

Learning and Teaching Innovation Fund 2020/21: Final Report

Title of Project: BAME Attainment in Higher Education: Exploring the Experiences of Black Students of African Descent and the factors that Impact on their Low Grades at Northampton University.

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This report is intended to provide an opportunity to reflect on your project, with an emphasis on impact (actual and potential) and also on the process itself. It will be used to inform future developments in learning and teaching stemming from the project and the development of the Innovation Funds generally. Thank you for your work on the project and we look forward to helping you disseminate and build on your findings.

Please return the completed report, either using this form, or if you prefer as a video or audio file, to Marie Graham (marie.graham@northampton.ac.uk) by 30th June 2021. Please also make a copy of the report available on your project blog in your preferred format.

- 1. Briefly describe your project, with particular reference to the impact on learning and teaching practice – yours, your colleagues and for the wider university. This could be immediate or potential impact.**

In recent years the success rates of different groups of students in HE, has come under considerable scrutiny. Gender and ethnicity were identified as key attributes for predicting differential achievement of ‘good degrees’. According to a report available on Universities UK (#CLOSINGTHEGAP) in 2019, there was an increase of more than 50% in the number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic full-time undergraduates in the UK between 2007 and 2017, 71% of Asian students who graduated in 2017 achieved a first or a 2:1, and just **57% of black students compared to 81% of white students**. Data shows that qualifications before attending university, are a key factor in degree outcomes, but it does not explain the differences between ethnic groups. There is also an issue with Black attainment at the **University of Northampton** and we have seen the award gap between white and black students increase year on year, faster than the overall sector. This project has examined the barriers impacting Black students’ attainment at the University of Northampton. The study has explored the experiences of students of African descent (Black British, African, Caribbean and other black) studying at the University of Northampton, while concentrating on the challenges they face, the coping strategies used at various stages of their studies and how the university could better support them on their journey to success. In this study, we interviewed **9 academics** from various faculties and departments at the university, conducted 2 focus

groups (focus group 1 had **4 academic staffs** & focus group 2 had **5 academic staffs**). Moreover, 2 other focus groups were conducted with students from various subject groups (focus group 1 had **4 students** & Focus group 2 had **3 students**).

Regular updates on the research progress were provided on the project blog available at: <https://mypad.northampton.ac.uk/blackattainment/>

Some of the **key observations** during the study were:

- Move from attainment gap to award gap (When we use the term “attainment gap”, we tend to transfer the blame on the students following the deficit approach. We should use the term “award gap” this then transfer the blame back to the university.
- Black students are not a homogenous group
- Black students find it difficult to relate to a large proportion of course content and references used on some programmes.
- Attainment gap and attitudes to learning is different amongst various Black subgroups (British/African/Caribbean)
- Prior negative learning experiences impact negatively on learning, ability, trust and confidence. This can be seen from the quote below from a focus group with students:

“[...] They never liked for us to be together because they felt we fed into each other’s egos, they thought we were trying to be cool, they thought we were trying to be something that we’re not, which wasn’t really the case. We were just enjoying each other’s company. We had similar interests, shared similar activities and stuff like that. We hung out after school, before school.

And from then on, because they started seeing us - you know when there’s a large group of people they tend to make a little bit more noise than others so from then on they started labelling us, attaching labels onto us

[...] other white groups have large groups of friends as well and they didn’t label them as noisy or as rebels or something like that. But for us that was the term.

And from then on that label was attached to us from Year 9 to Year 11 to the point where we would literally just get accused of doing things that we hadn’t even done, it would just be assumptions being thrown at us.

*I thought the narrative would have changed in college but when I was studying English Literature at my college they treated ourselves - myself and a lot of other students completely differently and you could definitely see that in the way they were marking our work at the time [...]”. **Black British Female student***

- A noticeable lack of Black academic staff representation in most departments
- Links between family responsibilities, socio-economic background and effects of commuting on attainment

"[...] I have family in London but as an international student you have to show you have basically higher financial details to provide so I wanted somewhere close enough to London, so I could visit my family but also lower living costs [...] **Black Caribbean international student.**

- Academic support services not diverse in staff, however, very helpful to those who see them.
- All staff who participated, highlighted the fact that the interview made them think and will help them reflect on their practice.

Some initial findings:

- Reasons for the existence of the Black award gap are multiple and complex
- Financial pressures, social isolation, and managing the demands of studying with personal and family life
- Barriers caused by cultural differences, as well as societal and institutional racism and discrimination
- Black students experiencing subtle and covert racism or more explicit bullying. With segregation occurring in the classroom: white sit with white, black with black

"[...] I experienced a little bit of racism there which made education for black students a little bit more difficult. You could see the difference between the attention that was given between the white students and the black students [...]." **Black British Female**

"[...] You would think my course, being [...], that would be very inclusive but overall I don't think so. Like I said, you go into your seminar, black people are sitting on one side, white people sitting on another side. It's not really that mixed [...]" **Black British Female.**

- The curriculum was perceived as Eurocentric; meanwhile, the extent to which the curriculum represents diversity may also be limited and did not include issues of diversity, equality, and inclusion

"[...] I would say that they need to take into consideration what black students go through in terms of their race because white students don't go through racism in this country at a large scale in terms of the education system and stuff like that. So I'd

*say that they need to look at the curriculum in general, what they are teaching, to make sure that it's inclusive and stuff like that [...]" **Black Caribbean male student.***

- Courses were mostly delivered by White staff who were not representative of the student body
- Other students and staff may also hold conscious or subconscious negative stereotypes of Black students' academic abilities, and subsequently have lower expectations of them

*"[...] Say if white students were to have a party or something, no-one would come and get them in trouble, basically. But if there's a group of black students together it's immediately shut down. I've actually seen that myself so [...]" **Black African Male student***

- Black students who have previously been educated in a different country may have additional barriers to overcome in order to adapt to the UK education system
- Black students do not feel they belong in higher education, and experience a sense of 'otherness' or isolation
- Black students experience a sense of alienation and lack of entitlement, for example, students described teachers as underestimating their abilities and having low expectations.
- These experiences resulted in Black students adopting 'coping alone' strategies, which led to fears about not fitting in, a reluctance to ask for help, and even a lack of knowledge about what help was available

"[...] I know a lot of black students struggle with mental health. They don't speak a lot about it, it's like -

Even African households, it's taboo for you to speak about mental health. You can't tell your Mum, 'I'm depressed', your Mum is just going to be like, 'You are not depressed, you are fine'.

*So yes, we don't speak a lot about it, that's the thing [...]" **Black African international student.***

- Some students recounted subtle forms of racism that they did not want to explicitly define as racist.

*"[...] For me at uni I haven't experienced overt racism, it was more like a micro aggression I would say [...]" **Black British Female.***

*"[...] I experienced a little bit of racism there which made education for black students a little bit more difficult. You could see the difference between the attention that was given between the white students and the black students [...]. **Black British Female***

Recommendations:

- The necessity and importance of open dialogue, making the uncomfortable comfortable, having conversations about race through formal & informal settings (e.g. organising book clubs in various faculties), and changing the culture of the institution.
- We should avoid the traditional 'deficit' approach, which views Black students' lower attainment as a consequence of their failure to adjust or adapt, or a lack of ability
- More staff training and reflection around race, equality, justice, inclusion, diversity, understanding of microaggressions and bias/unconscious bias
- Set achievable targets with regards to University - KPI
- Universities gaining the **Race Equality Charter** Mark
- Developing racially diverse and inclusive environments, getting the evidence and analysing the data, understanding what works,
- Collect data/statistics on Attainment/Award gap for various ethnic groups
- Empower Ethnic minority staff
- A move towards greater representation of 'real' Black academic models (role models) for students to see and aspire to.
- Develop mentoring programmes (Mentoring programmes should be developed for ethnic minorities staff to allow more of them to access higher position within the university management and decision-making board. This will allow them to influence decisions at that level therefore providing another perspective to other White colleagues. Moreover, the University should invest in the development of a mentorship programme from students too. The GEM Network is currently working on such a programme called "**JEWELS**").

Statement from the GEM Staff Network leadership about JEWELS

"The GEM network has designed the JEWELS project to support students of colour in their transition to employment with the introduction of an identity Mentorship programmes that will involve our members and external professionals. The aim is to provide practical coaching and mentorship guidance to facilitate students from ethnic diverse communities in overcoming systemic barriers in gaining graduate level jobs commensurate with their educational qualifications" ~Dr Marcella Daye.

- Investment on decolonisation of the curriculum
- Encourage staff development/self-education on race related issues
- Allowing ourselves time to understand the student in front of us and where they come from, in order to better support them

Outcomes of this investigation may aid in the development of **EDI workshops** at the University that may be recommended for staff members and students. The promotion of the **Cultural Integration Workshops** facilitated by experienced staff across various subject groups at the university and finally a move towards the decolonisation of the university curriculum, where special officers could be allocated to each subject group with the task to identify the best way forward towards **decolonisation/ internationalisation** of their respective curriculum.

2. Describe how you have, or intend to, disseminate your findings. What would help you with this activity?

As part of the intended outputs for this study, we would like to create an awareness of the factors influencing Black award gap at UoN. We were able to generate some very positive discussion and conversations about the attainment gap at the University of Northampton, bringing about greater awareness of the true impact of this on students from Black community. With regards to the dissemination of our study, we have delivered a workshop at the 2021 **Learning and Teaching conference** on the 15th June 2021. Findings will be shared with GEM staff Network members. We have shared some of our findings at the LLS seminar. We will deliver workshops at future C@NDO events, facilitate further discussion and reflection. Presentations to faculties via faculty development days.

We are also planning to share the findings outside of the university at conferences organised by other universities, where as a team, we could lead workshops and debates on the topic.

Progress of research including findings and conclusions made has been captured on a project site which will be used as a resource for other departments.

Some intended impact and benefits could be to inform and facilitate the integration of the project results into the University policies and procedures in this area, ensuring that the voice of the affected is represented. Members of the research team have been invited to share their findings with key members of the university leadership team and various committee groups including ISEG and the EDI working group.

By sharing our findings with all UoN stakeholders, it is our hope that this will lead to an improvement in the overall student experience, which in-turn will lead to better academic performance.

The discussions with the students allowed us to understand the differences in student in front of us and where they are coming from which will help inform strategies for supporting them.

What would help you with this activity

- Greater funding made available for external conferences after the end of the study.
- The innovation bid should be launched earlier during the year to give enough time to the research team to successfully complete the project.

3. Please reflect on the research process. What was most enjoyable and interesting about it? What barriers if any did you encounter? What would have made the project easier to complete? How did the mentoring relationship help and what would make it more useful in future?

a) Research process

Following the confirmation of the funding received from the Deputy Vice Chancellor, we applied for the ethical approval and it went smoothly with no concerns. We then started the recruitment of participants and data collection. As a research team, we had bi-weekly meetings to discuss the progress and various challenges encountered. We have created and are maintaining a research blog as a team. The findings of the study were later presented at the Learning and Teaching conference in the form of a workshop.

b) Interesting and enjoyable

The most interesting part of the study was the valuable time spent during the interviews and focus groups talking to staffs and students. It was also great to disseminate our findings during the conference workshop where we had very fruitful conversations with the audience.

c) Barriers encountered

During the process of recruiting the student participants for the focus groups, we were confronted with a communication issue, where a group of students reacted very negatively toward the study. The problem was resolved very quickly as we had to make sure it does not escalate. We were able to clarify the objectives of our study and further explain why this study was necessary for various marginalised ethnic groups at the university.

Moreover, it was very challenging to recruit participants. It happened that at several occasions during our data collection, many students accepted to take part in the study, but despite various reminders, they failed to show up during the focus groups.

d) Mentoring

Throughout the course of our investigation, we had the opportunity of meeting our mentor (Prof. Pauline Kneale) 3 times (14th December 2020, 15th March 2021 and 24th May 2021). During the meetings key issues discussed linked to ethical application, research dissemination and the future plans for the investigation. The team gained practical advice, encouragement and support. We learnt from our mentor vast experience on similar type of projects, which helped us to Increase our social and academic confidence. We became more empowered to make decisions regarding future bid and how to make sure the findings are taken seriously. Moreover, we were able to Identify goals and establish a sense of direction and gained valuable insight into the next stage of your university strategic plans.

4. What other reflections on the project do you have that will make the scheme better for participants and the university community?

This project allowed an opportunity for some meaningful and structured uncomfortable conversation. It gave us an opportunity as educators to better understand the challenges faced by our Black student communities and how those challenges impact negatively on attainment. We were encouraged by the honest responses from all our participants, who also highlighted the importance of such open conversations and dialogue, and the way it was conducted.

The bid review and feedback process were very effective. It was very useful to connect with other bid winners, to have an initial meeting at the beginning of the projects and being allocated a mentor to guide us during the process. The networking event half way through the project execution was also very useful and well received.