

Investigating the Relationship between Ethnicity and Degree Attainment

Authors:

Jaki Lilly, *INSPIRE, Anglia Ruskin University*
Berenice Rivera Macías, *INSPIRE, Anglia Ruskin University*
Mark Warnes, *INSPIRE, Anglia Ruskin University*

Theme:

Student Life Cycle

Introduction

In January 2008, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) presented their 'Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment Project' report (HEA 2008). Whilst the report does not locate clear causes for difference in degree attainment that can be directly linked to ethnicity and gender, it describes concerns from higher education institutions (HEIs) staff and students that ethnic minority groups are marginalised. The report recommends that HEIs develop their own research projects in this area (HEA 2008, p.27), as well as taking steps to address any issues of marginalisation.

As a response to that report, we began enquiring into the relationship between ethnicity, gender and degree attainment in our University where 20.2% of our students are 'non-white' and 69.0% are female. For the purposes of our research project so far, 'degree attainment' refers primarily to the classification of degree achieved by graduates.

Research in the higher education (HE) sector appears to show that students from minority ethnic groups obtain lower final marks than their white counterparts (cf. Gillborn 2008; HEA 2008; Law 1996; Richardson 2008; Sallah and Howson 2007). However, from the ethnicity statistics available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), it is difficult to determine where we might make interventions which could make a difference. Subsequently, our early work has focussed on developing a more insightful and reliable research agenda with which to examine the apparent differentials of attainment not only related to ethnicity but in relation to the student experience at our University.

Our aim here is to draw attention to the complexity of one question at hand: to what extent can we claim that degree attainment is determined by the ethnic background of students? This paper focuses on our work into the development of a 'model' for the identification of areas where we might assist to improve students' attainment. By a model we refer to the actions we have been taking since April 2008 until the present. Our work, as explained below, started by developing our understanding of *ethnicity*; then by looking at the recommendations from the HEA report, as well as the guidelines from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (originally provided by the Centre for Racial Equality (CRE)). We also took an in-depth look at different statistical aggregations, comparing our HESA return with the rest of the sector for the 2006/07 academic year. All of this has informed our working model.

Methodology

So far we have used a multi-method, participatory approach. As briefly presented below, we conducted two literature reviews: the first has shaped our theoretical background in challenging the value of HESA's ethnic categories in establishing differences in degree attainment by ethnicity; and the second centres on the guidelines and advice produced by the EHRC and the HEA. We have also carried out quantitative data analyses of our HESA return for the academic year 2006/07. Moreover, we are exchanging information with other institutions by participating in external meetings with the Higher Education Race Action Group (HERAG). Additionally, we have carried out statistical comparisons between our HESA return and the available data for the sector.

For the purposes of this paper, we have divided this section into three subsections. We present our departure point in challenging HEI use of HESA's ethnic categories; then we summarise key HEI-specific advice from the EHRC, and recommendations from the HEA. Alongside the recommendations from these two institutions, we make a comparison between our University's responses to each institution's report, and propose further guidance. Secondly, we explain how the in-depth quantitative examinations of our HESA return for the academic year 2006/07 have added to our work so far. This brief report reflects the rationale informing the progress of our working model.

Understanding *Ethnicity*, a Review of HESA Ethnic Categories

The ethnicity of each of our students is recorded using categories defined by HESA which are, in turn, based on categories defined by the Government for the 2001 Census. HESA acknowledges that the evolving nature of categories may mean that some statistics are no longer comparable with data from previous years. The following is the list of the ethnic categories used by HESA (2008a):

- White¹
- White – British
- White – Irish
- White – Scottish
- Irish Traveller
- Other White background
- Black or Black British – Caribbean
- Black or Black British – African
- Other Black background
- Asian or Asian British – Indian
- Asian or Asian British – Pakistani
- Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi
- Chinese²
- Other Asian background
- Mixed – White and Black Caribbean
- Mixed – White and Black African
- Mixed – White and Asian
- Other mixed background
- Other ethnic background
- Not known
- Information Refused

¹ This category is only available for continuing students who commenced their programme of study before 1 August 2001 or for students admitted via UCAS who commenced their programme of study after 1 August 2005. (HESA 2008a)

² For students enrolled from 2001/02 and onwards, HESA is currently accepting the UCAS code of Asian or Asian British – Chinese. (HESA 2008b)

From our initial research into our HESA return for 2006/07 we have found that there is such an attainment gap between our students from different HESA ethnic categories.. In our generic comparison of graduates, we found that *White British* and *Other White* graduates achieved the highest proportion of first-class honours and upper second-class honours degrees across the twenty ethnic groups and all the graduating population. However, we also found strong cases in which other ethnic groups such as UK based *Asian or Asian British – Indian* achieved higher proportions of degree classification than *White British* graduates.

However, we argue that the classifications used by HESA represent *broad ethnicities* (Modood 1997, p.293). Broad ethnicities – *White British, Black or Black British – Caribbean, Chinese, etc* – do not fully inform us about the ethnic identity of our students. In fact, it is difficult to study the sources of ethnic identity, and broad ethnicities, along with self-description, religion, language, visits to country of origin, marriage, and choice of schools, clothes and identification with Britishness are just some of the components of ethnic identity (Modood 1997, pp.333-334). Therefore, as we report here, we are not looking at the 'broad ethnicity' variable as acting on its own with regards to students' achievement, but as another important element in the composite of their profile in relation to the learning experience at our University.

The current debates on ethnicity, 'race' and racisms are crucial in our understanding of ethnicity, and whilst here we do not have the space to expand on the debates informing our work, we assert that it lies somewhere between Modood's pluralist approach and Bhabha's notion of the *third space*. A project with an underlying pluralist approach would require it to be

informed by the idea that the study of exclusion and inclusion, of equality and disadvantage, cannot consist of just measurements, and one way of overcoming this is to frame the study in the normative terms of civic inclusion and exclusion – not in terms of mere legalities but in a much more expansive sense of citizenship as a debating community with common concerns that structure a public space and interactions within it. (Modood 2005, pp.186-187)

The *third space* is understood as the *place* where two different, perhaps opposite, cultures of knowledge would come together and through social exchange, they will learn from each others' ways of seeing and approaching the world (Bhabha 2004, pp.52-53). In other words, this refers to the creation of hybrid identities, or hyphenated identities (Modood 2005, pp.196-199), producing an identity 'that is more than the sum of its (cultural) parts' (Archer and Francis 2007, p.29).

The way in which this theoretical background informs our study results in an unbiased approach initially looking at diverse factors that may be influencing degree attainment but also including other possible outcomes, such as students who leave before completing their studies and do not graduate at all, or who register for one qualification and leave with another – sometimes lower – qualification. For example, HESA states that

If a student gains a qualification after completing a programme of study, but not the qualification they were aiming for, then they should be coded... 'Successful completion of course' (HESA 2009a)

Furthermore we will be looking at students' experiences of degree attainment and their perceptions of learning and teaching at our University.

EHRC and HEA Recommendations to HEIs

The following is an excerpt from the Race Relations Act 1976 Order 2001 recommendations for governing bodies of HEIs. It is noteworthy that some of the points to follow are already included in our University's 'Combined Equality Scheme and Action Plan; second edition, spring 2007'.

*(4) It shall be the duty of [such] a body... to -
(a) assess the impact of its policies, including its race equality policy; on students and staff of different racial groups;
(b) monitor, by reference to those racial groups, the admission and progress of students and the recruitment and career progress of staff; and
(c) include in its written statement of its race equality policy an indication of its arrangements for publishing that statement and the results of its statement and monitoring under sub-paragraphs (a) and (b). (CRE 2002, p.10, original emphasis)*

The document also advises that the HEIs should have an equal opportunities group (CRE 2002, p.11), which is the case of our University. Furthermore, there are diverse staff networks addressing different groups' interests/needs/queries (i.e. women, disability, race). Additionally, the CRE document recommends that HEIs should produce their race equality policy as a written statement giving details of how their institution will put the policy into practice, monitor it, and assess how effective it is (CRE 2002). The efforts put into place by our University include the publication of information relevant to equality and diversity in the employee handbook, with indications on where to find the full policy documents.

However, it is necessary to regularly assess the impact of the policies in place (CRE 2002, p.15). The recommended assessment requires collecting information from the diverse ethnic groups on their potential needs, entitlements, and outcomes for students and staff. Furthermore, the CRE suggest that HEIs taking on this assessment could consider the collection and analysis of relevant information; talking to staff and students from the diverse ethnic groups in order to find their needs and opinions, and carrying out surveys and research projects. The information should be used to inform adjustments to policy and decision making (CRE 2002, p.17). A final point that we consider relevant to mention here is the monitoring of the admission process as well as the students progress. Thus, it is recommended that all areas of student life should be considered; e.g. the admission process, choice of subject, home/international status, achievement and academic advancement, student numbers, transfers and drop-out, assessment methods, group-oriented programmes, racial harassment (CRE 2002, pp.18-20). All of these are factors in student life and the student life-cycle, generating a task with wider dimensions to studying the potential effects of ethnicity on degree attainment. The University of Cambridge, for example, found it challenging to identify a single factor determining academic performance of students from minority ethnic groups at their University (Scales and Whitehead 2005).

The HEA recommendations are also important in planning inclusive strategies. On one hand, Willot and Stevenson (2008), on behalf of the HEA, provide a brief list of examples of good practice:

- Collection of data and analysis at Faculty level or subject area, as appropriate;

- Recognition of the issues (if present);
- Policy to address the problem;
- Action plan to address the problem, with specific objective, named individuals responsible and timetable;
- Initiation of appropriate projects;
- Regular reports on progress. (Willot and Stevenson 2008, p.8)

It is crucial that current and prospective staff and students have access to the documents that clearly address the equality and diversity schemes and practices of our university (HEA 2008, p.33). Moreover, it is recommended that these should be included in the induction process and in the student guide. Our University's *Undergraduate* and *Postgraduate Student Guide(s)* provide clear and concise guidance about equality and diversity; e.g. commitments from staff and students, in the curriculum, and its policies. Our work forms part of our University's policy impact assessment exercises.

Review of our Statistical Examinations

In the primary phase of our investigation, we analysed the HESA statistics for our University for the 2006/7 academic year. The HESA return for 2006/7 includes our total student population (23,970). Thus we were able to access all our students' data and no specific sampling was necessary. No direct consent from the students was necessary since HESA specifies that the data provided can be accessed ad-hoc by HEIs 'to assess their strengths and weaknesses, and to improve participation from under-represented groups' (HESA 2008c).

A preliminary ethical issue was that this dataset included the names of the students along with all the information they gave when they registered with the university, with the exception of their contact details (HESA 2008c). We avoided any potential ethical dilemmas by anonymising our datasets. During the process of statistical analysis we stored and manipulated the data through computer software for survey analysis. The database contains 251 variables including mode of study, age, gender, ethnicity, age on entry, disability, date left institution, qualification obtained, reason for leaving, and so forth.

The entire student population was analysed to determine its ethnic and gender composition. We then analysed the subset of the 2,635 students who had graduated in the 2006/7 academic year by broad ethnicity to check for any relation between broad ethnicity and qualification obtained. These observations reflect a broad brush approach to analysis as, in the 2006/7 academic year, our University was comprised of 23,970 students, studying in three UK geographically remote campuses, eleven partner colleges of further education, and six international partner colleges in Europe, the West Indies and Malaysia. Subsequent analysis looked for similarities and differences in student outcome for each location to determine parity of service for our student regardless of location.

One of the motivating factors for this research was the discomfort we felt with the HESA categories for ethnicity, which we feel rely too heavily on skin colour as an indicator of ethnicity. In a project examining the possible existence of institutional racism, the very terms used to define ethnicity are, in essence, racist. Further, these colour-based groups conflate otherwise distinct groups of people: *Black Caribbean* people born in the Caribbean who come the UK to attend university have different life

experiences to *Black Caribbean* people born in the UK, particularly in terms of exposure to educational systems. Experience of the UK primary and secondary education system, despite any racism encountered there, provide a greater understanding of the UK HE sector than educational experience in other countries. In addition, many of the ethnic groups are simply too large to reflect shared experience. To place all students from Africa into a single group disguises regional and national differences between 53 countries. Similarly the category of *Other White background*, as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has recently acknowledged, 'covers a vast and varied population' (ONS 2008, p.21).

Prior experience of the UK educational system is a key driver in our investigations as we feel that this has a more powerful influence on the student experience than skin colour. Consequently, we conducted analyses of our data cross-cutting broad ethnicity firstly with nationality and then with domicile in an attempt to derive any greater understanding. Each of these analyses was conducted within separate subsets of the data for each location and faculty.

In addition, we have explored the full range of student exit routes. Degree attainment is only one of a number of possible ways in which a student might leave university. Reasons for leaving include successful completion, academic failure, transferred (to another institution), health reasons, death, financial reasons, exclusion, gone into employment, and other (HESA 2009b). Therefore, in order to gain further knowledge on our students' reasons for leaving, we are inviting them to explain what they mean when using the 'other' option on our University's current exit form. A more comprehensive research of the potential factors intervening in the outcomes of students' academic progression, would lead us to a better understanding on the extent to which ethnicity is a contributory factor to student outcomes.

Future Work

We note with interest the ONS (2008) publications concerning the development of questions regarding 'ethnic group' for the 2011 census. The ONS use a suite of questions in what they describe as the 'ethnicity, [national] identity, language and religion (EILR) topics' (ONS 2008, p.4). While we acknowledge the ONS position on ethnicity and the sophistication they are developing, we remain sceptical of the use of census categories as being 'fit for purpose' in the HE context as the ethnic composition of the student population is different to the ethnic composition of the general population. In fact, HEIs have international students with different backgrounds and diverse contextualisation that are most likely to have effect on their student-life-cycle and hence outcomes.

Finally, the next phase of our research will endeavour to uncover the individual student's experience. Our aim is to develop a more wide-ranging model of ethnicity incorporating other contributory factors such as social class, prior learning, and cultural capital.

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