Updated presentation

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Title:

Stories from black minority ethnic (BME) students: how can we enhance their University

experience to improve their degree attainment?

Abstract:

This presentation focusses on the story of how students and staff worked together to

improve BME students’ degree attainment.

Elements of the BME undergraduate students’ experience were narrated via focus

groups. The presentation will be a structured “illustrated tale” highlighting six

interventions implemented to support BME students more effectively to achieve more 2:1

and 1st class good degrees.

Changes in progression and achievement rate will be monitored longitudinally over the

next 3 years but reflections on emergent findings will be reviewed innovatively in terms of

the realities of the “happy ending.”

The interventions are wide-ranging and attempt to solve some of the challenges

described by the students. They focus on i) the development of one- stop, inclusive

assessment guidance, ii) an exploration of “white curricula”, iii) enhancing their student

voice, iv) staff development about unconscious bias and v) strategic initiatives and

collaborative curricular projects in the Faculties.

Introduction:

This presentation focusses on explaining 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 scholarship of the learning and teaching approach particularly focusses on the elements of Martin et al’s (1999) definition of SoTL which encapsulate the need for staff to reflect on issues relating to their own teaching practice in their own discipline and enquiry into how their students may (or may not) be learning.

The story focusses on images from the emergent tale and 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 low at LBU (12%), there

is a clear attainment gap with non-BME students consistently attaining better degrees.

BME students across the Higher Education sector are more likely than their white peers

to get poorer marks and lower degrees classified as Thirds or 2:2 (Broeche and Nicholls, 2007;

Richardson, 2008). At LBU, only 49.8% only 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

58.5% of BME students nationally get 1sts and 2:1s. LBU *is below* average for attainment

for white *and* BME students both in our own University and compared to the sector and the gap in

white and BME attainment remains significant.

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 5 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

“real stories” about their learning experiences. These focus groups were structured around

different narrative elements and stages of the students’ journey- i) transition into University ii) family and social background and how that impacted on their learning iii) working and learning

from fellow students iv) the curricular content and assessment v) their life and career

aspirations vi) how they made their voices heard.

A thematic content analysis (Willig, 2003) was undertaken of the students’ stories and synthesised with those from the staff. Students in the focus groups were encouraged to engage in the stories and in the spirit of educational enquiry and the SoTL, engage in generating potential solutions as described by Healey, et al (2010). Staff in the University were encouraged to reflect on the stories and consider how their own teaching practice could be modified to address their own disciplinary and scholarly contexts.

Findings:

Key findings from the students’ stories focussed on i) anxieties about arriving at

University and feeling low in confidence in their first year ii) specific concerns about group

working, 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 v) more opportunity for free ranging discussions across the University

about attitudes, values and unconscious bias.

Conclusions:

Six practical short term actions (listed below) were identified from the emergent findings and will be explored briefly. These are part of a more inclusive approach to practice catalysed by our Race Equality Charter Mark Action. Participants in the workshop will be invited to reflect in small groups on i) what the challenges of implementing each action might be and ii) their own teaching approaches and if any of the named actions (or others) have worked successfully to improve or transform the learning experience of the BME students studying on their own courses in their own discipline.

The six practical actions are

a) the identification of two staff Inclusivity Champions per School and Service;

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) establishing a project to review overly “white curricula”;

f) working with the Students’ Union to encourage more BME students to stand as student course representatives.

The story will end with a brief reflection on the “happy ending” and our progress- can all these loose ends be resolved neatly or is there a sequel?

References

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How does this presentation address the conference themes?

It particularly addresses Track 2 (Student Learning) and Track 4 (Course Design). This “semi-structured tale” focuses on the narratives of 30 BME students and their stories about their learning experience and how those stories impacted on the teaching and learning approaches and strategies we catalysed at Leeds Beckett University to improve attainment. In addition, it addresses Track 4- the students tell stories that occurred while they were studying on their courses. Educational enquiry and staff reflection catalysed and influenced the design and assessment of those courses at a University level. The presentation will use elements of storytelling and illustration.