

# The BME Student Experience At A Small Northern University: An Examination Of The Experiences Of Minority Ethnic Students Undertaking Undergraduate Study Within A Small Northern University

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## Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a research study exploring the experiences of black, minority, ethnic ('BME') students within a small English University (the 'university'). The recognised need for research in this area is particularly compelling in relation to the experience of ethnic minority undergraduates on a campus with a low proportion of BME staff and students such as the research site. It is anticipated that the findings of this research will add to the emerging body of national and international work in this area and assist in understanding the BME experience within the research institution and other UK higher education institutes (HEIs), and also universities and colleges in the wider European context. In particular, it will provide a firm evidential base for the development of institutional policy and strategy in this important area, with a particular focus on the learning experience and progression of BME students. In addition to various external calls for further research in this area, the necessity for institutional research into the BME student experience is reinforced by the basic statutory requirements in the UK imposed by the public sector equality duty and pursuant to the Equality Act 2010.

## Background

The research reported in this paper was internally funded with a principal aim of furthering current understandings of the experiences of black minority ethnic ('BME') students within higher education (HE) and within the research institution. It was anticipated that the project would provide the opportunity to examine the particular nature of these experiences within the research institution with a view to using this information to develop university strategy in relation to key priority areas. Implications for institutional policy and strategy and for the enhancement of the student experience and academic practice are a central concern of the research.

There is a fundamental need for research into the BME student experience in HE, particularly fine-grained institutional research. This is reinforced by the statutory requirements imposed by the public sector equality duty (pursuant to the Equality Act 2010). The new Equality Duty (which came into force on 5 April, 2011) replaces the three previous duties on race, disability and gender and extends coverage to age, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief and sexual orientation. Under this duty, public bodies are required to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations in the course of developing policies and delivering services. The Commission for Racial Equality (2002) (now merged into the Equality and Human Rights Commission) stated that higher and further education observance of the requirements of the race equality duty (now the Equality Duty) would, "create a positive atmosphere, where there is a shared commitment to value diversity and respect difference". It is with reference to the Equality Duty in relation to race that the research reported here has sought to explore the experiences of BME students.

In considering the implications of these statutory requirements, it is evident that there is a relatively small body of pedagogic research into the general BME student experience (see inter alia, Jessop and Williams, 2009; Higher Education Academy and Equality Challenge Unit, 2008; Connor, Tyers, Modood and Hillage, 2004; Mai Sims, 2007; Ball, Reay and David, 2002). Whilst, there is a fairly solid body of work on BME access to HE (see, inter alia, Abbasi, 1998; Modood and Acland, 1998; Modood and Shiner, 1994; Taylor, 1992), and an emerging body of work in relation to degree attainment of BME students (see inter alia, Higher Education Academy and Equality Challenge Unit, 2011; Higher Education Academy and Equality Challenge Unit, 2008) there is a less significant collection of work on the general BME student experience. The research reported here seeks to address some aspects of the paucity of qualitative study in this area. Statistical evidence to date (such as the HEFCE report on student ethnicity, 2010) provides only a basic quantitative outline of the BME student situation. There is a need for qualitative research to 'drill down' into the potential issues to which existing quantitative studies point.

The intention of the research project described in this paper has been to build upon the body of existing work on BME student experience. This includes Osler's (1999) work on the educational experiences of BME undergraduates in Britain, the work of Connor et al., (2004) on the influences on participation in HE of minority ethnic students, that of Givens, Almeida, Holden and Taylor (1999), on the ethnic minority experience in initial teaching training, Mai Sims's (2007) case study on student experience of diversity, Jessop and Williams's (2009) work on the minority ethnic student experience in a small, mainly 'white', university and the more recent NUS (2011) report on the experiences of Black students in further and higher education.

This need for research to address the experience of students whilst they are at university as well as in initial recruitment (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003) is particularly compelling in relation to the experience of minority ethnic students on a campus with a low proportion of BME staff and students (Givens et al., 1999; Jessop and Williams, 2009) such as the research site. There have been various calls for further research in this area particularly from government funded work. Connor et al., (2004) call for further research and analysis into retention and degree performance of minority ethnic student groups. It is noteworthy that a project carried out jointly by the Higher Education Academy and the Equality Challenge Unit in 2008 recommends that specially commissioned qualitative research into the experiences of particular student groups could provide valuable intelligence to institutions. This present research, which commenced in September 2010, and which was commissioned and funded by the Learning and Teaching Institute at the research site, addresses such calls. Here, early findings are presented.

## Research Site, Research Objectives, and Methodological Considerations

In spite of being a 'new' university, the research institution has a modest percentage of BME students and staff. This is probably a reflection of the university's geographical location (Jessop and Williams, 2009). For 2009–10, the ethnicity of students known to be white stood at 93.1% of the current undergraduate student population. 4.8% of students declared themselves as black, Asian or ethnic other which is significantly lower than the national benchmark of 17.8%. This figure of 4.8% is slightly higher than the ethnic minority representation within the local population. The 2001 census data for the area in which the research institution sits records an ethnic population of just 1.96% (ONS, 2001). In spite of its proportionately low ethnic minority student population, the research institution has a Christian foundation and has a commitment to diversity and equality issues including a well-regarded Diversity Festival which takes place on an annual basis. In addition, there are a number of student union societies which link in to minority issues, including an International Society and an Afro Caribbean/Multi-Cultural Society.

The research was based on a multi-layered, qualitative exploration of the experiences of undergraduate BME students at the university between September 2010 and April 2011. It is important to note that this initial analysis of findings is to be considered against a dynamic and developing institutional context. In line with the project's longer term dissemination strategy, it is intended that internal and external dissemination during 2011–12 will result in further consideration of the important thematic foundations in light of emerging pedagogic and policy-related research in this area.

The findings presented here are based on an analysis of qualitative data gathered from seven undergraduate students across all of the campuses within the research institution who self-certified to be of BME status. It is recognised that this is a necessarily small sample and as such was never intended to achieve full generalisability. It is considered that the data collected has provided a vital addition to basic statistical data and as such has provided an important representation of the subjective experiences of the participating students rather than being determinative of a 'single objective reality' (Osler, 1999).

Data was collected by means of two focus groups and six individual semi-structured interviews. Two of the students (FG1A\SSI3 and FG1B\SSI6) participated in both the focus groups and the semi structured interviews. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the individual students' biographical details using individual codes. In line with current discussions in this area, it was considered important to allow students the freedom to determine personal ethnic identity and as such a particular category of ethnicity was not requested of the students nor was nationality questioned beyond British or international. In particular, following on from Cousin's (2002) work in relation to ethnic classification and the difficulties of alienating students through specific categorisation, it was felt prudent and important to provide participants with as much flexibility as possible in this regard.

The researchers employed a reflexive approach to this research and as such considered their position as white British researchers. It is recognised that many such studies have sought to ensure that interviews should be carried out by an ethnic minority facilitator (Givens et al., 1999). It has been suggested that research carried out by an individual with an ethnic minority background will encourage students to identify with that researcher and the result is a sharing of experiences (Osler, 1999). However, in relation to this project, it was considered that the researchers' attitudes, values, skills and approach were more important than ethnicity (Givens and Bennett, 2004). Nevertheless, a BME research assistant was a fundamental part of the research team throughout the focus group and interview process.

**Table 1** Student codes and brief details

Code	Nationality	Gender/status	Participation
FG1A/SSI3	British	Female/undergraduate	Focus group/semi-structured interview
FG1B/SSI6	British	Female/undergraduate	Focus group/semi- structured interview
FG2A	International	Male/undergraduate	Focus group
FG2B	International	Female/undergraduate	Focus group
FG2C	International	Female/undergraduate	Focus group
SSI1	International	Male/undergraduate	Semi-structured interview
SSI2	British	Male/undergraduate	Semi-structured interview
SSI4	British	Female/undergraduate	Semi-structured interview
SSI5	British	Female/undergraduate	Semi-structured interview

## Initial findings

The research findings are outlined and discussed in relation to eight key themes which have emerged from analysis of raw data:

- a. *Belonging/togetherness*: the implications of institutional ethnic diversity in relation to student perceptions of belonging and togetherness.
- b. *Academic experience*: the academic experience (including curriculum development and content) of BME students.
- c. *Student experience*: the wider student experience (including extra-curricular activities, the development of friendships, the provision of university facilities and services and experience of the relevant locality) in the context of ethnicity.
- d. *Differential treatment*: participant experiences of less favourable treatment linked to BME status (including racism).
- e. *Equal opportunities initiatives*: the subjective and objective considerations of participants in relation to institutional equal opportunities initiatives.
- f. *Segregation*: issues of segregation and differentiation arising from ethnicity targeted initiatives, societies and groups.
- g. *Early education*: the distinction between early and university education in the perception and development of the BME student experience.
- h. *Employability*: the perceptions of BME students in relation to future employability.

## Belonging/togetherness

It would appear that for those BME students participating, neither the diversity of the student body nor the staff demographic impacted on their decision to study at the university. This is not entirely in line with existing research in this area (NUS, 2011; Osler, 1999). However, it should be considered whether those already choosing to study at a predominantly 'white' university are those who would be concerned with a diverse demographic in any event. In this regard, it is suggested that further research as to those who decided not to study/or continue to study at the university would provide more representative data.

Whilst an analysis of the raw data found that the ethnic demographic was not a factor in choosing to study at the university, it was clear that most students felt that a diverse student/staff representation was important as a means of sharing experiences and gaining knowledge of other cultures as well as encouraging widening participation.

The predominantly 'white' demographic within the university was something of which students became acutely aware on commencing study. In some cases this led to both transient, and in others long term feelings of isolation and lack of belonging:

“When I first came here for the first month or first week I did find it a bit weird because I was the only one in our class I think there are only a couple more Asians in our class...there wasn't just one main group and I think that was one of the first shocks I got. I think I was a bit shocked when I first...I know it sounds a bit weird but I was...I was shocked when I first came in.” (SS12)

The impact of the 'white' demographic was particularly pronounced in relation to the experiences of international students. It was felt, however, that there was little the university could do to promote 'belonging' in this regard other than encouraging a wider BME visibility on campus.

## Academic experience

In relation to the BME academic experience (including curriculum development and content), most participants considered the university to demonstrate a commitment to the mainstreaming of ethnic diversity issues throughout the curriculum. Some participants did express the view that BME issues were not naturally included in their course and that issues were not satisfactorily followed up.

Most of the students considered that it was objectively beneficial to include diversity issues in course content in order to promote the sharing of knowledge and experience. However, whilst some students clearly felt comfortable in discussing such issues in class as part of their course, others felt awkward and considered that class discussions regarding ethnicity had added to their feelings of isolation detracting from a sense of 'belonging':

“You feel like you are being targeted [participant laughs]. It is the same with other groups because they say it is real uncomfortable for them as well to talk about it, because it is so negative to go on about those topics or about the feelings and we don't want to be saying stuff that will offend you and stuff like that but...” (FG2B)

Other participants claimed that they did not feel a strong sense of their ethnic identity and were able to detach themselves from discussions regarding ethnicity within their course.

## Student experience

When considering the wider student experience (including extra-curricular activities, developing friendships, the provision of university facilities and services and the experience of the locality), most of the participants felt their ethnicity had had little impact on their overall student experience. Most participants felt that their BME status had had little influence on the development of their friendships. However, one student reported that she had a predominantly minority ethnic group of friends, but considered that this had occurred naturally rather than by design. The only issue which was raised in relation to the facilities provided by the university was the lack of Halal food provided by institutional catering.

## Differential treatment

Whilst the methodology used was necessarily underpinned by discussions of potential differential treatment, in line with existing work in this area participants were invited to explore experience of less favourable treatment due to BME status (including racism). Encouragingly, none of the participants considered that they had suffered from any overt form of racism due to their ethnicity and most considered that they had not been treated in any way less favourably. However, in line with some existing studies in this area, some students felt that their peers and staff would sometimes modify their behaviour towards them for fear of appearing racist:

“There is hardly any like ethnic minorities around, people are so scared of accidentally being racist or anything so if they say anything there is always like a glance at me to see if like people are going to... if I am going to react or whatever but I never do, obviously I never do because they like don't mean it or they just trying to like I don't know what the expression is but there are just tiptoeing around me constantly.... I think that is that they...I am not sure.. I think that they do not want to like appear racist even if they are not the chance that they might appear is like scary for them.” (SSI5)

One student felt that she had actually been treated more favourably by tutors due to her ethnicity. In particular, she provided evidence that on occasion she perceived that she had been singled out for a welcome by her tutor whilst in a lecture hall due to her ethnicity. Only one student provided evidence of a situation which she believed may have amounted to less favourable treatment by a peer due to her race. This international student related how she had approached another woman who she had recognised from a previous selection day on her first week at university. The woman had appeared awkward and reluctant to engage with her. However, this student was unclear whether she considered this to have amounted to racism or less favourable treatment. In such circumstances it is important for the researcher not to impose their perception of the situation on to that of the participant. The view was also expressed that equal opportunities initiatives aimed at promoting equality on the grounds of ethnicity could be counterproductive and result in segregation and the paradoxical promotion of differential treatment.

We must be careful not to generalise in this regard. Whilst it is encouraging that participants considered they had not suffered direct racism, this should be seen in the context of the recent NUS (2011) study in which one in six of those students surveyed considered that they had experienced racism in their current educational institution and in light of institutional data relating to complaints of racism.

## Equal opportunities initiatives

When questioned about the equal opportunities initiatives in place within the university, most students were not aware of any specific initiatives aimed at BME students; although a couple of students referred to the existence of the institutional Diversity Festival. Most students considered that such initiatives would objectively

be of benefit but none related this to their own personal experience or expressed any dissatisfaction with their perceived lack of such initiatives within the university. A recurrent view was that if there was no problem within an institution then there was no need to have equal opportunities initiatives in place. Some students considered that having obvious initiatives in place would promote differentiation and segregation (a theme which is explored further below)

## Segregation

A theme which developed from a consideration of differential treatment and equal opportunities initiatives was the clear concern of BME participants that they did not wish to feel segregated by their ethnicity particularly in relation to targeted groups and societies. This has been an emerging theme in many of the more recent studies in this area and it is an issue which any HEI must pay heed. Most participants had a general awareness that institutions tended to have societies and groups geared towards BME students but were vague regarding the specific provision available within the university.

None of the students appeared to participate in any such societies or groups. A variety of reasons were provided for this disinclination. In particular, participants appeared to be averse to defining themselves by their ethnicity and would much rather join societies and groups based on their individual interests:

“Personally I wouldn’t join that because I am not just a Muslim and I am not just Asian I am not just those things. I wouldn’t...I am a female and I wouldn’t join a group because I am a female... I would join a group because I would be interested in it...not because of what I am. It is because it is something I would enjoy doing.” (FG1A)

Some students were concerned that such groupings would lead to differentiation on the basis of ethnicity and therefore prove to be a tool of segregation:

“At the same time you are segregating yourself from everybody else if you just sort of put yourself in to the hall with the same kind of people you are not experiencing somebody else’s culture and somebody else’s views you are just segregating away from that I think.” (SSI3)

In spite of this, some participants felt that such societies could objectively (rather than personally) prove beneficial in order to promote a forum for the sharing of knowledge and experience. This was felt by some non-international students to be particularly important in relation to international students and those without a family network. All such observations were from a detached viewpoint.

Only one student expressed a personal desire to participate in such societies and groups and he expressed the concern that such provision should not become divisive. A related point to this theme regarding segregation is that students appeared reluctant to participate in this research. This may be due to the concerns expressed above regarding an unwillingness to be defined by ethnicity and a distrust of targeted discussion of BME issues across the University generally.

## Early education

Many of the participants discussed their experience of the University in terms of contrast to their previous educational institutions. It became clear that those students who had attended schools and colleges in London had very different views to those who had been previously educated in the local vicinity to the University. Ball et al., (2002) have previously expressed the view that in their London based research project, students viewed HE from a ‘London perspective’. Those students from the London area expressed the view

that their previous institutions had been noticeably more culturally, religiously and ethnically diverse than the university:

“I went to a school in inner city London so there was so diverse and you know so many people from different backgrounds it didn't really kind of...equal opportunities don't really come in to effect because it was just everyone was a student. Here it is different...it is a predominately white University.” (FG1B)

Another London originator felt that the contrast in ethnic diversity within the university to their previous experiences had impacted upon their sense of belonging and their early ability to make friends:

“I think with school it was quicker for me to, I don't know, make friends in the first few months, whereas in university I think I found it quite hard for the first few weeks or was it a few months, so yeh.” (SSI2)

Those students, who had attended schools in the North relatively close to the University, expressed very different views. Both students who offered information on the locality of their schools felt the University to be far more ethnically diverse than their previous institutions. Such students suggested that they felt that this higher profile diversity was of benefit as part of their student experience:

“I think it is better in university than at school in the fact that I was...probably me and my brother were the only Asian people in our school so it was highlighted that you are a minority whereas here it is...you blend in you don't...it's not that you feel like you are a minority or anybody points it out whereas when I was in school it was more like the Asian girl over there but here it is not like that which you are really pleased about.” (FG1A)

## Employability

A theme which emerged from the initial student focus groups was that of ethnicity and future employability beyond university. It became clear during the primary focus group that, whilst students had a strong perception of equality within the institutional context, there was a corresponding sensitivity that this would not continue beyond university into future employment. This bore out the evidence from studies, such as Osler (1999), in which students had addressed their mind to the possibility of discrimination in employment. However, in Osler's (1999) study it was only those who had early experience of discrimination who expected their ethnicity to have any direct impact on their employability. In this study, almost all of those interviewed (even though they expressed no experience of discrimination) perceived their ethnic status would have a bearing on their future careers:

“Personally I would say if I left university and I got a job I would feel that I had less of an opportunity of getting a job over a white person, over the majority because I am a minority I would feel like they probably would hire the majority over somebody like me, generally... I just think it is a general factor that say in law which is the career that I wanted to be in, there is a lot less ethnic minorities than say the majority in law, in the real sector...” (FG1A)

This theme was further explored in the semi structured interviews with participants. All participants except one felt that their ethnicity would have an impact upon their future employability. Most perceived that their BME status would have a negative bearing on their future prospects:

“The job market is quite hard to get in but I think that still if I wanted to go into a certain type of job then I might have to... I think my ethnicity probably would hinder me but hopefully when I do get on the job market it will be a lot more focussed on equality.” (SSI6)



## Implications for student engagement, enhancement of the student experience and academic practice

Early examination suggests that there are a number of important issues emerging which have implications for institutional policy and strategy in areas that have a bearing on student engagement and experience, and on academic practice. In particular, feelings of isolation and differentiation have important implications for the development of strategy and policy within the university, especially in relation to the promotion and development of specific initiatives aimed at BME students, including internationalisation and widening participation. This research has necessarily sought to provide some pointers to implications for student engagement in two areas of importance within the research institution; namely, academic practice in faculties and academic departments, and policy and practice in central service departments. These include: (i) curriculum development and learning and teaching practices; (ii) transition strategies and induction practices; (iii) student retention and achievement; (iv) staff development and awareness raising; (v) approaches to marketing; (vi) recruitment and promotional activities; (vii) provision of academic support services; and central and local strategies for widening participation and internationalisation.

Having identified several pointers towards further discussion and future action within the research institution, it is clear from the growing body of work in this area, that any steps taken in relation to the development of policy and practice aimed towards enhancing the BME student experience and academic practice must be carried out in a subtle and cautious manner. In particular, Singh (2011) in his synthesis of research evidence enforces the fact that interventions based on such research must be carefully driven to avoid 'reinforcing stigma, which may result in negative outcomes'. Indeed, most researchers in this area advocate inclusive practice and policy development which is directed at all students and thus does not stigmatise BME students as being separate. This is particularly important when considering the project findings reported above in relation to feelings of isolation and segregation. As stated by Singh (2011), such inclusive initiatives will hopefully provide a clear foundation for the development of pedagogic strategies which will range across a variety of social variations. Institutional policy and subsequent action will need to take full account of this.

In conclusion, this is a discourse which will necessarily grow and develop in the future. This project has sought to contribute to this emerging dialogue and should be considered in its particular institutional context. As is increasingly accepted in this area, there is no 'one size fits all' solution to the emerging issues. Every institution faces its particular and unique challenges. In addition, one must be careful not to generalise in relation to the findings of any one particular study. Equally, categorisation in itself is fundamentally flawed and BME undergraduate students cannot be considered to be a homogenous group. However, what is clear from this present research and the project upon which it draws is that there are numerous issues which have the potential for further exploration both from an institutional perspective and also in relation to future potential collaboration. The distinct experiences of international students, feelings of segregation and isolation, and BME student perceptions of employability, are amongst these. One could argue that in this particular context the journey is most definitely as important as the eventual destination.

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