

The Amplify project was created by the Higher Education Progression Partnership South Yorkshire (HeppSY) team at Sheffield Hallam University as a timely and vital addition to an ongoing programme of increased participation projects that have sought to address the distinct needs of learners in our region.

The project was named Amplify as its aim was to help Black school students find their voice, reflect on their experiences through creative tasks and give expression to the challenges and barriers they may have faced in school and may envisage in future routes through academia.

The project aimed to improve the educational success rate of Black students by offering digital workshop designed to expand the range of their academic vision and to expose them to positive, practical and honest advice from inspirational Black role models who may have overcome barriers similar to their own in educational and social settings.

Research has demonstrated that, although the academic success rate of Black students is good when it comes to securing a place at a higher education institution, the drop-out rate of Black students before a degree course is completed is relatively high. This statistic provided the impulse for the project and, it is hoped, can be affected positively with interventions akin to the ones provided through the Amplify digital workshops.

What would traditionally have been a series of face-to-face workshops became a suite of digital, remote sessions as a result of restrictions imposed by the COVID pandemic. The sessions took place on three days during the Spring and Summer of 2021.

We approached inspirational and motivational Black role models from the region and were fortunate to secure the involvement of:

Dr Muna Abdi - a local academic specialising in education and racial equity

Magid Magid - a justice activist, author, former Lord Mayor of Sheffield and MEP

Danae Wellington - a poet, singer and co-founder of the Nyara Collective

John Kamara - a literacy advocate and creator of the Library of Life and Beards and Books

Each guest speaker was asked to prepare a remote session where they would share their own experiences and memories of the journey through school and education. As well as connecting with the students in this personal vein, they were also asked to address the barriers and challenges they had faced relating to race and education.

Sessions from creative guests included tasks where students could reflect imaginatively on their own unexplored stories and memories and create a piece of work that symbolised their experience. Sessions from academics, entrepreneurs and

politicians gave advice and reassurance about routes into these worlds that could be made more likely by a positive, optimistic outlook towards higher education.

The key note speakers' sessions were interspersed with in-house workshops created by our own experts on Career Planning, Student Finance, HE Routes and Student Life. The project was capped by a celebration event for participating students and their parents where the creative results of the project were praised and the positive Amplify message was reaffirmed.

Five Sheffield schools were invited to take part in the project. The schools selected were the ones with the largest cohorts of Black Y9 students. We also allowed participating schools with more Black UCP students in Y10 and Y11 to invite these extra students along. Forty five students took part in the first workshop in April and we received lots of positive feedback from the participating schools, praising the levels of interest and engagement displayed by the Amplify students. To add to this, some schools felt that Black students who did not fall into the UCP category would enjoy and benefit from joining the project so we invited some new students to join in from the second session onwards. With numbers now approaching 60 students, we hope that the conversations sparked by our inspirational guests will help all the Amplify participants find new reserves of confidence and motivation as they map out their plans for higher education and work towards the creative tasks that will be celebrated with their parents in attendance at the final workshop of the project.