



# Ethnicity, Education and Employment

## Executive Summary



Ethnicity, Education  
& Employment

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## **Executive Summary**

### ***Aims and Objectives***

This report is about student experiences of higher education (HE) within the context of the widening participation agenda and the changing expectations of the role of HE in society. The increasing representation of non-traditional students in HE, and particularly Minority Ethnic (ME) students, creates new contexts for higher education institutions (HEIs) to work in and means that English HEIs are facing a moment of critical transformation. Within the context of social and economic changes in our society and challenges to the discourse of multiculturalism, this research project has explored students' experiences of Higher Education from their point of entry, through their time on a course and to their search for employment following graduation.

Based on the latest research findings that emphasise the different HE participation rates, patterns and outcomes between different ME student groups, the project has attempted to assess the stakeholders' perceptions of the effectiveness of HEI strategies and policies designed to support ME students' participation in HE during all phases of their educational careers.

The four main project objectives were:

- to obtain a better understanding of the ways in which minority ethnic students and other stakeholders perceive the effectiveness of institutional strategies and initiatives designed to promote student success;
- to comment on the relationship between perceived learner needs and institutional provision for minority ethnic students in HE;
- to develop a clearer appreciation of the relationship between widening participation initiatives, strategies and measures designed to support minority ethnic student groups;
- to develop recommendations for building on existing work and developing new approaches to minority ethnic student support.

### ***Project Background***

The project was conducted between January 2004 and August 2006, funded by the European Social Fund. It has been undertaken by the University of East London as the lead agency, in partnership with the University of Bradford, Brunel University, Edge Hill University, and Leeds Metropolitan University. A case study approach was adopted due to the differences between partner universities in the profiles of student bodies and courses offered.

Each case study took a different methodological approach, but all the following research tools were used at some point in the project: a literature review; an analysis of national statistics; institutional data analysis; policy and strategy evaluation; questionnaires with students; interviews with students, graduates, university staff and employers; student focus groups; and participant observation. The principal methods used were qualitative research

methods, mainly semi-structured interviews, in order to allow the voices of the students to be heard.

Over the project lifetime, most institutions involved in the project saw some form of institutional restructuring and/or the development of new institutional strategies. It is therefore important to remember the transitional nature of institutional contexts.

### ***Key Messages***

Ethnicity is not a category that refers only to minority ethnic groups; White groups also have an ethnicity: each group has individual social and cultural characteristics but they can share a history and a present with other groups. Therefore, in exploring the needs of ME students it is vital to consider how the categories of ethnicity and difference are constructed and influence students' experiences of HE. No convincing argument has been made about how and in what ways ethnicity impacts on students' experiences; therefore, this research disaggregates the analysis to identify how other axes of difference such as educational and social backgrounds, gender, age, degree choices, career aspirations, and job seeking behaviour interact with ethnicity to influence student experiences.

In order to understand the complexities of student experiences, it is important to focus on students and hear their own perceptions of, and experiences in HE; this has been the focus of this project.

Interrogating institutional policies and practices on WP, Graduate Employability and Equality & Diversity through policy analysis and interviews with both Senior Managers and non-Senior Managers highlighted the necessity of good institutional communication and the need for clear, integrated strategies. The importance of rigorous monitoring and assessment of the effectiveness of these initiatives has been illuminated. This was often found to be insufficient. The current methods used by funding bodies for measuring student success are inflexible and can devalue the diversity of student outcomes today.

Many non-traditional students have multiple responsibilities including work and family commitments in addition to their studies, therefore HEIs are facing new challenges to meet these students' needs. Most students now enter HE with the aim of improving their career opportunities and the employability agenda in universities is a reflection of this increasing vocational ambition. However, students' voices also showed that HE can give them broader horizons and wider experiences, and some students stress that this should not be forgotten in the search for employability. Many non-traditional students have different learning support needs; these students' accounts of their experiences illuminate the need for HEIs to develop strategies to support students on a more individual basis according to their specific learning needs.

Many students do not see their ethnicity as a central factor in their experience of HE, or they see it as one of many interacting social and economic factors shaping their experiences. However ethnic differences cannot be ignored,

interaction between different ethnic groups has been observed to be limited on campus, with some level of segregation occurring. This is something that universities should be aware of, and actively encourage their whole community of staff and students to address given the current debates in our society that challenge the discourse of multiculturalism.

### ***Key findings***

- Career development is the most common reason for students coming to HE, but a significant number of students also see HE as an opportunity for broader personal development.
- The diversity of the culture of HEIs is seen as a positive characteristic, but the extent to which students from different backgrounds mix with each other varies.
- Providing positive role models can encourage ME students to be more successful in HE.
- At an institutional level the awareness of WP is considered high, but measuring the success of WP initiatives is difficult, and has brought new challenges for HEIs.
- Consistency in widening participation and graduate employability services, including better communication between services, academic schools and departments helps to embed policy initiatives across institutions and into each academic programme.
- The provision of more individualised and flexible academic support, as well as pastoral support, in order to meet diverse student learning needs is necessary for students to achieve their full potential.
- Employability has become a contested issue between managers and teaching staff, partly due to the ambiguity of the term. Students also have different understandings of their own employability and of the HEIs' role in enhancing their employability.
- Increasing opportunities for work placements and removing the barriers that certain groups face in accessing placements can enhance graduate employability.

### ***Conclusions***

This research shows that all ME groups are actively participating in HE, not just those who traditionally have had higher participation rates. It is clear that there are different educational outcomes for different ethnic groups, both White and Minority Ethnic. These findings are supported by previous research. However, the project also observed varied outcomes for the same ME group in different institutions. This reinforces the claim that ethnicity is not a central factor in educational achievement. Indeed, many ME students expressed the opinion that ethnicity is not a fundamental factor in their HE

experience at all, but that other factors such as gender, age, religion, and family circumstances interact with their ethnicity. Nevertheless, this research has shown that ethnicity does impact on a student's life in HE in various ways, such as in their access to a work placement or in everyday interactions at university, where they are still considered by some to be 'different'.

New WP policies and strategies have been offering non-traditional students a valuable opportunity to access HE, which could be a turning point in their lives. Through their experiences of HE, many students improve their career prospects, as well as gaining greater self-confidence and broadening their horizons. In this way HE offers a transformative opportunity to students that can challenge socio-economic hierarchies in society. However, these students are more likely to attend a local university, often with a large population of non-traditional ME students; and they are less likely to attend distant and more traditional or prestigious universities. Unless this trend is reversed, participation in HE by non-traditional or ME students will simply result in the reproduction of existing social, economic, and spatial divides.

Many students, who are the first member of their family to attend HE, feel that the experience has empowered them. However, some of these students feel that they do not fit into HE culture and thus feel isolated during their course. HEIs need to consider new ways to accommodate these students' needs and to welcome them into a diversifying HE culture. Otherwise, the experience of HE will only lead to these students internalising their self-perceived social inferiorities and accepting social inequalities, thus structurally reproducing societal differences. With the drive to meet government employability targets many universities are creating more vocationally orientated programmes; however, if HEIs have a specific educational role which is different from other learning providers, it is providing a space for wider social interactions and an opportunity to learn about and challenge existing social structures and inequalities. Within the context of the current challenges to the discourse of multiculturalism, providing a space for learning about and challenging societal and cultural norms is an important role for universities to take on to contribute to changing our wider society.

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