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# 'Race' and 'ethnicity' in adult education: issues of power and diversity

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The last decade has seen an increase in the number of Black students of African, Asian and Caribbean descent entering Further (FEIs) and Higher Education (HEIs) institutions. The percentage of Black students entering HEIs has steadily increased from 8.5% in 1991-1992 to 9.8% in 1993-1994 (UCCA 1992, UCAS 1994, 1995). This increase has been built on the success of the Black Access programmes in FE colleges; the Community Education programmes and Literacy Campaigns; the recognition and implementation of Accreditation of Prior Learning Experiences in HEIs; the creation of flexible modes of learning, teaching and assessment in HEIs; and the implementation of positive action programmes by HEIs to widen the cultural diversity of students and to increase the intake of mature students with non-standard entry qualifications. The increase in Black students in HEIs has brought new challenges which require HEIs to review their policies and practices in order to address the issues of institutional racism and to meet the needs of a dynamic and culturally diverse student intake.

The strategy of increasing access and participation of working-class, women, and Black students, and other groups that have been previously denied the opportunity to study in HEIs, is a welcome development. However widening access also means that HEIs need to have a commitment to meeting the needs of a culturally diverse student intake. A leading Black educationist, Petronella Breinberg (1987) suggests that 'Black people while welcoming the increase in access and participation of Black students, are however, more concerned with what happens when Black students enter HEIs'. The experiences of Black students in HE is frequently characterised by lack of quality treatment or of equality of treatment (Bird 1996). Many HEIs pride themselves over the numbers of Black students they recruit and the cultural, racial, and sexual diversity of their student intake. However, 'many have not acknowledged, recognised or responded positively to the many challenges that Black students bring to HEIs'. It is the teaching staff, the personal tutors and supervisors, those people at the front line of the profession, who are left to deal with the academic and cultural demands of Black students, and they are being asked to deal with it with limited training, resources and staff, and to deal with it the best way they can.

This raises issues of power, and who holds power within

the HEIs and within each learning environment, how that power is used, and how the use of that power affects the attitudes, perceptions and performance of Black students. The debate on increasing access to Black students also raises issues about knowledge, what knowledge and whose knowledge is taught in HEIs. Black students bring a diverse range of historical traditions, ontological positions, cultures, languages, values, and belief systems to HEIs. To what extent are these incorporated in most course structures? These are some of the questions that will be raised in this short paper. These questions become more relevant when viewed in the context of the fact that the majority of teaching staff in HEIs are still predominantly white, male and middle class.

## Research methods

In the design of the research, it was planned that 25 white academic staff and 100 Black students from London, Sheffield, Manchester and Huddersfield HEIs would be interviewed. This was slightly ambitious given the time constraints, so what appears here is part of a larger on-going study to be completed at a later date. So far only eight white academic staff were interviewed. The small sample reflects the small number of staff with direct experience of teaching or supervising Black students. A structured interview schedule was designed. Thirty-two questionnaires were completed by Black students, 18 were face to face interviews and 14 were completed by students themselves. The gender balance was 18 males and 14 females, 28 were undergraduate and four were post-graduate students. In terms of age group 29 were mature students over 21 years of age and three were under 21 years of age. Seven students had entered their courses as mature students after gaining work experience. Seventy percent of the students interviewed were pursuing their respective courses for career reasons, they saw education as giving them better opportunities to secure employment, and enhancing their career prospects. Most of the students interviewed preferred to be called Black rather than any other term, because this term expressed their *collective experiences of racism* in the UK. While the authors of this paper recognise that different ethnic groups have different education needs, however, in line with many other studies (Bird 1995; Foster 1990; Leicester and Taylor 1992; Moodley, 1995; Showunmi and Constantine-Simms 1996). All the Black students interviewed had

direct experience of racism in the education system, and that from their experience racism applied to all them irrespective of their ethnic background.

There is a growing amount of debate and controversy concerning research on Black communities (Foster 1990; Leicester and Taylor 1992; Bird 1995; Moodley 1995; Showunmi and Constantine-Simms 1996). This debate raises a range of ethical and political issues, whether research on Black communities should be occurring at all? If so who should fund such research? Who should be carrying out such research? We were conscious of the fact that Black students may be feeling, 'Oh no! Not another research study on us, again...'. The research was conducted by four HE practitioners, three are Black and one is white. As much as possible, the research is written from a Black perspective, and emphasis was put ensuring that the voices of Black students were heard. All the researchers are members of the Multicultural Group within SCUTREA which exists to address these issues and to ensure that the voices of Black practitioners, students and communities are recorded and published.

#### **The barriers to equality of opportunity**

Students were asked to describe their experiences within the school, FE and HE sector and to highlight specific incidences they felt were pertinent to their learning. Over 75% of all the Black students who were interviewed expressed negative school experiences, where teachers and Careers officers were not expecting them to pass their GCSE and A Levels and proceed to University, where they were encouraged to take up sports, placed in lower streams and non-exam classes etc, (Rampton 1981; Scarman 1982; Swann 1986; Eggleston 1986) as illustrated by the comment of this student:

When I told my Careers Officer that I wanted to go to University, he looked at me in complete and utter amazement, as if to say — are you sure you are all right? (Female: third year English Studies student)

Students still talk with anger and bitter regret when they recalled their past school experiences:

My general experience in the education system .... (pauses and thinks for a while) ... you see the thing is that teachers and lecturers did not give me enough attention, they did not understand my cultural and academic needs, I just was not taken seriously. It's like I was there just to fill in the numbers, but my history, my cultural background, my language, and my whole being as a Black young person growing up in Britain was seen as insignificant. I know its sounds odd to say this, but it is very painful to be present in those situations and yet be invisible. It is a very painful experience, considering the effort it takes for a Black student to jump all the hurdles of schooling just to get to University. (Male: second year Social Science student)

Fifty percent of students found that even where the school curriculum tried to address the experiences of Black people in Britain and the world, the subject

content was very shallow, that it was taught from a Eurocentric perspective, and that the knowledge and experiences of Black students in class or Black people with such knowledge within the community were not utilised. As a result most students saw these lessons as *marginal, not important, and not subject to the same academic rigor as other subject areas*. For example, three students: *found it quite frustrating to study A Level British History with limited exploration of the exploitation of Black people and their contribution to the British economy*.

This view was confirmed by white lecturers who identified a range of problems faced by Black students in HE. These included:

... negative experiences of previous schooling (particularly in terms of low teacher expectations), difficulties in discovering themselves or their identities owing to curricula being insufficiently inclusive of their cultural, social and historical background, and racism both from academic staff within HE and within placement organisations.

Some students saw the problems they experienced as emanating from the structural changes in the funding arrangements brought by the HEFC:

At the University there is very little time when tutors have one-to-one relationship with students. In some cases the personal tutorial system has been completely cut off. This has created difficulties for Black students who would have benefited from the support and guidance that the personal tutorial system used to offer. This also would be a time when Black students would voice their problems and share their experiences, and at times would change the tutor's attitude and behaviour in the way they viewed and treated Black students. That opportunity has been lost. (Male: third year Computing Studies student)

One of the major barriers to equality of opportunity in HEIs for Black students is the pervasive nature of institutional racism. Whilst most HEIs have Equal Opportunities policies, however the experiences of Black students show that racism exists in its most subtle forms. Sometimes the language of HEIs mission statements gives the impression that there is no problem of racism, and therefore it is not a serious topic of debate. After all how can liberal institutions discriminate when liberals do not, by self definition, discriminate? (Bird 1995). The reality for Black students is that covert racism is a common feature of their life, and that this makes it difficult to tackle racism, as the comment of this student suggests:

The racism in this institution is very subtle. Sometimes the racism I am talking about is not even apparent to some Black students. It is certainly not always apparent to white students or lecturers. At times when you mention that you have experienced racism, white friends and lecturers turn round and look surprised as if to say, how could you say such a thing, when we have been with you most of the time and we have not seen you experiencing racism.

That's how subtle that racism is. As a result to be honest some Black students don't bother to raise issues of racism because it appears that you are just nit-picking and being petty. (Female: first year mature student: Science course)

Most Black students commented that the racism that they experienced on a day-to-day basis was being marginalised not only by white academics but by the liberal ethos in most HEIs that makes it difficult for both staff and students to discuss the issues of unequal treatment of Black students (Dorn 1991).

One area of general misunderstanding was when white female staff tried to make connections between racism and other forms of oppression, and in particular sexism. Interviews with white staff showed that several had introduced the issue of gender, perhaps an inequality of which they had more direct understanding or experience. One male respondent found that issues of sexuality presented more difficulties than issues of racism. There was indication that white women staff attempted to use their understanding of gender and experience of sexism to try to understand and raise the issue of racism. Black students on the other hand whilst acknowledging the relevance of finding common threads in other forms of oppression, they felt that sometimes white feminists did this to minimise issues of racism under discussion:

White female lecturers talk about solidarity between feminists and anti-racists, I am not quite sure whether they are serious about this or just playing a game. I do not want someone to come and empathise with my plight and yet they do not challenge the racist and sexist practices that pervade the institution. Why is it that I am the only Black woman on the course, and why is it that all the research students in this department are white? This is no coincidence you know, and where is the solidarity there? The way I look at it, solidarity has to be put in practice, we cannot say one thing and yet be seen to be doing nothing about some of the oppressive practices that Black students have to put up with in these institutions. (Female: third year Women Studies course)

This view was reinforced by another female student in a different course. This leads us to believe that these views are not isolated incidences, but are common experiences of Black students in most courses.

What I found at times very upsetting and frustrating was that whenever there was a heavy discussion about the experiences of Black students or Black people in general with white female lecturers, invariably that subject would be quickly switched to a related or distant issue on gender or sexism. I am a positive Black woman, I know that sexism pervades most of these institutions. Issues of gender and sexism are very closely linked, but I strongly object to the way that debates or discussions on racism tend to be high-jacked and thus marginalised, and yet issues of racism are very important to all Black students. (Female: third year Social Science course)

One of the constant themes mentioned by Black

students and white staff is the need for HEIs to employ more Black staff. A statement made by one student summarises the feeling that the majority of the Black students felt.

Universities from my experience are a facade of neutrality in dealing with the racial inequalities. Firstly, there are far too few Black academics on the teaching staff. White teachers learn about racism from text books, they don't live it, they hear and read about it. This is very frustrating as it leaves (once again) little room for the experiences of Black students to be brought into the debate.

It is over the attitudes and behaviour of white staff that Black students were most vociferous. This varied from not being taken seriously as students to having no Black expression within the curriculum. The theme of limited understanding and in some cases total lack of sensitivity of Black experience and reality ran through all the responses. Most Black students felt that white lecturers *were playing a game* with anti-racism, they were not convinced that most white academic staff fully understand the nature, extent and negative effects that racism had on Black students, as illustrated by the comments of the following student:

I cannot count how many times I have sat in lectures or seminars and heard white lecturers talking and lecturing about racism and yet they themselves are act in a racist manner and are unable to deal with or confront their own racism. (Male: third year: Humanities)

Frankly I am sick and tired of being told that I should act like any other student in this institution by white staff who don't understand what I am going through. I am not asking for favours, but when I have a legitimate request for something that I feel is culturally relevant to me and I am entitled to, lecturers should not accuse me of wanting special treatment. I don't want special treatment, all I want is that my point of view is heard and that my request is acknowledged, that is all. (Female: first year: Economics)

They did not express their racist comments in my presence, and that was very hypocritical of them. But some white students told me of racists statements made about myself or other Black students in my absence. Some comments made by lecturers suggested that my presence on the course was not particularly welcomed. That's how it makes you feel. (Female: second year: Business Studies)

There were frequent references to racist attitudes and practices by white lecturers, over 50% cited having racist lecturers and in four cases there were verbal and physical confrontations with staff, and Black students saw these confrontations not as isolated incidents but as everyday occurrences:

While lecturers think of racism as an academic subject, to them it's another theoretical concept to be analysed and deconstructed, there is nothing wrong with that. But the difference here is that we live it and experience it everyday, it is not just a

theoretical concept that appears in and reappears in lectures and seminars. We live it daily. When sometime we remind those lecturers that what they have just said or done is racist by definition if not by intent, they become very sensitive. They forget that they cannot be immune from the history of imperialism, colonialism, slavery, etc. That needs to be acknowledged, otherwise they will never realise the amount of racism that has been passed on to them by accident of history. (Male: Post-graduate: Social Work course).

White lecturers working in a range of contexts in HE institutions were asked about their experience of working with Black students. The lecturers' work included dissertation supervision, lecturing, placement supervision and acting as personal and course tutors. Only a quarter of respondents had had any anti-racist training and none had been provided by their current HE employers. One had received training *once or twice in ten years, but issues of race became difficult in the staff team*. A second had been responsible himself for *setting up a useful anti-racist training session*. However, others had received training when working in FE or youth and community work. Opinions concerning appropriate responses to issues of racism extended along a continuum from assimilation through integration to pluralism. The curriculum itself was seen to be Eurocentric and the contribution of Black people to world development usually ignored completely or scant references were made to this. One lecturer stated, *I think Black students should be treated like any other students*, and added, *I believe that any special treatment solely for Black students would be counter productive and perhaps risk creating resentment where none previously existed*. However another suggested, *in teacher training there's no recognition that Black students are being trained for a different job to white students* and explored how courses could be designed to address the issue. Students therefore encounter not only academics who consider an assimilationist approach to be successful and desirable but also those who believe there is potential for a radical pluralist approach to course design and, indeed, to the epistemologies underpinning courses. This latter approach would serve to redress the current cultural construction of HE, identified by one white lecturer as *unwelcoming to Black students and communicating the message that they were there as a concession rather than as a right*.

Students were asked if there were issues of racism that they experienced in doing their dissertations and essays, and for 21 students lack of Black authors on most of their reading lists was a big issue, and in many cases Black students thought that *the white lecturers did not even think this was an issue*. For nine students the fact that many of the essays they had to write had nothing to do with Black experiences itself showed the lack of understanding and lack of sensitivity of the white academic community towards the concerns and indeed academic needs of Black students. The issue of dissertations was felt very strongly by third year and post-graduate students, who felt that they were not given

a choice of a supervisor, and that in most cases they would have preferred a Black supervisor. Most students found that their white supervisor had limited knowledge and understanding of Black history, and that they found themselves educating the white professional, a view expressed by one third Year student:

I am here to learn, and of course to share my own experiences too, but when you find yourself with a supervisor who has not got a clue of Black issues, and you are spending most of your valuable time in tutorials educating this tutor, I feel used and exploited. What makes me mad is that at times I myself am not sure of those issues too, and would really need someone to challenge or extend my knowledge.

Staff, meanwhile, were wary of challenging Black students for fear of accusations of racism. When dealing with certain aspects of students' performance and of the curriculum, white lecturers encountered a degree of resistance from some Black students, rooted in 'white/Black dynamics of mistrust'. This, it was suggested, could be exploited by some Black students; *if a white university is part of the problem, I don't need to explore why I am not learning or making progress*. For example, one respondent met resistance to a critical analysis of Black history including *a strong reaction to any criticism of African countries' human rights records*. For two students there were issues of racism in their work placements which were not dealt with by the academic staff. In one of these cases the student felt that they were,

being treated as guinea pigs by the lecturer as the lecturer only observed my reactions without providing support or challenging racism, they made copious notes as I spoke but nothing came out of it in the end.

For three students they felt that they had been placed in public sector institutions and yet white students usually had a choice between public and private sectors. The HEIs concerned did not challenge these racist practices, and as such were seen by these Black students to be colluding with the racist practices prevalent in the private sector. Another issue was that the treatment of Black students in seminars, for some students they felt that when it came to seminars and group work white tutors spent more time talking, listening and explaining to white students than Black students. During group work white lectures spent very little time or even missed out groups made up of Black students, and according to this student — *they don't even realise that they are doing it*. Another major issue raised by Black students was the feeling of being the lone Black student in courses, and the feeling of isolation, not having anyone nearby for support or to share experiences.

One the most frequently mentioned areas of contention for Black students was the issue of the Eurocentric curriculum, as illustrated by this student:

Firstly, I think it is absolutely crucial that all courses should re-examine the curriculum they offer to students at University. These courses should have

relevance to Black students. I am currently in my second year at the University and since I came here, I have not had the opportunity, that for example some women students have had with Women Studies modules, to have the opportunity to study modules that deal exclusively with issues affecting Black people. Secondly, we must have more Black academics, there is very few Black lecturers at Universities if any in some cases, and this cannot be good for Black students, it is a real problem indicative of the invidious nature of racism in our society. Universities are neither above or beyond society and its problems. (Female: second year: English Studies)

### Conclusion

What comes out very strongly in this study is that both FEIs and HEIs are seen by Black students to be failing to find effective ways of addressing issues of racism, there was a *culture of arrogance* which seemed to overlook the immense contributions that Black people have made and continue to make in all aspects of British life. Black students need to feel that their presence is acknowledged and that they are given adequate support once they are there.

There should be a structure in place for Black student support, a structure that includes support from both white and Black lecturers. (Male: third year: Legal Studies)

In their view there should be a radical re-examination of the curriculum and course content of all course:

There should be an expansion of the curriculum so as to include more coverage of Black issues in specific areas, for example, in the politics or law modules there could be coverage of political or legal systems of African, Caribbean and Asian countries. (Male: third year: Legal Studies)

HEIs should look at their employment practices and recruit more Black staff because:

It would also be very helpful if the Universities could employ more Black staff, who would be positive role models and mentors for Black students, offering culturally relevant support. (Male: third year: Legal Studies)

Current policies and practice underpinning HEIs need to be redefined and reshaped to take into account the ontological perspectives and pedagogical realities of students of African, Asian and Caribbean descent. This is major challenge ahead and HEIs need to take this issue on board, otherwise Black students and white tutors will be left to battle it out in the front-line with no winner at the end but a large number of Black students leaving HEIs with a negative learning experience which may adversely affect the numbers of Black students that participate in adult education. At the moment the numbers of Black students taking up HE courses is on the increase, the appropriate responses from HEIs and the predominantly white academic staff is long overdue.

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