

# **Understanding the Experiences of Ethnic Minority (and Other) Students at Loughborough University**

## **1 Background**

In late 2006, the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) was commissioned to undertake a study into the experiences of ethnic minority students (BME) at the Loughborough University. The project was funded via Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) and focussed specifically on UK/EU resident undergraduate students.

A preliminary report was produced in November 2007 covering analysis of data on the admissions characteristics of students together with progression and achievement data (most analyses on students registered in 2006/07 with some review of earlier data). The final report was submitted in April 2008 and it provided a qualitative analysis of interview and focus group research undertaken with 42 BME students and interviews with staff from four academic departments (two each from Loughborough University School Art and Design, Chemistry, Aeronautical and Automotive Engineering and School of Sports and Exercise Sciences) and support services (Student Advice Centre, Counselling, Student Accommodation, and Community Warden).

## **2 Conclusions from the Preliminary Report (quantitative results)**

Whilst the focus of the study was ethnicity, the preliminary report also presents findings relating to a wider range of student characteristics. This both puts the analysis for BME students in context and provides interesting information related to the whole student body. It should be noted, however, that due to data limitations, analysis of the tariff scores of students on entry could not be undertaken.

## **2.1 BME Students are not an homogenous group**

It is important not to make generalisations about BME students as each group shows different patterns in relation to prior educational institution, type of qualification on entry, age on entry, socio-economic background and Faculty, e.g. black ethnic origin students are slightly more likely to be in Engineering and over 25 on entry, whilst students of Asian origin are more likely to be from less favourable socio-economic backgrounds and be admitted to Science. This diversity of prior experience was also confirmed by the interviews and focus group discussions.

## **2.2 Some BME (and other) groups have lower completion rates**

Overall an examination of ethnic variations in completion of study show less favourable outcomes for BME students and outcomes vary depending on ethnic group. Once other factors (including Faculty, socio economic background, qualification on entry and prior educational institution) are taken into account, some of these variations can be accounted for. However, these factors do not appear to account for the lower achievement of qualification aims by Bangladeshi, Pakistani or other Asian (excluding Chinese and Indian) students. This group is about 32 per cent less likely to achieve their qualification aim than white students with similar characteristics. Chinese students are more than twice as likely to achieve their qualification aim as white students from similar backgrounds.

The analysis shows that the following factors are generally associated (all UK/EU students) with greater likelihood of failure to achieve qualification aim:

- Foundation, Access, BTEC or vocational qualifications on entry
- Being male
- Registration in Engineering rather than SSH
- Being over 25 on entry
- Membership of a less favourable socio-economic group
- Prior study at an independent school
- Registration in Science rather than Engineering or SSH

The above are grouped with the highest impact factor(s) at the top and lowest at the bottom.

### **2.3 BME students (and some others) are less likely to achieve good degree outcomes**

Overall, of those students who completed their studies, BME students were significantly less likely to attain a first or upper second class degree than white students (white: 65 per cent, black: 46 per cent, Indian: 55 per cent, Chinese: 44 per cent, Other Asian: 50 per cent, Mixed: 58 per cent). The analysis controlling for student background characteristics did not provide a full explanation for these variations. In this context, it is interesting to note that the following other factors reduce the likelihood of attaining a good degree class for all students (greatest impact first):

- Foundation, Access, BTEC or vocational qualifications on entry
- Being male
- Studying at an independent school
- Being in the Science Faculty rather than engineering
- Having overseas qualifications
- Studying at an FE or adult education college
- Changing departments
- Studying at a GM school

This pattern of degree class achievement for Loughborough BME students is similar to that found in a number of national studies. For example, research undertaken by Cambridge University in 2006 suggested that being from a BME group by itself was not the key factor in determining academic achievement. It concluded that the following were most important to success: strong motivation and career focus, a feeling of fitting in and having a network of friends, and having few concerns about finances. BME students were more likely to lack one or more of these characteristics and this seemed to feed into lower achievement.

## **2.4 NSS Results do not show significant variation by ethnicity**

The report reached this conclusion based on the 2005 and 2006 results.

## **3 Key Conclusions from the Final Report (qualitative results)**

### **Student Focus Groups and one to one Interviews**

#### **3.1 Reasons for coming to Loughborough**

Students did not report the ethnic make up of the University as being a significant issue for them in deciding to come to Loughborough but we do not know the views of prospective students who did not come. Students chose to come to Loughborough for a range of factors that included: the university's academic and sporting reputation; a positive experience of coming to the university's Open Day; and Loughborough being a campus university. BME students suggested how the University profiled itself in its publicity material was important.

#### **3.2 Learning and teaching issues for BME students**

BME students did not perceive there to be any special issues relating to them in connection with their experience of the curriculum, programme delivery, support from departmental staff, course representatives or most support services. Many actively stated that they did not want to be treated differently in any way. The limited number of BME staff in some areas was not reported to be a concern. BME students reported the same issues about the English language of some international staff and the unevenness of the personal tutor system.

There were mixed views about the desirability of the special initiatives offered by the Careers Centre for ethnic minority students (special sessions on CVs etc and mentoring scheme)—many were uncomfortable about targeted provision based on race and felt it had the potential to stigmatise them.

#### **3.3 The social experience of being at Loughborough**

Most students reported socialising with others from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Some clustering of ethnic groups was reported though this was felt to be more evident amongst international students. There was evidence that some cultural

clubs and societies were exclusive in that they were only open to a particular ethnic group which could be detrimental to social mixing. A minority of white students were thought to be wary of interaction with BME students due to lack of familiarity with them and a wish not to offend.

Some experience of racist or discriminatory incidents both on campus and in town was reported. Incidents were rare on campus but evidence did exist that showed it could be an issue. This being said in general students and support staff felt that incidence were more likely in town rather than on campus. Most incidents were felt to arise from a lack of awareness/ignorance and were not perceived as serious.

Overall, ethnicity did not appear to represent a significant issue in students' social experience. However, issues which might be linked to ethnicity were seen as barriers and possible problems by some BME students. These centred around religious and cultural values and tended to relate to food and alcohol consumption, observance of festivals, family values and possibly location of residence. A number of students did raise concerns about the Student Halls suggesting that how some BME students experienced this could be detrimental to their experience of Loughborough University.

A number of BME students sought to maintain a strong link with their family. Some students chose Loughborough because it was close to the family home and within this group, some visited their parental home regularly, while others commuted from their parental home. In some instances, students who commuted, also held down a part-time job near their parental home. Those students that chose to commute are more likely to have a 'semi-detached' University experience than those who live and study in Loughborough.

### **3.4 Staff interviews**

The staff interviewed did not report any monitoring of admissions, academic performance and use of services by ethnicity and in general did not feel there was evidence of any particular issues. All the departments surveyed felt they operated transparent policies that promoted equal opportunity with regard to entry requirements. There were no particular targets for increasing BME participation. It

was felt that increasing participation by BME groups would be achieved by the Widening Participation work that targeted particular schools and areas. Within each department, there existed a number of strategies to increase take-up from disadvantaged groups.

At departmental level, it is of course not possible to monitor admissions data by ethnicity as data is only obtained after registration. Students arrive in their departments without their tutors knowing that they may have entered through Widening Participation. Departments do not want to be seen to be targeting particular students either by stigmatising them or giving them preferential treatment. All departments have early intervention mechanisms to try to address educational under-achievement to minimise the risk of them dropping out. No department thought that BME students were particularly vulnerable to under-achievement or dropping out, although there was no evidence to support this assertion (in fact evidence from the interim report shows that ethnicity could be a factor). The content and timetabling of some subjects was raised as an area in which departments need to be sensitive to cultural or religious needs.

The Student Advice Centre does not tailor make special provisions for BME students. Student visits to the SAC are not monitored because staff feel that to do so would add bureaucratic complexity although it is generally felt by SAC that when it came to which ethnic groups used their service it was felt that it tended to be international students not BME. The customer satisfaction questionnaire includes ethnicity but the results of such ethnic monitoring are not analysed by the SAC. Ethnicity and issue related to this was not viewed as an issue by SAC staff.

The Counselling Service have a small but increasing number of BME using their service. There is often a commonality between the issues that they and UK students raise. However, the Counselling Service had also received some reports of racial harassment. This does not seem to have happened to any great extent, and most of it appeared to be located in the town although there were cases on campus. It was not seen, by the Counselling Service, as a major factor in BME students dropping out. Again the issues reported by both academic and support staff centred around

cultural and religious matters which might be indirectly related to race and which may also be significant matters for international students.

#### **4 Possible Actions**

The Cambridge University study suggests that issues of 'fitting in' may be a factor in the greater non-completion rate of some groups of BME students and the lower performance in terms of degree class.

#### **Issues related to academic departments/learning and teaching**

- 4.1** Marketing and Communications should ensure images used in departmental recruitment publications show an appropriate diversity of students (central material was felt to be fine).
- 4.2** Further consideration could be given to whether to share admissions, retention and achievement data by diversity group with academic departments on a more systematic basis.
- 4.3** Further research could be undertaken on how location of residence (off campus, or e.g. with parents in Leicester or Nottingham) impacts on academic performance and student experience.
- 4.4** Consider whether further work is needed to increase our understanding of other factors contributing to poor academic performance generally (e.g. do more male students drop out because they are more likely to be in Engineering or is there an underlying problem of male student motivation?).
- 4.5** Consider whether students with non-A-level qualifications should be more explicitly targeted for additional support.
- 4.6** A review of the curriculum and teaching styles in relation to ethnicity itself should probably not be a priority given the views of BME students. Internationalisation issues may have some relevance here, however.
- 4.7** The planned review of examination arrangements in relation to religious observance should be completed.

## **Issues to refer to Student Experience Team in the first instance**

- 4.8** The Director of Student Services and his section heads should be invited to review the comments relating to student support services and, in particular, consider whether more ethnic monitoring would be feasible or desirable. The views on the targeted Careers initiatives from ethnic minority students should be reviewed.
- 4.9** The emphasis on provision of a wide range of student activities should be maintained—LSU is key.
- 4.10** Consideration should be given to mechanisms for monitoring and reporting student views on catering provision, noting that developments in the last 12 months may have improved perceptions of food provision for different cultural and religious groups.
- 4.11** In organising accommodation in Student Halls a balance needs to be found that recognises the cultural and religious needs of some groups over the importance of 'social mixing'. Hall activity can be excluding and some BME students can find this problematic.