

# Black and Minority Ethnic Student Access to Doctoral Education: Lessons Learned from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

## ***Outline***

### Background

This details of this paper reflect the findings from a month-long research placement at MIT, within the Office for Minority Education, and the Office of the Graduate Dean of Education. The aim of the placement was to explore how a top tier institution such as MIT encourages and supports black and minority ethnic students to enter the university and to succeed while there. This placement was part of a wider PhD research study focusing on access to top tier universities and graduate careers for black British males from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This research placement was exploratory in nature, taking an ethnographic approach, observing events and workshops, speaking with students, as well as interviewing key programme and administrative leaders at MIT. This work adds to the wider field of BME student experiences (McNamara and Coomber, 2012), the work on BME student access, (Boliver, 2013; Noden et al., 2014), BME student attainment (Stevenson, 2012), and the BME academic experience (Bhopal, 2014; ECU, 2015).

### Methodology

This was a piece of field-research, an ethnographic exploratory study using interviews with a range of stakeholders at MIT, participant observation and document analysis. This was primarily undertaken within the administrative departments of the Office for Minority Education (OME) and the Office of the Graduate Dean of Education (ODGE). Time was spent talking to programme leaders as well as students, and in particular one programme was explored which targeted BME students from around the US who were interested in pursuing a PhD in STEM (or another area within MIT's remit). This is the MIT Summer Research Programme (MSRP) run by the ODGE office, which has been running since 1986.

### Lessons

MIT has a range of well-established, centrally funded programmes and activities used to target and support BME students, and create a sense of community in a highly competitive environment. These programmes not only encourage BME students from within MIT to consider graduate studies, but from outside of MIT also, and they run a successful programme for external minority students from across the US to experience MIT for a summer and learn about the processes relating to and requirements needed to apply for doctoral education (MSRP programme). As many of their programmes have been running for a long time, they are well-known and students share their knowledge of the programmes with other students. This peer to peer recommendation supports the take up for the programmes and they have good participation rates for their activities.

While their programmes are open to all students from all ethnic backgrounds, MIT are very aware of the ethnic groups which are minorities in the STEM field and focus on targeting these students, rather than all ethnic minorities. They recognise that being from an ethnic minority group does not

always mean that you are underrepresented, and this is particularly true for Asian Americans in STEM in the US.

The programme leaders focus on creating a sense of community for BME students and this is something students comment on, while also stressing the importance of students recognising the wider culture of MIT as a highly competitive and academically demanding university.

Posters and signs across campus display the university's focus on equality and their various campaigns, and this is also evident for the programmes, with a large amount of time and effort spent on the branding of programmes, the materials for students, and the language used to refer to activities for minority students. Language came across as particularly important as programme leaders found that students were not signing up to programmes that had words such as tuition in their name, due to their perception that this signalled they needed additional help.

Despite continuous effort to support students and with 25% minority undergraduates, the Office for the Graduate Dean of Education has still struggled to see an increase in the number of black doctoral candidates, however, the numbers of Hispanic students has increased since its MSRP programme began.

#### Points to consider

Understanding what the barriers are for black students in terms of entering doctoral education both in the UK and the US is an area which needs further exploration and research. Taking a more detailed approach to understanding different cultural groups, rather than seeing BME students as a homogenous group is important here, particularly if there is to be an increase in the number of black professors in the UK.

Targeted programmes that are well-branded can go some way to showing a university's commitment to encouraging diversity across the board, as well as highlighting the benefits of doctoral education for a career within and outside of the academy.

International sharing and collaboration can be a good way of sharing practice and experiences, particularly in this field, and outreach and widening participation leaders could benefit from this international perspective.

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