole have to do, things which are beyond the scope of the school? Well, the module materials-- and I'm sure this is true of students throughout the world-- they lack the materials in smartphone-friendly bit-sized chunks and in print, so wherever, whenever they can study.

We need to start producing module websites that take account of lack of broadband and low internet speed. I know at one time, there was a sort of emulator where you could put your website through a simulation of a dial-up modem. I don't know if that's available anymore, but perhaps we should think about it more.

We need to be encouraged to make the missions more globally relevant while still looking at the high technology. Oh, I'm sorry. I've done it again. Qualification-based registration-- this would help our statistics, which is perhaps a minor point. But it would also hopefully help to

encourage the feeling of cohorts of students and give them more peer support. I think the University as a whole should widen our participation in the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme. It's a wonderful scheme. I don't know why everyone isn't involved.

Having said that, to run the scheme takes a heck of a lot of effort from our admin and support people. And perhaps when we're thinking about setting them up, we tend not to think about that as much. So, we need to look at ways of streamlining the system, possibly even centralising it. We've got a wonderful system, FAS have a wonderful system. Other faculties may well have-- perhaps we need to talk to each of them a bit more.

And perhaps my last barrier, which I mentioned a lot to many people is, can we find some way of incentivizing students to do the "Are You Ready For" material and so once they do sign up, they're better prepared study? Well, that is a whistle stop tour through our STEM subject.

But the last slide of all-- as you see, we did organize a celebration for our new graduates in Nairobi. I think it was a year ago last weekend. And there four or our very proud graduates. They had a wonderful day with their families, and we enjoyed sharing their celebration. And that really is what the scheme is all about.

And I think at that point, I'll return you to Katrina. And I hope you enjoyed the presentation. Thank you.

[GLITCHY NOISES]