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The Black, Minority, Ethnic Student Experience at a small Northern University: an an examination of the experiences of minority ethnic students undertaking undergraduate study (0053)

Paper Outline

Background

The need for research into the Black Minority Ethnic ('BME') student experience in higher education, particularly fine-grained institutional research, is reinforced by the statutory requirements imposed by the public sector equality duty (pursuant to the Equality Act 2010). The new Equality Duty replaces the three previous duties on race, disability and gender and extends coverage to age, sexual orientation, religion or belief, pregnancy and maternity and gender reassignment. Public bodies are required to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations in the course of developing policies and delivering services. The Commission for Racial Equality (2002) (now merged into the Equality and Human Rights Commission) stated that Higher and Further Education observance of the requirements of the Race Equality Duty (now the Equality Duty) would "create a positive atmosphere, where there is a shared commitment to value diversity and respect difference". It is with reference to the Equality Duty in relation to race that the research reported here explores the experiences of BME students. Implications for institutional policy and strategy and for the enhancement of the student experience and academic practice are a central concern.

In considering the implications of these statutory requirements, there is a recognized lack of pedagogic research into the BME student experience (see inter alia, Ball, Reay & David, 2002; Connor et al., 2004; Higher Education Academy & Equality Challenge Unit, 2008; Mai Sims, 2007; Jessop & Williams, 2009). Whilst, there is a fairly solid body of work on BME access to HE (see, inter alia, Taylor, 1992, Modood & Shiner, 1994; Abbasi, 1998; Modood & Acland, 1998), and an emerging body of work in relation to degree attainment (see inter alia, Higher Education Academy & Equality Challenge Unit, 2008; Higher Education Academy & Equality Challenge Unit, 2011) there is a less significant collection of work on the BME student experience of HE. The research reported here addresses aspects of the relative absence of such research. Statistical evidence to date provides only a basic quantitative outline of the BME student situation. There is a need for qualitative research to 'drill down' into the issues to which quantitative studies point.

The intention of this research project has been to build upon the small body of existing work on BME student experience. This includes Osler's (1999) work on the educational experiences of BME undergraduates, the work of Connor et al. (2004)

on the influences on participation of minority ethnic students, that of Givens et al. (1999), on the ethnic minority experience in teaching training, Sims's (2007) case study on student experience of diversity, and Jessop and Williams's (2009) work on the minority ethnic student experience in a small, mainly 'white', university.

This need to research the experience of students whilst at university as well as at recruitment (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003) is particularly compelling in relation to the experience of minority ethnic students on a campus with a low proportion of BME staff and students (Jessop & Williams, 2009; Givens et al., 1999) such as the research site. There have been various calls for further research in this area particularly from government funded work. Connor et al. (2004) call for research into retention and degree performance of minority ethnic student groups. A project undertaken by the Higher Education Academy and the Equality Challenge Unit in 2008 recommends that specially commissioned qualitative research into the experiences of particular student groups could provide valuable intelligence to institutions. This present research addresses such calls.

Research Site, Objectives, and Methodological Considerations

The paper will provide information on the early findings of the research study (commenced in September 2010), commissioned and funded by the Learning and Teaching Institute at the research site. The principal aim was to further understandings of the experience of BME students within HE, and to examine the particular nature of these experiences within the research institution with a view to identifying priority areas for institutional policy and strategy.

The research was based on a multi-layered, qualitative exploration of the experiences of BME students at the research site between September 2010 and April 2011. The paper will present findings from a primary examination of the qualitative data, collected from a purposive sample of undergraduate BME students. This initial analysis of findings is to be considered against a dynamic and developing institutional context. In line with the project's longer term dissemination strategy, internal and external dissemination during 2011/2012 will result in further consideration of the thematic foundations in light of emerging pedagogic and policy-related research.

The sample of undergraduate students, who self-certified to be of BME status, was drawn from across each of the University's sites and campuses. Data was collected by means of focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews. It was considered important to allow students the freedom to determine personal ethnic identity.

Initial Findings

The research findings will be discussed in relation to eight themes emerging from analysis of data:

a. *Belonging/togetherness*: implications of institutional ethnic diversity in relation to student perceptions of belonging and togetherness.

b. *Academic experience*: academic experience (including curriculum development and content) of BME students.

c. *Student experience*: wider student experience (including extra curricula activities, development of friendships, provision of university facilities and services and experience of the relevant locality) in the context of ethnicity.

d. *Differential treatment*: participant experiences of less favourable treatment linked to BME status (including racism).

e. *Equal opportunities initiatives*: subjective and objective considerations of participants in relation to institutional equal opportunities initiatives.

f. *Segregation*: issues of segregation and differentiation arising from ethnicity targeted initiatives, societies and groups.

g. *Early education*: distinction between early and university education in the perception and development of the BME student experience.

h. *Employability*: perceptions of BME students in relation to future employability.

Implications for Student Engagement, Enhancement of the Student Experience, and Academic Practice

Early examination points to a number of emerging issues which have implications for institutional policy and strategy in the areas of student engagement and experience, and academic practice. For example, whilst an analysis of the raw data found that ethnic heterogeneity was not a factor in choice of university, it was clear that most students felt that a diverse student/staff representation was objectively important as a means of sharing experiences and gaining knowledge of other cultures as well as encouraging widening participation. Equally, the predominantly 'white demographic' of the institution was something which students became acutely aware on commencing study. In some cases this led to transient, and in some cases long term, perceptions of isolation and lack of belonging. The impact of the 'white demographic' was particularly pronounced in relation to the experiences of international students. A further emerging theme was an obvious disinclination of those participating to join in with societies, groupings and facilities which were linked to individual ethnicity. Participants appeared to be averse to defining themselves by their ethnicity and preferred to join groups based on their individual interests. Some students were concerned that such targeted groupings could lead to differentiation on the basis of ethnicity and therefore prove to be a tool of segregation.

These feelings of isolation and differentiation have important implications for the development of strategy and policy within the research institution, particularly in relation to the promotion and development of specific initiatives aimed at BME students. The paper concludes with pointers to implications for the management of

student engagement. These include: curriculum development and learning and teaching practices; approaches to marketing, recruitment and promotional activities; transition strategies and induction practices; provision of support services; student retention and achievement; central and local strategies for widening participation; and staff development and awareness raising.

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