

SCHOOL OF PHYSICS AND ASTRONOMY

BME Focus Group

November 28, 2018 (13:00—15:00)

Moustafa Gharamti

Background

As tasked by the School's Diversity committee, I organised a focus group to discuss BME issues affecting Physics and Astronomy undergraduate students. This event provided an informal and relaxed environment for students from all years and courses where they could talk about any BME issues within the School and the University. The aim was to hear what the students' experiences in the School and the University have been, both positive and negative, to identify any relevant issues, and to discuss any actions the school could take to improve things for all our students.

I wasn't sure which week to choose for organizing the event. I didn't want the focus group to be premature especially for the first-year students who are yet to become familiar with the school environment. However, one week before organising the event, being from an ethnic minority myself, I was asked by couple of BME students about ethnic diversity among the staff. Their question initiates discussion about BME students' issues and helped me find the good time for organizing the focus group, and identify topics for discussion. Also, their comfort in talking to me about their issues assured that the event will be carried out in a sensitive, relaxed and honest manner. A preliminary list of the topics for discussion is included in Appendix 1. Each topic was presented on a slide and projected on a big screen.

I invited all undergraduate students via e-mail (Appendix 2), and with posters (Appendix 3) posted on the UoN Physics and Astronomy Facebook page and distributed in key areas within the School. I was the only academic present, and 6 students participated; [REDACTED]. One of the students was white and I thought that helped the focus group a lot by hearing a white person perspective of the topics mentioned.

Overview

Though I was expecting more people to join, I thought that the focus group went very well. I thought that everybody was relaxed and involved in the discussion and in sharing stories and experiences. We used the whole two hours allocated, and we would have extended the session more if I didn't have another meeting.

The major complaint was the low number of BME students in Physics and Astronomy as compared for example to Engineering (more on that in the next section). In general, it was obvious that there are two major attitudes in living in a community with low diversity (the Physics and Astronomy School): One group of students were mentioning that they are adapting to the conditions, trying to make friends and live their lives. This usually happens at the cost of detaching emotions, or soothing themselves to the idea that they should be grateful to the new life compared to the community that they came from (privilege situation). The second group didn't want to adapt (expression used "white-washed") to the environment, because it will be just acting. They believe they are here for a purpose, which is education, and very soon they will move on, so why try to change to something that you don't belong to, when you know in four years you are out of this environment. The only issue with that, is the feeling of loneliness, and not having the opportunity to study with other students, especially when it comes to working on assessments.

Discussion, Thoughts and Recommendations

I organized the focus group such that I present a broad topic on a slide, and a related quote, to help initiate the discussion. I started by describing my own related experience within the University as a member of staff, which has been fantastic, and my teaching experience with all students. Each of the topics listed in Appendix 1 guided the discussion initially, but later participants were picking things up and discussing different thoughts and mentioning various experiences and stories. The thoughts and issues discussed and related recommendations proposed by the group are summarised here.

■ Thoughts/Issues:

- No discrimination in Physics and Astronomy School
- Number of BME students in Engineering > Number of BME students in Physics
 - Clearer career path with engineering major
- BME students feel much more comfortable around other BME students
- It is possible that we don't have discrimination because BME students in physics are clear minority, issues might arise if the BME rate increases (Engineering School example)
- White student: it feels more familiar to joke and talk to white people. We feel kind of cautious to make jokes in front of black students.
- Black student: White students are not making effort to understand the black culture (example: our sense of humour ...).
- On open days, black students look for each other, look for black ambassadors to ask University or city related questions. (Housing, food, going out ...)
- Racism in the system/structure not in the individuals. White students are not contributing to the system; hence they don't think there is a BME oppression.
- All participants mentioned that they don't feel discrimination from any member of staff, not in any teaching activity. They feel that they get same attention as any other student.

- One participant: I don't feel comfortable to practice my tradition. I even forgot that it's even a possibility to practice some of my culture at school.

■ Recommendations:

These recommendations are the participants' thoughts on possible solutions for the issues mentioned above.

- BME special tutor;
All participants mentioned that they feel more comfortable to speak about their issues to BME staff members, so they would like to have BME special tutor. This gives them the opportunity to disclose any issue honestly and at any time.
- Blinding names in marking;
Though all participants mentioned that they don't feel any discrimination within the School, they asked if it is possible to blind the names for the coursework. Now that we have electronic marking, I'm not sure how this is going to work.
- More BME ambassadors in open days;
As mentioned above, BME students look for each other on open days, so having more BME ambassadors will make new BME students feel comfortable and more welcomed.
- Black student representative;
One participant asked for the possibility of having a representative of black students. The role of the representative would be similar to the years' representative role, who can be the voice of other students and meet year leaders or the head of School to discuss students' issues.
- More diverse social event;
Participants suggested organizing more social events to bring the students with different backgrounds together, which will help them understand their cultures/backgrounds better. Participants also requested if the food can be more diverse in the social event, like cuisines from different cultures.
- Place for Muslims to pray on Friday;
One participants asked for the possibility of having a place for Muslims to pray on Friday. I mentioned that there is one place in Portland Building specified for that, he mentioned that he is always late to his lecture because of the distance he has to walk back.
- BME grant to study physics;
One of the participants' suggestions to increase the number of BME students in physics is to specify a scholarship for black students or ethnic minority students.
- More Focus groups;
The participants found this focus group very useful, and suggested to organize more often, at least once every academic year if possible. They also requested that the focus group email to be sent directly by the organizer. They mentioned that students ignore a lot of emails based on the sender.

Appendix 1: suggested topics for discussion

Each of the following points was presented in a slide and projected on a big screen. The idea was to initiate, but not direct, the discussion. I was surprised how every point/question was followed by very lengthy discussions and originated different topics and stories.

- My own experience
 - Experience with physics students as a staff member
 - Experience when I was a student and some of my family experience.
- Your experience. Mention incidents/experiences (good or bad) that you have experienced or witnessed.
- How often does the topic of your ethnic background come up? Did you ever hear an expression that you didn't appreciate?
- If you are in a group with other Physics students, do you feel you are being treated any differently?
 - Not much ethnic diversity, less friends
 - Need to change something to fit in
 - Other students are cautious to open certain topic when you are around.
- Have you ever felt that you were given less attention than other students at a lecture, lab, or workshop session?
- Is being BME a "non-issue" in physics is an issue?
 - Do other students take your issues seriously?
- Admin issues like names, clothes, culture etc.
 - Do you feel confident practicing your culture/traditions in the school ?
- What should the School do about it? What should you do about it?

The same email was sent on the morning of the focus group day 28/11/2018 as a reminder. The emails were sent by Melanie Stretton.

Subject:
Black and Minority Ethnic Focus Group

Email:
Hello everyone,

I'd like to invite you to participate in a focus group I'm holding to discuss BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) issues affecting Physics and Astronomy students. This event has been organized by the School of Physics and Astronomy Diversity Committee, as part of the School's commitment to an inclusive, safe and friendly environment for all of us.

I'm aiming for it to be an informal and relaxed event for students from all years and courses, where we can chat about any issues within the school and the University. I'm looking forward to hearing what your experiences in the school have been, both positive and negative, and to discuss any actions the school could take to improve things for all our students.

I will be the only academic present, and I am inviting all Physics and Astronomy undergraduates who would like to talk and listen about any BME related issues. A discreet location has been chosen so that we can all discuss freely.

Please join me for a chat. No booking necessary. All welcome. Just turn up!

Date: 28/11/2018
Time: 13:00-15:00
Venue: Physics C30 (13:00-14:00) and Physics C29 (14:00-15:00).

P.S. If you cannot come but would like to bring any issue to the School's attention, please feel free to e-mail me (moustafa.gharamti@nottingham.ac.uk). I assure you that the School will listen and take appropriate action if necessary. Complete confidentiality is assured.


Thanks. I hope to see many of you then.

Best wishes,
Moustafa


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Appendix 3: poster posted on the UoN Physics and Astronomy Facebook page and placed in key locations throughout the School

 The University of
Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA

BME Focus Group



Date: 28th November 2018
Time: 1pm - 3pm
Location: C307/C297 Physics Building

I would like to invite you to participate in a focus group to discuss Black and Minority Ethnic related issues affecting Physics and Astronomy students. This will be an informal and friendly event where we talk about any BME issues within the School and the University.

See my email for more details.
No booking necessary. **All welcome!**

Dr Moustafa Gharamti