**Broaden my Bookshelf: working with the University of Huddersfield SU to tackle the attainment gap**

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This article is based on a talk prepared for the one day conference *Decolonising the curriculum - the Library's role* at Goldsmith’s College in January 2020.

Broaden my Bookshelf is an initiative to increase the range of authors represented in the University of Huddersfield Library. It was launched in October 2018 and is being delivered in collaboration with the University of Huddersfield Students Union (UHSU) and is supported by UHSU’s Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Ambassadors. It grew out of our desire to work with the SU on improving the quality and breadth of reading lists, along with a growing awareness of issues around the *Why is my curriculum White?* Campaign which started at UCL in 2014 (Hussain, 2015). At the time that we started discussing a new initiative to improve the range of our book stock in the summer of 2018, we already had a good working relationship with UHSU.

**The BAME Ambassadors Scheme**

This was launched in September 2017 as an initiative to close the BAME attainment gap. It was the brainchild of Jonathan Stephen who was Education Office from 2017-18 and then President from 2018-19. Ambassadors work to challenge the academic community to diversify the curriculum and to adopt an inclusive learning environment. They also negotiate changes to teaching and learning practices at senior level committees (University of Huddersfield Students Union, n.d.). The scheme won UHSU the Students' Union of the Year Award at the NUS Black Student Awards 2018. In 2018, the President and other SU Officers were keen to involve BAME ambassadors in advocating for a wider range of reading material. Our goals and the SU’s coincided at the right time and Broaden my Bookshelf was the project which resulted.

The attainment gap is the difference between BAME students and their white counterparts’ level of achievement. Statistics show that BAME students are not likely to be as successful as their white course colleagues and this applies across all disciplines. Figures from Advance HE show that In 2015/16, the gap was largest in England, where 78.8% of white qualifiers received a first/2:1 compared with 63.2% of BAME qualifiers – a 15.6 percentage point gap (Advance HE, n.d.)

**What is Broaden my Bookshelf?**

At a basic level, Broaden my Bookshelf is simply the Library asking staff and students to suggest books by authors from a BAME background and, since March 2019, by or about members of the LGBT+ community. We do this by making available in the Library Broaden my Bookshelf postcards and a postbox, along with an online form on the Library web pages. This is an ongoing commitment by the Library. The Director of Computing of Library Services has been very keen to support Broaden my Bookshelf, initially pledging £20,000 for us to spend on books in 2018 to get the initiative off to a really good start. Our budget for the current academic year is £10,000. Of course we need to keep reminding students and staff about Broaden my Bookshelf and we do this by mentioning it as often as possible in Student Panels, Course Committees, School Board and Teaching and Learning Committee meetings, on our social media channels and by organising a range of events.

To launch Broaden my Bookshelf we planned a week of activities in October 2018 to coincide with Black History Month. These included daily readings at lunchtime (given by the BAME Ambassadors and by library staff), a keynote talk by Dr. Shola Mos-Shogbamimu, a panel debate, a Black History Month themed Wikipedia Editathon and workshops to help lecturers diversify reading lists.

In February 2019 (LGBT History Month) we relaunched Broaden my Bookshelf to encompass books by and about the LGBT+ community. New publicity was designed, along with a new postcard incorporating the LGBT+ rainbow. In October 2019 we planned more Black History Month activities, including another panel debate entitled *Tackling the BAME attainment gap together*. We also had outreach stands in all seven schools of the university which were staffed by BAME Ambassadors and librarians jointly. The aim was to talk to students about how inclusive their curriculum is and gather feedback and ideas about how things could be done better. The success of these stands was mixed and some didn’t happen due to last minute unavailability of BAME Ambassadors. There was also an Inclusive Curriculum Forum, which was run by UHSU and the BAME ambassadors.

**Challenges**

It hasn’t all been plain sailing with Broaden my Bookshelf. One of the challenges we have faced was the difficulty of engaging students and teaching staff and getting them to attend events. We had a poor turnout at both the Wikipedia Editathon and the sessions to help lecturers diversify reading lists which were run in 2018. This was in part down to publicity problems. In both 2018 and 2019 we found it difficult to finalise publicity in time for October as new UHSU officers were only in post from late summer. Publicity needed to be finalised in August when many people were away on holiday. These factors contributed to publicity being designed and printed at the last minute and this may have contributed to poor attendance at some events.

It is generally a very positive experience working with UHSU, but on occasions we have come out of meetings and realised we haven’t agreed who is going to actually do anything! Another issue is that it takes a while to get to know the new officers and they keep changing every year. We have realised that SU officers all come with their own political agenda and desire to bring about change in a short period of time and leave a legacy. They are passionate about their aims and can be intolerant of delays in achieving them. Officers tend to be young and have little work experience so they aren’t used to meetings which are well chaired and where everyone comes away with a set of actions. We also found that poor communication over publicity in 2018 led to some duplication of effort and inconsistency. In addition, on occasions we have tried to deliver events with the help of the BAME ambassadors, for example readings in 2018 and outreach stands in 2019, it has been hard to get their buy in and to rely on them. On several occasions they failed to turn up or pulled out at the last minute.

**Successes**

There have been some high points along the Broaden my Bookshelf journey too. The keynote talk delivered by Dr. Shola Mos-Shogbamimu in October 2018 inspired us to be activists in everything we do. Both panel debates have elicited some great questions and contributions from students. The 2019 panel focussed on the question “How can we close the BAME attainment gap?” and was well supported by senior academics, with Professor Tim Thornton, our Deputy VC on the panel as well as Dr. Jane Tobell, who is a Teaching Fellow with a university-wide role in Teaching and Learning. We feel this sent a positive message to BAME students that senior academics are listening to them. It has been a privilege to work alongside some incredible student activists, both in planning events and participating in readings and outreach events with them.

The main aim of Broaden my Bookshelf was to improve the diversity of our collection and we have had some success in this area. 251 books have been bought by the time of writing, of which 93 have been borrowed more than once. The most popular book (Milk and Honey by Rupi Kaur) has already been borrowed 13 times. The majority are fiction titles, which are located in our HudReads leisure reading section. A sizeable minority are non-fiction titles and we would like to see at least some of these being added to reading lists.

**What next for Broaden my Bookshelf?**

A minority of lecturers are already on board with broadening their reading lists (especially the BAME staff network) but there is still a way to go and this will be our focus over the next 12 months. We are hoping to get a well-known author to come and talk about their book as part of the Huddersfield Literary Festival in March 2020.

We have concentrated a lot on promoting the BAME agenda so far and now we really need to do more on the LGBT front, probably working together with the LGBT Society and LGBT staff network. We have a couple of LGBT poets in our local area and have started talking about organising a poetry event with them in 2020.

All these things will hopefully enable us to keep the momentum going with reminding students and staff to keep suggesting books. It will be a long, slow process, but it is our hope that through Broaden my Bookshelf we can do our small part in redressing the balance for students who are part of a minority and in particular that we can help to close the BAME attainment gap.

**References**

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