

Higher Education and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Students: Borderlands of Being and Becoming What Drives Them?

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Abstract

This paper will explore the idea of educating the BME population and try to question what drives education- “borders of power” or “borderlands of being and becoming”.

Black and minority ethnic students and their educational achievement has been researched for a while now and HEA (2012) report shows that there is a huge attainment gap between BME and white learners in the UK. This attainment gap is visible in higher education especially in the universities. According to the report the reason for this gap is social, economic and cultural.

Surprisingly research done by department of business innovation & skills (2015) shows that there has been an increase of BME participation in higher education, mainly in level 3, 4 and 5. The same report points out an increase of BME student population in level 3 upward and progression to Higher Education.

There is a sudden change in further and higher education demography which is visible from 2012. Students from BME background are increasingly taking up level 3, 4 and 5 courses. What is the reason? Is it the self-realisation to do something with their life or is it the favourable government funding policy of money for education?

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This research explores the increase in enrolment of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) student in higher education. Research by (Noden, Shiner and Modood, 2014) shows that there is an overall increase in enrolment and participation of BME students in university based traditional higher education. Recent research by (Smith, Joslin and Jameson, 2015, p. 9) shows that there is an increase of BTEC students from 22% in 2007-08 to 44% in 2011-12. This shows an increase in enrolment of student who wants to get a first degree following the non-traditional route.

Student finance England (SFE) from September 2012 started funding Level 4 and Level 5 other undergraduate (OUG) courses. Students applying for BTEC Higher national certificates and diplomas was given the opportunity to access student loan. This shift in policy from the UK government saw a sudden surge in numbers of applicants who want to do BTEC level 4 and 5. According to Smith, Joslin and Jameson (2015, p.9) there is an increase of number of students in BTEC from 22% in 2007-08 to 41% in 2011-12. This can be attributed to change of government policy in regards to student finance of OUG courses.

This change in UK government policy also so more mature students enrolling in OUG programmes delivered by Further Education /Higher Education (FE/HE) colleges (Smith, Joslin and Jameson, 2015, p.10). BME students accounted for majority of those who took up these courses delivered by FE/HE colleges. In St. Patrick's college, London 84% of the students identified themselves as BME. My research was based in this same HE college that I teach in School of Health and Social care.

I have been lecturing in St. Patrick's college since October 2012 just about the same time as the funding for OUG started by the UK government. Prior to 2012 St. Patrick's college focussed on international students and that made the crux of their student base. Changes to immigration rules which made it difficult for foreign students to come in the UK for education impacted FE/HE colleges and many ceased to exist. St. Patrick's college at this point ventured in domestic market and joined the bandwagon to deliver HNC and HND to home students who were helped by the student finance to get into education and get their first degree.

Students who enrolled for the HND courses came from London and surrounding areas. Most of these students (84%) identified themselves as BME and around 72% are women. This demography is quite interesting as it differs a lot from the traditional undergraduate demography. The age statistics show some interesting differences when a comparison is done between OUG and traditional undergraduate students. 88% under 20 years, 74% 20-24 years and 49% 25+ (Smith, Joslin and Jameson, 2015, p.51) years took traditional first degree route while in OUG courses 96% were 25+ years and only 4% under 25 years.

This statistics gives an interesting insight into student demography of the FE/HE colleges delivering HNC/HND courses. The statistics tells us that the students in OUG and in traditional undergraduate have different stories and different circumstances. Student's following the traditional route to graduation mostly had a steady educational achievement graph whereas it differs for students in OUG's.

To find out what actually drives students enrolled in HND courses in St. Patrick's college I did a small survey with a sample of 17 students studying health and social care. They were asked to answer a questionnaire comprising 10 questions ranging from- why did they take up the course? How the student loan and grant help them? What do they think about the government funding for HNC/HND? Would you have done a course without funding? and such.

Social justice can be defined as “the equal distribution of resources and opportunities, in which outside factors that categorise people are irrelevant” (Pachamama, n.d). Looking at the definition of social justice we can understand that equal opportunities is one of the major tenets of the same. I am trying to establish a relationship between the government policy of funding OUG courses and trying to achieve social justice. As we have seen above that the UK government's decision to fund HNC and HND courses saw an exponential increase of learners enrolling. This also highlighted the fact that most of these new learners come from the BME background especially from the black African and Caribbean communities.

Why this increase and why from these communities and why from 25+ age group? As stated earlier I conducted a small questionnaire based research on a sample size of 17 learners. The findings from that questionnaire showed that government policy of funding HND and HNC definitely helped a lot of learners to think about continuing studies and motivated them to start from where they left off. Learners at St. Patrick's college who took part in this research that the funding helped them to believe that they can get a degree at a university which was difficult for them as they didn't had enough credits in A level to follow the traditional route.

The learners also discussed how student loan and the maintenance grant helped them to get back into education. The funding also helped to take up full time education and reduce their working hours or leaving it completely. Some of the students also said now they can concentrate on education and career as the grant will be helping them to take care of childcare. Few of the learners said that the student loan made it easy for them to get an education as they couldn't afford to self-fund their education even if they wanted to.

When asked these students how this education going to help them. The answers sounded quite familiar, they are similar to what any university student will tell you when asked. The students said that they wanted to do something with their life, get a job or better job, get more knowledge that they can use at work. They also said that they think this is now their time to do something for themselves as now their children are grown up. They also said that they want to go to university to complete a degree.

The students were asked why they didn't do any similar courses before and 88% of the sample said that it was due to lack of funding. They said they wanted to do similar courses or other courses that would have helped them to get a better job. They couldn't do the courses as they didn't had the financial resources or support. They said without the financial support from the government they couldn't think about getting their first degree. 12% of the students said that they couldn't do any courses before as paying for childcare was an issue as they couldn't afford it.

The learners through the questionnaire and formal discussion expressed the view that it would have been difficult to do this course without the loan. They said that their aspirations, goals would have been a dream and their careers would have been stagnant. Student's also said that the course have helped them to get promotion at their workplace. Students who have left education at an early age said that the student loan for OUG has helped them to get back into education.

From September 2016 government changed their funding policy for higher education including OUG courses. The maintenance grant which students get will be changed from September 2016 to a loan component. This will affect student's financial liability and their monthly loan repayment. When asked students as in whether they would have done this course if the maintenance grant was changed to loan. Most of them said no, as they had to pay back more and it will affect financial wellbeing.

Why did the UK Government start funding OUG? Was it to give learners from disadvantaged backgrounds a fair chance and access to education? Was it to make up numbers to show that BME students are faring well as well? Was it a short term goal to get people off benefit and give them some skills? Why this change in funding policies? How will it affect BME students and their achievement? Will this affect their dreams and aspirations? Will social justice be achieved through education? How will the government achieve it?

References

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