'Widening Participation' Retention, Achievement, and Support for BME Students

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Background

I was initially approached to undertake some research to address the concerns of the drop-out rate for BME students within the Faculty of Education. It was felt that the researcher's own experience enabled a better understanding of the need for support for BME students within the Faculty of Education initially but university wide generally. I began by looking at policy statements of the university in relation to Widening Participation and its obligations in particular, to non-traditional students according to legislation. While it is important to focus on initiatives to encourage the recruitment of under-represented groups to HE, it equally important to examine measures to retain these students, ensure their progress and assist them into the labour market on completion of their study.

While widening participation may have the impact of viewing institutions as more accommodating of diversity, the perceptions of BME students is important in eliciting the extent to which they feel HE institutions are addressing their needs. Thus impacting their retention achievement and support. I wanted to elicit to what extent BME students felt part of the culture of the institution socially, culturally and academically. It was felt the response would identify the extent to which Widening Participation policies and practices affected the daily lives of BME students in a variety of ways, furthermore, it was an assumption that the extent of satisfaction would ameliorate retention rates and impact degree classification positively. To this extent, how the research were undertaken at CCCU will be discussed later, however in the ensuing discussions a context is provided for the specific approach.

This is an unexplored area, for whilst there is in existence a plethora of research in relation to retention and classification of degrees; such as Connors et al (2004); The National Black and Minority Ethnic Education Strategy Group (2006); Broecke and Nicholls (2007) Fielding (2007); Richardson (2008) and Elias et al. (2005) among others. Few of these have paid real attention the perception of students in relation to the culture of the university, while at the same time identifying the collaboration between non-traditional students; retention; access

and degree classification. Views proffered, such as those of Richards (2008) and Connors et al (2004) is that that some of the contributory factors lay in the unfamiliar territory of BME non-traditional students studying at HE level and the lack of academic support from family.

However, Connor et al. (1996, pp.66, 71-72) survey of students who had graduated from four UK institutions of higher education in 1993, yielded responses from 136 students from non-White ethnic minorities, and they were matched with 136 White respondents on the basis of gender, age, type of university and degree subject. The two groups had originally entered university with similar academic qualifications, and yet they differed in the classes of degree awarded. In particular, 65% of the White students had been awarded 'good' degrees, while the corresponding figure for the non-White students was only 39%. In other words, the odds of the non-White students obtaining good degrees was only 34% of the odds of the White students obtaining good degrees. Connor et al (2002) report on Ethnic Students in Higher Education stated that all minority ethnic groups achieve lower classes of degrees, on average, than White students. Black and especially Black African students come out as the lowest achieving group, whilst Broecke and Nicholls (2007) analysis demonstrates that little change have occurred, with those awarded degrees in 2004-5, again white students were shown to have obtained good degrees than students from other ethnic groups..

There is little doubt that the transitions into HE poses cultural adaptation for many students. Often, states Christie et a (2007), the first step was to recognise that participation required the students to develop new ways of learning; seemingly basic conventions, like taking active responsibility for finding learning materials and moving closer to the model of the 'independent learner', were unfamiliar to them and had to be learnt. Ridley (2007) gave a questionnaire on approaches to studying to two cohorts of first-year psychology students at a single institution. They were classified as White British (32 students), Other White (13 students), Black Caribbean (15 students) and Black African (17 students). The four groups did not differ in their use of a deep approach or a strategic approach, but the two groups of Black students were more likely to adopt a surface approach than the two groups of White students. Across all of the students, the adoption of a surface approach was negatively correlated with their marks in both coursework and examinations, and Ridley argued that the variation in surface approach scores among the different ethnic groups was a cause for concern. The four groups differed in their examination marks, with the White British students obtaining better marks than the other three groups. Nevertheless, the White British students still tended to obtain significantly better marks even when the effects of variations in the students' approaches to studying was been statistically controlled. These studies seem to imply that there may be factors at play, other than those commonly addressed above, namely of comfort and a sense of belong, and of equity in UK institutions in relation to degree classifications but also of the environment itself.

According to Crozier et al (2008) social and cultural experiences at university make students confront their own difference both in the university and at home. Through this process, they

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deconstruct and reconstruct their identities. Some distance themselves from their old self, but most seek to manage multiple or hybrid versions of themselves with particular ethnic and gender dimensions. For some the challenges are can bring dissonance and isolation in a culture that purports to nurture individual and academic growth. Studies primarily from the United States, cites the academic underperformance of people from ethnic minorities, particularly African-Americans, and has been used to explain the theory of "stereotype threat," according to which members of negatively stereotyped groups can feel sufficient anxiety at the prospect of being negatively stereotyped that they underperform in test situations (Steele et al 1995). Might stereotype threat explain the underachievement of UK BME students? The primary problem in applying this theory to UK BME students is that although there is a pervasive negative stereotype that African-Americans are less intelligent than European Americans (Steele et al 1995), it is not clear where there are negative stereotypes about UK students from ethnic minorities.

Another view similarly offered is that of Izlicht and Good (2006), who asserts that social factors can create threatening environments and come to affect intellectual performance, academic self-concept, and feelings of belonging. For Izlicht and Good (2006) being in a numerical minority for example, can impact intellectual performance, whilst specific environments can make people apprehensive about being the targets of prejudice, which in turn can pose problems for their academic self-concepts. Their study examines how threatening environments convey exclusionary messages by signalling that certain groups have only marginal status in the setting and so are not as valued as other groups. In so doing, these settings can hamper feelings of belonging, acceptance, and comfort, especially when they communicate that ability and intelligence are fixed qualities.

For Izlicht and Good (2006) threatening environments can be thought of as settings where people come to suspect that they could be devalued, stigmatized, or discriminated against because of a particular social identity. These settings compel individuals to think about their particular social identities and, in addition, the stereotypes associated with them. For individuals belonging to stigmatized groups, these stereotypes are negative, and any cues that signal that one's group is treated with ill will, is not valued socially, or is marginalized in any way, should increase one's vigilance for prejudice, foster mistrust, and create a threatening environment (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). Similarly, Seligman (2002)—highlights how environments can hurt, threaten, and impede.
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Similarly, the work social psychological research shows us that our environments can be threatening (Sanders et al 2008). They can remind us of our social identities, activate negative stereotypes, and otherwise communicate that our groups are marginalized, devalued, and not accepted. When this happens people must cope with these pejorative messages, and

the skill with which this is done can influence a number of important outcomes, including academic and intellectual performance, feelings of trust and belonging, and the accuracy and stability of self-knowledge.

Developing a support network for black and ethnic minority students – retention and access

As previously stated the research undertaken at CCCU specific aims was to Developing a support network for black and ethnic minority students – to address retention, with the objectives being;

1. To provide a support network where black and ethnic minority students can discuss and share experiences.

2. To establish links with central services to address issues that arises.

3. To feed back to central services positive experiences and possible initiatives.

The University's strategic plan outlines the values held as central to the success of the mission statement. These values include that the University:

'Seeks to ensure that students and staff are at the heart of the University life'

'Welcomes and values educational, social and cultural diversity'.

'Seeks to promote equality of opportunity in all aspects of our work'

To ensure that these values become practice as well as policy we wish to focus on the above in relation to students from black and ethnic minorities.

How the research was undertaken
There was 6 focus group meetings with BME students during the academic year (2007-2008) identifying a range of students from undergraduate to post graduates from the main campus. There were also visits to two HE institutions, the purpose of these were to identify and inform good practice from similar and different institutions.

Background work for the Project
The researcher initially arranged meetings with some programme heads from the Faculty of Education; Registry; Equality and Diversity Officer, Student Union President and the Black

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Student Officer, to explain the purpose of the research, and to solicit their support. This was followed by an invitation to be part of the steering group.

Project Steering Group

The research was overseen by a Project Steering Group, made up principally from a number of Faculties, but also to include staff member from the Registry Office; Equality and Diversity Officer; Student Union President and the black Student Officer.

Consultation with external facilitator

There was an agreement between the Equality and Diversity Officer and the Researcher, that an external facilitator was necessary in ensuring objectivity; in providing the BME students an environment to view their concerns without feeling that they would be 'victimised' by what they would want to say. Further, in conversation with the Equality and Diversity Officer, a number of students had expressed concerns about airing their views to a CCCU academic staff in particular. They were worried about the implications and repercussions for them personally and academically.

Thus, a number of discussions took place between the Researcher, External Facilitator and Equalities and Diversity Officer to inform and shape the planning for the meeting. The research and planning for the consultation meeting was informed by a range of documents including the Race Equality Policy (2006 & 2007), the Race Equality Strategy, meeting notes of the BME Students forum, March 2007,

Methodology

The BME student consultation sought to engage with students on a purely self-selecting basis, based upon their interest in the matter and their willingness to contribute to improvements in their University.

The consultation identified three activities. Each planned to elicit different responses from students. This was to ensure that the diversity of the students, including their learning styles experience of group and team working, ability for reflective learning and knowledge of equality and diversity.

The four aspects of the consultation meeting were:

1. Questionnaire
2. Unstructured large group discussion
3. Structured small group discussion
4. Plenary feedback

The consultation with BME students was carried out to inform research by Canterbury Christ church University into the experience of BME people at universities

Questionnaire
The students were asked to complete a written questionnaire by the facilitator. Little explanation was given to influence their answers, since their own views were being sought. A copy of the questionnaire is attached in appendix 1, and the statistical analysis to the questionnaire is attached at appendix 2. Analysis and observations are provided to some of the questions, where the students raised wider points or where the question was explored in the feedback discussions

Unstructured large group discussion
This was designed to generate discussion and afford the students the opportunity to share their experiences. This also enabled the facilitator, researcher and equalities officer to have an input into the event and to offer explanations and context for the way in which their input could contribute to effecting change at Canterbury CCCU. Examples of feedback are included in appendix 3.

Structured small group discussion & feedback
The university has a clear duty under the Race Relation's Act (1976) and the Amended Act (2000) to promote equal opportunities, eliminate unlawful discrimination and to promote good relations among its members (staff and students). The questions sought to explore the extent to which the students felt the university was meeting its obligations. The questions that were considered by the small groups were based on extracts from the University's race equality policy, equal opportunities statement and other published documents associated with the public duty responsibility. Feedback can be found in appendix 4.The small group sessions aimed to elicit a more considered response from the students'. It was also recognised that whilst the most vocal were always heard, some of the more quiet students may feel more at ease sharing their experiences and giving their response in a smaller group.
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Plenary feedback
Each group was required to feedback the responses into the plenary session towards the end. This ensured that the students listened to each other, and had the opportunity to explore issues and learn from each other.

Theoretical Context and Background

The CCCU research was conceived within the qualitative tradition of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This approach was underpinned by some feminist and ant-racist methodological principles, notably that theory should be derived from the actual experience of research participants (Mizra, 1995, p.165); and that it should be problematise and challenge racism.

The research data were collected through a process of semi structured questions and focus group discussions with 16 students via an external facilitator. The focus group feedback was transcribed with the consent of informants, and transcripts were returned electronically for checking by the students. The data were subjected to comparative analysis, and themes generated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The transcript and analysis was undertaken by the external facilitator but discussed with the researcher and equality diversity manager. Throughout the process, the transcript was transparent for all participants and open to scrutiny. The transcript and analysis was further seen and discussed by the project steering group, who provided review mechanism for the finding at stage one.

Research states Giroux (1992), which seeks to articulate the experience of 'others' is always likely to raise questions about representation. The Project Steering Group was both ethnically and gender mixed. The project researcher was black and female, doing a certain amount of 'border-crossing' in terms of representing the university.

Like Kemp (1993). The researcher acknowledges the problems of representation. "Representation is always partial. "I can never be you. I am always crossing to understand you. To translate what you say into my language, my experiences" (ibid.p.28).

Acknowledging that interpretive research is a view from "somewhere" (Diversi, 1998), it was all the more important to establish mechanisms for ensuring that the research process was trustworthy. In this case, mechanisms for trustworthiness included using participatory methods, transparency with informants, and the use of an external facilitator.

Given that the study is an 'insider' study, conceived in an institutional setting, it has both applied and policy influencing dimensions. However, it goes beyond traditional notions of bureaucratic research to reveal some of the everyday realities of Black and Minority Ethnic students on campus, speaking into the divide between organisational policy texts and the real life to which Van Manen (1981) and Neal (1995) both refer:

> "data in this category (organisational texts) deal far
> more with the manufacturer's image if idealised
> doings than with the on-going practical activities
> actually engaged in by members of the group"
> (Van Manen) 1981, quoted in Neal, 1995, p.6.

Key Findings from questionnaires; large group discussion; small group discussion and plenary session with BME students CCCU

- BME students wanted to be part of, and influence change at CCCU

- BME students are of the opinion that making improvements in equality and diversity performance will enhance the reputation of the University

- Students felt unsupported and vulnerable in placements due to race issues.

- None of the students rate CCCC performance as good or excellent in its equality and diversity performance

- Overall, the student reported a high level of personal support by staff, teaching and non-teaching staff at CCCU.

- Overall, 80% of the BME students felt that international students received a different level of support in comparison to all other students. This response is rather striking since it is probably the case that international students have an even greater need for staff support due to the difference in culture and learning environment.

- Students viewed teaching staff as ignorant due to their lack of knowledge of equality and diversity. They were of the opinion that this knowledge deficit was based on reluctance to educate and enable white students to develop a more balanced non-discriminatory view of BME as peers.

- In relation to above, BME student felt they had no way of addressing these concerns since they had no one else to turn to for help and support other than lecturers.

- Only 3% of students were aware that CCCU had an equal opportunities statement, many were not aware that this could be found on CCCU's webpage. They were unclear whether at some point they had received information concerning the university's legal and statutory responsibilities, further, they did not know whom they could ask for these documents or whether they had a right to receive and read them.

- BME students' felt they were facing a dilemma in wanting to address legitimate concerns, yet on the other hand they did not want to be perceived as 'troublesome students', which could potentially result in further isolation for them and adversely affect their class of degree

- BME students' felt they lacked mentors at the University, they suggested these was needed in providing information; as a point of reference; for support; to excel academically and otherwise. BME students identified mentors as helping them to address some of the issues presented on CCC

- . Many of the students felt that they would strongly discourage others from attending CCCU unless they were able to see changes in the way the University treated BME and International students.

- None of the students associated the University's equality and diversity performance to their academic studies and their need to secure a degree. They were able to make a clear distinction between the two and refused to allow the impact of discrimination; stereotyping and lack of support by faculty staff to influence their desire to get their degrees.

Conclusion and key findings from the research

Generally, the students painted lack of confidence in the system, however this may not reflect a true picture of how the majority of BME students perceive the culture of the university, since most of the students attending the focus groups were final year and post-graduates students. Third year students by definition would having spent a longer studying period at CCCU may well have been more disaffected in comparison to a first year students. Additionally the focus group could have attracted students who generally were displeased with their overall experience, of with a particular staff member and so on, and may have used the group as a vehicle for articulating their views. On the other hand, students doing well academically, and who found the university environment conducive to studying and socialising, may not have seen the necessity of attending the focus groups, or of needing to be part of a specific support network. That said the key findings are significant and identifies areas the University can build on, by taking the necessary steps in ensuring that all its students experience a positive and healthy environment for studying.
In order to ensure the success of the Widening Participation agenda, the University must put mechanisms in place to support students from diverse and non-traditional backgrounds. In the group discussions it was clear that the vast majority of students did not feel in any way

adequately supported. This message is being fed back to their peers and communities both by UK and by international students..

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