Investigating the Relationship between Ethnicity and Degree Attainment

Jaki Lilly (Jaki.Lilly@anglia.ac.uk), INSPIRE
Berenice Rivera Macías (berenice.riveramacias@anglia.ac.uk), INSPIRE
Mark Warnes (Mark.Warnes@anglia.ac.uk), INSPIRE

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 black and minority ethnic (BME) groups are marginalised. While the HEA/ECU suggest that '[t]he causes of degree attainment variation with respect to gender and ethnicity were found to be unlikely to be reducible to single, knowable factors' (2008, p.2), they do note that 'even after controlling for the majority of contributory factors, being from a minority ethnic group…was still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment' (ibid., p.2). The relationship between ethnicity, gender and degree attainment remains both troubling and uncertain.

The report recommends that HEIs develop their own research projects in this area (ibid., 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 & 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 focused 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 the relationship between ethnicity and degree attainment. This paper focuses on our work into the replacement of the currently employed blunt object of ethnic categorisation with a more sophisticated method of identifying areas where we might assist to improve students' attainment. Here we describe 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.

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 two subsections. We present our departure point in challenging HEI use of HESA's ethnic categories, and then 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 work so far.

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):

White[1]

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

Chinese[2]

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

From our initial research into our HESA return for 2006/07 we have found that there is 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 20 ethnic groups and all the graduating population. We also found 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.

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. 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 & Francis, 2007, p.29).

This theoretical background informs our study, resulting in an unbiased approach (i.e. excluding an ethnic-centred focus) initially looking at diverse socio-economic factors recorded in the HESA database (such as social class, qualifications on entry, age, and so on) 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. Some of the points raised are addressed 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 Act also advises that the HEIs should have an equal opportunities group (CRE, 2002, p.11), which is the case in 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.

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 suggests 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 out 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 & Whitehead, 2005).

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 preliminary 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 (n=23,970). Since we were able to access all our students' data, we felt that it would be counterproductive to select a sample since this would result in a smaller dataset. We therefore used the full population of students for the 2006/7 academic year as this provided the most representative and complete data for analysis. 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 3 UK geographically remote campuses, 11 partner colleges of further education, and 6 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 students 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 to 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, provides 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, as degree attainment is only one of a number of possible ways in which a student might leave university, we have explored the full range of student exit routes. Other 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 of 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 of 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 uses 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 effects on their student-life cycle and hence outcomes.

The next phase of our research will endeavour to uncover the individual student's experience.

Notes
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).

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