

Defining the Future: an exploration of perceptions of employability of undergraduate minority ethnic students

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In 2011 the researcher undertook a funded institutional project considering the experiences of minority ethnic undergraduate students within HE. Analysis of project data pointed to a number of issues with potential for further exploration, both from an institutional and national perspective. A key theme which emerged was that of perceptions of future employability beyond university. Ethnic minority groups comprise 20.2 per cent of undergraduates studying on a full-time degree programme in the UK (ECU, 2010), whilst they comprise only 9% of the working population (Connor et al, 2004). Equally, whilst 53.3% of white university leavers were in full-time paid employment six months after leaving university, only 42% of minority ethnic leavers (subject to variation across ethnic categories) were in full-time paid work (ECU, 2010).

It became clear from an analysis of initial data that, whilst students had a strong perception of equality within the institutional context, there was a corresponding sensitivity that this would not continue beyond university into future employment. This resonated with other studies (e.g. Osler, 1999), in which students had addressed their mind to the possibility of discrimination in employment. However, in Osler's study only those who had early experience of discrimination expected their ethnicity to have any direct impact on their employability. In this project, almost all of those interviewed (even though they expressed no anecdotal evidence of discrimination) perceived their status would have a bearing on their future careers.

In light of these initial findings, there is an opportunity to drill down further into minority ethnic student perceptions of employability. There has been a significant body of work in relation to widening participation and ethnic minorities, and more recent development of important work in the area of minority ethnic performance, progression and retention in HE (see inter alia, Higher Education Academy & Equality Challenge Unit, 2008; Higher Education Academy & Equality Challenge Unit, 2011; Singh, 2011). Equally, the employability agenda in the context of diversity post-Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) has become an influential force in the pedagogic research arena (for example Thomas & Jones, 2007) and there is a body of quantitative data as to minority ethnic student progression into the labour market (see inter alia HEFCE, 2010; ECU, 2010). However, there is an apparent paucity of work considering minority student perceptions of employability within Higher Education and whether this may be linked into the data suggesting a disproportionate BME representation within the labour market. There is also a broader range of work from the US exploring whether perceptions of discrimination can lead ethnic minority groups to target a restricted range of employment opportunities which could thereby perpetuate disadvantage (Peterson, Taylor, Charlton & Ranyard, 2005; Taylor, Charlton & Ranyard, 2011). In light of the initial findings from this project, and the lack of research in this important area, it is considered that it is both timely, from an institutional and wider sector perspective, to undertake further research.

The purpose of this paper will be to explore these initial findings and open up an academic dialogue as part of the development of further research in this area. In a future world where taking responsibility for oneself may well be the preferred response to societal pressures and where education is a route to ensuring basic survival through self-reliance, the ability for us as researchers to understand the implications of perceptions of minority ethnic students on future employability is vital to individual security.

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