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Developing and documenting BAME heritage projects

Jennie Vickers, 15.05.2019

Case study from the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust, Manchester

We are an anti-racism organisation, with an archive and library, that focuses on local BAME heritage. Our collections are one of the University of Manchester's Special Collections, and we are in the basement of the city's public lending library.

We are halfway through a three-year programme financed by the National Lottery Heritage Fund to support black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) community groups in Greater Manchester to develop and archive their own heritage projects.

Our work is not solely about collections development – groups may choose to deposit their archives with us or elsewhere – but rather about promoting the importance of documenting BAME British heritage and making it visible.

In the first year, we actively supported 17 projects, through training, advice on project facilitation and documentation, archiving, information-sharing and exhibition development.

As a result of this work we accepted 15 new archives into our collection. Content includes ephemera relating to family and business histories, organisational papers and oral testimony.

Our approach to partnership working with communities is simple – we don't do things "to" people, we do things "with" people, pooling knowledge, expertise and resources.

The people we work with often express frustration when they are described as "hard to reach". They recommend that organisations wishing to engage make efforts to meet in community spaces, listen to people's needs, get involved in activities initiated by communities and take time to develop meaningful relationships.

Though archiving is our bread and butter, we never mention it until a relationship is well established. This may mean that groups are not ready to generate archive material until their second or third heritage project, when the longer-term impact and visibility of their activities evolves as a priority.

Below, we have outlined some of the learning from our project to date.

Co-curation: benefits

- Groups select and frame their own narratives, instead of being represented by official, institutional memory.
- Groups contribute to the development of historic archives, so content and cataloguing is more representative.
- Groups learn transferable skills that can be used outside of a heritage environment: interviewing, writing, storytelling, digital skills, research skills and so on.

Co-curation: challenges

- Archiving is not usually an initial priority for communities. Engagement is more often a focus for project work.
- The quality of research material and documentation can be variable if it is done by a range of volunteers. This may result in extra work for the archive or some material that is inadmissible.
- Groups may not have enough time at the end of their project for archiving, and this can have a significant impact on the collecting institution. Involving groups in cataloguing and documentation is preferable, but not always possible.

Jennie Vickers is the community engagement manager at Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust and Race Relations Resource Centre, Manchester



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