

RAEMS report and recommendations on work to date: July 2011.

Executive summary.

Over the last three academic sessions the Retention & Achievement of Ethnic Minority Students working group (RAEMS) has undertaken quantitative and qualitative research to better understand differences in student achievement at DMU.

Analysis of the data collected using a variety of means has shown that there are differences in the achievement of a “good honours degree” depending upon ethnicity and gender and that there are also some differences between the faculties.

Data from focus groups identified key factors affecting the achievement of DMU's Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students including the methods used to assess students such as group work, a feeling of favouritism amongst some staff, a desire and need to positively identify with the university, the need for “a safe place to express their concerns” and the need for more role models and mentors who are supported and visible.

These findings reflect the national picture that has emerged over recent times. This is therefore a corporate issue that needs a corporate response.

A number of conclusions and recommendations are made at the end of the report that either requires a culture shift, an investment in resources or both. Executive Board are asked to support the recommendations contained in this report, to endorse the further work of the RAEMS group, and to advise them on any specific actions that they feel should be addressed.

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1 Introduction

The Retention & Achievement of Ethnic Minority Students working group (RAEMS) was established following discussion of the Diversity Reports presented to AQSC (see paper D8 06/07) in June 2007. These reports seemed to suggest that a significant number of DMU's ethnic minority students did less well on the whole than those from majority groupings. AQSC was sufficiently concerned about this to establish the RAEMS group. The remit of the group, as recorded in the AQSC minutes (E1 07/08) is "to consider the retention and achievement of ethnic minority students at the University" and the group has taken the opportunity to interpret this remit as widely as possible. The group now also reports its findings to the university's Equality and Diversity Committee.

The initial aim of the group was to find ways of listening to the student voice, especially the voice of our ethnic minority students. As a consequence we have, since our inception, worked with groups sponsored by the De Montfort Student Union (DSU) who have a specific membership such as the African Caribbean Society, the Hindu Society, the Krishna Society, the Muslim Society and the Sikh Society. We have also run some faculty-based focus groups. The aim of both initiatives has been to listen to the student experience in order to gain a fuller – and perhaps more detailed – view of what it is like to be a student at DMU.

There has been some resistance to this work perhaps based on the lack of immediacy for some colleagues: if there is little which is seen as directly relevant to the work colleagues have to undertake at that moment then there is some resistance to getting involved. However a second reason for resistance seems to be concerned with both system inertia and the substance of the project itself. Since the RAEMS agenda has the distinct possibility of drawing what might seem to be unsettling findings there seems to be a reticence to confront these possibilities on the part of some colleagues, perhaps fearful of the consequences of any findings. Such colleagues have used passive resistance methods to, for instance, stop or slow down the organisation of focus groups. They have used the hierarchical structure within their own faculties as reasons for a lack of movement - waiting for permission from others before agreeing to organise the events requested. However when a member of staff with perceived authority within the organisation is prepared to back the project then focus groups have been organised swiftly and efficiently.

2 DMU and the national context

The underachievement of specific ethnic groups of students in higher education has been a national concern over recent years and two national reports are highlighted

here. Firstly, in November 2010 the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) published a report “Equality in higher education: statistical report 2010”. The report showed that over the six years from 2003/04 to 2008/09 the proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students in higher education increased from 14.9% (261890) to 17.8% (346410 students). However the degree attainment of these students differed from the other ethnic groups: in 2008/09 67.2% of white students achieved a “good honours” degree¹ whereas only 49.2% of BME students achieved the same classifications, with black students achieving 38.1% - the lowest of all ethnic groups. The report highlights that this “attainment gap” between white and BME students achieving good honours degrees has increased during the six years concerned from 17.2% to 18.0%, with the highest gap again being between white and black students – 29.0%.

Secondly, in June 2011 the National Union of Students (NUS) produced Race for Equality: a report on the experiences of Black students in further and higher education. The report concluded that the previous educational experience of the students involved was a significant factor in their attainment with a perception that “many Black students enter further and higher education without the same academic skills, such as study skills and understanding of theoretical debate, as their white peers.” A “significant minority” of the students involved also suggested that the teaching and learning environment could appear as ‘cliquey’, ‘isolating’, ‘hostile’ or ‘racist’. Elsewhere 42% of the students involved did not believe the curriculum they experienced reflected issues of diversity, equality and discrimination; and 34% of the students felt that they were unable to bring their perspective as a Black student to lectures and tutor meetings. There was some anecdotal and emerging research data from amongst the RAEMS group to suggest that this picture was replicated at DMU and the work undertaken by RAEMS hoped to address these concerns.

At DMU these patterns continue. The SPS report 3093 “Good honours attainment gap analysis” shows firstly the total number of students across three years of data who were eligible for an undergraduate degree. An extract from this report is presented in the table below. This table then categorises the student numbers into white and BME students, and shows the number and proportion of each group who were awarded a good honours degree. Finally the table shows the attainment gap between white and BME students regarding good degrees over the last three academic sessions. A key message to emerge from this data is the way in which this attainment gap has remained relatively constant for the university as a whole but has increased in three of the five faculties (AAD, HUM and TECH). It is also worth noting that BAL is the only faculty across all three years where the total number of BME students is greater than the total number of white students and yet BME students still do not gain proportionately more good honours degrees than white students.

¹ First class honours or upper second-class honours.

Good Honours Attainment Gap Analysis (1st and 2:1 classification)

All full time and part time undergraduate qualifiers

Note: Total excludes not known/information refused ethnicity students (equates to 39 qualifiers and 19 good honours students in 2009/10)

Data source: HESA

Good Honours Attainment Gap as calculated in Student Diversity Report 2009/10 i.e. proportion good honours within total group qualifiers

		Total Qualifiers			Good Honours Attainment Gap	Good Honours			Proportion		
		2007/08	2008/09	2009/10		2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
AAD	Total	677	664	649		347	341	324	51.3%	51.4%	49.9%
	BME	138	128	161		48	38	43	34.8%	30.2%	26.7%
	White	539	538	488		299	303	281	55.5%	56.3%	57.6%
	Difference	401	412	327	Gap	251	265	238	20.7%	26.2%	30.9%
BAL	Total	955	879	873		460	466	457	48.2%	53.0%	52.3%
	BME	619	583	607		241	268	274	38.9%	46.0%	45.1%
	White	336	296	266		219	198	183	65.2%	66.9%	68.8%
	Difference*	-283	-287	-341	Gap	-22	-70	-91	26.2%	20.9%	23.7%
* note: negative values because more BME students than white											
HLS	Total	923	764	890		467	351	410	50.6%	45.9%	46.1%
	BME	364	349	407		143	109	156	39.3%	31.2%	38.3%
	White	559	415	483		324	242	254	58.0%	58.3%	52.6%
	Difference	195	66	76	Gap	181	133	98	18.7%	27.1%	14.3%
HUM	Total	647	539	576		373	323	344	57.7%	59.9%	59.7%
	BME	118	93	126		51	41	56	43.2%	44.1%	44.8%
	White	529	448	451		322	282	288	60.9%	63.2%	63.9%
	Difference	411	353	326	Gap	271	241	232	17.6%	19.1%	19.1%
TECH	Total	442	427	489		227	204	201	51.4%	47.8%	41.1%
	BME	217	243	232		85	79	59	39.2%	32.5%	25.4%
	White	225	184	257		142	125	142	63.1%	67.8%	55.3%
	Difference	8	-59	25	Gap	57	46	83	23.9%	35.4%	29.8%
DMU	Total	3646	3286	3519		1874	1690	1766	51.4%	51.4%	50.2%
	BME	1457	1388	1538		588	537	589	39.0%	38.4%	38.3%
	White	2189	1898	1983		1306	1153	1177	59.7%	61.1%	59.4%
	Difference	732	490	447	Gap	738	616	588	20.7%	22.7%	21.0%

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3 Statistical analysis by RAEMS of DMU data

RAEMS worked with the university's Strategic Planning Service to analyse specific data covering four years of undergraduate data from 2006/07 to 2009/2010. It included data on 14791 students and did not include terminations. The size of the sample enables statistically credible conclusions to be formed.

The following tables show across the university (all students, all faculties) the number of "good" degrees awarded by ethnicity and then by gender.

2006/07 - 2009/10 data - all students, all faculties

Ethnicity	First	Upper second	Lower second	Third	Pass	Total
White	1104	3935	2694	485	435	8653
Black	26	263	402	128	69	888
Asian	186	1200	1729	497	203	3815
Chinese	16	126	222	87	31	482
Mixed	25	144	115	24	12	320
Other	3	51	56	22	7	139
Not known	32	168	152	50	26	428
Info refused	4	25	21	9	4	63
(blank)	0	1	1	1	0	3
Total	1396	5913	5392	1303	787	14791

Ethnicity	All degrees	Good degree	Proportion
White	8653	5039	58%
Black	888	289	33%
Asian	3815	1386	36%
Chinese	482	142	29%
Mixed	320	169	53%
Other	139	54	39%
Not known	428	200	47%
Info refused	63	29	46%
(blank)	3	1	33%
Total	14791	7309	49%

Gender	First	Upper second	Lower second	Third	Pass	Total
Female	817	3747	3086	647	417	8714
Male	579	2166	2306	656	370	6077
Total	1396	5913	5392	1303	787	14791

Gender	All degrees	Good degree	Proportion
Female	8714	4564	52%
Male	6077	2745	45%
Total	14791	7309	49%

Although some of the data had been aggregated up using HESA headings because of low numbers, **there is a clear suggestion that ethnic origin seems to be an indicator of degree classification. Gender also seems to be a statistically significant causal factor.** Generally female students achieve better than males and white students do best of all the ethnicity categories. Further statistical analysis (available separately) showed differences between the faculties as follows:

- For all faculties a significant difference in degree classifications exists between people in the different ethnic groups.
- For all faculties except HLS and TECH a significant difference in degree classifications also exists between male and female students.

Health and Life Sciences and Technology do not show significant differences, however this could well be due to the low proportion of males in Health and Life Sciences and the low proportion of females in Technology

Whilst these results do not claim to be comprehensive (they do not, for example include information about the level of qualifications on entry and thus the “distance travelled” by students), they do show clear differences in degree classification for different groupings. The RAEMS group is concerned with differences in attainment between the different ethnic groups and it therefore undertook a qualitative investigation using student focus groups in order to identify possible reasons for the substantive statistical differences identified.

4 A qualitative investigation into the BME student experience at DMU

In order to test whether the NUS report above found any echoes in the DMU student experience, two sets of focus groups were established. Two approaches were used to gather the views of students through focus groups: the first used faculty-based groups whilst the second used groups run through the student union. Different methods of collecting data were used with the different groups with the first using “facilitated group decision software” and the second using analysis of face-to-face conversations. Together this combination has meant that the data gathered is richer than a single source and method and helps add credence to the conclusions drawn and recommendations made.

Faculty-based focus groups.

Initially six cross faculty workshops with BME students were commissioned by the RAEMS group, of which 3 have been undertaken so far. The workshops recruited volunteers and are designed to: discuss the student’s experiences of learning and studying at DMU; understand these ideas in order to highlight the key issues of concern; and invite the students for their thoughts on how best to resolve, or learn from, these key issues that are surfaced- action orientated.

The prompt question used in the session was: “In what ways can DMU better help you achieve your expected level of academic performance?” Student feedback on the process was positive, with students commenting that “We felt that the questioning was unbiased and not leading” and “(the process) allowed us to discuss our experiences as a whole”

From the sessions that have taken place so far the Issues that have emerged are;

- Ethnicity as an explanatory variable tends NOT to emerge naturally from the wide range of student responses.
- Students needed to be prompted to discuss this.
- Once discussion was engaged, aspects relating to ethnicity and degree experience, did seem to be raised.
- Lack of will to take part – because as stakeholders they cannot change strategy/ policy in the university. Since the students are not empowered to affect decision-making, it can seem a hollow process for them.

In conclusion certain “dimensions” emerge that BME students feel impact on their degree attainment, these include the way that group work is used as a teaching tool and as a means of assessment, a perception of favouritism amongst academic staff towards certain groups of students, the absence or encouragement of identification with the university, and the need for the university to provide students with “a safe place to express their concerns”.

Student union based focus groups

One of the initial aims of the student union based focus groups was to find ways of listening to the student voice, especially the voice of ethnic minority students. The DSU facilitated this process by providing some initial contact details for key officers on several student societies including: the African-Caribbean Society, the Hindu Society, the Krishna Society, the Muslim Society and the Sikh Society. The societies were often seen as a space for social networking, an informal space that was determined by them; it was where they met their friends or others who they felt that they had something in common with. In addition to the DSU student society groups, it was decided to try and find other ways to listen to the authentic voice of students by initiating discussion groups. These were referred to as Black Students Discussion Groups.

Initiating and sustaining such groups can be very challenging; these groups demand time, as it takes a great deal of time to build confidence with students. Students are often circumspect of academics who claim to understand their situation. Students are often hesitant and reluctant to speak openly about their experiences in the presence of academic members of staff.

In the focus groups BME Students were asked to reflect on experiences at primary, secondary and tertiary education levels; in the discussion and in feedback, it became apparent that there were similar themes at all levels. These themes had consequences for students arriving in higher education; a continuation of discrimination that had pervaded a whole educational career and no visible or experiential challenge to the expectations, responses or stereotypes embedded in educational institutions. A second theme concerned the differences identified by students who had experienced educational institutions elsewhere

The difference was almost wholly negative within UK institutions, highlighting the degree of institutional racism embedded within UK educational systems. The BME students involved in the focus groups were positively engaged in their education and want to do better; they feel that the university has a role in changing the circumstances to enable them the opportunities to thrive. They have identified what they consider to be some initial steps toward change, these include recognition by the university of their specific issues and the provision of specific support & advocacy, the allocation of resources to address these including specific issues around the type and allocation of accommodation, more Black tutors as role models, and affirmative action to raise numbers of Black students.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

From the work of the RAEMS group to date the following conclusions and recommendations are made:

1. The RAEMS group's own statistical analysis shows that:
 - a. There is a clear suggestion that ethnic origin seems to be an indicator of degree classification. Gender also seems to be a statistically significant causal factor.
 - b. Generally female students achieve better than males and white students do best of all the ethnicity categories.
 - c. For all faculties a significant difference in degree classifications exists between people in the different ethnic groups.
 - d. For three faculties a significant difference in degree classifications also exists between people of different genders. Health and Life Sciences and Technology do not show significant differences, however this could be due to the low proportion of males in Health and Life Sciences and the low proportion of females in Technology
2. This is therefore a corporate issue that needs to be addressed positively: the current "colour-blind" approach has not rectified the situation. It is recommended that faculties and programme teams work to collect data that is statistically significant and to take affirmative action following an analysis of that data.
3. The university needs to recognise that it is an agent of change and should accept this responsibility positively, declaring it in all appropriate documentation including in the communications with the Office of Fair Access regarding support being made available to new undergraduates from 2012.
4. The university should take other actions to demonstrate it is positively addressing this issue including the promulgation of examples of good practice found internally combined with an institutional-wide plan to do more.
5. Allocation and deployment of resources – both physical and human – need to be geared towards addressing the issues raised in this report. It will be vital to

show that this is occurring in order to engender hope and to create a positive feeling of identity.

6. There is a need to recognise that BME students in particular often come to university with a series of experiences that mean they have a preconceived view of what to expect from organisations and authority. This needs to be included as part of staff awareness raising and any actions that are taken to address issues of discrimination need to be widely publicised in order to demonstrate that the university is serious in its intentions.
7. In addressing the issue of underachievement amongst BME students there is a need to have meaningful conversations with our students (and our staff) so that they feel that change will happen – feedback and progress reports are thus vital.
8. Issues of ‘belonging’ and ‘identity’ for all students are important factors in achievement and this research suggests that these are particularly important factors for BME students in order to counter feelings of isolation and being outside of the clique that are genuinely felt. The university needs to acknowledge and address this through all of its mechanisms, including staff awareness, marketing and publicity materials, timetable construction and provision of soft spaces for study and socialising.
9. The use of positive role models has been cited by students as a significant agent for change and this should be rolled out across all aspects of the university, perhaps in the form of mentors/coaches.

RAEMS group,
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