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Stories from black minority ethnic students: how can we enhance their University experience to improve their degree attainment?

Dr Susan Smith, Centre for Learning and Teaching, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds LS1 3HE, UK

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Introduction

This poster focusses on the process, initial findings and actions from Leeds Beckett University's Deep Dive project which explored BME (Black Minority Ethnic) students' stories of their learning experience at the University and how this is impacting on their learning and degree attainment and achievement.

The poster explores elements of the BME undergraduate students' experience and specifically highlights how the University can support them effectively to get more 2:1 and 1st class degrees.

Background

Despite numbers of BME students being relatively small at LBU (12%), there is a clear attainment gap with non-BME students attaining degrees which are classified as Firsts or 2:1s.

BME students across the Higher Education sector are more likely than their white peers to get poorer marks and degrees classified as Thirds or 2:2 (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007; Richardson, 2008).

At LBU, only 49.8% of BME students get good degrees compared to 64.5% of white students. Nationally in the UK, 73% of white students get 1st and 2:1s but only 58.5% of BME students nationally get 1sts and 2:1s.

Our University is below average for attainment for white and BME students both in our own University and compared to the national HE sector.

Conclusions

Six practical short term actions were identified from the emergent findings. These focus on pushing forward a more inclusive approach to learning and teaching at Leeds Beckett University. They will be embedded into our new Education Strategy for 2016-17.

- a) the identification of two academic staff Inclusivity Champions per School ;
- b) establishing a pan-University group to address improvements in more inclusive assessment practice;
- c) establishing a work group exploring BME student uptake of placement opportunities;
- d) "unconscious bias" training for all staff;
- e) encouraging course leaders to work with library staff to review their "white curricula" and reading /resource lists;
- f) working with the Students' Union to encourage more BME students to stand as student course representatives.

Methodology

A broadly interpretive approach was adopted for this project with a focus on qualitative inquiry (Cresswell, 2007).

Detailed thematic analysis of quantitative data relating to five large UG courses, of the course documentation and qualitative data from staff and student focus groups was undertaken.

Four focus groups with 30 BME students from across the University were undertaken and students were encouraged to tell us stories about their learning experiences. These focus groups were focussed on different narrative elements of the students' journey:

- i. transition into University;
- ii. family and social background and how that impacted on learning;
- iii. working and learning from fellow students;
- iv. the curricular content and assessment;
- v. their life and career aspirations;
- vi. how they make their voices heard. A thematic content analysis (Willig, 2003) was undertaken of the students' stories and synthesised with those from the staff.

Findings

Key findings from their stories focussed on:

- i. anxieties about arriving at university and feeling low in confidence in their first year;
- ii. specific concerns about group working, discussions on attitudes and values, assessment expectations and placements;
- iii. wanting more student and staff BME role models in student representative and senior academic roles;
- iv. curricula taught through a primarily white lens.

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Contact: **Dr Susan Smith,**
Centre for Learning and Teaching,
Leeds Beckett University,
Calverley Street, Leeds, LS1 3HE.
Email: s.v.smith@leedsbeckett.ac.uk or
Tel: **0113 812 5268**