

Research Report

The Impact of Social Identity and Cultural and Social Capital on Different Ethnic Student Groups at University

ESRC Grant 2007/09 – RES-000-22-2485

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Background

Ethnicity and Success in Higher Education (HE)

Studies suggest there are barriers for minority ethnic students achieving successful outcomes in HE (e.g. Archer et al, 2003; Solomon & Woodfield, 2005; Reay et al, 2001). Whilst minority ethnic British students have higher participation rates compared to White students per capita of population (Connor et al, 2004) their degree outcomes are markedly lower (Leslie, 2005, Elias and Jones, 2006, Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Richardson, 2008) and they are less satisfied with their higher education experience (SurrIDGE, 2006). In comparing different ethnic groups, Modood (1991) found that some minority ethnic groups did better than White British students, highlighting the need to deconstruct the catch-all phrase ‘minority ethnic’. Black students are the least likely to obtain a first-class or upper second-class honours degree (Connor et al. 2004; Naylor & Smith, 2004; Owen et al. 2001). Additionally, age was found to increase or decrease students’ likelihood of obtaining a good degree in different contexts, and gender, subject mix and prior attainment also have an impact (cf Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Purcell et al, 2005; Connor et al, 2004), suggesting that demographic and social factors may impact differently on attainment across ethnic groups.

Whilst these factors are thought to explain much of the relative under-achievement of minority ethnic graduates (Connor et al, 2004), an attainment gap persists even when attempts are made to control for these characteristics (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007).

Ethnicity, Identity and Cosmopolitanization

The research available on the needs and experiences of minority ethnic students highlights the importance of students’ racial identity (Gallineau, 2003) and sense of belonging or alienation (Calbrese & Poe, 1990; Connor et al, 2004; Archer et al, 2003) as key factors for positive learning experiences and outcomes. Social Identity Theory (SIT-Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers a useful framework for understanding the impacts of minority ethnic students’ sense of in-group identity and can be specifically applied to feelings of belonging at university.

Affiliation with one’s university and fellow students may relate to the extent of a group’s social capital (Bourdieu, 1997; Coleman, 1988; Putman, 1995, Field, 2005). Social capital

provides social connections and networks as a personal resource to advance personal and group interests. In addition to the well-documented self-esteem and well-being benefits of peer support and in-group identification (Worchel & Austin, 1986), research suggests that strong social networks and educational achievement are mutually reinforcing (Field 2003).

Identity and certainty are increasingly difficult in a society where boundaries are more blurred (Urry, 2002; Beck, 2006). This complexity is particularly marked when individuals and groups bring with them multiple affinities and cultures, creating a kind of ‘transnational anomie’ or cosmopolitanization (Beck, 2006:104).

Ethnicity and Cultural Capital/Habitus

Many writers have argued that educational success is determined by the amount of cultural capital available to the individual concerned (Bourdieu, 1979, 1997; Bowl, 2002). Cultural capital refers to forms of knowledge, skill, education, attitudes, expectations, or any other advantages a person might have which make environments such as the educational system a familiar place in which they can succeed easily (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Central to Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is the notion of habitus: people’s patterns in thought, beliefs, behaviour or taste. Habitus can provide (or fail to provide) students with the skills and dispositions needed to navigate within the HE environment. Elements of an institution’s habitus that can effect student attainment and progression include the level of education for which it prepares its students, the curriculum on offer, organisational practices, and cultural characteristics such as expectations, conduct, character and manners (Reay et al, 2002, Thomas, 2002).

Malach (2003) describes the disadvantages often experienced by minority ethnic communities based on geographical location, prejudice and high rates of exclusion from school. Such early experiences shape students’ attitudes, perceptions and expectations as they enter and try to navigate the field of HE.

Objectives

Building on the concerns raised in the literature the research aimed to address the following specific objectives:

Identify the effects of 'University Cultures' on students' experience of higher education and establish if any differences occur between White and minority ethnic students

Problematised the notion of a simple divide between minority ethnic students and White British students

Examine the similarities/differences of students' demographics and their cultural experiences in order to explore the concept of 'belonging' and social identity within a university.

Examine social theories such as social capital (Field 2005), cosmopolitanization (Beck 2006) and mobility (Urry 2002) and assess their relevance to the experience of minority ethnic and White British students in HE.

Methods

This project utilised a mixed-method design, administering a large-scale questionnaire, followed by qualitative focus groups and educational life history interviews, in order to explore attitudes to the HE student experience across ethnic groups.

Phase	Activity	Participants	Completion
1	<i>Literature Review</i>		<i>Nov. 07</i>
2	<i>Quantitative Survey Study (& Pilot)</i>	<i>n= 766 (54)</i> <i>total = 820</i>	<i>Feb. 08</i>
3	<i>User Forum</i>		<i>June 08</i>
4	<i>Student Focus Groups (x10)</i>	<i>n= 46</i>	<i>July 08</i>
5	<i>Follow-up Survey to Obtain Marks</i>	<i>n= 26</i>	<i>August 08</i>
6	<i>Educational Life History Interviews</i>	<i>n= 8</i>	<i>January 09</i>

Questionnaire

The large-scale quantitative survey was devised, piloted, revised and delivered across 4 universities chosen for representing a cross-section of institution types and varied student bodies (766 in total). All questionnaires were delivered to second year undergraduate students during lectures.

Measures

The questionnaire was developed to utilise a combination of previously validated, adapted and newly developed measures, (see annex 1 for full description of measures). The measure was a fully piloted instrument that demonstrated the internal reliability of existing measures ($\alpha=.77$) and adapted measures (alphas ranging from .79 to .83).

Focus Groups

Students indicated their willingness to participate in the focus groups by ticking a box on the questionnaire. Topics discussed included their feelings of belonging at university, and the effect that this had on their studies, the extent that they thought they ‘fit in’ with their peers, the level of support they received from friends and teachers, and their academic progress.

Follow-up Survey of Marks

All students who participated in the questionnaire were contacted via email at the end of term and asked about their actual marks for their coursework and exams; 26 students responded to the follow-up survey. Self-reported anticipated marks yielded high reliability with the follow-up volunteered ‘actual’ marks ($r=.46, p<.01$), supporting the notion of anticipated marks as reliable and questionnaires as producing valid and reliable data.

Educational Life History Interviews

Educational life history interviews were conducted with students from the overall sample to examine the impact of broader life experiences on participation in higher level study. The data were transcribed and analysed in ATLAS(TI), using a grounded theory to develop a basic coding framework to explore emergent themes (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 1998).

Confines of the research

It was not possible to compare the effects of *specific* institutional culture on the minority ethnic student experience due to the under-representation of minority ethnic students at two of the participating universities. However, it was possible to consider instead the effect of broader ‘university type’ (i.e. ‘old’ / ‘new’) on students’ experiences.

Following advice from the project’s ethics committee at the University, rather than obtaining students’ marks through their university student numbers, we contacted them directly and asked them to volunteer their marks.

Results

Overall students were sampled from a diverse range of ethnic and other demographic backgrounds, although this varies by institution as shown below.

Table 1: Demographics by institution

		Institution type and location							
		A: New		B: Old		C: New		D: Old	
		University 1		University 1		University 2		University 2	
		count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
Ethnicity:	White	148	43	190	83	54	37	18	42
	Black	62	18	2	1	53	36	4	9
	Asian	94	27	18	8	16	11	19	44
	Other	39	12	18	8	24	16	2	5
Religion:	Not religious	103	31	140	61	32	22	18	42
	Christian	109	32	49	21	87	59	7	16
	Muslim	61	18	1	1	14	10	10	23
	Hindu	29	9	3	1	2	1	6	14
	Other	42	10	38	16	12	8	2	5
Age:	Young	210	62	187	81	42	28	28	65
	Mature	129	38	44	19	104	71	15	35
Gender:	Male	141	41	118	51	17	12	18	42
	Female	203	59	113	49	130	88	25	58
Disability:	Disabled	6	2	8	4	4	3	0	0
	Learning needs	16	5	19	8	6	4	4	10
*SES:	I-IV	77	26	47	22	48	35	12	29
	V-VII	231	75	167	78	89	65	29	70
	1 st generation HE	103	30	66	29	47	32	10	23
	Fees Bursary	4	1	10	4	6	4	2	5
Courses:	Vocational	259	75	61	26	63	43	43	100
	Academic	85	25	170	74	85	57	0	0
<i>n</i> =		344		231		148		43	

*SES correlated significantly with having a fees bursary ($r=-.18$, $p<.01$) and prior family experience of HE ($r=.27$, $p<.01$).

Belonging, ‘Uni identification’ and ‘comfort zone’

To explore different ethnic student groups’ experiences of social identity and sense of belonging in higher education, we created two new variables. ‘Comfort Zone’ measures how well students ‘fit in’ at their university, and refers to how personally comfortable they feel in and around the university. University Identification (Uni identification) measures positive feelings towards the university including feelings of pride and identification with peers. Table 2 shows that these two variables are very important for students of all ethnicities for a variety of academic outcomes, but particularly in terms of their social networks. As can be seen in the correlation matrix, these two variables are associated with a number of positive student experience and outcome factors across all ethnicities. Regressions indicate that ‘Uni identification’ predicts 30% of the variance in students’ academic self-esteem scores, 30% of the variance in their peer support scores and 15% of the variance in their well-being scores; and ‘Comfort Zone’ predicts 25% of the variance in students’ academic self-esteem scores, 27% of the variance in their peer support scores and 30% of the variance in their well-being scores. There are some significant differences in how these variables affect different students’ experiences. Minority ethnic students’ comfort zone and university identity are more strongly associated with peer support and engagement in activities that provide a good social network, suggesting the importance of these two variables for their social support at university. Hence ‘belonging’ and ‘social identity’ were very important for students’ success. Correlations suggest that minority ethnic students’ comfort zone is more strongly associated with well-being, a strong university identity and academic self-esteem compared to White students. Therefore, whilst White students’ comfort zone is more important to their involvement in university-based extra-curricular socialising, it appears that minority ethnic students’ comfort zone is vital to their confidence about their studies and positive feelings towards their university. The relative importance of academic and extra-curricular concerns for White and minority ethnic students was also a theme that was picked up in the qualitative data.

Different university cultures emerged, with the older universities having large numbers of White middle class students who saw university as a place for friendship and fun, and the new universities having larger numbers of minority ethnic students who saw university as a place for study.

Table 2: Significant correlates of university identification and comfort zone for different ethnic groups

	'UNIVERSITY IDENTIFICATION'					'COMFORT ZONE'				
	WHITE	BLACK	ASIAN	ARAB/ PERSIAN	MIXED	WHITE	BLACK	ASIAN	ARAB/ PERSIAN	MIXED
<i>comfort zone</i>	.33**	.56**	.32**	.44*	-	.33**	.56**	.32**	.44*	-
<i>ac. esteem</i>	.40**	.42**	.31**	-	.42*	.31**	.53**	.46**	.51**	-
<i>peer support</i>	.43**	.48**	.38**	.40*	-	.33**	.53**	.46**	.63**	-
<i>well-being</i>	.29**	.22*	.28**	-	.38*	.30**	.42**	.43**	-	.47**
<i>social net.</i>	.23**	.23*	-	-	-.49**	.18**	.25**	.26**	-	-
<i>uni activities</i>	.24**	-	-	-	-	.15**	-	-	-	-
<i>friends</i>	.11*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>marks</i>	-	-	-	-	-	.17**	.24**	-	-	-
n	400	121	146	27	30	400	121	146	27	30

Note.

ac. esteem = academic self-esteem
social net. = my commitments and activities provide me with a good social network of friends
uni activities = total number of different university-based activities engaged in
friends = number of days per week spend seeing friends outside class

*p<.05 **p<.01

The predictive utility of ‘university identification’ and ‘comfort zone’

Regression analyses confirmed that students’ sense of university identification and comfort zone lead to key academic outcomes. These models show that our two variables matter for all ethnic groups’ university experience.

Table 3: Significant Predictors of Academic Self-Esteem

Regression models that predict academic self-esteem for different ethnic groups:					
Predictors:	OVERALL	WHITE	BLACK	ASIAN	ARAB/PERSIAN
‘Uni Identification’	.30***	.34***	.17*	.18*	-.05
‘Comfort Zone’	.25***	.20***	.43***	.40***	.53*
Variance explained	21%	20%	30%	24%	26%
Adjusted R ²	.20	.19	.29	.23	.20
Model fit	F(2, 760)=98.83, p<.001	F(2, 406)=49.60, p<.001	F(2, 118)=25.53, p<.001	F(2, 143)=22.27, p<.001	F(2, 24)=4.18, p<.05

Table 4: Significant Predictors of Peer Support

Regression models that predict peer support for different ethnic groups:					
Predictors:	OVERALL	WHITE	BLACK	ASIAN	ARAB/PERSIAN
‘Uni Identification’	.30***	.37***	.26**	.26**	.15
‘Comfort Zone’	.27***	.21***	.39***	.37***	.57**
Variance explained	22%	23%	33%	27%	42%
Adjusted R ²	.22	.22	.32	.26	.37
Model fit	F(2, 759)=106.90, p<.001	F(2, 406)=59.19, p<.001	F(2, 117)=28.83, p<.001	F(2, 143)=26.06, p<.001	F(2, 24)=8.68, p<.01

Table 5: Significant Predictors of Well-being

Regression models that predict well-being for different ethnic groups:

	OVERALL	WHITE	BLACK	ASIAN	MIXED
Standardised Beta Coefficients:					
‘Uni Identification’	.15***	.21***	-.02	.17*	.28
‘Comfort Zone’	.30***	.23***	.43***	.38***	.40*
Variance explained	14%	13%	18%	21%	29%
Adjusted R ²	.13	.12	.16	.20	.24
Model fit	F(2, 761)=60.27, p<.001	F(2, 407)=30.01, p<.001	F(2, 118)=12.71, p<.001	F(2, 143)=18.73, p<.001	F(2, 27)=54.87, p<.01

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05

University for Fun

Table 2 indicates that peer support rather than academic self-esteem is more crucial to White students' 'comfort zone' and 'uni identification'. Unlike other ethnic groups, the time White students spend with friends outside of class, and doing university-based extra-curricular activities, also appears to contribute to their sense of identification with their institution. ANOVAs indicate that they appear to possess more social networks at university than Black students in that they enjoy more peer support ($p < .01$), spend more days per week seeing friends ($p < .05$), and engage in more university activities ($p < .05$). This translates into White students reporting higher levels of well-being at university than all other ethnic groups.

White students said in the focus groups that university was primarily about personal development and 'having fun', and friendships at university were often prioritised over study:

The thing I love most about university is the atmosphere here, common interests and lots of friends, seeing people around on campus, everyone's out and about and friendly. *'Nicola', Old University, 1*

There's no point being here and having a great degree but no good memories. So I wouldn't sacrifice my good time. *'Abi', Old University, 1*

These students also said their social networks benefited their studies, by helping them know who to turn to for help, and allowing them to learn from and collaborate with their peers:

I will always go to my friends for help first, because they've been through the classes with me and are more likely to understand my difficulties. Then if we still don't understand, a group of us will go and ask the teacher together. . *'Lauren', Old University, 1*

Sometimes the workload is so bad that you're seeing the results of a collective effort to meet the deadlines. We divide up the work and then copy from each other, it's sad but its just a matter of survival...*Hugh, New University 1*

In the life history interviews, the White students described how they enjoyed collaborative work and group discussion at university, a precedent that had been set during their early schooling experiences:

There were only 4 of us in philosophy ['A' level] so it was almost all class discussion and group work which was just brilliant, it's the best way to learn. *Mark, Old University 1*

The constant pressure and exams in Maths doesn't faze me so much, because our group of friends know how to plough through revision together. *'Lauren' Old University 1*

University for Study

For Black students, table 2 shows that their comfort zone co-varies strongly with their academic self-esteem, suggesting that compared to White students, academic confidence plays a more important role in helping Black students to feel comfortable at university. ANOVAs indicate that Black students have a stronger sense of academic self-esteem than White students ($p < .01$), suggesting that they are both more focused on and confident about their studies. They also have the highest university identification overall [significantly higher than White ($p < .001$), Mixed-Race ($p < .001$) and Asian ($p < .05$) students], indicating a strong sense of connection and positive feelings such as pride towards their universities.

There was a general consensus among Black students in the focus groups that university was primarily a place for study. These students prioritised their learning over socialising and having fun at University. Religion also seemed to play an important role in their studies:

There are slackers who don't come in the whole year, but I have my personal approach to my studies and academic work. I'm determined to be successful in what I do and I hate failure, so I think I'm more hard working than the typical student. *'Kwame', New University1*

Religion is the basis of my whole personality, how I handle things...That's why I put so much effort into my studies...*Abde, New University*

Black students from higher SES backgrounds report feeling more comfortable in and around the university compared to Black students from lower SES backgrounds. ANOVAs showed that Black students are lower than all other ethnic groups in terms of perceived peer support [significantly lower than White ($p < .01$), Asian ($p < .01$) and 'Other' ($p < .05$) students]. They also spend the least amount of time seeing friends outside of class [significantly less than White ($p < .05$), Asian ($p < .05$), Arab/Persian ($p < .05$) and Mixed-Race ($p < .05$) students] and are engaged in less university-based extracurricular activities [significantly less than White ($p < .05$) and Asian ($p < .05$) students]. Strong social networks and educational achievement are mutually reinforcing, particularly through informal learning (Field, 2003), and it would appear that this is a benefit that Black students are missing out on at university, despite their strong focus on study. These findings suggest that the marked gap in degree attainment for Black students in higher education (Connor et al., 2004; Naylor & Smith, 2004; Owen, 2000) may relate to a lack of social networks at University.

The life history interviews provided instances where White UK students' cultural and social capital gave them 'insider knowledge'. They were more aware of the support on offer to them and their entitlement to such support, making it easier for them to approach staff and to

gain support from their institutions. In contrast, Black students, and those from minority ethnic groups more generally, were less likely to make use of the extra support on offer at their universities. The effect of negative early educational experiences on students' confidence to seek out support and help was particularly an issue for Black students (Malach, 2003):

This teacher, he put me into an exam where the highest mark was a C. And I kind of lost interest after that. Stopped going to school and stopped doing any work. I got away with it for too long because my other teachers just assumed I was doing the work at home. *'Gemma', New University*

Compared to White students, Asian students' 'comfort zone' is more highly correlated with their peer support and their academic self-esteem, again suggesting the importance of social capital and academic confidence for helping members of this ethnic group 'fit in'. This co-varies more strongly with their well-being, compared to most other ethnic groups. ANOVAs showed that they report significantly less well-being at university than White students ($p < .001$), and the lowest well-being overall. Gender differences also affected experience creating differences between Asian men and women. Asian females reported lower well-being ($p < .001$) and lower marks ($p < .01$) than Asian males. It may be, therefore, that issues of 'fitting in' and feeling comfortable are undermining Asian students' sense of well-being and progression at university.

In the focus groups mature students said that their more serious attitude to study and their age prevented them fitting in with other students:

I think it's very age dependent, the younger lot will be partying almost every night whereas the mature will probably be at home having family life and responsibilities and therefore less time to actually socialise. *'Safiya', New University 1*

As with Black students', class affects the results. Asian students from lower SES backgrounds also reported lower levels of well-being than their higher SES counterparts ($p < .05$). Issues of ethnicity, social class and age may interact to affect the university experience of Asian students. The student below describes how his feelings of belonging at university were influenced by his social and educational background and his family's lack of higher education experience, coming from a relatively deprived Bengali neighbourhood with low university participation:

Where I'm from, it's just really drug excessive and loads of crime. And if I tell my friends they all laugh coz they think I'm joking. They don't take it seriously. I don't think they believe me particularly. They all think that everyone are just like them. *'Majdy', Old University 2*

Cosmopolitanization, Diaspora and Comfort Zone

In looking at ‘comfort zone’ and ‘Uni identification’ the research team examined the relationship between citizenship and identity to consider any impact this may have had on the results. The vast majority of White students were UK students (83%), most had always lived in the UK (75%) and most identified themselves as British (78%). ANCOVAs revealed that White students still spent more time seeing friends ($p < .001$) and doing university activities ($p < .02$) than Black students did, regardless of their nationality.

While the vast majority of Black students were UK citizens, many of them had lived and been educated abroad at some point (71%) and more than half identified themselves as non-British (57%) with 41% identifying themselves as ‘African’. ANCOVAs revealed that whilst differences in Black students’ peer support disappeared when controlling for nationality, they still spent less time seeing friends ($p < .001$) and doing university activities than other ethnic groups ($p < .02$) regardless of nationality. The life histories illustrate the impact of living between different societies where students highlighted significant differences between the cultures they had experienced:

Because I lived in Sierra Leone for the first 9 years of my life, the African culture is very competitive, extremely competitive, nothing like it is here...where everybody is almost striving for the first in the class...’I’m gonna get this right, I don’t need your help’ Coming to England I think my confidence decreased’ *Joseph, New University1*

These experiences also had an impact on the students’ preferences for teaching techniques. Black students preferred seminars with minimal group work and class interaction ($p > .05$).

‘At school really I just got on with whatever I wanted to do on my own. I just did it really...’ *Gemma, New University2*

Most Asian students were UK students (71%). Just over half of them had always lived in the UK (52%) and over a significant number did not identify themselves as British (47%).

ANCOVAs revealed that Asian students still reported lower well-being ($p < .01$) and university identification ($p < .001$) than White students when the effects of nationality were controlled for. Asian students also expressed a preference for studying alone rather than in groups:

I’ve been invited to the formal study groups but I prefer to work independently. I suppose it goes back to school, I didn’t learn how to work in large study groups...’ *Majdy’ Old University 2*

The majority of Arab/Persian students were UK students (85%), many had lived abroad at some point (77%) and most identified themselves as non-British (61%).

‘Comfort zone’ remains more important for minority ethnic students generally and ‘Uni identification’ for White students even when controlling for nationality. However the impact of living in different countries and having different affiliations seems to have affected minority ethnic students’ sense of identity. As Beck (2002) argues, sociological analysis needs to move beyond a sociology of nationalism to a ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ (22). This research suggests that the conventional distinctions between British and International students found in the literature on HE students is too simplistic in any analysis with a focus on ethnicity and may indicate the need to explore Beck’s theories of cosmopolitanism. Szerszynski and Urry (2006) suggest that as travel increases peoples do not inhabit places from ‘within’ creating a surface level engagement, positioning ‘one outside the world and alienated from it’ (2006:122). This could affect a student’s sense of ‘belonging’ and identity at university. Further work investigating these findings is suggested as this research indicates that multiple identities may affect students’ engagement at university.

Conclusions

These results show that ‘comfort zone’ and ‘uni identification’ are vital for belonging and identity for all students’ experience, accounting for 16- 40% of the variance in key factors like academic confidence, well-being and peer support. However, these two factors are conceptualised and experienced differently across ethnic groups. For minority ethnic students, these two variables are more strongly related to peer support, suggesting the importance of social capital (Field, 2005), as well as academic confidence, for enabling these students to ‘fit in’ at university.

The picture is even more complex for students with less cultural capital, many minority ethnic students, who possessed less ‘insider knowledge’ of their institutions’ social support networks, and this was compounded by an early lack of institutional and peer support at school level that shaped their patterns of formal and informal learning. Minority ethnic students from lower SES backgrounds reported feeling less comfortable in and around their universities than those from higher SES backgrounds. This research suggests this is related to limited ‘comfort zone’ at a monocultural university environment or as Beck suggests; ‘ in order to survive...migrants must become an acrobat [to] manipulate boundaries... and can at any moment fall from the tightrope he or she is balanced’ (2006:103).

The minority ethnic students expressed views of university as primarily ‘for study’, prioritising academic concerns and reporting more positive feelings towards their institutions, such as a sense of pride and connection. By contrast, White students often expressed views of university as primarily ‘for fun’, viewing higher education as a time for personal development and socialising. White students described ways in which their friendship networks indirectly benefited their studies, giving them the social confidence and knowledge to collaborate with peers or successfully seek out extra help and support. Despite minority ethnic students’ stronger focus on study they appear to be missing out on the benefits that social networks at university can provide. Early educational experiences influence the focus on study or fun at university, as well as student expectations and knowledge of peer, teacher and institutional support.

The newly created ‘comfort zone’ variable appears to be a better predictor of positive academic experience; students who feel more at ease in the different spaces of the University, will in turn feel more confident academically, better supported by peers, have an overall sense of well-being, often identify more strongly with the University and perhaps even perform more strongly in terms of marks.

Feeling comfortable within the University is directly co-related with strong friendship and peer support networks at University. Being between cultures, manipulating ‘boundaries’ (Beck, 2006) exacerbates the difficulties minority ethnic students face. These findings on ‘comfort zone’ suggest fruitful ground for further enquiry on how different ethnic groups ‘use’ and experience University.

Activities

Five seminars at Universities as part of internal seminar series

Four presentations at national conferences (For a detailed list see Annex 2).

Website and participant blog

Virtual steering group/user forum for the project.

Outputs

- HEA Briefing Paper (06/09)
- Memo to the Parliamentary Education Select Committee on Higher Education (02/09)
- *Life History, Learning and Social Inequality in Education*. Abstract accepted by the International Journal of Lifelong Education for publication in 2011.
- *The Impact of Social Identity and Cultural Capital on Ethnic Student Groups at UK Higher Education Institutions*. Abstract accepted by the British Psychological Society Social Section.
- *Listening to Students' Experience of Learning and Teaching* – paper in progress
- *University for Fun and University for Study – The different Cultures of University Students* – paper in progress.

Impacts

There is currently considerable interest in the attainment and progression of minority ethnic students in UK HE.

Our findings have been disseminated to policy makers (Parliamentary Select Committee, Equality Challenge Unit and HEA), HE practitioners as well as to researchers and academics (see presentations). Additionally, institution-specific findings were disseminated to managers and teaching and learning practitioners from the participating Universities.

The HE Academy, in association with Action on Access and Equality Challenge Unit, commissioned the research team to lead a seminar as part of their annual series on equality in HE. The seminar provided a forum for the dissemination and discussion of research to inform institutional policy and practice to support success for all students. A briefing paper was provided to stimulate discussion, share practice and support the sector's access to

relevant research. This was disseminated through the Academy’s Widening Participation Research Service (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/institutions/wp/wprs>).

Future Research Priorities

These findings highlight the importance of students’ identification with, and personal ‘comfort zone’ within, their universities for academic outcomes. The predictive power of these two measures illustrates the need for further research into their effects to develop interventions to improve the student experience at university.

These findings indicated significant differences in teaching and learning preferences across ‘old’ and ‘new’ universities and between White and minority ethnic student groups and further research on different practice is required.

The research was based on a ‘snap-shot’, year two of the students’ undergraduate careers. A longitudinal approach could provide a broader picture of students’ experiences.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Questionnaire measures

Demographic Factors. Demographic variables were assessed, including ethnicity, religious beliefs, sex, age, SES (Rose & Pevalin, 2001), family's educational background and disability.

'Uni Identification' was a new measure adapted from Brown et al.'s (1986) social identity measure. We developed it to encapsulate how connected students feel to the university and how strongly this connection affects their sense of self. It is more than University identification, as it entails positive feelings towards the university including feelings of pride and identification with peers (e.g. I identify strongly with the other students around me or I am proud to be a student at this university).

'Comfort Zone' was a new measure developed to encapsulate how personally comfortable or at ease students feel, and therefore how much they feel they 'fit in', in various University environments (e.g. How comfortable or at ease do you feel in lectures? or How comfortable or at ease do you feel in the social spaces/eating areas?). This is a variable that seeks to explore the relationship between the degree of fit that the students perceive between their own habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and the institutional habitus (Reay et al., 2002), and therefore how at ease they are within the university itself.

Academic Self-Esteem. Thirteen items were comprised from adapting the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) and the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) in order to measure the students' confidence and self-esteem specifically in the domain of their academic studies (e.g. I am enjoying my degree course or It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals).

Well-being at University. Overall well-being was measured by adapting the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Adults (STAI; Spielberger et al., 1970) with the additional instructions 'Take a moment to visualise your average day at University and think about how you normally feel'. This yielded 8 items assessing well-being at university specifically (e.g. At

university, do you generally feel nervous and stressed? or At university, do you generally feel satisfied with your life?).

Marks. A self-report measure of marks was devised using 4 items, where students were asked to estimate firstly their coursework marks, then exams. Students were also asked to estimate their final degree mark that they anticipated as well as the mark they were aiming for.

Peer Support. The ‘Peer Support’ variable encapsulates the level of support that students receive from friends at university. Nine items were adapted from Jessop, Herberts & Solomon (2005) in order to measure peer support specifically in the domain of university (e.g. I have made good friends since coming to University or I find my fellow students helpful and supportive). Additionally, the ‘friends’ variable is the number of days per week that students reported seeing their friends.

Social Activities. Students were also asked to list their extra-curricular commitments and activities, and to indicate where these took place. The ‘university activities’ variable is the total number of these activities and commitments that are based at the university. The social network variable is a single item, ‘My commitments and activities provide me with a good social network of friends’.

Annex 2 : Conferences and Seminars

Changing the Experiences of Ethnic Minority Students: Lessons From Research. Higher Education Policy and Practice (HEPP) Research Seminar (02/06/09), Kingston University.

Extra Curricular Activity and Graduate Outcomes: Insights from Students, Alumni and Employers [Further Research]. Research Seminar (5/11/08), Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, Roehampton University.

Extra curricula activities: Impact on graduate employment prospects [Further Research]. Research Seminar, (13/01/09), Academic Development Centre, Kingston University.

HE Students and Ethnicity: Lessons From Research. HEA Seminar Series (19/05/09), Kingston University.

How can we best support different students in their studies? The importance of well-being, belonging and identity for different ethnic groups. Paper presented (1/4/09) at the Annual Positive Psychology Conference, Warwick University.

Informal Learning, Students and the Student Experience. Public Lecture Series (15/5/08), University of Birbeck, Faculty of Lifelong Learning.

Inquiry into the Student Experience in Higher Education. Memo to the Parliamentary Select Committee from Prof. Mary Stuart (06/02/09).

Student Diversity, Extra Curricular Activities and Perceptions of Graduate Outcomes [Further Research]. Paper presented (1/7/08) at the Annual Higher Education Academy Conference, Harrogate.

The Impact of Social Identity & Cultural Capital on Widening Participation Student Groups at University. Psychology Research Seminar Series (22/10/08), Canterbury Christchurch University.