**Students as Co-Creators DRC Project Evaluation**

The Impact of Academic Leadership Behaviours on BME Student Attainment

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| **Abstract** |
| This aim of this small-scale research study aims to explore student perceptions of the quality of the  learning environment, academic leadership and sense of belonging and how these factors impact on attainment levels of black and ethnic minority (BME) students in UK tertiary education. The study  aims to build a picture of the underexplored relationship between quality of the learning environment,  academic leadership, sense of belonging and BME outcomes. Moss, McDuff & Tatum (2018) have  found that leadership style is one of the top four factors out of 14 that BME students believe influence their academic achievement (alongside motivation, fair treatment and fair assessment) and highlight  the significant role that inclusive leadership could play in closing gaps. With the aid of in-depth  interviews and a survey, a grounded theory approach will be followed in which the views of BME students will be sought via semi-structured interviews. Initial findings will include emergent themes  and intervention-based opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning environment, academic leadership and sense of belonging. Implications for student mental health are noted and the research paves the way for further research into the association between the quality of the learning  environment, academic leadership and sense of belonging and BME student productivity, motivation  and well-being. |
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| **Background and Aims** |
| Background:  A recent Universities UK Report (2019) argued that, “As other organisations have dealt with the injustices and inequalities faced by ethnic minorities, the higher education sector has fallen behind other parts of the education sector, the NHS and local government in addressing these inequalities”. Although business schools are often the most diverse of our university faculties, evidence suggests that we may be disadvantaging specific groups of students and staff through our teaching practices and organisational processes. It is therefore timely that the Chartered ABS annual Diversity Workshop (held on 27 February 2019) was on this issue. In the words of the University of the West of England’s Equity programme, “the time for talk is over” and we must address the growing attainment gaps for our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students and diversify our academic community and its leadership (see Miller 2016; Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2017). It is everyone’s responsibility.  Annie Ruddlesden from Advance HE, highlights why action is needed. In terms of student data, the gap in final degree results between white and BME students is closing but remains, with nearly 79.6% of white students being awarded a first class or 2:1 degree, compared with 66% of BME students. Although the gap of 13% (2017) was smaller than the 15% seen in 2016, action is not being taken fast enough and other data shows that 11.2% Black students leave HE without a qualification – significantly higher that the level of 6.9% for white students. It was found that in 2016-17, just 25 black women were working as professors (out of about 19,000 professors in total). More than 14,000 white men were recorded as professors, while just 90 black men held positions of the same status. Furthermore, BAME staff were more likely than their white peers to be in junior positions, to be less well paid and to be employed on fixed-term rather than permanent contracts. Of staff with known ethnicity, 9.4% of UK staff identified and 28.4% of non-UK staff identified as BME. The same report found that business school faculty in the UK are 86% white and 14% BME.  Husbands in the Guardian (2019) notes “We’ve known for years about the gap between how well black and white students do, so let’s do something different about it”.  Earlier research on the BME attainment gap, while identifying institutional and non-institutional factors behind at play, failed to examine the possible impact of leadership in increasing/reducing the attainment gap and the proposed project, and the parallel project at Bucks and Kingston Universities will fill this gap through new empirical work.(Moss et al (2018).  The project is divided in two phase:  Phase One: In 2018-19, there was an exploration of the literature base and establishment of the  Research aims, objectives and research questions.  Phase Two: in 2019-20, The first stage will consist of semi-structured interviews with BME students at Westminster Business School in order to understand the relative importance in BME students’ minds of academic leadership, as a factor influencing their academic attainment, as compared with other factors identified in the earlier research.  In a second data collection stage, an existing Leadership survey will be modified in the light of issues emerging from the interviews with Westminster BME students and then administered to a cross-section of BME students. The survey will be in two parts, measuring perceptions of impact factors on academic performance, motivation and well-being. Correlations between the two can be measured in order to establish possible influences on academic performance and motivation. Ideally, the survey would be distributed to BME and non-BME u/g students in order to allow a comparison between BME and non-BME responses.  Aims:  The project aims to increase our understanding of factors influencing BME student attainment since BME attainment (nationally) is currently 25% lower than that of white students where the award of first or second class degree classifications are concerned. The UoW has a high BAME population.  Objectives:  (i)to explore the prioritisation of influencers, both individual and institutional, on BME attainment at both school and university level  (ii)to explore the level(s) and type of academic leadership behaviours that are likely to have the greatest impact on attainment, whether by module leaders, Heads of Department, Heads of School or other Senior figures in the Institution.  (iii) to understand student perceptions of institutional culture and leadership styles in relation to sense of belonging  (iv) to explore the BME student experience at the University of Westminster  (v) to scope for future funding of a larger-scale project on this topic (Quintin Hogg Trust Fund)  *(vi) to understand the factors (*quality of the learning environment, academic leadership and sense of belonging )*that impact on BME students’ academic performance*  *(vii) To understand what can be done to minimise the negative impact of these factors?*  (viii) *To understand the impact on attainment, progression and mental health*  Research Questions:   1. *What is the academic performance of BME students in relation to the performance*   *of other students*   1. *What are the main factors (*quality of the learning environment, academic leadership   and sense of belonging) *that affect BME students’ performance*   1. *What do BME students think about their performance and what influences it* 2. *What can be done so improve BME students’ performance* 3. *What is the impact on attainment, progression and mental health* |
| *How do you think this research will impact YOUR learning and teaching?*  The project will encourage us to look more closely at our business curriculum, our pedagogy, the learning environment (how diverse are staff and campuses), and in turn empower our students to fosters a greater achievement attainment.   * Co creation within modules * Address systematic bias within module teaching * Develop programmes of work to foster greater levels of understanding and in turn, more inclusive practices * Inclusive teaching protocol adherence * Mentoring & Coaching within modules for greater sense of belonging * Fostering of inclusive leadership approach |
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| **Methods** |
| Phase One: Literature Search  A literature search was completed in a systematic, thorough search of all types of literature  (e.g. books, peer reviewed articles, etc.) on the topic of student BME and attainment. Literature searching can be broken down into a series of iterative steps. The following steps were taken…..  Around 25% more of the white student cohort received a 1st or 2:1 than the BME student cohort, but only 60.4% of BME students – a gap of 15.2 percentage points (Equality Challenge Unit 2015). Moreover, the attainment gap between BME and white students is increasing (Tedam, 2015).  The main causes for BME students to perform less than other groups are the following: taking the ‘surface approach’ when studying (Cotton et al, 2015), an improper academic environment with a lack of cohesive institutional policies, not enough interaction because BME students and other students and academic staff, not being open to collaborative learning, or perceiving assessment and moderation processes unfair.  Phase Two: Data Collection  The first stage will consist of semi structured interviews with 15 BME students at the University of Westminster in order to understand the relative importance in BME students’ perceptions of factors influencing their academic attainment. A grounded theory approach will be followed in which the views of BME students will be sought via semi-structured interviews.  The interviews conducted in this first stage will determine perceptions from a sample of BME students as to:  (i) the prioritisation of influencers, both individual and institutional, on attainment at both school and university level and (ii) the level(s) and type of leadership that are likely to have the greatest impact on attainment, whether module leaders, Heads of Department, Heads of School or other Senior figures in the Institution.  To this end, fifteen interviews will be conducted, eight with BME students from areas in which BME attainment is higher or lower than expected using the value added score with each set of eight interviews spread evenly between first and third year students.  In a second stage, an existing Leadership survey prepared and modified in the light of leadership issues emerging from the interviews with Westminster BME students and then administered to a cross-section of BME students. The survey will be in two parts, measuring perceptions of impact factors in the University of Westminster as well as self-perceptions by BME students of their academic performance, motivation and well-being. Correlations between the two can be measured in order to establish possible influences of leadership on academic performance and motivation. Ideally, he survey would be distributed to BME and non-BME u/g students in order to allow a comparison between BME and non-BME responses.  Documentation pertaining to ethical research submissions were submitted to the University Ethics Committee.  Data analysis:  When the interviewees find a natural end to their narrative story, the interviewers will encourage further remarks by highlighting a number of events or incidents, which had been stated. This will provide the impetus for greater commentary. All the interview participants’ will be self-selected for inclusion in the interview process. In advance of the interview, ethical protocol will be fully explained to the participants, including personal anonymity and confidentiality of the interviews. All participants’ will be asked to consent to the research interviews being used for the purposes of academic research. Preliminary analysis of the Interviews will provide details of emergent themes, which relate to the factors and themes that have been elicited from the literature (transition, university life/environment, and expectations/aspirations, mental health, mitigating factors, interventions).  *Copies of the Participant Information Sheet, consent form and questionnaire proposed, is currently under development.* |
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| **Results** |
| *Present*: present your data in an appropriate and analysed format (tables, graphs, narrative etc.).  *Describe*: Describe your findings.  If appropriate, you may wish to combine the results and discussion (section 5) into once section,  Key Summary of the literature search.  Approximately per cent of BME students tend to avoid the acknowledgement of any mental health issues (Kerr, 2013), which can be caused by university, as students believe it makes them feel different, lonely or isolated (Johnson et al, 2013). BME students are usually arrested by the police rather than be referred to mental health services after a crisis. At the same time, BME students tend to avoid contacting their General Practitioner in relation to mental health problems (Arday, 2018). Thus, leaving these problems unsolved is likely to have a negative impact on retention and degree attainment.  In order for the BME students to be and feel more united and to reduce the risk of mental health issues, they should create online support groups, on which they can casually socialise and build friendships, but also discuss coursework and seek advice from other peers. This should facilitate communication between individuals because there would not be any cultural barrier. Also, it is thought this can also improve their academic results (Bartoli, 2013). |
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| **Discussion** |
| Limitations of interviews:  A number of limitations must be acknowledged regarding the proposed research study.  The data collection and analysis methods will require extended periods of research time to complete, and so regular interim meetings and summary notes/reports will serve as interim stages of the project. The research focuses and centres upon the stories/narratives of a small number of research  participants. As such, the investigation considers the views of fifteen students (five from each School). This in itself does limit the generalisability of the findings to the wider population.  Limitations of surveys:  The reliability of survey data may depend on the following factors: Respondents may not feel encouraged to provide accurate, honest answers. And the number of respondents who choose to respond to a surveys may be different from those who chose not to respond, thus creating responder bias. An additional major disadvantage of questionnaire usage is the possibility of low response rates  and the inability to probe responses.  Questionnaires are structured instruments. They allow little flexibility to the respondent with respect to response format. |
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| **Conclusions and Future Work** |
| The project will continue into 2019-20:  The project will explore key conclusions regarding what type of holistic approaches might encourage us to look more closely at our business curriculum, our pedagogy, the learning environment (how diverse are staff and campuses), and in turn empower our students to fosters a stronger sense of belonging for all. Kirsty Johnson from the Office for Students OfS suggests that the most effective ways to address the BME gap is to engage with students in co-creation to address systematic bias and develop programmes of work to foster greater levels of understanding and in turn, more inclusive practices. |

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| **Lessons Learned** |
| Link to key points coming out of literature :  See Section 2 |

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| **Group Reflection** |
| The team worked well to an extent by aligning its working practices to the principles of the co creation initiative by   * Assigning research tasks to each member; setting up deadlines; maintaining communication via a ‘whats app’ team chat, communication and commitment is the key for effective working. * The project helped to develop student research skills and will support the University values pertaining to the * Objectives: (International), People, Culture and Inclusion. Team members were equal partners in relation to accountability, ideas generation and achievement objectives (no hierarchy, democratic approach). * Roles were regularly be negotiated at each meeting. * A team coaching approach further facilitated understanding of others self-awareness thus permitting individual personal growth and learning. * Our working approach involved engaging with other parties across the institution.   Hindrances included:   * Variable attendance at team meetings * Ethics taking longer than anticipated. |
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