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Exploring the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Student Attainment Gap: What Did It Tell Us? Actions to Address Home BME Undergraduate Students' Degree Attainment

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores work in progress on six key actions derived from a project exploring Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) student degree attainment at Leeds Beckett University (LBU). In 2014–15, in common with the wider national picture in higher education, at LBU there was a significant disparity between the percentage achievement of good degrees (Firsts and 2:1 classification) between the white students (64%, who comprise 84% of the total institutional student population) and the BME students (49%, who comprise 16% of the total institutional student population). This attainment gap existed across all the degree programmes after controlling for UCAS tariff points on entry. Indeed, it has been indicated in the literature that the degree attainment gap is strongly related to the experience of teaching and learning at a university (Stephenson, 2012; Office for Fair Access [OFFA], 2015). This context provided the opportunity to examine the particular nature of the BME student experience with a view to using this information to develop local University strategy and actions in relation to identified priority areas. This research used a mixed methods approach of i) documentary analysis of course documentation wording to explore the visibility of inclusive curricular issues and ii) focus groups and interviews to explore staff and student views on BME student experience and achievement.

This paper presents findings from student and staff focus groups and documentary evidence from course documents of the five courses in our University which had the highest numbers of enrolled BME students. The findings focused on the BME students' low confidence, their classroom and placement experience, curricular content, reading lists and delivery.

Discussion of these findings by staff and students generated six priorities for short term action. Progress on these actions and proposed future developments are outlined.

Keywords: Black minority ethnic students, student experience, degree attainment.

Background

Black and minority ethnic (BME) is a broad term used to incorporate a range of minority communities living in the UK. Over the past 20 years, the term has gained wide currency within public and private sector organisations to distinguish individuals and groups whose ethnic origins are either: non-White, in the case of African Caribbean and Asians, or non-British, as in the case of Eastern Europeans and Irish people. The term 'BME student', for the purposes of this paper, refers primarily to the undergraduate students from Asian and African Caribbean origin who are designated as home students, i.e. students who are not designated as 'overseas students'.

Universities have a long way to go before they become exemplars of ethnic equality and diversity (Runnymede Trust, 2015). There are significant differences in the experiences of Higher Education (HE) between BME and white students (OFFA, 2015). Retention rates are lower for all ethnic groups (apart from those with Chinese ethnicity) than their white peers. There are also disparities in progression of different ethnic groups from undergraduate study to employment and further study with British ethnic minority graduates between 5-15% less likely to be employed than their white British peers six months after graduation (Zwysen & Longhi, 2016). There are stark differences between ethnic groups in terms of whether students receive a degree, and the degree classification they achieve. These gaps persist even when controlling for other factors which may affect attainment such as the student's age and qualifications on entry. This suggests that the disadvantage continues into and beyond HE and the degree attainment gap may be influenced by the students' experience of curricular, pedagogic, teaching delivery elements of university life (Stephenson, 2012; Broecke & Nicholls, 2007). The curricular element is the specific focus of this local project.

There is a fundamental need for research into the BME student experience in Higher Education, particularly fine-grained institutional research (Davies & Garrett, 2012). The Equality Duty (which came into being in 2010 required public bodies, including Higher Education institutions, to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, value diversity, advance the equality of opportunity and foster good relations in the course of developing policies and delivering their services.

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A review of the literature identifying factors which affect BME student achievement in Higher Education and the degree attainment gap was undertaken. There is a solid body of work on BME student access to Higher Education (Taylor, 1992; OFFA, 2015) and the degree attainment gap (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Higher Education Academy [HEA] & Equality Challenge Unit [ECU], 2011; Stevenson, 2012; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015) and its profound implications for individuals and the wider society (Richardson, 2008a; Ladson-Billings, 2006). In addition, a body of pedagogic research into the BME students' experience and how this might be impact on their achievement is valuable and conclusive in its signalling of the need to reduce the attainment gap and improve the students' experience in the classroom whilst at university (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Jessop & Williams, 2009; National Union of Students [NUS], 2011; Mai Sims, 2007; Ball, Reay & David, 2002; Higher Education Policy Institute [HEPI], 2016).

There is increasing discussion of racialised inequalities in the university sector but it appears little is changing – for white students (despite a growing proportion of BME individuals in the student population) are *still* far more likely to convert their entry qualifications into a 2:1 or above compared to BME students. To narrow this gap a review of the current models of delivery and support (which are failing BME students) will need to take place and sustained action from the sector to address infrastructural, curricular and pastoral needs must occur. However, the causal factors are complex with the ECU/HEA report (2008) stating that it is important to avoid “reductive or simplistic explanations”. However, key contributing factors to this persisting and non-narrowing gap between BME students and their white peers may be that i) more BME students arrive at university from poorly performing schools from lower socioeconomic groups which have been regularly linked with poor degree attainment (Department for Education, 2015), ii) that cultural learning styles are not appreciated (Shepherd, 2009), and iii) whether university policies, pedagogic practice, curricular content, practice around assessment, support and marking are inclusive and fair (Hockings, 2010; Morgan, 2016) – a factor that is particularly relevant for this project.

It is noteworthy that the ECU/HEA (2008) report specifically recommended that specially commissioned qualitative research into the university experience of BME students could provide valuable intelligence to universities and help with informing the identification of strategic institutional priorities and actions to support their execution.

Attainment rates

Despite numbers of BME students being relatively small at LBU (16% of the total student population; n=625 in 2014-15), there is a worrying attainment gap with non-BME students consistently attaining better degrees. At LBU in 2014-15, 64% of white students achieved a good degree compared to only 49% of BME students. This mirrors the typical attainment picture across the UK Higher Education sector (Loke & Berry, 2011).

BME students are more likely than their white peers to get poorer marks and lower degrees classified as Thirds or 2:2 and, although achievement is improving the gap itself has not reduced significantly over many years (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Richardson, 2008b; Loke & Berry, 2011; OFFA, 2015). These outcomes place BME students at a significant disadvantage when it comes to seeking graduate level employment. Nationally in the UK, 73% of white students get Firsts and 2:1s but only 58.5% of BME students achieve Firsts and 2:1s. LBU is *below* average for attainment for white *and* BME students both in the University and compared to the sector, and the gap between white and BME attainment remains significant.

There is no single explanation for this attainment gap. Causes are multifactorial and complex – structural, attitudinal, cultural and financial (Stevenson, 2012; Loke & Berry, 2011). Ladson-Billings (2006) regards the attainment gap as an education debt – a legacy of BME disadvantage resulting from decades of inequality and lack of opportunity. Clegg, Stevenson and Willott (2009) have discussed the social and cultural capital of different student groups and how staff, when designing university curricula, should take account of the wide variety of material and contextual aspects of their students' lives and the constraints some may face e.g. in presuming students will be in a position to seek internships and beneficial placement programmes (Cosslett, 2015). Whatever the causes, both historically and currently, the primary interventions in universities have all assumed a BME student deficit model. This misconception has underpinned the continued focus on ‘fixing’ BME students, with little success. Morgan (2016) has identified over forty factors which either cause or sustain the attainment gap, the vast majority are the result of University policies, course practices, curricular design staff attitudes and behaviours.

A specific focus explored good practice in sector projects exploring BME degree attainment at Wolverhampton and Coventry Universities. In addition, sector guidance from the HEA framework series on access retention and attainment (HEA, 2015) describes a holistic approach to practice specifically highlighting the importance of action plans which facilitate embedded equality and diversity, inclusive curricula for all flexible learning and inclusive technologies.

We need to move away from a deficit model which sees ethnic minority students as lacking in ability and aspiration and our universities as ‘already’ inclusive. This requires less of a view that individual BME students need fixing and more of a view that ‘quick fix’ approaches should be avoided and a culture of inclusive practice in universities should be nurtured (Loke & Berry, 2011). This project took this premise and explored active ways that we could use a mix of data (from qualitative data from staff and student stories collected in 2015-16, text evidence from current course and module documentation, and quantitative attainment data from courses) to interrogate our processes, curricular practices and create a sense of belonging and a more inclusive learning environment for home, black and minority ethnic students at the University. The University's Ethics Committee approved this project as research into our core internal business of learning and teaching. Staff and student participants voluntarily consented to take part in the interviews and groups and their identity was kept confidential.

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Methodology

A broadly interpretive approach was adopted for this small, local project with a focus on qualitative inquiry (Cresswell, 2007). This approach aims to allow the researchers the opportunity to understand the emergent subjective meanings articulated by the study participants as they interact with the wider world (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). This project focused on a mixed method, multi-layered exploration of the experiences of our BME undergraduate students and staff. The methods chosen were broadly similar for student and staff participants.

Methods for the students' data collection: All the home BME students on the five identified courses (Accounting and Finance, Business and Management, Law, Sports and Exercise Science, and Childhood Studies) which had the largest number of BME students enrolled in 2014-15 were invited via email to attend a two-hour focus group meeting. Confidentiality of their identity was assured and only the focus group facilitator (SS) and the note taker knew who had attended. Potential student participants were asked by invitation to think in advance about their university learning experience. Focus groups were chosen as an appropriate interactive method for data collection because they explore participants' rich experiences and perceptions through in-depth discussion, insight, and group dynamics (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Four focus groups, with the twenty BME students from across the University, were undertaken over a period of six weeks and these student participants were encouraged to tell us stories about their learning experiences at LBU. These focus groups were not audio recorded (to preserve confidentiality) but detailed notes were made by an observer note taker and the author who was facilitating the groups. The notes summarised quotations and the key issues raised, and were structured around different narrative elements and stages of the students' journey. This mirrors the same model used by Stevenson (2012) in her report for the Higher Education Academy exploring BME students' attainment. The stages are 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 and vi) how they made their voices heard. Students were given a book token if they attended a focus group (although this had intentionally not been mentioned in the invitation email in order to encourage students with a genuine interest in discussing their experience and inclusivity issues to attend).

Students in the focus groups were encouraged to engage with stories in the spirit of educational enquiry and the scholarship of teaching and learning, engage in generating potential solutions as described by Healey, O'Connor and Broadfoot (2010). Notes were annotated with a code which related to their course, gender and level so confidentiality could be preserved.

Methods for the staff data collection: Because of difficulties with staff availability, it was impossible to have all the academic course leaders from the five courses in one focus group. Each course leader was invited to be interviewed individually by the researcher. Two, two-hour focus groups were then generated. Six volunteer course teaching staff attended one and fifteen staff interested in the BME students' experience and inclusive curricula joined the second in response to a general staff invitation. The focus groups discussions followed the same stages of the student journey (as above) and likewise were given the opportunity to suggest solutions to issues raised (Healey, O'Connor & Broadfoot, 2010). All the staff participants in the focus groups were invited to reflect on their own stories and consider how their own teaching practice could be modified to be more inclusive as well as address their own disciplinary and scholarly contexts. As with the students' focus groups, the staff focus group participants agreed ground rules for behaviour specifically relating to maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of their colleagues. As with the student focus groups, they were not audio recorded and summarising notes were made by two experienced note takers.

Both the student sample and the staff sample were given the opportunity to cross check the notes for attribution and accuracy after the focus group events.

Staff were asked about their experiences and challenges of teaching in the University, their learning and teaching experience when teaching a diverse group, how they worked with University processes and regulations, and what inclusive practice meant to them. The main limitation to this methodology was the small proportion of the total pool of BME students who attended the focus groups which narrowed the breadth and scope of the perspectives obtained.

Course documentation text review: The text of five separate packs of the course documentation (primarily module/course templates and prospectus text) was systematically reviewed and analysed.

Analytical approach

A thematic content analysis (Willig, 2003) of the transcripts of the student focus group notes was undertaken and synthesised with those from the staff groups' analysis. Some additional context was sought from the focus groups' data of staff and students which had been undertaken six months earlier in relation to LBU's wider strategic scoping work for preparing to apply for a Race Charter Mark.

As part of the analytical process, the researchers employed a reflexive approach to this project i.e. they considered themselves as inserted into the social field itself (Bourdieu, 1986) and, as such, considered their own power positions and perspectives particularly, as part of the student focus groups. They did not know the students or staff participants or have any line management or assessment marking roles with any of the participants. Literature on indigenous methodologies speaks of the value and importance of researchers considering, articulating and using culturally appropriate methodology when working with people from different sociocultural backgrounds (Tillman, 2002). Consideration of all the cultural backgrounds of the staff and student participants was

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strengthened by clear understanding of the issues in the literature and a sensitive, transparent, verbal introduction to the focus groups with ample allocated time for questioning and/or withdrawal and a discussion about the need for authentic tales. This was enhanced by writing anonymised notes of the discussion but not audio recording the conversations although clearly this could compromise "trustworthiness" but enhance the richness of the data (Elo et al., 2014, p. 5).

Findings

The key summarised findings presented here are based on a thematic content analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the student and staff participants. While recognising this is a small sample and not generalisable to other institutions, it has provided a vital addition to the basic statistical data and, as such, has contributed a more multifaceted representation of the participants' issues rather than just seeking a single objective reality (Osler, 1995, p. 42).

i) Documentary findings

The document analysis of the course approval documentation revealed:

- insufficient detail about developing inclusive approaches to curricula;
- lack of exploration of the inclusivity element of the global outlook graduate attribute;
- no detail about a more inclusive approach to placements and work-related learning;
- lack of explicitness about how integration, group work and multicultural issues are addressed explicitly within the course delivery;
- overly white authored reading lists;
- little detail on inclusive approaches to induction and inclusive assessment strategies;
- patchy activity relating to inclusive curricula (specifically in relation to focused interventions for BME students identified at course/School level in the Faculties).

ii) Findings from the course leader interviews and staff focus groups:

- low numbers of BME student course representatives;
- BME students not taking up placements/year out opportunities thus leaving them at an "employment disadvantage";
- high numbers of BME students living at home leading to the possibility of reduced integration and social opportunities;
- different help-seeking behaviours with some students reluctant to ask for help with essay writing. This leads to an increase in the submission of substandard work and more resits;
- needing a more comprehensive approach to improve student retention and support right through the student lifecycle from pre-entry to graduation;
- clarity of expectations at induction in relation to assessments, class behaviour and group work.

iii) Findings from the students:

- anxieties about arriving at university, not "feeling academic", needing support and feeling low in confidence in their first year:

It felt like a massive transition for me to come to university from A levels. (Level 4 Law student);

Those ones who found social interaction difficult fell under the radar. (Level 4 Law student);

- specific concerns about group working, assessment expectations and placements:

I felt I didn't have friends in class. Group work was a good way to make friends with people. I wish the teacher could have mixed us up more. (Level 6 Business and Management student);

I would love a placement but I don't know much about it and no one I know has done one out of the Uni. I want one at Audi as I want to work as a salesman in a good job for them. I will try to look at options in the second year and work out how to apply. (Level 4 Business and Management student);

- wanting more student and staff BME role models in student representative and senior academic roles:

I wanted to be a course rep but I didn't know how to. (Level 6 Business and Management student);

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We don't have any black staff on our course so I am not sure if they understand our perspective. (Level 4 Law student);

- curricula taught through a primarily white lens and the students struggling to engage in a curriculum that was seen to be mono-cultural:

It would be interesting to see and hear many more diverse views. Our work doesn't cover international foreign companies or systems. (Level 6 Business and Management student);

- more opportunity for free ranging discussions across the University about attitudes, values and unconscious bias:

It would be great to have more free-ranging discussion to help the breaking down of social barriers and there would be less ignorance socially and in the classroom. (Level 6 Business and Management student).

The findings told us there was clear congruence between student-identified concerns and staff concerns. Staff concerns were manifested verbally in the focus groups and interviews and highlighted in the quality of some sections of the formal course documentation produced. Findings where both staff and students mentioned the same concerns were prioritised in terms of action planning.

This research adds to the emerging body of national and international work in this area and assists in understanding the BME experience within universities. It provides a firm evidential base for developing our institutional strategy and activities with a particular focus on improving the learning experience for BME students and enhancing the academic practice of all staff through the development of a more inclusive learning environment for all. This good practice should have a knock-on benefit to all students, not just the BME students, who will begin to understand the importance of inclusive curricula, and sharing values, cultures and opinion through understanding of the student voices.

The six prioritised actions

Six practical short term actions (listed below) were generated from the emergent findings and the proposed solutions of the participants and will be explored briefly.

The six actions are:

- i) Identifying staff with a special interest in inclusivity who will encourage and support inclusive approaches to teaching and learning in each School;
- ii) Establishing a pan-University working group to address improvements in more inclusive assessment practice and the generation of online, accessible downloadable guidance for academic staff on inclusive practice;
- iii) Establishing a working group exploring BME student uptake of placement opportunities;
- iv) "Unconscious bias" training for all staff;
- v) Establishing a project to review overly "white curricula";
- vi) Working with the Students' Union to encourage more BME students to stand as student course representatives.

i) Identifying academic staff to champion inclusive approaches to teaching and learning

Most Schools have now identified an academic staff member with an interest in inclusive teaching and learning. These individuals, who have an interest and skill in fostering an inclusive approach to teaching and learning, will support colleagues in improving the BME and disabled students' attainment and experience. Their roles will vary depending on the individual and be tailored to the needs of the School but broadly may involve:

- Being catalysts of School activities and projects;
- Getting involved in work streams and part of an advisory academic community of practice relating to the review of the Learning Pathway and Student Support Framework in 2016-17. This work aims to improve the experience, progression and retention of first year students;
- Sharing inclusive practice across and between Schools at key Learning and Teaching Fora events led by The Centre for Learning and Teaching;
- Working with course teams involved in enhancing their provision for approval;
- Focusing on our reasonable adjustment provision, i.e. considering intersectionality and specifically addressing the wider needs of the disabled BME students.

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The scope and range of these roles are still being established but a series of working groups and practice-sharing events are planned for 2016-17.

ii) Inclusive Practice Working Group

A working group, with membership from Faculty academic staff and Professional Services, has generated good practice guidance and case studies. The content of the guidance has links to accessible resources and is based on the evidence from the project findings and sector research.

The working group has discussed a range of issues which impact on disabled and minority student groups e.g. robust anonymous marking where feasible (to reduce unconscious bias), formative feedback strategies which emphasise early feedback (especially in Level 4), clarity of assessment levelness, marking criteria/process and submission requirements, and the effective use supporting technology.

iii) Maximising placement opportunities for BME students

The importance and associated benefits of work placements for students and employers cannot be underestimated (ECU, 2010). Placements have also been shown to lead to higher degree classification and success. Some BME students in our focus groups expressed challenges in accessing and completing work placements. In the HE sector it appears that great value is placed on self-directed placements, accompanied by an expectation on students to be self-motivated and driven in both finding placements and making the most of them. Not all students can take up such an approach. Locating a 'good' placement and getting the best from it depends on students' access to social, economic and cultural resources, such as access to industry networks, the money to undertake unpaid or lengthy placements, and knowing how to 'sell yourself' to employers. This social capital is not distributed equally between groups of students. The University's placement development project, running over the course of 2016, aimed to maximise awareness and take-up of the placements' system, expand its scope into new areas, and ensure its fitness for operational, reporting and governance purposes. There will be three key actions relating to this:

- Collaboration with the Students' Union on consulting students about their experiences before, during and after placement (the intention is to survey around 300 students who have taken part in an extended sandwich placement);
- Creation of video clips illustrating how students from a range of backgrounds have engaged with, and derived benefit from, placements;
- Deployment of a new version of the placement software which opens up additional areas of use. These include implementation of a student-centred approach for particular cohorts (e.g. those with shared requirements or characteristics) and support for cross-curricular placement activity, such as multi-disciplinary projects.

iv) Unconscious bias training for staff

This focuses on developing equality and diversity training in new areas. For example, as part of our Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice for new staff, inclusion in all the University staff induction programmes and, via a pilot with an external consultant as part of the University bid for Athena Swan recognition, the rolling out of an online module on unconscious bias for all staff.

v) "Why is my curriculum white?"

A campaign, founded at UCL and catalysed by the NUS focusing on the lack of diversity and inclusivity in course content, stimulated our enquiry (NUS, 2015). This was also informed by Gaztambide-Fernandez's (2011) proposal that white supremacy and colonial thinking still dominated curricula and reading lists and "a conscious browning" (p. 60) of the curriculum was necessary. A preliminary exploration of the representation of BME authors and/or titles on resource lists was conducted and our University academic librarians are now also exploring ways of evidencing curriculum diversity using online module resource lists.

The University's online resource list system *Rebus* is an intuitive database offering a snapshot of both module titles and the module content delivered at the University. The system is currently used by staff and students as a way of supporting the delivery of the curriculum and as a way to help Quality Assurance Teams support approval events. It is seen as the 'single source of truth' for those learning resources recommended by academics to support learning. Academic staff wishing to interrogate their resource lists and seek evidence of diversity within our curriculum could use this as a tool to help them. The Resource Lists System Team will assist with this.

In addition, a project has been commissioned exploring similar issues around white Western bias in the curriculum in social sciences, particularly Psychology. The academic librarians for these courses will compile a list of BME authors over the coming academic year and promote them to staff and students via themed web guides and social media. This approach will then be modelled by other course teams.

The resource lists of the five courses (Accounting and Finance, Business and Management, Law, Sports and Exercise Science, and Childhood Studies) were also reviewed. Initial findings showed that it was difficult to ascertain accurately whether resource list items represented BME authors. It appeared clear, however, that the authors' backgrounds alone are insufficient to create a diverse resource

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list. The resources' content, currency, diversity and approach to the subject matter is more crucial when it comes to developing broad reading which addresses perspectives through multiple lenses. Module staff are now encouraged to work closely with academic librarians and research staff to review their lists.

vi) Increasing the number of BME student course representatives

The Students' Union (SU) is currently working on exploring strategies to increase the number of BME course representatives. With regards to advancement of BME and all liberation representation within the SU, a policy has been recently passed to engage groups of self-defining reps to attend forums to include Women, BME, International, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) and Disabled students. This work is in addition to active promotion to BME students during spring elections and the By-Elections. Work is also ongoing to capture data on existing BME representation which is limited because of the Data Share agreement the SU currently holds with the University.

The SU reports that, with input from academic staff it should, in the future, be possible to measure the number of BME Course Representatives and be able to gather feedback from them when necessary, ensuring a direct communication channel and the ability to understand their specific experiences much better. With the Union's new online training system, the SU will also be able to create online training modules, similar to those staff use, exploring issues relating to the voice of the BME student, their experience, as well as matters such as the white curriculum and campaigning for change. This module will be undertaken by course representatives and other students who engage in the Union as well, such as council representatives or society members.

Discussion

After a series of focus groups, interviews and data analysis activity at our University it appears, as predicted, there is not (nor should there be) a simple explanation for the attainment gap. When asked to speculate why BME students were less satisfied with their course and did not achieve as well as their peers, respondents (staff and students) consistently highlighted problems with the curriculum, the academic environment, assessment practice and academic support. This state of affairs is not unique to LBU and reflects issues felt by BME students across the sector (Stevenson, 2012). Nationally, students from ethnic minorities are significantly less satisfied with their university experience (HEPI, 2016) with only 21% of black home undergraduates being very satisfied with their experience (well below the average score of 27% of all those surveyed). The survey also highlights how students' expectations were not being met. Among students whose expectations were not met, 29% said that they had not felt supported in independent study, but this figure was markedly higher among Asian students (37%) and those students living at home (31%). The majority of Asian students (53%) live at home, compared with just 23% overall, and this data is broadly similar to LBU's data. It is clear there may be a link between not living with other students and possibly not gaining access to the same level of support, and lower satisfaction (Mountford- Zimdars et al., 2015). There is considerable interest in the sector in exploring this student group particularly by The Student Engagement Partnership who work collaboratively with the Higher Education Funding Council, the Quality Assurance Agency and the NUS.

These important issues have implications for our University strategy that has a bearing on the BME *and* non BME students' experience *and* on staff academic practice. In particular, the students' feelings of isolation, low confidence, and difficulty with induction and transition into the first year of their HE experience has accelerated clarity around our priorities for our new Education Strategy. We aim to focus University endeavours on the Level 4 experience and review the entire cross-institutional student support framework. It is recognised that academic attainment can only be achieved through the provision of joined-up, collaborative, academic and pastoral provision so our BME students can achieve their best in a learning environment which supports them. The need for a fully inclusive approach to learning and teaching in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment is designed to be meaningful, engaging, relevant and accessible to all (Hockings, 2010; Thomas & May, 2010) underpinned our approach. This represents not a dilution of individuality or a reduction in bespoke needs assessment, but a recognition that we must be more aware of diversity and individual rights within a wider mix and the need to respect identity and meet the individual needs of all.

The future and food for thought

This discourse will necessarily grow in the future. The University's issues and actions are not part of a one size fits all approach to BME student attainment issues. We have adopted broad ranging, practical initiatives which together, however small individually, may have a greater effect together than in isolation. They can only be regarded as specific to our institutional context and challenges, but bearing in mind the national picture, there may be some developments that other universities could consider useful developments to improve their own students' experience. We are also aware that BME students can't be, and shouldn't be, considered one homogeneous group and that our categorisation for this project of considering their needs 'en masse' is flawed. Individual views provided through the focus groups and the staff awareness of the needs of different groups go some way to mitigate against this. A key action from the focus groups is that there is a requirement for staff to examine and reflect on their professional practice in relation to:

- creating an inclusive environment on the campus;

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- making a curriculum more inclusive;
- adopting an inclusive approach.

All these actions may challenge the conventional thinking and behaviours of university staff. The result will be a student body that feel a sense of belonging on campus and can achieve at the highest level.

Changes in the student progression and degree achievement rate will be monitored longitudinally over the next three years. There is a real sense that interventions that address student attainment and success in the most inclusive way possible, i.e. policies that are directed at *all* students and not to single out BME students but teach in “a non stigmatising way that does not support a deficit model” (Singh, 2011, p. 50). As Davies and Garrett (2012, p. 9) discuss, inclusive policies are particularly important when dealing with evidence that BME students may feel isolated and lack confidence. Although low confidence can commonly be felt by all other groups of students too, BME students may operate from a position of lesser power than ‘other student groups’ so, while their feelings may be similar in terms of isolation and marginalisation, their positioning in society means they may perceive and deal with the issues differently. This is supported by work which reveal that universities comprise a field of discursive practices which mesh with the ‘habitus’ of the dominant, white middle-class student groupings and, as such, exclude non-traditional or minority groups from the prevailing mainstream culture of university experience. As Singh (2011) states, inclusive initiatives provide a baseline for developing a full spectrum of pedagogic strategies which cover a range of social variations and any institutional actions should take full account of this.

There are numerous issues which emerged from the qualitative data which need further work and warrant further research. Future work in the short term will focus on:

- i) further development of BME students' success stories with a wider curricular and employment focus;
- ii) exploring the progression of BME students' to postgraduate study;
- iii) studying the experience of ‘commuting’ students (in 2014-15, for the five courses studied in this project, an average 53.4% of BME students lived in the parental home and travelled in to the University) and;
- iv) evaluating BME students' peer to peer support in the first year. To complement this, it would be timely to consider the future implications of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) metrics and how they might impact on the BME student voice and their narrative reporting of BME students' expectations and experience of higher education.

It is also clear that some issues raised in this project by the home BME students also overlap with distinct experiences raised by our international students, particularly relating to lacking ‘a sense of belonging’, overly white curricula, challenges when working in groups with fellow students, and their support and induction/transition into and through the first year.

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