

*micro placements,  
macro impact:*

## LEVELLING THE EMPLOYABILITY PLAYING FIELD FOR BAME STUDENTS

WENDY BROWNE, Senior Employer Engagement Adviser at City, University of London (UoL), and NATALIE EMMANUEL, Operations Director at Gradcore, outline how efforts to refocus the delivery of an established Micro-Placements Programme is helping to level the employability playing field for BAME students.



City is the second most diverse university by undergraduate ethnicity (The Times and The Sunday Times Good University Guide, 2020), with 70% of our UK undergraduate student population identifying as Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME). Young BAME adults continue to be at a higher risk of being unemployed than white young adults, so our top priority is to give these students access to professional opportunities at an early stage in their careers.

### CLOSING THE GAP

With this in mind, we worked in collaboration with Gradcore, a social enterprise committed to levelling the playing field in graduate recruitment and employability, to develop our award-winning social mobility initiative, the Micro-Placements Programme (MPP).



MPP seeks to address the employment gap by placing students – the majority of whom are from under-represented backgrounds – into short term career exploration projects over the summer. Currently in its fourth iteration, the programme has now become a 15 credit-bearing elective module.

As part of the programme, students are taken through a mock graduate recruitment process, which includes an assessment centre run by Gradcore. Students then apply for specifically created real-life projects with UK-based employers. This allows them to build their confidence in a professional setting, expand their network of industry contacts and develop key transferable employability skills.

### TAILORED MARKETING

Driven by a perpetual desire to be inclusive and with the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, we redesigned our marketing of the programme to incorporate a particular BAME focus. We worked to ensure that student ambassadors (previous programme participants), as well as the images and student quotes used, were reflective of the student cohort we were aiming for. We also engaged our BAME student societies to gain their support in promoting the scheme and to expand our reach.

Our information workshops outlined the supportive nature of the module – a robust reasonable adjustments disclosure process, access to student support services, personalised feedback, and guidance from personal tutors – and also highlighted the tailored support sessions available to BAME and widening participation (WP) students.

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## BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Ever conscious that one of the key challenges facing students from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds is a lack of social capital, we were keen to enhance students' understanding of an assessment centre scenario.

Gradcore delivered several 'tech check' sessions to demystify the process and build students' confidence ahead of the final recruitment stage. All participants at the virtual assessment centres received personalised feedback, which included their scores and details of their performance within each exercise. Engagement from the students across the four days was extremely high at 92% attendance, with all participants stating that they would recommend the events to a friend.

For the pandemic-hit placements that we converted to remote delivery last summer, 74% of MPP students placed identified as BAME, and 45% as WP. We surveyed students' confidence and resilience before they started the MPP journey and after the assessment centre and found that all 9 markers had increased. Feedback from BAME participants in particular outlines how the MPP had increased their communication, presentation and time management skills.

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## EMPLOYER PLEDGE

We redesigned our employer approach to ensure equality is as important to them as it is to us. We have incorporated an inclusion pledge into our disclaimer: employers must now agree to core equality values and practices before even signing up to the scheme.

We have also proactively engaged with organisations promoting inclusion and equality through their work. The MPP is currently sponsored by Tata Consultancy Services, an organisation with a reputation for corporate social responsibility and track record in supporting City's diverse student cohort. We have also developed links with other organisations with a strong commitment to inclusivity, such as The Honeycomb Works.

## SUPPORTIVE EXPERIENCE

As the impact of Covid-19 looks likely to disproportionately affect BAME communities, the drive to support students from our BAME cohort becomes ever more pressing. In this year's recruitment process for MPP, BAME students scored higher than White students: 63% of the top candidates were BAME, evidencing that assessment centres, even in virtual format, can still provide a nurturing and supportive learning experience for this group.

We have invested in expanding our provision into the next academic year (21/22) and beyond to continue to support our students through these turbulent economic times. We will also review our provision in terms of delivery and content, with our ultimate aim of a programme that is accessible to all, regardless of background.



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