NTU Student Parliament and Nottingham Citizens
Listening Campaign Group Events

In December 2020 the NTU Student Parliament hosted two listening events: one focused on Challenges of the Pandemic and Mental Health and the other on Structural Racism within the University, the city of Nottingham and society in general. This report includes the thoughts from the students involved, a summary of each event, and action points collated from both events.

Suggested Action Points:
NTU Student Parliament and/with Nottingham Citizens:
- Develop and formalise an NTU Student Parliament and Nottingham Citizen liaison role:
    - Continuity facilitated through written reports/stories by students from one year to the next
- Enhancing student leadership in wider Nottingham, including development and training:
    - Student leadership, with Nottingham Citizens, addressing structural racism and making the issue more visible. Running training events across the staff and students and wider community, within and out with the universities.
    - Members of the Student Parliament are running some events at the university as a direct result of the Group Listening event
    - Student led discussions on Mental Health, isolation and community, within and out with the university.
- Action points linked to isolation and the wider Nottingham community:
    - More opportunities and links with organisations across the city, enabling students to feel a sense of belonging within the local community.
    - International students from both universities need support in/from Nottingham community as a whole.
    - Structural racism - More platforms like this listening event but led by people of colour/with lived experience, with people across Nottingham.

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Challenges of Pandemic and Mental Health Group Discussion

Summary

The NTU Student Parliament held a listening event with students from all years of the Politics and International Relations department, focussing on the effects and challenges of the pandemic on our Mental Health. The group was self-selecting, signing up to take part in the event. This is a summary of the views and recommendations expressed by the student participants during the event.

The participants were very grateful for the chance to talk and would welcome more chances to engage with each other and staff, outside of academic work, in similar forums, with the opportunity of these being student led. The students also welcomed the idea of peer-to-peer support, possibly along the lines of the CERT Student Mentor programme, but across all years not just in the first year. Many of the participants find working remotely challenging and very isolating. However, some students found that it helped with pre-existing mental health difficulties and were able to 'attend' and take part in lectures and seminars at times when in-person meeting would be difficult. A need for more timely and targeted communication from the university was felt to be a priority; with clarity and quality rather than quantity highlighted as a priority.

The student participants felt that there is a lack of community, within the department, school, university, and, perhaps most importantly, Nottingham itself. They would like more opportunities and links with organisations across the city, enabling them to feel a sense of belonging within the local community (even when not physically able to be here in person).

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Event Challenges of Pandemic and Mental Health Group Discussion

How people are at the moment:
- We spoke about things we've all missed doing since lockdown, for example meeting in real life.
- We discussed the psychological impact of the pandemic pressures on our wellbeing, some of us found it had a positive impact: allowing them to improve as a person and get things done.
- The majority, however, found learning and life in general much more challenging and isolating. Many participants face financial difficulties as most places that students traditionally get work have been closed or restricted. All of this has led to more feelings of stress and anxiety.
- We talked about the inequalities highlighted by the pandemic: people who benefitted financially; private landlords/accommodations; multinational, national, and local businesses who secured government contracts (PPE procurement, School Meals Vouchers, Test & Trace etc); certain public sector work e.g., nurses, teachers, supermarket workers all continued to earn wages throughout the pandemic.

Discussion of pressures on mental health during pandemic – the University as a community:

The need for more extensive/1 to 1 help for students struggling with mental health problems, and pandemic pressures in general, was felt. This could include developing the 1st year mentoring scheme; the potential for peer-to-peer partnerships across the years was thought a good idea.
- The students felt that there was a need for communication from University to Students. There are a lot of emails but there is a need to fine-tune methods of communication rather than quantity, and what is communicated. Sometimes communicating that there isn't anything yet decided is better than nothing being said at all.
- More contact with students outside of timetabled hours to check on wellbeing would benefit many struggling students. Just contact for the sake of contact without having to think of 'fun' events etc but… More opportunities for students to interact online, maybe online quizzes, society meetings etc would be welcome.
- All the above really are tools to help to develop a sense of belonging.

The 'new normal':
- Microsoft Teams has become normal for students now, but it has a mixed response
  - many find it beneficial and easily accessible.
  - however, support and perhaps other options should be available for students who struggle with Teams.
  - Most people don't like breakout rooms – its difficult to engage with most people choosing to type rather than speak (or staying 'silent' altogether); usually only a couple of people get involved, if at all. Seminars seem to work better when not blended, and when in a big group all together.
  - More face-to-face learning where possible or ensuring attendance won't be affected if a student prefers to work on pre-recorded lectures in their own time.
- Many would value more links with other organisations in Nottingham (voluntary sector, the Council…) as a whole, to feel like they are here, rather than the feeling they could be anywhere, placing themselves in the Nottingham community – even if physically living elsewhere.

Action plan
- Student leadership training events
- Increase frequency of meetings/discussions similar to this listening event (perhaps a couple times a term) - student-led rather than staff-led. There was a particular enthusiasm for more meetings to discuss Mental Health and coping being a student at this time (a couple meetings per term of this kind) – but student led rather than staff led.
- More online events – for fun.

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Structural Racism Group Discussion

Summary:

The NTU Student Parliament held a very well attended listening event with students from all years of the PIR department, focusing on Structural Racism. The group was self-selecting, with participants signing up in advance to take part. This is a summary of the views and recommendations expressed by the student participants during the event.

The first exercise, discussing whether it was a good idea to take down statues with links to Britain's colonial, slave trade past, and whether there were some statues that could be put up. The consensus was that, whether statues were taken down or replaced, the most important thing was to be honest about the history of the country and the people that have been commemorated.

Considering what identity meant to the participants and society was understood to be different. Individually we will often define our own identity by our relationships, purpose in life, careers, communities. Other people, however, often will see our identity relating to our skin colour, accents, language, education, gender, 'race'. This can lead to 'othering' people of colour; generalisations and stereotyping rather than valuing individual's skills and experience, which in turn can lead to undermining an individual's and group's sense of pride and self-worth.

The discussion moved on to structural racism; hearing how this is understood and experienced generally, and more specifically, within the university. Racism is understood to be based on physical features, skin colour, and religion, and is deeply embedded in people's beliefs. This is experienced in many arenas, but significantly for the participants, within the education system which leads to the oppression of some groups of people and benefit of others. Within the university a minority of the participants who identify as people of colour did not feel they had experienced structural racism, feeling that the university has a good response, and good multicultural mix of students. However, overwhelmingly people's experiences had not been as positive: experiencing overt racism as well as its undercurrents. Examples were that people whose first language is not English felt that they are often ignored or expected to be less able by academic staff. There is also a significant lack of BAME academic staff, which leads to an experience of underrepresentation. With predominantly online learning some students have felt their experience has been more positive (without face-to-face learning and cameras being turned off encouraged the first impressions are not based on physical appearance), but the majority have felt that this has excluded more people of colour and foreign students in general, as there are less opportunities to get to know and see each other, and to be called on by tutors in seminars (for example). Some students had experienced teaching that was biased towards celebrating Britain's colonial past, with focus on the 'benefits' while ignoring the violence, brutality, and oppression that colonised populations had experienced, and the legacy still experienced today.

Many of the students said they had participated in Black Lives Matter events over the summer; the feeling of empowerment and the opportunity to express lived experiences had been very powerful. There was a feeling that there was beginning to be a recognition that structural racism exists and needs to be addressed in Britain; that it is not just a problem in the USA. However, there was also a recognition that the mainstream media had focussed on the events

and causes in the US, largely framing the protests in the UK as 'copycat' or 'using' the US protests as an excuse. This had frustrated, but at the same time helped to encourage a sense of community, many young people in the UK. There was a consensus amongst the students that the government had not done enough towards eradicating structural racism; pressure groups and charities are being expected to do the work.

The student participants felt it important that the university needs to take positive action: employ more teaching and senior management from the 'BAME' community; run antiracism training for students, academics, and management; the critical voice of students needs to be listened to and heard; and the curriculum needs to be decolonised – the white man needs to be only part of the story. It was understood that this needs to start at senior management level, not at the academic staff.

Measures across Nottingham as a city need to be taken; for 'BAME' students it is not just a problem within the university. The participants felt there needed to be a change within the police, the local government, schools, and the press. It was felt that Nottingham does not welcome international students well; they are not made to feel an important and integral part of the community. Increased, and better dialogue between the two universities and across organisations like the Women's Centre, BLM, the universities, and the council, for example, would help to move the dialogue. The participants agreed that Black History Month needs to change; they felt it adds to marginalisation and places the history and lived experience of people of colour as 'other'. Structural racism cannot be addressed by an event held one month every year; it must be addressed all the time in every public arena.

Structural Racism Group Discussion
Which statue would you tear down? What statues would you put up in their place?
Tear down:
- Various statues identified, with a consensus that statues didn't really have much relevance today. Many historical figures were problematic because of colonial/slave trade past.
- 'White people don't have the right to give their opinion as they weren't the ones being oppressed'.
- Maybe renaming buildings, streets etc would make more of an impact.
- Not take down any statues – history is something we can learn from, but need to be told of their full history as a reminder – leave the statue, include the narrative/context

Put up:
- A consensus of putting up status with wider representation and diversity ie
  - A representative black soldier
  - Malala
  - A foreign nurse – someone from NHS, especially now – people seem less racist because of what's going on…. Years to come that will talk about what is happening now
  - Need more people of colour – not necessarily 'big' names, but also the people who have done things but not seen 'bottom of the pile'
  - Peace activists in general
  - People from now rather than history, so people can relate now.

Identity means to you:
- How sometimes a person of colour is 'required' to explain their identities – people always ask what country you are from.
- Language, accents, and language barriers
- Many people see the colour of skin as a person's identity – associated with colour rather than culture, traditions etc ie colour doesn't define who you are in the same way culture
- Identity goes very deep – seen as different (other) rather than what you can bring to the table.
- Pride in their identity important, but aware how people see them can undermine that pride.
- There are different ways we all see our identity: gender, geography, purpose in life, relationships, 'race'.

What does structural racism mean to you?
- Racism often based on physical appearance, skin colour, and religion.
- Need to be aware that racism is still embedded in peoples thinking.
- Difference depending where geographically you're from – ie small communities vs bigger cities is important to identity, and when in a bigger pond become an even smaller fish – people still see the colour of skin
- Systematic oppression – the education system means some people benefit more than others.

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How does structural racism look like in the university setting?
- Online, people can't see you, they just hear you.
- People need to get to know people in a deeper way but it's more difficult online. Online format more isolating because more difficult to really know people.
- It is felt that some lecturers won't call on international students, assume they have less to say, or they find speaking more difficult. Sometimes they need more time to put across their thoughts/comments, leading to international students being treated as less able.
- Feel undercurrents of racism without being spoken about openly.
- Subconscious racism – how many black academic staff there are makes a difference.
- Glorify the colonialism – and gloss over it, emphasising the benefits.
- Eg Someone who had a lecturer that kept saying "coloured people", and that "racism doesn't exist", but couldn't/wouldn't engage with a student who called them out on it…
- Hadn't personally experienced Structural racism here.
- University has a good response, and good multicultural mix of students.

How has Black Lives Matter impacted you?
- People empowered to become more outspoken and able to show their lived experience
- It makes everyone aware of police brutality in UK as well as USA
- Good to see so many young people getting involved, particularly marches in London: strength in numbers.

What do you think about the response of various organizations and the government to BLM?
- Government haven't done enough: leaving it to pressure groups and charities.
- Not enough coverage of events and protests in the UK – media predominantly stopped the discussion at the events in the USA.
- The Government has used COVID-19 and social distancing as a means to undermine or stop the protests.
- Contradictory how they reacted violently to peaceful protests.

What do we students think needs needs to be done about structural racism in the university?
- Dismantle physical barriers to learning ie Library – take down barriers so the wider community to access the space of knowledge – those in lower socioeconomic and ethnicities could access learning for free
- More scholarships for refugees (for example) as they can't access student finance
- Representation through employing more black teaching staff: being taught by someone who looks like them. Black students (feel they potentially) are marked down by tutors who are not black.
- Not much university can do to cure structural racism but the curriculum needs to be more diverse & decolonized, more representative for example by using more diverse case studies – too many Eurocentric case studies
- More critical as students: hold the community to account
- Hold more events to reinforce the issue – led by students with lived experience of racism
- All starts from management level – not just the academic staff
- Can't be eliminated within the current system but could run antiracism workshops across the university community – students and staff at all levels

- Suspend cooperation with Home Office – the Home Office requires monitoring that is deeply racialised.
- Need to take away the labelling because the international students need to feel at home. The labelling of international students, refugees, domestic students etc 'others' people
- No more increased fees for international students as their experience is often worse they don't have local support. Particularly during the pandemic international students have felt very isolated.

How do we students think we can tackle structural racism in and around Nottingham?
- More platforms like this listening event but led by people of colour/with lived experience, with people across Nottingham.
- People can unlearn racism - better education and communication. Younger people involvement and training in leadership.
- Curriculum in schools needs to change: stop the 'white saviour' teaching, and need to include the darker side of our history.
- Advertising by the Council could positively highlight the diversity of the population in Nottingham. Nottingham council could then, also use Social Media to discuss structural racism.
- Black History month – not helpful as awareness should be much wider, and not just for a month. The emphasis needs to adapt, not be seen as 'one month a year and its 'done'.
- Reporting of crimes in the press ie knife crime: always reported what colour/grouping they are, and reported more often when people of colour are involved. This needs to be understood and changed.
- Police need to stop targeting shutting down black led events.
- Better dialogue between both universities and between other organisations in the city: Women's Centre, Nottingham Black Lives Matter.
- International students from both universities need support in/from Nottingham as a whole. Uni does welcome international students well, but the university experience is not just about the University but the wider community.