APPG on Race and Community Inquiry on Race and Higher Education

Written evidence submitted by the National Union of Students (November 2013)

Introduction

The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of local students' unions, associations and guilds in colleges and universities throughout the United Kingdom. Through them, we represent the interests of over 7 million students in further and higher education.

The NUS Black Students' Campaign is a section of NUS which represents students of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean heritage. NUS uses the term 'Black' as a political term to refer to people from the above-mentioned communities.

We would like to thank the APPG on Race and Community for the opportunity to contribute evidence on race and higher education (HE). As a student-focussed organisation, we have concentrated our submission on evidence pertaining to students.

Overview

A longstanding body of evidence demonstrates the way that race can shape students' entry into, experience of, and outcomes following HE. We assume that this body of existing research is taken as background knowledge for the purposes of this inquiry. We have therefore chosen to highlight insights that NUS has gained through our own research and work with students and students' unions.

In recent years, NUS has conducted several pieces of research with Black students, which together demonstrate the ways in which Black students' experiences differ from those of their white peers. NUS believes that many of the racial and ethnic disparities in the experiences of students that the research demonstrates can be understood as related to student engagement in the learning community, and that a partnership approach is most likely to be successful in solving these problems.

Below we explain the concept of partnership as NUS understands it, before exploring the relationship of partnership to our research findings in relation to key areas of the Black student experience: teaching and learning; the institutional environment; hate crimes and incidents; retention; and progression into academia. We then propose solutions based on the ethos of partnership with Black students.

Partnership

Partnership is a term used by NUS to describe an ethos that enables students, students' unions, and institutions to work together to co-create knowledge, learning, and indeed the higher education institution itself. It is related to the concept of student engagement, which holds that students should be active participants in their own learning; while student engagement often describes activities, partnership describes an *approach* to identifying problems, devising solutions, and implementing those solutions. Partnership implies shared responsibilities for both students and institutions, and allows space for good-faith disputes on the issues that matter to both students and institutions. More information on NUS' approach to partnership can be found in our document, *A Manifesto for Partnership.*[1]

NUS believes that Black students experience a 'partnership gap'. That is, institutional mechanisms for student engagement and partnership seem to function more effectively for white students than for their Black peers. This includes students' participation in the classroom and in the co-creation of knowledge, the building of the learning community as a whole, and indeed in identifying and delivering solutions to the issues surrounding race in higher education.

Teaching and learning

NUS' 2011 report into Black students' experiences of education, *Race for equality*,[2] found that 42 per cent of Black students did not believe their curriculum reflected issues of diversity, equality, and discrimination. A third (34 per cent) stated they felt unable to bring their perspective as a Black student to lectures and tutor meetings. There was widespread frustration amongst the research participants that, on the whole, courses were designed and taught by non-black teachers, and often did not take into account diverse backgrounds and views.

Respondents regularly cited racial and cultural bias as a deterrent to their overall satisfaction and attainment. Some respondents expressed a feeling that their teachers did not provide the same level of attention or encouragement to non-Black students and that they were 'condemned to fail'. While this perception was hard to quantify, respondents pointed to a lack of support and constructive feedback, providing examples where they believed their teachers were willing to help other students, but were apathetic when they requested the same.

Fair assessment and transparent marking procedures were a key area of concern. Many expressed the need for anonymous marking, without which they felt potential bias and discrimination could take place.

These findings are describing a set of barriers to student engagement and co-creation of learning that may be particular to the Black student experience, or at least more deeply felt by Black students. In many classrooms, there has clearly been a failure to create an environment that supports Black students to participate as full and equal partners in their learning. Black students' (real or perceived) experiences of bias in terms of support as well as assessment procedures have further alienated them from participating in a community of learning.
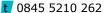
The institutional environment

Race for equality also asked respondents about the environment at their institution. Respondents were clear that the existence of institutional racism needed to be acknowledged in order to fully understand Black students' experiences of further and higher education.

While the majority of respondents were positive about their teaching and learning environment, a significant minority viewed it negatively, with 23 per cent describing it as 'cliquey', 17 per cent as 'isolating', 8 per cent as 'hostile' and 7 per cent as 'racist'. One in six (16 per cent) of survey respondents reported that they had experienced racism in their current educational institution.

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The research found that experiences of racism within their institutions led to a drop in self-esteem, confidence, motivation, and desire to continue their education for many respondents.

These findings again demonstrate ways in which Black students do not feel part of a learning community; if partnership exists at their institution, they do not seem to have been included in it. It is hard to expect students to feel comfortable and confident to engage as equals in their education if their experience is shaped by institutional racism.

Hate crimes and incidents

NUS' report, *No place for hate: Race and ethnicity* (2012)[3], forms part of a series of reports looking at students' experiences of hate crime. It found that 48 per cent of Asian or Asian British, 44 per cent of Chinese, and 42 per cent of Black or Black British respondents were very or fairly worried about being victimised because of their race, compared to only four per cent of white British respondents. Overall, 18 per cent of Black (BME) students had experienced at least one racial hate incident during their studies. The most common types of hate incidents were verbal abuse, threats of violence, or threatening behaviour. Only 13 per cent of victims of racially motivated incidents reported this to someone in an official role in their institution and only ten per cent had reported it to the police.

Two in five (42 per cent) of racially motivated hate incidents took place in and around the students' institutions, and 12 per cent had occurred in the learning environment (e.g. the classroom). More than half (54 per cent) of victims of race hate incidents had considered leaving their course as a result of their experience. 21 per cent of racially motivated hate incidents negatively affected the victim's mental health, compared with 12 per cent of non-bias motivated incidents.

The prevalence of racial hate crimes and incidents further underlines the challenges for Black students to engage as partners in their

learning and in the community of the institution. At the most basic level, both the classroom and the institution as a whole must be safe and welcoming environments in order for effective learning, communities, and partnership to take place.
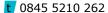
Retention

NUS' *Pound in your pocket* programme of research surveyed 14,404 students in England in 2011.[4] 11.5 per cent of HE respondents were Black, making it possible for NUS to compare Black and white students' responses on most questions of the survey, which can be found in our briefing, *The Pound in Your Pocket: Black students*.[5] The survey found that the same proportions of Black and white respondents indicated that they had seriously considered leaving their course—39 per cent. This finding is more complex than it appears at first glance, given that Black students have a lower continuation rate than white students.[6]

There are both formal and informal mechanisms that influence a student's decision to leave their course (once they are already 'seriously considering' doing so). They must be in part related to partnership, in the sense that strong ties to a community within the institution can act to prevent a student from dropping out.[7] Again the evidence suggests a gap, in which mechanisms for creating partnership seem to be functioning more effectively for white students who are considering leaving their course than for Black students.

Progression into academia

Our *Pound in your pocket* research can also shed some light on Black students' routes into academia by looking at the funding sources which support that progression. While similar proportions of Black and white postgraduate students received institutional bursaries or scholarships (20 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively), Black postgraduates were half as likely as their white counterparts to be in receipt of a Research Council studentship (8 per cent vs. 16 per cent, respectively). It appears that many Black postgraduates are filling this

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gap in research council funding by taking out professional and career development loans, which 12 per cent of Black postgraduate respondents had taken out, compared with 7 per cent of white postgraduate respondents.

We would suggest that there are differences in the prestige and opportunities afforded to students in receipt of Research Council funding as compared to self-funding via bank loans, and that difference this may affect routes into academia for Black students. Moreover, there are questions about the extent to which Research Council funded students experience better integration into the academic community, as suggested in some media reports.[8] Further research is needed in this area, but it points to a gap in partnership at postgraduate level as well.

Solutions

The above research coalesces around a series of observations pointing to a partnership gap for Black students in higher education:

- Many Black students feel that they are asked to leave their identities at the classroom door. Based on existing research, we can speculate that this has a negative effect on their learning.[9]
- Many Black students experience their institutional environment as exclusive, and/or they experience direct racial hatred, and as such do not feel part of the community of the institution.
- Some forms of pastoral and financial support for students are not functioning as well for Black students as for their white counterparts.

A gap in the mechanisms of student engagement and partnership seems to be a contributor to the issues experienced by Black students in HE. Importantly, a partnership approach can also contribute to solving these issues.

Part of the challenge around creating a partnership approach to race in HE may be the degree of discomfort that honest conversations about race evoke for many in the HE sector and indeed in wider society. Partnership requires trust and open communications. It can be hard to create trust if Black students do not feel part of the institution's community; it can be even harder if Black students feel that their lived experience is being denied, which can be the result of (perhaps well-meaning) attempts to shift the focus away from race. The first step towards addressing issues of race in HE is acknowledgement that the problems exist.
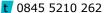
Partnership is also about shared responsibility. Once the issues themselves are acknowledged, it is just as important to recognise that institutions, students' unions, and Black students all have shared ownership over the problem and its solutions. This would involve institutions, students' unions and Black students working together to develop and implement solutions to the issues outlined above, and others that have been identified by organisations across the HE sector.

Contacts

NUS would be happy to further discuss any aspect of this response. In the first instance, please contact:

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Endnotes

[1] NUS (2012). *A manifesto for partnership.* Available from:
http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/partnership/a-manifesto-for-partnerships/

[2] NUS (2011). *Race for equality: A report on the experiences of Black students in further and higher education.* Available from:
http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12350/NUS_Race_for_Equality_web.pdf

[3] NUS (2012). *No place for hate: Hate crimes and incidents in further and higher education: Race and ethnicity*. Available from:
http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12238/2012_NUS_No_Place_for_Hate_Race.pdf

[4] NUS (2012) *The pound in your pocket*. Available from: http://www.poundinyourpocket.org.uk/

[5] NUS (2013). *The pound in your pocket: Black students*. Available from:
http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/open/38530/PIYP-Black-students/

[6] ECU (2012). *Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2012*. Available from:
http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/files/equality-in-he-stats-report-2012-students.pdf/view

[7] Thomas, Liz (2012). Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: Final report from the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/what-works-student-retention/What_works_final_report

[8] Marazzi, Luca (6 June 2013). "Self-funded PhD students deserve support, not stigma and secrecy." *The Guardian Higher Education Network*. Available from:
http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/jun/06/self-funded-phd-students-secret

[9] Trowler, Vicki (2010). *Student engagement literature review*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at:
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