

Listening works: using the Listening Rooms methodology to explore diversity

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Abstract

This case study presents how two innovative methods have been used at a UK university to explore the lived experiences of minoritised groups. The Listening Rooms Project collects data through friendship conversations between friends, and places key stakeholders with the audience and influence to affect change at the heart of the data analysis process. Using these methods creates safe spaces for minoritised groups to share their lived experiences in a meaningful and empowering way. Here, we describe how the project has learned from the experiences of BAME students, LGBTQ+ staff and students, disadvantaged males, and female employees to create a better place to study and work. The study found distinct differences in the themes covered between cohorts despite fairly consistent conversation 'prompts', but also some common themes such as the need for better role models for minoritised groups and better training and guidance in challenging negative behaviours. The study concludes that listening, using these methods, provides a depth of understanding of the lived experiences of minoritised groups, resulting in real and impactful change.

Keywords: listening; qualitative research methods; minoritised groups; equality, diversity and inclusion

Introduction

Knowing more about how individuals *really* experience university affords us an opportunity to appreciate, understand and better celebrate the many dimensions of equality, diversity and inclusion. Capturing lived experiences gives us a better chance of bringing about meaningful and effective change precisely because our practices are based on authentic evidence.

One large northern university, driven by its mission to be a genuinely inclusive institution for employees and students alike, has been heavily involved in work on student and staff Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) matters, from responding to the regulatory requirements of the Access and Participation Plan and working towards charter mark status (Stonewall, Athena Swan, and Race Equality Charter) through to exploring course-level experiences and curriculum design through subject or discipline EDI lenses. Whilst these types of pursuits are perhaps not particular to this specific university, what makes this institution different from others is its adoption of an innovative methodology deliberately designed to listen better to the everyday voices and experiences of its staff and students, allowing them to share, in a safe space, their lived reality of being from a minoritised group, including BAME students, LGBTQ+ staff and students, disadvantaged males, and female employees. In effect, this method has been used to give those groups the necessary institutional focus both to acknowledge their lived experience and also, crucially, to support positive change. Our listening method has proved successful in terms of individuals feeling authenticated in their experiences and 'changemakers' feeling legitimated through their immersion in real voice data. This case study reveals how data collection and analysis (through friendship listening and democratic data immersion, respectively) has enabled exploration, celebration and/or resolution of EDI matters. Key findings and recommendations undertaken in the past few years are shared.

Method

The Listening Rooms Project (Parkin and Heron, 2022) comprises two novel and innovative methods for collecting and analysing qualitative data at scale, and is employed widely to explore the experiences of minoritised groups in order to affect positive change.

The combination of these two methods is driven by Kline's (1999) values of equality, respect and inclusion, with the resultant approach a fitting way of addressing issues of inclusion, diversity and equality in Higher Education (HE). The project has full ethics approval at the host institution.

Data collection

Friendship pairs undertake a guided, recorded conversation without a researcher present (Heron, 2020). Early discussions with the project lead (for example, an EDI lead in a department) determine the nature of these conversations through the development of prompt cards. Participants are invited to 'bring a friend' and together the pair complete a consent form and an equality monitoring form and are given the opportunity to ask questions of the research team before embarking on the conversation. The necessary 'kit' needed for these conversations comprises six prompt cards, a timer and a recording device. The participants work their way through the set of cards over an hour and, when completed and before departing, each fill in a debrief form sharing their views of the method.

Data analysis

Round Table Analysis (Parkin and Heron, 2022) identifies key stakeholders and invites them to a collaborative thematic exploration of the data set. During Round Table Analysis, the facilitator will guide the stakeholder group to identify priorities for discussion in order to generate an evidence base for the development of findings and recommendations. The sessions are action focused – stakeholders co-create findings and recommendations on the understanding that these are realistic, achievable, and within their sphere of influence in order to generate real, positive change. Exploration of the experiences of minoritised groups is a challenging area, particularly when the 'researcher' is not part of the minoritised group. It could be argued that 'outsider' researchers have a limited understanding of the factors affecting the lived experiences of minoritised groups. For this reason, Round Table Analysis seeks to include stakeholders from the minoritised group in

question so that they can bring their lived experiences to the table and contextualise some of the experiences shared during the Listening Rooms conversations.

Listening rooms projects exploring equality, diversity and inclusion

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students

Sector evidence tells us that there is a serious attainment gap between BAME students and their white counterparts, with pre-pandemic statistics showing a 13% attainment gap (Universities UK, 2019). This case study uses the term BAME, which is consistent with sector reporting, notably in the Race Equality Charter (Advance HE, 2022). Addressing this gap is a key priority for universities, and research to understand the causes is an important part of addressing and reducing the gap. As a result, this university used the Listening Rooms method to listen to its BAME students, with the findings from the research being used to inform the development of its Race Equality Charter, aiming to help develop cultural and systematic improvements to racial disparities for its staff and students.

Participants

This Listening Rooms project listened to the experiences of 23 friendship pairs from one academic department. Nine stakeholders attended the Round Table Analysis.

Findings and recommendations

The main themes emerging from this project were confidence, success and understanding the lived experiences of BAME students.

Students derived confidence from their peers and particularly from those who share their lived experiences and backgrounds. They also recognised the importance of a variety of experiences to develop a sense of belonging and feelings of happiness, including but not limited to, sports societies, academic groups, and social media:

The people that you surround yourself with, really affect and have an impact on your confidence big time. And events as well, oh god yes. [...] I think what you learn from those difficult times makes you stronger and helps you to know where you're going.

To support students with this, the study recommended that students be provided with opportunities to engage with role models and alumni who reflect the lived experiences and backgrounds of students and can share stories of success. Sharing students' stories with the wider student body could also help to validate feelings and experiences, and create a stronger sense of community.

Students experienced microaggressions in a number of environments, with some students having encountered difficulties obtaining employment because of their name:

Say when it comes to applying for jobs, for instance. We have both experienced this, like applying for the same jobs. Me being a white British female, I was sort of accepted and you found it difficult because your first name is [redacted].

Working with employers through employability fairs to raise awareness of unconscious bias could lead to positive changes in recruitment practices. There was also recognition that white privilege exists, and that BAME individuals would face difficulties that their white peers would never experience. The study recommended promotion of inclusive practices and acknowledgement of the 'white advantage' through curriculum and structure, and that the promotion of existing positive bystander materials could support the student community in challenging negative behaviours.

Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ+)

The LGBTQ+ steering group at the university sought a better understanding of LGBTQ+ (Stonewall, 2022) staff's lived experiences, informing an LGBTQ+ action plan and the university's equality objectives in order to move towards a more inclusive workplace. In addition, the Students' Union sought to ensure that every student experienced fair treatment, equally, without fear of discrimination.

Participants

These projects explored LGBTQ+ staff's (six pairs) and students' (four pairs) experiences. Six stakeholders attended the Round Table Analysis for the student project and seven for the staff project.

Findings and recommendations

For staff, the main themes emerging from their friendship conversations were about the impact of heteronormative views and the notions of 'identity' and 'belonging'. Staff shared many positive experiences of working at the university and feeling confident and comfortable to be their authentic selves amongst colleagues, but there was a sense that there was more work to be done across the university to achieve a more inclusive culture. Staff shared experiences of heteronormative assumptions that are regularly made:

What affects my sense of belonging? Other people's assumptions, constant assumptions. I think we've covered that, probably, but their kind of, like you said, straight, CIS, white assumptions about how the world is and how it operates, and everyone's experienced that.

The study recommended that people be encouraged to consider the importance of language and unlearn the gendered biases of language, potentially through a relaunch of the university's LGBTQ+ network. It was also recommended that workshops and training be provided to encourage all staff to actively reflect on and address their biases against the LGBTQ+ community through engagement with, and demonstration of, equality objectives and institutional values.

There were some examples where staff had had experiences of homophobia and microaggressions, and while some of these behaviours were challenged and managed through appropriate processes and practices, some behaviours remained unchallenged:

I think allyship has been passive. I think people feel unconfident challenging, or knowing what is homophobic behaviour, and I feel like the university doesn't have a clear grip of what to do in a situation where that happens. I think it's quite difficult to work out exactly what you're supposed to do if you want to raise an issue.

The study recommended raising awareness of how to challenge inappropriate behaviours and promotion of existing EDI training through an improved new starter induction programme and through wider staff development programmes such as the university's leadership programme.

Student participants discussed mental health issues within the LGBTQ+ community, and it was apparent that many of the participants had experienced their own mental health challenges:

At that point, when I started, happiness very much did look like being free of anxiety and being free of depression because just that in itself was ecstatic for me, not feeling like shit all the time.

The study acknowledged that there was a need to review current wellbeing provision at the university with regard to support for mental and sexual health for the LGBTQ+ community. Discussion around 'risky behaviours' such as drug-taking was prevalent, although further research to explore this issue is necessary for the university to respond appropriately for different cohorts of students.

I used substance abuse as a response to my trauma, when I was late teens, early 20s and that was more alcohol and party drugs, and it was happy happy, happy, I wasn't sitting in my room with a bottle of whisky crying, but it was let's just pound this into oblivion.

The study also revealed a need for safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community that are not focused on alcohol, and recommended that the university and the Students' Union work together to develop such spaces.

Disadvantaged male students

Disadvantaged males, defined as males from areas of low higher education participation, low household income or low socioeconomic status (Office for Students, 2018), were identified as a priority cohort for this university and Listening Rooms were employed to explore their experiences. Given '[a]ccess and participation plans set out how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education' (Office for Students, 2018), the Listening Rooms findings have informed the development of actions in the university's own Access and Participation Plan.

Participants

This Listening Rooms project listened to the experiences of 13 friendship pairs. Fourteen stakeholders attended the Round Table Analysis.

Findings and recommendations

This cohort of students held a wide variety of views on what success looked and felt like, and such discussions suggested that HE needed to 'open up' the conversation on success and reframe failure to be a more normalised part of the student journey. The study recommended open discourse on notions of success and failure, particularly through meetings with personal tutors. Social mobility and the 'bettering of oneself' was a strong theme for this cohort. Aspirations were very high and there was a belief that anything can be achieved with hard work, echoing Blower's (2020) belief that the disadvantaged have high aspirations:

It's about the time and effort you put into it. The time and effort you put into something personally beats all of the skill and stuff. Like if you have a mindset of where you want to be, no one should stop you from getting there or doing that thing.

Reframing discourse in the sector about aspirations for disadvantaged males to challenge the existing narrative was recommended.

This cohort looked to role models but also saw themselves as role models, although many suffered imposter syndrome. Embracing the power of the existing cohort as role models to encourage further participation in HE was recommended. Part-time working was often an everyday necessity for this cohort but was perceived as a barrier to their success. This data set showed what skills these students had gained from their part-time work, and in particular, there was strong evidence of increased confidence:

I think jobs help massively. I became more confident when I started doing pub work, waitressing and bar work, because you are forced into a situation where you have to make conversation with people, you also have to deal with complaints and things like that and it's really good character building and it does bring out a lot of confidence in you.

Exploring ways in which the university could embrace the skills developed through part-time work as part of the curriculum was seen as highly beneficial.

Female employees

In order to address gender inequality, the university was committed to achieving the Transformed Charter (previously the Athena Swan Charter). To identify and address barriers to progression that affect women, the Listening Rooms project explored female employee experiences across the university.

Participants

This Listening Rooms project listened to the experiences of five friendship pairs. Eight stakeholders attended the Round Table Analysis.

Findings and recommendations

Analysis focused on career progression, career development and 'dominant behaviours'. Participants expressed concern over the loss (and subsequent absence) of women in senior roles at the university, in particular at university leadership team level, resulting in a distinct lack of role models. It was felt that strong female role models were, in fact, missing at all levels of the university:

Since I started at [the university] it has been leaking women in leadership like crazy. Like women at senior staff grade seem to leave this place really quickly.

In terms of career progression and development, women felt that their ability to work part-time was limited by overwhelming workloads meaning that they felt they needed to work more hours to get the job done. This often led to women increasing their hours against their wishes so that they got paid for the additional hours that they needed to work:

I returned to work part-time and on both occasions, I ended up increasing my hours initially just by them creeping up, and you're doing more work but then being offered more hours and thinking, well, I may as well because I'm doing them anyway so why not get paid for them? I personally find part-time work difficult to manage.

Women also felt that working part time had a negative impact on their opportunities for career progression. Participants articulated a desire to achieve a good work/life balance, with some more able to achieve this than others. Good management practices were felt to make a significant difference to staff experiences:

I think that it's quite hard to see opportunities for progression for people who aren't able to work full-time. I don't see many jobs that seem easily – that appear to be suitable for part-time work so, yeah. I think that feel a bit of a challenge to me.

There was a belief that how certain behaviours were received (and accepted/rejected) differed depending on whether the behaviour was displayed by a man or a woman:

I've had incidences where there's maybe been a male in the department who asks those challenging questions, plays devil's advocate and the manager at the time has said, oh, we need to invite that person in to the meeting because he's got all these great ideas and he stirs things up and he gets us thinking whereas the female has done similar the same manager has, oh, you know, what can we do about her?

Creating space for conversations around behavioural expectations and how these differed for men and women was seen as necessary through the development of internal programmes. Creation of a clear framework for how negative behaviours are challenged and addressed was felt to be a gap that needed addressing.

Conclusion

For groups of students and staff from minoritised groups, these methods offer real potential. Participants involved in providing data valued the opportunity to be heard:

[The method] helped to feel more comfortable and open to telling the truth.
It feels as though you actually care.

For stakeholders involved in the Round Table Analysis sessions, this was an empowering method to affect positive change:

It made me realise that we are sitting on a huge amount of knowledge and understanding of our students that you cannot see in the metrics.

Whilst all these projects used a consistent set of themed prompt cards, the discussions were very different between cohorts. For example, discussion around the importance of part-time working alongside study was common in conversations with disadvantaged males but missing from other cohorts. Similarly, unprompted discussion around 'risky behaviours' such as drug taking were prevalent in the LGBTQ+ student conversations and completely absent from all other cohorts. This shows us that the methods allow participants to explore themes which are important to them and share experiences in ways that other methods may not allow. There were also some consistencies between each of these cohorts, such as discussions around (a lack of) role models and the need to challenge negative behaviours. This shows that application of good inclusive practices such as robust guidance and training on positive bystander action and deployment of diverse role-models in a variety of contexts can have benefits for all minoritised groups, and as such these recommendations have been implemented at the university to good effect.

Table 1. Summary of findings and recommendations.

	Findings	Recommendations
Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	Confidence is derived from peer groups and those who share lived experiences.	Provide opportunities to engage with role models and alumni who reflect lived experiences.
	Sense of belonging is developed through variety of experiences and engagement with wider social opportunities	Validate feelings and experiences through sharing students' stories.
	Microaggressions were experienced in a number of environments.	Raise awareness of unconscious bias in a variety of contexts within and outside of the university.
	Recognition that white privilege exists.	Promotion of inclusive practices and acknowledgement of the 'white advantage' through curriculum and structure.
LGBTQ+	Awareness of heteronormative views and notions of 'identity' and belonging'.	Raise awareness of the importance of language and unlearn the gendered biases of language.

	Many positive experiences of working at the university but a sense that more could be done to achieve a fully inclusive culture.	Provision of workshops and training on equality objectives and institutional values.
	Some staff had experiences homophobia and microaggressions.	Raise awareness of how to challenge inappropriate behaviours and promotion of existing EDI training.
	Students experienced a variety of mental health challenges.	Review current wellbeing provision for mental and sexual health in the LGBTQ+ community.
	The study also revealed a need for safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community that are not focused on alcohol.	The university and the Students' Union to work together to develop safe, inclusive spaces on campus.
Disadvantaged Males	This cohort of students held a wide variety of views on what success looked and felt like.	To enable open discourse on notions of success and failure, particularly through personal tutoring.
	Social mobility and the 'bettering of oneself' was a strong theme for this cohort. Aspirations were very high.	Reframing discourse in the sector about aspirations for disadvantaged males to challenge the existing narrative.
	This cohort looked to role models but also saw themselves as role models, although many suffered imposter syndrome.	Embrace the power of the existing cohort as role models to encourage further participation in HE.
	Part-time working was necessary for this cohort but perceived as a barrier to their success.	Explore ways in which the university could embrace the skills developed through part-time work as part of the curriculum.
Female Employees	Participants expressed concern over lack of women in senior roles at the university, in particular at university leadership team level.	Explore ways to increase visibility of women at all levels of responsibility.
	Women felt that their ability to work part-time was limited by overwhelming workloads.	Provision of mentoring and coaching for women, with a focus on managing workloads.
	There was a belief that how certain behaviours were received (and accepted/rejected) differed depending on whether the behaviour was displayed by a man or a woman.	Creating space for conversations around behavioural expectations and how these differed for men and women.

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