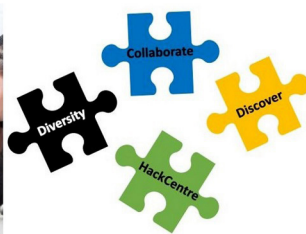


# Encouraging and embracing black diversity in industry

**Nigel Page** (Kingston University London, UK)



The start of 2020 not only saw a world gripped by COVID-19, but also saw the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, amongst others. Their deaths emphasized the continued underlying systemic racism routinely experienced by people of black heritage worldwide. Often these disparities can be hidden/covert and it is clear that black students face significant disadvantages when it comes to achievement at university, including differential degree awarding outcomes and poorer employment prospects (see further reading).

Consequently, we at Kingston University took action to tackle these injustices, barriers and unconscious biases with initiative-taking steps to enhance the student experience and unlock the talent of our black bioscience students. During the academic year, 2021–2022, Kingston University ran a year-long dedicated programme in collaboration with GSK's EMBRACE (Employee Resource Group focussed on Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic diversity). The programme designed to support and embrace black diversity in industry was funded by one of the Biochemical Society's Diversity in Science grants.

We worked together between higher education, industrial partners, black students and alumni, enabling us to develop more meaningful and wider industrial engagement informed by the lived experiences of black students and employers. In our strategy, we grasped the importance of students not only seeing themselves belonging and reflected within the curriculum but also seeing their talents demonstrated to their wider scientific community. We felt this especially important as many black students reported feeling excluded, being unclear where to start on job applications, or lacking the soft skills, confidence, commercial awareness and professional networks crucial to their future employability. Within the discipline areas of the life sciences, chemistry and

pharmacy at Kingston University partnering with GSK, we developed and delivered a dedicated year-long employability support package to encourage more black students to engage and embrace careers in the pharmaceutical industry. This supported our tangible steps towards racial equality and tackling 'Black Lives Matter' head-on – recognizing diversity and creating equal opportunities and access for all.

The programme enabled an immersive employer experience, where our students learnt about the multifaceted roles available whilst considering how industry works through direct engagement with black role models at all stages of the process. The first stage in December 2021 was an introduction to business at GSK and the wide variety of career options available, including an overview of diversity within GSK, the recruitment process and how it works, along with tailored advice. The second stage (January 2022) focussed on an interactive workshop exploring motivations, enterprising growth mind-sets and values. Here, we were joined by eight black storytelling employees from EMBRACE representing various GSK roles (from apprenticeships to senior scientists). The final stage (February 2022) was a 'Discover Industry' hackathon, where students worked alongside role models to develop their enterprise skills/attributes working on real-world industrial challenges.

Our approach afforded opportunities linked to the wider bioscience community that provided first-hand experiences for our students through direct interaction with employers to help navigate the world of industry. This has provided 'tasters' to what it is like to work for a business, enabling insights into the actions required and developing the appropriate skills through vital networking opportunities with role models. This is especially advantageous when getting any experience or growing networks with an employer, whose time can seem at a premium or seemingly unobtainable for many students.

The impact on our black students has been phenomenal: our inclusive programme reached over 250 students in the first year of delivery (from a total population of just over 600 black students in the school from first-year undergraduate to postgraduate). Students came from a wide range of bioscience and chemistry courses, where surveyed attendees stated either 'exceeded/met completely' (100%) their expectations.

*'I want to take this opportunity to let you know the workshops were beyond my expectations and the testimonies were outstanding. I really enjoyed the sessions.'*

*'I was wondering if there was any way I could contact [the GSK employees] for further conversation on the topic. I share similar concerns and challenges as their backgrounds, and I was hoping to reach out for some advice as a new international student.'*

*'The GSK Discover Industry event helped me to understand the many different roles and opportunities available to me as a graduate scientist – a great opportunity for networking!'; 'It was so good to meet some of the people at GSK.'*

*'I really liked that they give you a "taste" of what industrial workplaces are like.'*

This was the first dedicated partnership we are aware of between a university and an industrial employer that has set out to directly prepare students for diverse workplaces, turning recruitment into a force for equality and maximizing the position of black students to land creative graduate roles in the pharmaceutical industry.

*'Bringing people together from different backgrounds and a variety of perspectives leads to innovation and creativity which is critical for developing new medicines. However, the sources for this diverse future talent are not always obvious or accessible to employees. It was a privilege to partner with Kingston University to provide Black students opportunities to engage with GSK employees in*

*a constructive and meaningful way. Enduring networks were built benefiting students and employees alike' – Jacqui Piner (retired Scientific Director and GSK Fellow).*

Kingston University would like to thank the Biochemical Society for their generous support for this programme. This project was subsequently recognized as a finalist with a highly commended award at the National Enterprise Educator Awards 2022 in the category of 'Inclusive Enterprise Education' and Pearson's HE Innovate Awards 2022. Special thanks go to Jacqui Piner (GSK), who worked tirelessly as a GSK ambassador to support this programme.

This project was funded by the Biochemical Society's Diversity in Science Grants. Find out more about the grants and the projects that have been funded here: <https://www.biochemistry.org/grants-and-awards/grants-and-bursaries/diversity-in-science-grants/>. ■  
*Nigel Page is Director of Learning and Teaching for the School of Life Sciences, Pharmacy and Chemistry at Kingston University London, where he teaches biochemistry, molecular biology, and bioinformatics. He is passionate about ensuring equitable and inclusive practices especially in promoting employability, enterprise, and professional development and performs institutional research in these areas to support his students in the molecular biosciences. Email: N.Page@kingston.ac.uk*

## Further reading

- Konotey-Ahulu, D (2021) What can universities do about the Black recruitment gap? Higher Education Policy Institute, Oxford. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/09/06/what-can-universities-do-to-improve-graduate-recruitment-for-black-students/> [Accessed 09/01/2023]