

Exploring the experiences of Black students in further and higher education

Education is the key to increasing life chances for Black students and it has been positive to see more Black students entering college and university. However, the disadvantage and the systematic marginalisation of the Black perspective in education are symptoms of the barriers that restrict many gifted Black students in their struggle to reach their goals.

Over the past few years, various surveys and research bodies have highlighted the inequality that Black students face, reporting facts such as the attainment gap between Black and White students in FE and HE. It is evident that institutional racism is rife and that some educational institutions are struggling to fully implement measures to enforce equality.

The NUS Black Students' Campaign is working to redress this with the help of this project. Combined with existing literature, this project will create a well informed campaign for changes to improve Black students' experiences of education now, and in the future.

We hope that these findings show you the variety of challenges Black students face. We also thank all the Black students who participated in this project – it is only through our collective voice that we can be a force for change. **Bellavia Ribeiro-Addy, NUS Black Students' Officer**

In 2009 the National Union of Students' Black Students' Campaign, which represents students of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean descent at colleges and universities, launched a research project exploring the experiences of Black students in further and higher education. The project was initiated after the National Student Survey consistently found that Black students were less likely to be satisfied with their student experience than their peers. The project furthermore seeks to shed light on research conducted by the Department of Children, Schools, and Families (formerly DfES) in 2007, which found that Black students were less likely to achieve first-class degrees relative to White UK and Irish students, even after controlling for potentially confounding variables¹. Our project aims to explore the possible reasons behind this dissatisfaction and difference in degree

attainment, by focusing on various aspects of the academic experience including teaching and learning, attainment, campus life, and support networks.

An online survey was launched for Black students in 2009, gathering 938 responses from home and international students nation-wide. A literature review and focus group, held at a Black students' regional meeting, was also conducted. Whilst the project is ongoing, with further focus groups planned in the coming months, the data collated thus far has highlighted a range of issues that are affecting Black students, as well as the unique challenges they face. The findings from this briefing are predominately based off the survey data, with elements of the focus group data also incorporated.

¹ Reference: Broecke, S. and Nicholls, T. (2007), Ethnicity and Degree Attainment, Department for Education and Skills Research Report RW92.

Key findings

Respondents were asked a range of questions to explore why they felt Black students were both less likely to be satisfied with their educational experience and less likely to attain first-class degrees in comparison to their White peers. It is evident throughout the data that there are a variety of inter-related factors that impact Black students' experiences of FE and HE.

Whilst our survey respondents and, correspondingly the Black student population, are a highly heterogeneous group, with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints, it was clear that there were common concerns. The strongest message emerging from the survey was how students felt that fair and equal treatment was essential to a positive educational experience. Students further stated that this treatment was currently lacking, to some extent, at their institution.

The following highlights some of the main areas commonly cited by respondents in regards to dissatisfaction and degree attainment.

- Previous educational opportunities;
- Teaching and learning;
- Academic and social environment;
- Experiences of racism.

Previous educational opportunities

Many respondents noted that there was a complex interplay between their satisfaction and attainment at FE and HE and wider problems within society and the education system. Some suggested that economic and social backgrounds had a direct effect on Black students' prior educational opportunities and, consequently, the degree to which they were prepared to undertake their FE and HE studies.

“Most of my friends went to very good schools/6th forms and therefore I feel they are more academically prepared than myself. This may not be because the others are ‘cleverer’ or ‘better’, but maybe because they had better teachers and therefore were taught better.”
– Survey respondent

Respondents also expressed how important secondary schooling was in terms of the quality of support they received in reviewing their options and the application process.

Whilst 75.2 per cent of the respondents rated the information, advice, and guidance they received prior to FE and HE as excellent or good, nearly one in four (24.9 per cent) felt that it could have been better or was poor. Qualitative evidence provided within the survey indicated that the level of support appeared to be widely dependent on the type and quality of school they attended, their socio-economic background, and teachers' expectations of their academic performance.

“As an FE student, my classmates and I were pretty much left to

ourselves to decide what we wanted to study and where we wanted to study... I went to a college where the aspirations of Black students were low and there were conflicts (inter-racial and BNP). The college did not attempt to reach out to the Black students who were frustrated by their society, peer pressure and family.”
– Survey respondent

Teaching and Learning

Within the area of teaching and learning, respondents frequently highlighted issues of unequal treatment by tutors and lecturers, particularly within the areas of assessment and the curriculum.

Assessment

Analysis of the qualitative data indicated that fair assessment and transparent marking procedures was a key area of concern for respondents. Many expressed the need for anonymous marking, without which they felt potential bias and discrimination could take place. As one respondent stated:

“If your name is a foreign-sounding name then you're more likely to get

less marks than someone with a Western-sounding name.” – Focus group participant

Curriculum

Respondents also highlighted problems with the curriculum, with 41.6 per cent stating they did not believe the current curriculum on their course reflected issues of diversity, equality and discrimination. Many respondents felt marginalised within their learning environment, with more than a third (33.4 per cent) stating they felt unable to bring their perspective as a Black student to lectures and tutor group meetings. One such respondent said:

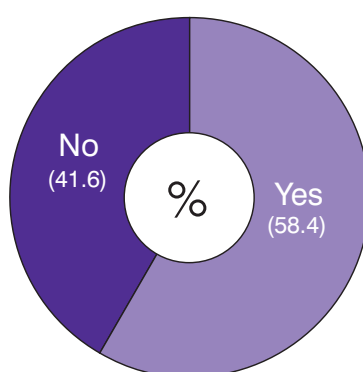
“I tend to not share my views, because I feel it is the voice of the minority and no one will want to hear it.” – Survey respondent

Academic Support

Whilst the majority (70.5 per cent) felt adequately supported by their academic tutors, with one student even describing their tutor as “the nicest and most understanding person I have ever met,” almost one in four (24.0 per cent) did not. Nearly the same amount (22.4 per cent) also expressed dissatisfaction with their personal (pastoral) tutor when asked if they felt supported enough by him/her. 59.9 per cent felt they were supported enough, whilst 17.6 per cent reported they did not have a personal tutor at all.

“The attitude and teaching method of a tutor reflects on my grades. I do less well in units where I feel isolated. For example, in a class where everybody seems to know everything and I'm the only one putting my little finger up to show

Do you feel the curriculum on your course reflects issues of equality and discrimination?



that I don't understand.” – Survey respondent

Respondents highlighted how tutors were in an ideal position to provide encouragement and care for Black students and address the unique challenges they faced. Some attributed their academic success to the level of support they received from tutors, highlighting the importance of this support to satisfaction and attainment.

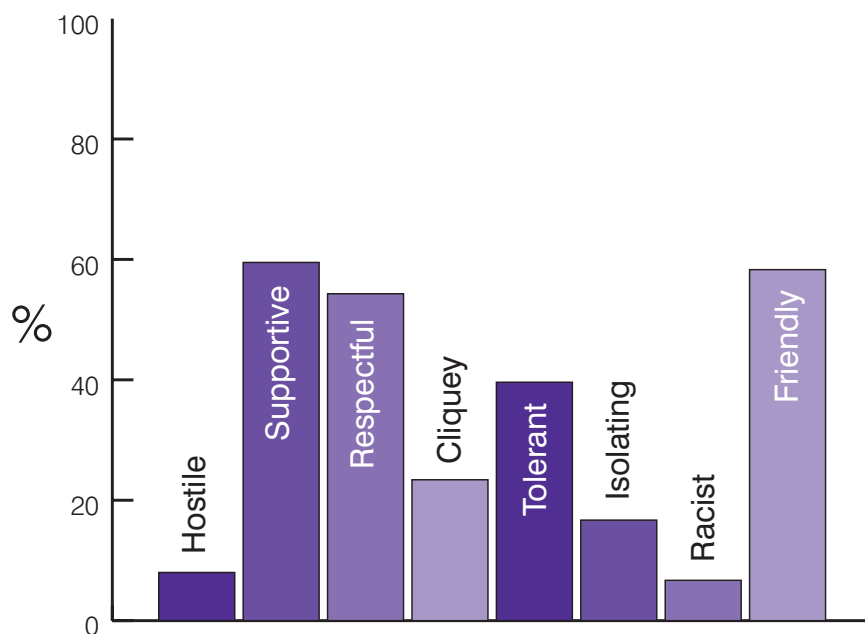
“Two of my lecturers actually didn't apologise for wanting to see the three out of 170 Black people on my course achieve. And they made that quite apparent. They encouraged us to use them as our dissertation tutors. They always asked us to wait behind after class lectures and class seminars to make sure that we understood the work that we were given. They had a kind of open door policy if we didn't understand any of our work or needed help with our essays. And I genuinely believe that if they didn't do that, I wouldn't have got the grade that I got at the end of my three years.” – Focus group respondent

Academic and social environment

Equalities Policies

When asked, 56.8 per cent of students surveyed were not aware of any equalities policies at their institution. However, even those who were aware of these policies noted that their existence alone did not achieve an inclusive institutional ethos, stressing that it was the everyday practices of staff and

How would you describe your experience of your current teaching and learning environment? (tick all that apply)



students that truly created a welcoming and inclusive environment.

“A policy is only of significance if it is put into practice – I have personally found that the words don't necessarily match up to good practice.” – Survey respondent

Teaching and Learning Environment

The majority of respondents rated their institution's teaching and learning environment positively, with 59.5 per cent describing it as 'supportive,' 54.3 per cent as 'respectful,' and 58.3 per cent as 'friendly.' A further 39.6 per cent described their environment as 'tolerant.' Those who did so often highlighted how this type of environment greatly contributed to their learning experience, linking it to their self-esteem and achievements.

“It makes me more focused, because I know that my teachers are there to help me, and not to

single me out in any way. It helps me perform better, because I am comfortable in my environment and I feel that I am able to perform better whilst knowing that there are supportive teachers and students.” – Survey respondent

There was, however, a significant minority who expressed a more negative opinion of their institution's culture, with 16.7 per cent describing it as 'isolating,' 23.4 per cent as 'cliquey,' 8.0 per cent as 'hostile,' and 6.7 per cent as 'racist.' Whilst some felt that this type of learning environment only served to push them to succeed, others believed that this had a negative impact on their university experience and made them lose motivation in their studies.

“It makes me disheartened at times. The doctor put me on medication because I became so depressed with the situation. I tried to commit suicide, as I felt invisible, like I wasn't a person

and I was just there to make up numbers and to say that the college is multicultural when the truth was that it wasn't... It makes me want to leave but I've realised, as I tell all my friends, that we have to stick it out. We only have three months left to go. I think it also has made me work harder. At first it was to prove to them that I was a good student, but now I'm working for myself." – Survey respondent

Some students also expressed feelings of isolation and alienation at their institution, both in their academic and social environment. This sentiment was particularly strong amongst international students, who often cited language and cultural barriers as being detrimental to their FE or HE experience. This played a role in their sense of well-being; those who felt excluded often explained that this negatively impacted their motivation and overall desire to attend their course.

Experiences of Racism

Throughout the survey, respondents touched upon the various forms of racism and how they could impact Black students. Nearly one in six (15.8 per cent) respondents reported that they had experienced racism in their current educational institution. From the qualitative data, it was clear that although this racism was often hard to quantify, it had a negative impact on students' attainment and overall satisfaction of their course.

"These days, racism has evolved... it has become not so obvious and hard to prove so it is hard to even call it racism. The major thing I have noticed is the difference in treatment, attitude, and mannerisms I get from teaching staff and students. With the teaching staff, some would be rude for no reason or look down on you for asking questions... With the students, it would be like not wanting to pair up with you, or being a bit distant." – Survey respondent

Moreover, many respondents linked these experiences with a drop in their self-esteem and desire to continue their education.

"If you get called names and you get told every other day to go back to your own country or you're being spat on or you're being told these stupid comments saying that because you're ethnic you're probably a thief... This kind of has a psychological effect on students. And from students going through this, they think, "What's the point if I go to university and get a degree? I might face the same racism I faced at university when I get a job." – Focus group respondent

A more extensive research report will be available by the end of the year. To find out more about the project, please contact Mandeep Rupra-Daine at mandeep.rupra@nus.org.uk or Stephanie Neave at stephanie.neave@nus.org.uk

The following highlights some of the key areas in which survey respondents felt their experience of FE and HE could be improved:

- **Educate and encourage:** Promote further education to Black students in primary and secondary school.
- **Awareness:** Increase awareness of the unique challenges Black students may face.
- **Diversity:** Increase cultural diversity of staff and students.
- **Equal treatment:** Ensure equal treatment by employing policies such as anonymous marking.
- **Role models:** Increase number of Black academics and invite successful Black individuals to come speak at institutions.
- **Representation:** Provide International and Black students' officers in all students' unions.
- **Academic support:** Provide academic support systems, such as skill-building workshops.
- **Pastoral care:** Assign students an advisor who can monitor their progress and offer them advice.
- **Teaching:** Use different teaching approaches to ensure all students are engaged.
- **Information:** Increase awareness of how courses are taught and the services offered by the institution.
- **Financial support:** Increase funding available to Black students.

About the campaign

The NUS Black Students' Campaign is the largest organisation of Black students in Europe representing students of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean descent. The Campaign works to ensure that the Black perspective is fully integrated into the fabric of all students' unions and society at a local and national level.