How do students respond to institutional labels around widening participation and equality and diversity? (0336)

Miriam R. Miller[1], Aunam Quyoum[1] [1]*The University of Sheffield, United Kingdom*

In the UK, Widening Participation (WP) policy has been consistently moving towards considering the entire student lifecycle rather than simply increasing rates of access (OFFA 2016a; OFFA 2016b; HEFCE 2016). Students entering Higher Education (HE) from a diverse range of backgrounds should therefore be supported in their studies to ensure they are as able to fulfil their potential as more 'traditional' entrants; particularly with regard to their student experience and outcomes, such as degree awards.

In this paper, we draw on our findings from four research projects which include the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students, and students with specific learning difficulties, mental health and/or autism spectrum conditions. We explore students' resistance to particular institutional labels around equality and diversity, how tensions emerged between institutional labels and students' identities, and how students also came to use these labels instrumentally, despite resisting them in other arenas.

BME Students

Research in the UK HE sector has consistently demonstrated an attainment gap between home-domiciled BME students and their White counterparts. This gap is persistent over time and still exists when factors such as entry qualifications and socioeconomic status are taken into account (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; HEFCE, 2015; ECU, 2015). However, whilst some research has explored how applicants from WP groups are less likely than their peers to be offered places into highly selective, research-intensive Russell Group universities (Shiner and Modood, 2002; Boliver, 2013), there has been comparatively little exploration of how this might be translated into the experiences of BME students who *do* enter such institutions - particularly in the context of the post-2012 increase in tuition fees (Clark et al, 2017).

Our research set out to explore how BME students understand and experience their transition into, and through, the University. Participants' responses highlighted challenges in trying to map sector-wide patterns on to individual student experiences. We noted the divergences between the external definitions of ethnicity and WP systematised by Universities, and the internal definition as felt and experienced by 'BME' students.

Participants had varied individual responses to the 'BME' label and noted how their responses could also change at different times throughout the student lifecycle - from empowering, equalizing, discomforting, or indifference/lack of relationship to. This suggests the flexibility and internal negotiability of an ethnic identity in response to Universities established "way-of-doing-things" (Jenkins, 2008).

Whilst we recognise that homogenising a diverse group of student voices and experiences, based on an umbrella identity of 'BME' is highly problematic, we also noted that participants also had concerns about the institution adopting "post-racial" approaches. Participants felt that broader definitions of "inclusivity" and "liberation" served to mask how education can reinforce colour-blind racism and the minimisation or individualisation of ethnicity related inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Students with specific learning difficulties, mental health and/or autism spectrum conditions

Recent OFFA Access Agreement guidance has tasked HEIs with gaining a more in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by different groups of students. One of these target groups is students with mental health problems, Specific Learning Difficulties, and/or an autism spectrum disorder, such as Asperger Syndrome (OFFA 2016a).

This section discusses findings from a participatory action research (PAR) project that looked at the way one Russell Group institution supports students with Specific Learning Difficulties, mental health, and/or autism spectrum conditions. Using a PAR approach allowed us to explore the social reality of these students, ultimately aiming to surface their insider knowledge about their own lives and to improve our practice in a way that would be meaningful to them (Burns 2007; McNiff 2013).

Six students were employed as co-researchers, undertaking the initial research design, analysis of findings, and the dissemination of the work (the importance of which is discussed in Pain et al. 2012, Maunder et al. 2013, and Morgan et al. 2014.) In working with these students, issues arose around the label "vulnerable" in the context of an ethics application, which included people with disabilities and learning differences. Gufstavson and Brunger (2014) note that this label of 'vulnerable' can impact the ability of researchers to successfully build relationships with their participants, so this label potentially impacted both the staff researcher's relationship with the student researchers, and their relationship with participants. The student researchers ultimately rejected this label as they did not feel that their conditions made them, or their participants, any more 'vulnerable' than others.

The results from the online questionnaire the student researchers designed highlighted other ways students interacted with institutional labels. Firstly, respondents were noted to using the label of 'disability' instrumentally, to join or form committees and social groups in order to find people with similar experiences. Secondly, the data analysis showed that postgraduate students were the least likely to disclose a mental health condition, despite the fact that research shows that the prevalence of mental health problems is higher amongst PhD students than in the highly educated general population, highly educated employees and HE students (Levecque et al., 2017). Respondents talked about the tension between disclosing a mental health condition and the impact they perceived this having on their future academic identity; they felt disclosing their mental health condition in an academic environment that encourages overwork and normalises stress and anxiety might lead to them being perceived as less employable.

Implications for the sector

This research highlights the challenges the sector faces when attempting to conceptualise, research or research with, and understand the student experience and perspective. Our findings suggest that the sector needs to be more mindful of the flexibility of these labels and the points at which they are appropriate to use when working with students. We suggest that taking a lead from students is the most appropriate way forward, since the ways labels are used in different contexts can impact on their meaning, and we recommend the Participatory Action Research approach as one potential way of doing this.

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