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Reflections and actions following consideration of the attainment gap between Black and White student performance on a journalism course

Sharon Maxwell-Magnus and Helen Barefoot

Sharon Maxwell-Magnus, Senior Lecturer in Journalism.

s.r.maxwell-magnus@herts.ac.uk

Helen Barefoot, Deputy Head of the Learning and Teaching Institute.

h.barefoot@herts.ac.uk

Abstract

Despite the proportion of black and minority ethnic (BME) people entering education being higher than the proportion of BME individuals within the overall UK population, the proportion of BME students achieving first or upper second class degrees is lower than that of white students (attainment gap of 18.6%). The biggest attainment gap is between White and Black students (29.8%). Within a journalism course at the University of Hertfordshire the performance of black and mixed race students was considered in relation to that of white students. An attainment gap was noted, however further investigation of the data indicated that black/mixed race international students out performed black/mixed race home students and also outperformed white students. Consideration of the differences in performance suggested the importance of extra curricula activities and journalism work experience opportunities which were accessed by black international students but not as well accessed by black home students due to time pressures faced by home students including long hours of paid part time work and commuting time. Awareness of the issues stimulated some of the teaching staff to investigate, and promote, paid diversity schemes to enable BME students to gain work experience in journalism enhancing their degree performance in addition to improving their employment prospects. The teaching team also reflected on their curricula and stimulated positive activity within the classroom; the inclusion of assessments and course content directly associated with race has increased student awareness, and the facilitation of discussion of difficult topics within the classroom has reinforced to students

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the benefits of learning from people with different ethnicities, cultures and backgrounds from one's own.

Introduction

The proportion of UK domiciled black and minority ethnic (BME) people entering higher education in the UK has steadily increased from 14.9% in 2003/04 to 18.1% in 2009/10 (Blandford *et al.,* 2011). This is greater than the overall UK population for BME individuals, who were identified as comprising 8% of the population in the 2001 census. However, it has been reported for a number of years that the proportion of BME students who achieve a 'good' degree (i.e. first class honours or upper second class honours) is lower than the proportion of white students attaining good degrees (figure 1) (Blandford *et al.,* 2011). In 2010, 67.9% of white students achieved a good degree, yet only 49.3% of BME students achieved a good degree; an attainment gap of 18.6%. As can be seen in figure 1, the attainment gap has been recorded for a number of years with little variation in performance. When considering different ethnic groups, black students underperform compared to all other groups and the largest attainment gap is seen between white and black students (29.8% in 2010) (Blandford *et al.,* 2011). As the gap is largest between white and black students, this study focuses on black (and mixed race) student performance in comparison to white student performance.
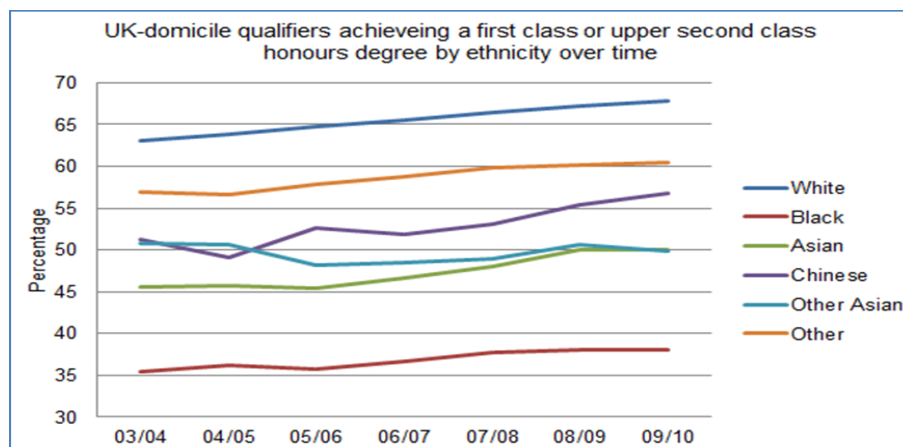

Figure 1. *Performance of UK domiciled students according to ethnicity, over time (adapted from Blandford et al., 2011).*

Background to the Study

Given the national data associated with degree differentials, it was decided to examine the degree achievements of three cohorts of black and mixed race students (between the academic years of 2007-10) on an undergraduate journalism course within the university to see if the national findings were mirrored within the course and, if so, to look at national literature to examine what factors might be contributory to this situation.

The portfolio module was chosen because it involved individual tutorials with the teaching team, ensuring good rapport with all students, and as the final module of the course, it provided a good indication of summative achievement over the three years. A total of 146 students took this module, 14% of whom were black or mixed race. This represents a higher proportion of the population than the 2% of the UK population who were identified as black or mixed race by the UK census in 2001. In terms of recruitment, black students are well represented on the journalism course.

Over the three year period, 52% of black or mixed race students received grades of 2:1 or above which is better than the national performance of black students. According to the Equality Challenge Unit's annual statistic report (Blandford *et al.,* 2011) an average of 38% of black students achieved a good degree. Over the same period, the average proportion of white students achieving a good degree was 67%.

Year	Black	White
07	36.7	65.5
08	37.7	66.4
09	38.1	67.2
10	38.1	67.9

Table 1. National data showing the proportion of black and white students achieving a first or upper second class degree (Blandford *et al.,* 2011).

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However, when the portfolio information was analysed more closely, a paradox emerged. While UK black/mixed race students did slightly worse than white students, (there were no EU black/mixed race students on the course) black/mixed race international students performed much better than any other group, including white home students and students of all other ethnicities. In the years surveyed 71% of black/mixed race international students received a 2:1 or above; higher than the national average for any group. It should be noted that the sample size is very small so it is important to be cautious when considering the data. However, the journalism result is in line with University data which showed that international black students significantly outperformed black home/EU students in terms of good degrees (Haddleton, pers. comm., 2010).

The 2010 National Union of Students report 'Race for Equality', which surveyed over 900 black students Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE), investigated factors which may contribute to the attainment gap. As well as considering topics such as academic support and institutional environments, central to the discussion was the importance of equal treatment from teachers and tutors and the importance of inclusive teaching and learning environments. Although the majority of responders were positive about their teaching and learning environment, a significant minority viewed it negatively and indicated that the environments were cliquey, isolating or hostile and reported feelings of being left out of discussions or debates within the classroom (National Union of Students, 2010). Even more concerning was that 7% of responders described their teaching and learning environment as 'racist' (National Union of Students, 2010).Even concerning was that 7% of responders described their teaching and learning environment as 'racist' (National Union of Students, 2010).

The lack of evidence of a widespread pattern of under-achievement amongst black students (i.e. the very good performance of international black students) on the journalism course at the University was somewhat reassuring, as on the basis of this finding, it would be reasonable to assume an absence of explicit racism.

However, there is a body of academic thought which suggests that everyone is to some extent racist as a result of both experience and personal bias. This theory is

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put forward, for instance, by authors such as Crenshaw *et al.,* (1995) in their book 'Critical Race Theory: The key writings that formed a movement'. The small evaluation carried out within the journalism course suggests that any unconscious biases of staff members did not have an obvious impact on black student performance as evidenced by the very good performance of international black students. However, it is pertinent to investigate what might account for the achievement gap between black home and black international students as well as the gap between white and black students.

Examining possible contributory factors to the achievement gap

One theory of black under-achievement at university is that black students traditionally enter with a poorer level of educational qualification and academic history behind them. This is supported by the data from the Higher Education Funding Council for England report (Gittoes, 2010):

 "Of students with known entry qualifications, a lower proportion of black students entered [university] with A-levels compared to entrants from other ethnic groups: 81 per cent for young students and 10 per cent for mature students."

The educational disadvantages endured by black students before they arrive at university are also given as a reason for under-achievement at University by Connor *et al.,* (2003) in their report for the Department of Education and Skills.

"The key entry factors affecting degree outcomes in general are entry qualifications and prior education and, as these vary considerably between ethnic groups, they help explain much of the observable differences in degree outcomes."

If home black students are often entering university with poorer prior educational achievement than international black students and white home students, it is likely that there will be some residual disadvantage.

In his book, 'Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy?' David Gillborn (2008) argues that the education system is essentially racist in focus as well as in terms of inherent assumptions by white teachers about black students. If this is so, it would account for why some black home students enter UK universities with

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lower qualifications and would also explain why international students who come from predominantly black countries are not impeded by past experience and education in the same way.

However, Broecke and Nicholls' (2007) report demonstrated that even after controlling for the main factors one might expect to impact attainment, such as prior entry qualifications, type of prior institution, parental attributes and language, there still remains a statistically significant gap in attainment between white and black students. Prior higher educational achievement may be a contributing factor as to why black International students do better than both white and black home students; however, there may be other factors which contribute to the difference.

Campus advantage?

Black international students cannot live at home since, as in most cases, they have come from overseas. Conversations with black international students on the journalism course revealed that most took advantage of the offer to live in University residential halls during their first year of study and then subsequently chose to live close to the university in private accommodation. This may explain why, in general, they tended to participate to a greater extent in extra-curricular activities related to journalism than home black students did. For example, attendance by international black students at a symposium with journalism students from the United States of America, and at a talk by former University of Hertfordshire graduates, was better than the attendance of black home students. (30% of attendees were black international students, whereas only 10% of attendees were black home students).

When considering black home students, research shows that black home students are less likely to live on campus than white students. The Higher Education Funding Council for England on Student Ethnicity, found that 61% of white home first year students lived in halls of residence as opposed to only 41% of black home students. (Gittoes, 2010).

Living at home, *per se*, may not affect university performance, but if one student is commuting an hour each way every day and the other is able to spend those two

hours either studying or attending an extra-curricular activity he/she is likely to benefit from that time. When discussing travel with students, all those who commuted indicated difficulties such as buses and trains being delayed or cancelled. Challenges in terms of travel may result in students living at home being less willing to attend after hours activities, whatever their ethnicity.

The work gap

Another potential factor in the disparity between the achievement of black home students and black international students may be the impact of high levels of part time work carried out by black home students. Black students spend longer in paid jobs than white students, or indeed any other ethnic minority (Connor *et al.,* 2003).

Andrews and Wilding (2004) argue that financial concerns have a greater impact on academic performance than other events (e.g. relationship breakdowns). EU legislation stipulates that students from outside the EU can only work up to a maximum of ten hours a week in term time (Kelly, 2010) yet there is no legislative maximum for home students, so the impact of long working hours on student performance is likely to be greater for home students. Connor *et al.*, (2003) suggest that black full-time home students have the longest working week on average (over 45 hours), and spend the most time in paid work (13 hours) compared with students from other ethnicities. Some home black students may therefore be spending almost 30% of their working week in paid employment which may impact upon academic performance.

The Survey of Higher Education Students' Attitude to Debt and Term-Time Working and Their Impact on Attainment (2005) found that 40% of students with term time jobs had missed lectures because of their jobs, with over a third missing them occasionally and 29% missing seminars occasionally. Overall the report noted that not working in term time produced a positive outcome, particularly in the third year, while working was associated with lower attainment.

Evidence from the University of Hertfordshire journalism course supports the findings from Connor *et al.*, (2003), with most black home students needing to work in term-time for financial reasons. A consequence of the long working hours is the

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lack of time to undertake relevant journalistic work experience/campus journalism. It was evident on the journalism course that the uptake of journalistic work experience was much lower for black/mixed race home students than it was for white and international students. 71% of black international students reported having journalistic/campus journalism experience either here, or in their home country, yet only 31% of black home students self-reported this. However, the black home students who did have relevant work experience in journalism scored an upper second class mark or above. It therefore seems that relevant work experience improves degree attainment irrespective of ethnicity or fee status (i.e. home or international).

This may be particularly relevant to the University of Hertfordshire journalism course since the syllabus is based on acquiring vocationally relevant skills, and assignments are therefore strongly orientated towards producing professional quality articles for a variety of media. Those students who undertake journalism work experience generally gain the opportunity to produce work similar to assignments with the added benefit of a professional evaluation and possible publication.

In order to tackle this discrepancy and lack of opportunity for black home students, one could consider redesigning journalism assessments to make them less practical and more theoretical. This could have the required effect of ensuring more parity between those who undertake relevant work experience and campus journalism and those who don't. However, if this approach was adopted, it's likely that all students would be less employable within the field of journalism due to the lack of practical experience of writing for a variety of markets. They would not have a portfolio of journalism articles and hence would not have relevant pieces to send and sell to employers. This would, in turn be likely to make those students who hadn't done any work experience even less employable. Milburn's recent report (2012) again stressed the importance of journalism work experience in gaining jobs within the profession.

Rather than changing a curriculum to arguably make it worse, another option is to continue to stress the importance of work experience and to facilitate work experience opportunities within the journalism course particularly for those students who

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have to undertake paid part time work in order to support their studies. It is hoped that introducing such work would benefit black home students who are more likely to work part time as previous evidence has shown. This has just been undertaken with the introduction in 2012 of a level six module featuring work experience for journalism students in an environment such as a newspaper or magazine, where they can utilise their journalism skills.

In order to specifically support black home students, paid work experience opportunities have been promoted. Diversity schemes which offer paid work experience, specifically for black candidates in journalism, such as the Pearson's diversity summer internship scheme, The George Viner Fund Journalism Bursaries and Channel 4's diversity fund enable black home/EU students to work less hours in part time jobs as they are paid for their journalism. Such diversity schemes are an example of positive action (Equality Act, 2010) in that they are open to students on the basis of particular ethnicities and disabilities. This could be seen either as "social justice or unfair preference" (Mosley and Capaldi, 2006) in that selecting someone on the basis of that they are black could be viewed either as an attempt to reverse centuries of discrimination or as merely substituting discrimination against one skin colour by discrimination against another. However, given that there are only between 10-20 black journalists on UK national newspapers out of a workforce of 3,000; only 15 out of 7,000 on regional newspapers (Ainley, 1998) and that all national newspaper editors are white as are all the national newspaper political editors (Gribbin, 2012), black journalists are severely under-represented in the media. Giving paid bursaries to students who might otherwise not be able to afford to do work experience could be a step to helping better representation of individuals from ethnic minorities in the media, and therefore a justified positive action.

Course content

In addition to promoting diversity work experience schemes, the teaching materials within the journalism module have also been critically reviewed to improve the representation of articles by black authors and the increased consideration of topics related to race (Bok, 2010). The number of positive interviews and features

about black people has been increased and the Voice newspaper is studied as an example of a successful media product. (The Voice newspaper, which was founded in 1982, aims to serve Britain's black community and focuses on news of specific interest to this community).

Managing the classroom to facilitate multicultural learning has also been a key development within the module. Gurin *et al.,* (2002) argue that students who had a more diverse university experience did better in terms of maturity of thinking in the senior year of study. It was noted within the portfolio module, and other modules, that students generally chose to sit next to people they already knew. Allocating students to mixed groups for particular projects had previously shown limited success, with many students opting to go back to their friendship groups as soon as the formal exercise was complete.

In order to facilitate more inclusive group work and enable students to learn from students of other ethnicities and cultures, a tutorial session was held where the findings of Gurin *et al.,* (2002) were discussed. Students were asked to consider the conclusions of the paper (i.e. that students who worked in diverse environments tended to do better academically than those who worked in mono-cultural ones) and were asked to reflect on why they thought this was. Taking time to share the findings of the paper enabled discussion of the benefits of managing group allocation including a greater opportunity to experience diversity which in turn improved academic ability. Students were asked to reflect upon why sitting next to people who were different from themselves should enhance academic performance and to share their opinions with the group. Most students agreed that hearing different perspectives encouraged a more open-minded approach that would increase their critical thinking. Indeed, the fact that diversity could be of benefit to the individual student, rather than a chore imposed by the tutor, facilitated inclusive and more productive group work. This was evidenced by the enhanced level of critical discussion within groups and the engagement and involvement of students within the discussions.

Developing interview skills is of crucial importance for practical journalism and most modules feature at least one assignment based on an interview or material

sourced through interviewing. Introducing challenging topics for first and second year journalism students as part of their interview practice has also enabled improved understanding of other peoples' cultures and backgrounds. In previous years, students were able to choose a current affair topic with subjects such as money, drugs and alcohol being chosen. Now topics are more restricted within the interview component, and students are encouraged to explore one of the following areas: race and racism, religion, attitudes to homosexuality, attitudes to women and attitudes to disability. This allows for student and tutor discussion of these sensitive topics and the exploration of student attitudes towards them.

In particular, the opportunity for students to discuss race enabled not only the consideration of crude and obvious acts of racism, but consideration of the more subtle operations of power and behaviours which may disadvantage one or more ethnic minorities (Gilborn, 2008).

The National Union of Students' survey (2010) of black home and international students stated that 33.4% of black students felt unable to bring their perspective as a black student to lectures and tutor group meetings. One black student stated: "I tend not to share my views because I feel it is the voice of the minority and no-one will want to hear it." It is hoped that by providing black students on the University of Hertfordshire journalism course with the opportunity to discuss areas such as race and discrimination within seminars and through interview practice, we may enable a more open culture and feeling of empowerment in seminars. Discussing

these issues more overtly in class should encourage free and open debate, particularly in relation to how journalists treat such issues and how difficult interviews can be handled.

Conclusions

In summary, considering the performance of students on a journalism course at the University of Hertfordshire has stimulated positive activity both within the classroom and beyond. The promotion of diversity schemes for paid internships will provide an opportunity for black home students to take up journalism work experience opportunities, with the potential to enhance both their academic

performance and employment prospects. Anecdotal evidence suggests that facilitating the discussion of difficult topics within the classroom has increased student awareness of race and the benefits of learning from people with different ethnicities, cultures and backgrounds from one's own.

It is too early to know if these subtle changes will result in greater academic achievement for black students but it is hoped that having an awareness that these issues do exist, and a willingness to tackle them, will create a learning environment that will enable all students to achieve their full potential

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