

Black and Minority Ethnic students at Russell Group universities: exploring the link between 'Possible Selves' and degree attainment

This paper reports on research with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and White students studying in two Russell group universities. It highlights the students' shared ambitions, the different academic strategies they are putting in place to try and attain a 'good' degree and the role that academic staff play in confirming or denying what may be possible. The paper, therefore, contributes to debates not only about 'What' but, more critically, 'Who' Higher Education is for.

There is a significant gap in degree attainment between BME and White students in UK HE, as measured by the percentage being awarded a 'good' degree: recent data evidences that 66.5% of White students studying first degrees receive a first or upper second class Honours degree, but only 49.2% of BME students and 38.1% of Black students do so (ECU, 2011). Research conducted by the DfES (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007) showed that even after controlling for the majority of contributory factors (prior attainment, subject of study, age, gender, disability, deprivation, type of HE institution attended, type of level 3 qualifications, mode of study, term-time accommodation, and ethnicity), being from a minority ethnic group (except the Other Black, Mixed and Other groups) was still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment. Although attainment is improving across all groups, the gap has not narrowed substantially over recent years (ECU, 2011).

The reasons for the attainment gap are complex, and multiple factors - structural, organisational, attitudinal, cultural and financial – are all of significance (Loke and Berry 2011; Singh, 2011, XXX, 2012). To date, however, only limited research has explored the specific outcomes of students studying within Russell Group universities (Fielding, 2008; Richardson, 2008) and much of this has been quantitative rather than qualitative. In addition little evidence has been put forward to explain the attainment gap. Emerging evidence, however, suggests that students with highly elaborated 'possible selves' are more likely to set higher career goals, to put actions in place to achieve these goals, and, overall, to achieve better graduate outcomes than students who have under-developed possible selves, or whose orientation lies in the past or present rather than the future (XXX and XXX, 2011 and 2012). Possible selves are future cognitive representations of the self (Markus and Nurius, 1986) including those that are desired and those that are feared. The more highly elaborated the possible self, or selves, the more a person is likely to develop specific goals to work towards, or to avoid, achieving it and to develop strategies for action (Pizzolato, 2007; Plimmer and Schmidt, 2007). Such goal-directed action can result in positive possible selves being realised and negative possible selves being avoided. Others, including parents and educators, can, however, heavily influence the development of possible selves (Rossiter, 2003), confirming or denying what is seen as possible - including students' academic attainment.

Previous possible selves literature has also highlighted the significance of racial differences in students' beliefs about what is both possible and achievable (Kerpelman et al, 2002; Unemori et al, 2004; XXX and XXX, 2011) as well as the strategies that different individuals adopt to try and attain the possible. This research was, therefore, designed to explore further the range of possible selves students from different ethnic backgrounds describe, and identify the strategies students undertake to achieve their desired future possible selves, in particular their academic 'help-seeking' strategies. A series of focus groups were undertaken, separately, with White, Asian, Black, Chinese and 'mixed heritage' 'home' under-graduates studying Science, Technology and Maths related subjects. In all sixty six students participated in eight focus groups. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically via Nvivo.

The results show that there were strong commonalities across all cohorts of students particularly in terms of their aspiration to gain a 2:1 or 1st. Getting a 'good' degree was perceived by all students, regardless of ethnicity, to be the best chance of obtaining post-graduate employment enabling them

to become their desired possible self - academically successful, and in professional and well-paid employment. All except the White students, however, believed that they may be prevented from achieving their desired possible self due to a lack of academic support, inadequate teaching and uninterested lecturers. This latter point was a particularly strong theme running through the Black, Asian and Chinese groups, with many lecturers perceived as emphasising their research activities to the detriment of their teaching responsibilities, regarding teaching as a 'chore' and students as an 'irritant'.

In addition, many of the Black students did not regard themselves as 'academic'. They believed that they lacked sufficient foundation knowledge in order to be able to fully understand their courses and possessed insufficient academic communication skills to be able to 'interpret' what was being required of them academically. Consequently these students believed that they needed substantial support in order to achieve their desired possible selves. However, the Black students along with those from the Chinese and Asian focus groups had, in the main, formed poor relationships with their lecturers and did not feel able to draw on them for academic support, relying instead to friends or struggling to cope alone. The White students, in contrast, were drawing on multiple forms of support including, critically, high level academic support from their lecturers in order to realise their desired future possible selves. The White students also appeared to have a stronger sense of entitlement to seek help from lecturers, and a greater sense of belief that such help would be both forthcoming and useful.

Consequently, whilst all students had shared ambitions, the different academic help-seeking strategies of the White students suggest that these students may be more likely to attain their academic goals and become their desired future possible selves than their Chinese, Asian or Black contemporaries. The research therefore contributes not only to debates about differential degree attainment but, more importantly to wider debates about the aims and inequities of UK higher education.

References

- Broecke, S. and Nicholls, T. (2007), *Ethnicity and Degree Attainment*, DfES Research Report RW92, London: DfES.
- ECU (2011) *Equality in higher education: statistical report 2011*. London: ECU.
- Fielding, A. (2008), *Degree attainment, ethnicity and gender: Interactions and the modification of effects: A quantitative analysis*, ECU/HEA. Available online at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/EDA_Quantitative_Report_March08.pdf Accessed 24th March 2012.
- Kerpelman, J. L., Shoffner, M. F. & Ross-Griffin, S. (2002) African American mothers and daughters: beliefs about possible selves and their strategies for reaching the adolescent's future academic and career goals, *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 31(4), 289–302.
- Loke, G. and Berry, J. (2011), *Improving the degree attainment of Black and minority ethnic students*, ECU/HEA. Available online at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/inclusion/ethnicity/ImprovingDegreeAttainment.pdf>
- Markus, H. and Nurius, P. (1986) Possible Selves. *American Psychologist* 41, 954-969.
- Pizzolato, E.J. (2007) Impossible Selves Investigating Students' Persistence Decisions When Their Career-Possible Selves Border on Impossible *Journal of Career Development*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 201-223
- Plimmer, G. and Schmidt, A. (2007) Possible Selves and Career Transition: It's Who You Want to Be, Not What You Want to Do, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 114, pp 61-74
- Richardson, J.T.E. (2008), *Degree attainment, ethnicity and gender: a literature review*, ECU/HEA. Available online at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/J_Richardson_literature_review_Jan08.pdf Accessed 24th March 2012.

- Rossiter, M. (2003) Constructing the possible: a study of educational relationships and possible selves, in: D. Flowers et al. (Eds) *Proceedings of the 44th Annual Adult Education Research Conference* (San Francisco, San Francisco State University).
- Singh, G. (2011) *Black and minority ethnic (BME) students' participation in higher education: improving retention and success. A synthesis of research evidence*. York: HEA.
- Unemori, P., Omoregie, H. & Markus, H. R. (2004) Self-portraits: possible selves in European-American, Chilean, Japanese and Japanese-American cultural contexts, *Self and Identity*, 3(4), 321–338.