Nottingham Trent Students' Union Position Paper

Tackling the BME Attainment Gap

NTSU

NOTTINGHAM TRENT STUDENTS' UNION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Racial inequalities are a significant issue within higher education. White students are, on average, more likely to graduate from a higher education institution with a first or upper-second class degree than students of other ethnicities. This outcome is referred to as the BME Attainment gap. It is a sector-wide problem, though the contributory factors are not limited to the academic environment. They are complex and exist systemically in wider society. Within HE, the Students' Union and University both have significant roles to play when it comes to solving this issue.

KEY STATISTICS

•   Sector-wide, 77% of white students received a first or 2:1 compared to 62% of BME students in England. (NUS)

•   22% of NTU's 18-year-old first degree entrants were BAME, compared with 16% of the UK 18 year-old population. (NTU APP dashboard data, in 2017/18)

•   Overall BAME versus white attainment gap at NTU has reduced from a 9% difference in 2014/15 to a 2% difference in 2016/17. (NTU Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25)

•   The gaps in graduate level occupation or further study rates between white and BAME graduates are remarkably low when considering the gap in degree outcomes. The latest DLHE data for NTU show just a 1% gap between white and black, a 3% gap between white and Asian, and no gap between white and mixed ethnicity groups. (NTU Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25)

•   NTU's most recent ethnicity progression analysis shows that for NTU, the progression of BME students is lower than their white counterparts. The most significant attainment gaps at NTU affect male students, BME students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students entering via the BTEC pre-entry qualification route, with just 31% of this group achieving a good degree in 2015/16. (NTU Access Agreement 2018-19)

AIMS

This paper summarises the barriers to success and key factors contributing to the attainment gap and makes recommendations for addressing the gap.

It is hoped this position paper will provide clarity and transparency for our members and will encourage NTU and NTSU to collaboratively create solutions which reduce the attainment gap.

METHODOLOGY

The findings and recommendations in this paper are heavily based on work carried out by VP Education, Afua Acheampong, who led on NTSU research into the experiences of black students at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and the factors affecting their attainment.

Her primary qualitative research conducted during the 2018-19 academic year, includes:

- #TellTrent feedback cards (98 academic reps, mixed ethnicities)

- 1-2-1 student interviews (19 BME undergraduate students)

- NTU staff consultations

- NTSU sabbatical officer consultations

- Feedback from NTSU's Black History Month event attendees

The findings from this research are supported and contextualised by secondary research where appropriate.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

For clarity's sake, it is worth defining the terms 'BME' and 'BAME' and briefly discussing their limitations.

BME stands for Black and minority ethnic. **-** stands for Black, Asian and minority ethnic.

Although these terms are widely used, Advance HE[1] have identified limitations of these terms, including:

- They imply that BME/BAME individuals are a homogeneous group.

- Both BME and BAME single out specific ethnic groups, this can be divisive and exclusionary.

- They can be perceived as convenient labels that are placed on minority ethnic groups of people, rather than identities with which people have chosen to identify.

- It is generally perceived that these terms refer only to non-white people, which does not consider white minority ethnic groups.

The use of these terms, then, may serve to reinforce stereotypes and assumptions, which makes them of limited value and potentially offensive. They may also hinder a nuanced approach to the problem of the attainment gap. "Ethnic minorities" is another widely used term, though Advance HE suggests that this still has its problems:

> *'Ethnic minority' places the emphasis on ethnicity as the main issue. There can be a tendency in our media and language to see 'ethnic' as synonymous with not-white and so the term could be perceived as implying the issue is with people being not-white, or non-white people being the issue.*

As a consequence the term tends to be reversed to refer to 'minority ethnic groups' to highlight the fact that everyone has an ethnicity and the issues being referred to relate to minority groups in a UK context and the discrimination and barriers that they face.

As such, "minority ethnic groups" will be the preferred term used throughout this paper.

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1   Advance HE: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/using-data-and-evidence/use-of-language-race-ethnicity

PRIMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The factors affecting BME attainment at NTU can be grouped into six key themes:

1. Knowledge

There is still a lack of widespread knowledge among students surrounding the Black and Minority Ethnicity attainment gap and terms like 'BME' or 'BAME'. This lack of awareness and understanding hinders efforts to close the gap.

2. Representation

There is currently a lack of diversity within the ethnic makeup of the workforce on campus. This lack of diversity also extends to that amount of course material that is from authors from a minority background. Factors affecting this include proportionally lower numbers of minority ethnic minority professors[1] and a pay gap between white and minority ethnic staff[2].

a. Representation at NTSU

Between 2011 and 2020, 55 individual officer positions were filled at the Students' Union. 11 of those 55 officers, or 20%, were from minority ethnic groups, a figure which broadly echoes UK census data[3] and the demographics of NTU's student body[4].

b. Representation at NTU

In most recent instances, the only minority ethnic members of senior meetings at NTU have been NTSU's student officers. Success for All and ASQC currently have only two BME members, both of whom are officers from the Students' Union. This academic year, there are 3 BME members on Academic Board out of the 39 attendees. A review of NTU's Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25 shows that the bulk of activity addressing the BAME attainment gap at the institution mentioned within it refers to NTSU-led research.

3. Racism and Microaggressions

Racism is often assumed to be aggressive and overt, however this is not always the case. It manifests through symptoms like microaggressions, which are defined as "a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority."

1   Black And Minority Ethnic Academics Less Likely To Be Professors And Earn Less Than White Colleagues, Analysis Finds: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/university-black-minority-ethnic-pay-gap-academics-professors-ucu- staff-a9155451.html

2   UK Universities'' BME Staff Less Likely To Hold Top Jobs: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/oct/15/uk-universities-bme-staff-less-likely-to-hold-top-jobs

3   2011 UK census data: the total population of England and Wales was 56.1 million 86.0% of the population was White, 14% was minority ethnic groups. https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest

4   In 2017/18, 22% of NTU's 18-year-old first degree entrants were BAME, compared with 16% of the UK 18 year old population. (NTU Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25)

Due to their subtle, indirect nature, microaggressions are difficult to tackle and often go unreported. When they are reported, complaint handling can be inconsistent due to lack of staff training. This problem is compounded by the lack of representation within the staff body.

This is a sector-wide issue, with secondary research identifying an over-reliance on signposting people to policies on the university website, and an under-reliance on developing BME networks, ongoing campaigns and proactive students' union activity[5].

4. Sense of Belonging

According to the Universities UK report on addressing BME attainment, the culture of an institution is an important factor that affects the attainment of students from BAME backgrounds and is strongly associated with students' sense of belonging. By surrounding students with a diverse student body and academic staff team they can relate to, a more inclusive environment that contributes to their sense of belonging is created.

Many NTU students can attribute their sense of belonging to a sports club or society they may be a part of. BME students typically show lower than average engagement in extra-curricular activities, which may contribute to a reduced sense of belonging. Improving this sense of belonging could improve future attainment.

5. Comfortable Conversations

Sociologist Dr. Robin DiAngelo uses the term 'white fragility' to describe the disbelief and defensiveness that people exhibit when their ideas about race and racism are challenged. This fragility creates a social cost for the members of minority ethnic groups who point out discrimination when they see it, as they often feel compelled to justify the fair and equitable treatment that is their right.

Encouraging sensitive discussions around campus requires students and staff to be bold and willing to resist the urge to respond defensively, and to listen and learn instead.

6. Conversations with NTU staff

All staff play an integral role in the attainment of the students at their institution. Insight from recent interviews with NTU staff included:

- There is a lack of diversity in the membership of the Success for All working group.

- Home students often appear hesitant to work with international students for fear that their inability to communicate fully in English may hinder academic success in group work.

- There is a need for more awareness raising and training regarding unconscious bias to be rolled out across the institution.

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5   How effectively do HEIs communicate their policies? https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/racial-harassment-in-british-universities-qualitative-research-findings.pdf

- Consideration should be made regarding how to help staff and academics understand their role in addressing and combating the attainment gap.

- Multi-mentoring schemes, including non-academic mentors, may help with understanding and supporting diverse students.

- Learning communities for first- generation students with similar cultural backgrounds may help these students and foster a sense of belonging.

Further to NTSU's primary research findings, the **Race Equality Charter** serves as an effective guide for tackling racial inequality in HE. The Race Equality Charter is underpinned by five fundamental guiding principles:

1. Racial inequalities are a significant issue within higher education. Racial inequalities are not necessarily overt, isolated incidents. Racism is an everyday facet of UK society and racial inequalities manifest themselves in everyday situations, processes and behaviours.

2. UK higher education cannot reach its full potential unless it can benefit from the talents of the whole population and until individuals from all ethnic backgrounds can benefit equally from the opportunities it affords.

3. In developing solutions to racial inequalities, it is important that they are aimed at achieving long-term institutional culture change, avoiding a deficit model where solutions are aimed at changing the individual.

4. Minority ethnic staff and students are not a homogenous group. People from different ethnic backgrounds have different experiences of and outcomes from/within higher education, and that complexity needs to be considered in analysing data and developing actions.

5. All individuals have multiple identities, and the intersection of those different identities should be considered wherever possible.

These findings and principles lead to the following set of recommendations for the trustees to consider.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. NTU and NTSU should both aim to have a workforce that is representative of the student body. This is particularly important in the membership of working groups. An external consultancy should be engaged to audit current recruitment processes and recommend how to diversify the body of staff.

2. There is a need for more effective, consistent methods for reporting racism. Awareness of existing mechanisms needs to be improved.

3. Staff training. The institution needs to make sure that staff are better equipped to identify and tackle racial discrimination. Bystander and unconscious bias training as well as training for dealing with complaints should be prioritised.

4. Leadership programme for students. More needs to be done to encourage BME females into leadership positions both in the university and beyond.

5. NTU Community. Research best practice from other institutions as to how they have been able to incorporate cultural communities and / or create a greater sense of belonging for their diverse students.

6. Celebrating black culture should not be limited to Black History Month. A diverse offer of activities and events throughout the year should be the norm.

7. Interventions may help students fulfil their potential for attainment. These could be facilitated through use of NTU's dashboard. Any such action must be approached with sensitivity to avoid negative perceptions and a sense of being destined to fail.

8. Mentoring. Opportunities need to be available for students from underrepresented groups to have support and guidance on how to do well.

9. Conversations around race and culture. The institution needs to start consulting students and leading the conversations around race and culture. Academics are often uncomfortable addressing race and culture and students mirror this behaviour. Students need more opportunities to talk directly about race, racism and the gap. There needs to be a clear institutional message that issues of race are embedded within wider strategic goals and the culture on campus should reflect this message.

APPENDIX

#TellTrent feedback card questions

1. What is your knowledge of the BME Attainment Gap?

2. What factors do you believe contribute to this?

3. Did you find it difficult to get engage with this question? How responsive were people?

1-2-1 BME student interview questions

1. Briefly tell me about your life before you started at NTU. (Where are you from? Are you the first in your family to go to university? What were your pre-entry qualifications?) Do you hold multiple identities? i.e. WP, BTEC, Student/Parent Carers, commuting student?

2. What made you choose NTU? Has your experience here met your expectations?

3. Tell me about your experiences at NTU as a student from a BME background.

4. Whilst on campus, how comfortable do you feel? To what extent do you feel like you 'belong'? Have you ever felt like an outside?

5. Have you ever experienced or seen any form of discrimination on campus?
   a If yes, how did this make you feel?
   b. Was this incident reported and how did the university handle it?

6. Do you have any role models at NTU and if so, who?

7. The student body at NTU is majorly diverse at NTU. Do you feel that the body of staff at the university is also diverse?

8. What do you know about the Students' Union? Have you ever been engaged with the Union before?

9. Are you aware of the societies, sports clubs, volunteer opportunities, campaigns or advice centre at the Union?
   a. If yes, what effect has this had on your university experience?
   b. If no, do you think being involved in this type of activity would enhance your university experience.

10. Do you see the Union as an inclusive environment for BME students?

11. Across all universities in the UK, research indicates that several demographics are systemically disadvantaged and less likely to achieve a 1st class or 2:1 degree compared to their counterparts. This isn't just BME students, but also BTEC, WP and Disabled students. NTU are actively trying to reduce these gaps and help all their students attain. If a member of the university told you in the first year of your studies that you are systemically disadvantaged compared to your white counter parts, how would you react to this?

12. How would you feel if your white counter parts were also aware that you are systemically disadvantaged in comparison to them?

13. From beginning your journey at NTU, as a BME student, in your opinion, what could the university have done to improve your experience?

14. How would you feel if you had to take a compulsory class once a fortnight that helped with your studies and employability and was a 'skills for success' offer?

15. Is there anything else you would like to share or would like to see happen at NTU?