



Saying students' names (right) in contexts of culturally diverse student populations: experiences of learning communities at NTU

Research Project Findings & Recommendations

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Funded by

Context & Methods

Project title:

The pronunciation of students' names in contexts of culturally diverse student populations: capturing experiences of learning communities at NTU

Funding

TILT Seedcorn Fund 2020/21

Timeline

The project ran during 2021

Project team:

Jane Pilcher

Chloe Roesch

Project methods:

Focus group interviews
with NTU staff & with
NTU students

Project aims:

- To explore how pronunciation of students' names is experienced by NTU students, and by NTU staff who interact with them
- To use findings to constructively critique current language & behaviour practices
- To produce new evidence-based guidelines to help engender inclusivity, equality & engagement in NTU learning communities

Why saying students' names right matters

Data show there are now more international students and BAME students studying in English universities (UK Universities 2018) than before, suggesting that higher education has become less monocultural, mononational, and monolingual in recent years. It is likely that there is an accompanying greater variability in students' names.

Personal names discursively index identities, including socio-cultural identities of ethnicity, nationality, language and religion (Pilcher 2016). The complexity of entanglements between names and identities means that if names are misspelt/mispronounced, identities are misrepresented. This may result in affected persons feeling disrespected, disempowered, excluded and/or othered (Wheeler 2016).

There are few studies worldwide looking at the issue in educational contexts, but research in the US by Kohli and Solórzano (2012) and Payne et al (2018) concludes that mispronunciation and/or Americanisation of students' names amount to practices of 'renaming' and are 'racial micro-aggressions' which reinforce cultural paradigms of privilege and power. The students in these studies described their experiences of the 'renaming' that occurred when teachers and peers said their names incorrectly, and how it made them feel anger and shame and pressurised to conform to the majority culture. When their names were pronounced correctly, this gave students sense of empowerment, self-acceptance, and pride, enhancing their feelings of belonging in their learning communities.

NTU University Reimagined

The research project links to NTU's University Reimagined strategy through contributing to the personalisation of student experience ("Creating Opportunity"), being a force for good in social and cultural development ('Enriching Society'), 'connecting globally', and 'empowering people to do the right thing'.

Findings

From STAFF at NTU

Participants

- Nine NTU staff with a range of teaching roles & administrative responsibilities participated in the focus group.
- Pseudonyms are used in line with choices of participants

Some of my students have been pretty vocal in saying that when names are pronounced incorrectly, it makes them feel a little bit less seen, less heard.

Priya

KEY FINDINGS

- Staff awareness of importance of issue on grounds of respect, equality, inclusivity
- Staff awareness of power imbalance between staff & students as complicating factor
- Individual staff use *ad hoc* strategies to improve their pronunciation of students' names
- *Ad hoc* strategies are often paired with lack of knowledge & resources to improve name pronunciation
- Staff would welcome centrally-provided technological tools & training

If I get it wrong, I get them to correct me. And if I still can't get it, I've got them to record it into my voicemail, my phone, and I practice it & practice it until I get it right.

Sam

If we espouse inclusivity and diversity & everything else, well, there are certain obligations that come with that.

Rob

We need the [training] & we should have some tools [to help us say names correctly].

Priya

It should be done centrally. We shouldn't put the onus on the students to have to go through this potentially embarrassing, awkward [experience].

Naomi

I see a lot of issues in the classroom with group rapport when students aren't comfortable saying each others' names, but also when the teacher isn't comfortable saying particular people's names.

Laura

I don't think it's fair to expect our students, particularly international students, to have that level of confidence [to correct staff].

Rish

For graduation, the hours of time we try to work out how to pronounce names & create phonetic tips!

Clare

You wonder if students don't come to us & say 'actually [you said my name] wrong' because they feel there's gonna be some sort of academic punishment or penalty for doing so.

Sam

Findings

From STUDENTS at NTU

Participants

- Seven NTU students participated in the focus group, including undergraduates, postgraduates & international students
- Pseudonyms are used in line with choices of participants

KEY FINDINGS

- Students saw pronunciation of names as an issue of respect, equality & inclusivity
- Students saw power imbalance between staff & students as complicating factor
- Students appreciated staff efforts to at least try to say their name correctly
- Students felt that persistent mispronunciation of their names by teaching staff impacted on their motivation to learn & their relationships with staff

If you are continually miscalled, it's very difficult to feel like you really belong.
Kavita

It's easy for you to try, so at least...This is like, show some respect [for] other people.
Ngan

So, a mispronunciation of a name actually is quite crucial to me. Uh, because I think they're not addressing me.
Abeeda

So, I think if you're gonna repeatedly get my name wrong, you're gonna get my back up.
Kyesha

I really notice when people pronounce it properly. And you feel, oh, that's really good. I like that.
Akpene

I think, you know it's not my duty to continually educate people or like justify my being ...It is about signaling respect & if people, you know, can or can't be bothered, & that's really on them, not me.
Kavita

I feel it's like a level of respect. If like someone attempts it.
Jane Adeoye

Classmates, it's quite easy but maybe in class, then maybe there's a lecture going on & a teacher or lecturer calls you. And he gets it wrong he, or she gets this wrong. It's kind of difficult to like [say] ' My name is not that, it's this".
Akpene

100% like if a tutor has pronounced my name a certain way, just immediately drops my, you know, motivation to do better in that class & I feel like if that goes on consistently that would probably reflect in the whole module.
Shalini

Messages for NTU: institutional EDI policy & teaching & learning practices

KEY MESSAGES FOR POLICY

- Names & their pronunciation are an important EDI issue & can impact student belonging & engagement
- Ad hoc, individualized strategies around name pronunciation should be replaced with NTU-wide institutional strategies
- NTU institutional strategies should address the pronunciation of students' names from registration right through to & including graduation
- EDI training for all NTU staff should include names & their pronunciation
- Induction programmes for students should address issues of names & identity
- Software solutions such as NameCoach should be used to embed audio recordings of name pronunciation in NTU students' records systems & in email signatures of staff & students

KEY MESSAGES FOR PRACTICE

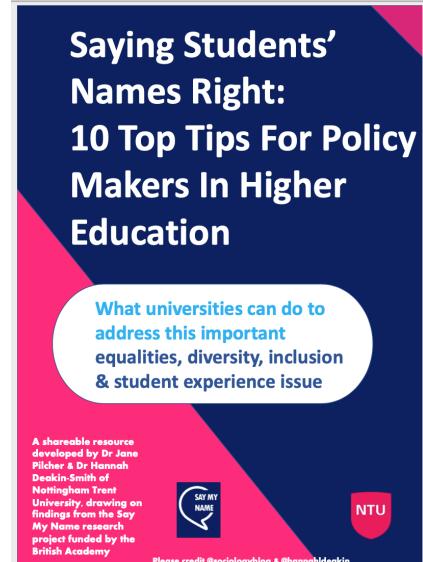
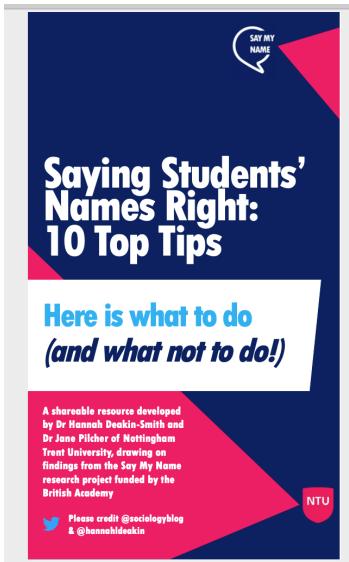
- Students appreciate attempts to pronounce their name correctly & see it as a matter of equality, and of respecting cultural diversity & their individual identity
- Ask a student how to say their name, but not in group settings. This puts them in the spotlight & may be experienced as 'othering'
- Don't avoid saying a student's name & don't offer to alter their name: always use their preferred name
- Use online resources to help you say students' names correctly, such as NameShouts.com or Howtopronounce.com
- Help normalize the declaration of preferred pronunciation of names by including an audio-recording of your own name in your email signature. Encourage your colleagues & your students to do so, too

Names are part of equality & diversity & inclusion & creating that culture where one feels one belongs. And not making an effort with somebody's name is just saying, you are different, you're not one of us.

Abeeda

Resources

Want to access some shareable resources? Go to <https://bit.ly/3LwDf3c> or use the QR code!



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