



STARTING CONVERSATION: RACE IN THE LAW SCHOOL

24th October 2018

Discussion report

Starting Conversation: Race in the Law School

OVERVIEW

The purpose of the event was to start a conversation about race and ethnicity in the Law School and to allow students to raise their thoughts and concerns about their experiences.

We tackled topics such as integration within the Law School, curriculum and welfare. In the first instance there was an opportunity to anonymously respond to the asked questions and subsequently we opened the floor for further discussion. Those who attended, both students and staff, shared their thoughts on the topics and their personal experiences of life in the law school.

Through the event, we were able to start an ongoing conversation and begin to identify some of the issues faced by BAME students. We have also begun to discuss solutions for improving diversity and cohesion in the Law School moving forward.

This report gives a summary of the discussion. It only highlights the issues that were raised and gives very preliminary suggestions for solutions. Moving forward, more work will need to be done to refine some of the issues so that they can be tackled head on.

We would ask that this report be treated sensitively as it comes from the personal experiences of members of the law school. Those who attended the event and gave accounts of their experiences will not be named.

INTEGRATION WITHIN THE LAW SCHOOL

Feedback from the discussion suggested that students felt that there was little integration between students of different ethnicities. This left many students feeling isolated and that they were separated from the community within the law school.

Students felt that seminar groups did not help with that process of integration. They stated that they did not feel comfortable enough to speak up in class for various reasons such as their accents and opinions. They also felt that in some instances, seminar leaders did not shut down inappropriate conversations concerning race leaving students feeling awkward and uncomfortable.

Solutions

To increase integration, some students suggested more icebreakers in seminar groups. They also recommended that seminar leaders made it clear that hurtful and ignorant statements will not be tolerated and speak up when situations arise within seminar groups.

Initiating programmes and events to encourage social mixing were also suggested. We will be looking into what these could look like.

WELFARE

During the event it was suggested that some students felt that they are unable to access the welfare services within and outside of the law school, be that through the welfare tutors, personal tutors or seminar leaders. We think that this is a major problem as we recognise the great services offered by the welfare team and think it is important that everyone can access them.

What transpired from the event was that it was cultural differences that caused students to feel like they would not be understood. Rather than going to the welfare team, it seemed that students were going to other members of staff who they felt they could relate to. This meant that they were not getting the help and advice that they needed, as they were not going to see the right people. Some students suggested that having BAME welfare staff may help with this issue.

The topic of funerals was also discussed at great length. The funeral process differs between cultures and some students felt that they were unable to get the time or support that they needed due to a lack of understanding. This linked to a more general issue around showing leniency and understanding when it came to the practices of other cultures and the idea that different events will affect people in very different ways.

Solutions

We think that it is important to make students aware of the great services that are offered by the welfare team such as extensions, RAP's and extenuating circumstances so that students do not miss out on help due to a lack of knowledge about the services.

We also think that it would be good to explain the process for accessing this support in order to make it more transparent. This way students may feel less intimidated by the unknown processes.

PERSONAL TUTORS

Some students at the event mentioned that they felt that their personal tutor did not understand them. They recounted times where their personal tutors laughed at their home situation or where they failed to grasp the severity of their circumstances. The students felt that this was due to cultural differences.

Solutions

The BAME Community Officers feel that moving forward, it would be good to have a process in place for changing personal tutors. It is impossible to know beforehand that all students are going to get on with and relate to their personal tutor. We see the importance in having tutors and recognise that they put a lot of time aside in order to offer this support. Therefore, we think that it is important to ensure that this avenue is not shut off for any student. If they do not feel comfortable going to their tutor, there should be some ability for them to change.

We also think that it would be great to create a welfare information pack for personal tutors that sums up the available services and procedures so that they feel equipped to address a student's problems. We understand that some things can only be done by the welfare team and so want to make this accessible.

CURRICULUM

Some students felt that there was a lack of intersectionality within the curriculum especially concerning race. They felt that issues of race in core modules were skimmed over or avoided, leading students to feel like those issues did not matter to lecturers.

In the same way that feminist jurisprudence is discussed in modules, students felt that it would be great to have a discussion about how laws impacted and were affected by people of different races. They felt that they would like lecturers to be more comfortable in discussing issues around race.

There was also talk about introducing a 'Race and the Law' module.

Solutions

Students said that they would like to see improvement in the integration between race and the law in current modules. They would like to see issues of race discussed in the same way that feminist issues and viewpoints are discussed.

Natasa Mavronicola is working on the foundations of a new 'Race and the Law' module.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

We are looking to continue the BAME Community Officer initiative as the positive response has proven a need for it in the law school. The importance of BAME students being advocates for one another was highlighted as being very important throughout the event.

This initiative will evolve into a student-staff committee which will help to improve the efficiency of solving some of the problems and demonstrate the law school's commitment to tackling the issues.

Going forward, we will be looking towards creating a system by which students can be directed towards BAME Officers who can help to advocate on their behalf as well as pointing them to the best course of action and to the services that are provided by the law school.

We have had very positive responses to the discussion event and other schools in the college have asked about how we set up the BAME Community initiative so that they can look into doing a similar thing.

We would like to make the discussion event more regular. We are looking to organise another one in Semester Two in which we will feedback to students on the progress we have made and will continue the discussion. We also want to create forums that allow students and staff to have these discussions regularly and to have some way to evidence the fact that suggestions are being acted on.

CONTACTS PAGE

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Designed the BAME community initiative as part of his role as Student Experience Officer. He secured the funding for the initiative through the Alumni Fund.

Ben Warwick: B.T.Warwick@bham.ac.uk

Helped to run and implement the BAME community initiative. He gave guidance and support throughout to the BAME Community Champions

Natasa Mavronicola: N.Mavronicola@bham.ac.uk

Helped to run and implement the BAME community initiative. She has begun the foundational work on creating a 'Race and the Law' module.

Emma Oakley: E.L.Oakley@bham.ac.uk

Helping to form the student-staff committee as part of her work to improve diversity and equality in the Law School.

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