Ethnicity and Degree Attainment: Developing a Sophisticated Measurement Tool

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Introduction

Concerns over the relationship between ethnicity and degree attainment have led to allegations of institutional racism in higher education (HE). The statistics imply that non-White groups fare less well than their White counterparts but these statistics may be misleading. INSPIRE is exploring the nature of the Government's categorisation of ethnic groups to determine whether they are 'fit for purpose' in an HE context. The figures used in this project are those for our University's statistical return to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the 2006/7 academic year.

Background

At a sectoral level, the experience of non-White students in HE appears to be negative. As Bhattacharyya points out:

"London Metropolitan University has more African-Caribbean students than the whole of the Russell Group put together…it seems that, for most people, it continues the informal racial separation that exists in other areas of society"

(Bhattacharyya, 2006, online)

Despite this, numbers of Black students are rising (cf. Andalo, 2007), although, as Lipsett (2008), referring to the recent joint report from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) reminds us, 'ethnic minority students [are] still underachieving' (2008, online).

Two of the HEA/ECU recommendations are that:

- There is a need to ensure that the valuable information gained from data sources, such as management information systems, are used as a means of reflective institutional analysis and action planning, ideally through impact assessment. The loop between data collection, data analysis and action planning must be closed
- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to implement systems that can evaluate, review and design teaching, learning and assessment activities in light of data on degree attainment variation

(HEA/ECU, 2008, online)

INSPIRE's project aims to provide a means of ensuring that the data collected by our University concerning student ethnicity is used in the most informative and effective ways possible to better inform any staff development and curriculum design that might be necessary.

Current Position
Ethnicity

INSPIRE is at the beginning of the project and is in the process of defining the core concepts involved. Defining the concept of ethnicity has proven to be more complicated than had been envisaged. HESA has based its ethnic categories on those used in the 2001 Census:

- White
- White – British
- White – Irish
- White – Scottish
- Irish Traveller
- Other White background
- Black or Black British – Caribbean
- Black or Black British – African
- Other Black background
- Asian or Asian British – Indian
- Asian or Asian British – Pakistani
- Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Other Asian background
- Mixed – White and Black Caribbean
- Mixed – White and Black African
- Mixed – White and Asian
- Other Mixed background
- Other Ethnic background
- Not known
- Information refused

The ethnic mix at our University is shown in the table below. The largest single group is 'White – British', which accounts for two-thirds (66.9%) of our University's student body. Cumulatively, 'White' ethnic groups (i.e. 'White', White – British', 'White – Irish', 'White – Scottish', and 'White – Other') make up three-quarters (76.3%). One in five students at our University, therefore, are not White. The following table shows the cumulative ethnic categories:

Ethnic Group	Count	% age
White	18294	76.3
Black	1887	7.9
Asian	1792	7.4
Mixed	637	2.7
Other	520	2.2
Total non-White	**4316**	**20.2**
Not known	45	0.2
Information refused	790	3.3
Total	**23695**[1]	

All discussions surrounding ethnicity are focused on these broad categories. These definitions are, however, somewhat problematic, as they are highly Anglo-centric and primarily based on skin colour. Groups such as 'Black or Black British' and 'Asian or Asian British' conflate distinct groups of people, as does 'Other White' (see below). A British-born Indian is culturally different to an Indian who has travelled to England to study and then returns to India. Similarly, a British-born African is different to an African-born African, and so on.

To complicate matters further, our University has:

- 23,970 students; studying in
- 5 Faculties; located in
- 2 Core UK Campuses; and
- Regional Partners; with
- Courses delivered in Europe, Trinidad and Malaysia (x 2)

The experience of a student who ticks a box on our University's ethnic monitoring form indicating that he or she is 'Black or Black British – Caribbean' may have a different experience depending on any of these factors. To describe the experience of 'Caribbean' students at our University in universal terms is clearly problematic.

Furthermore, despite the increased subdivision of ethnic categories in the 2001 Census, large segments of the population remain unrepresented and unable to effectively indicate their ethnicity. For example, Demopoulos describes how:

"[Tyrer and Ahmad] found that some Muslim women said that they felt discriminated against even on ethnic monitoring forms and said universities should review the categories used."

"Latifa, a 20-year-old student of Arab and Islamic studies who comes from a Moroccan-English background, said in her experience that university ethnic monitoring forms never had a box for 'Arab'."

"'It's really weird 'cause I have to tick the "Mixed" one or the "Other", d'you know what I mean? It's like "Reject". The only box I tick ever is "Other" or "Mixed", and then I just write, there's no space to write it but I just write what I am 'cause I never really know what to tick.'"

(Demopoulos, 2006, online)

It follows, therefore, that the current categories for ethnicity can only be perceived as a blunt object and a more sophisticated measuring tool is required to unpack these broad groups into more clearly focused clusters which actually do share common characteristics.

The first step in this process was to combine ethnicity with nationality to determine how the ethnic categories are comprised. One clear example of the diversity of the current ethnic categories is 'Other White background', for example, which contains 1881 individuals from 78 different countries. This category also includes 155 people from the United Kingdom who did not feel that British, Irish or Scottish addressed their own definition of ethnicity.

The countries with the highest representation in this category at our University are primarily, although not exclusively, European:

Country	n
Germany	386
France	218
Spain	110
Poland	96
Greece	86
Italy	76
Israel	64
United States	61
Hungary	55
Cyprus	44
Netherlands	36
Australia	32
Denmark	30
Sweden	29
South Africa	26

It is unlikely that people from so many different countries can share sufficient cultural characteristics to be contained within a single group.

Another finding from the combination of ethnicity and nationality involves people from the Philippines, who, in terms of ethnicity, are remarkable in that 210 of the 212 students at our University place themselves in 'Other' groups[2]:

Ethnicity	n	%
Other White background	1	0.5
Other Black background	27	12.9
Other Asian background	163	77.6
Other Ethnic background	19	9.0
Total	**210**	

While ethnicity combined with nationality demonstrates how current ethnic categories conflate diverse nationalities, this may not, in itself, explain differences in the outcome of a period of study at a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI). One of INSPIRE's hypotheses is that exposure to different (i.e. non-UK) education systems may impact on a student's ability to effectively engage with the UK Higher Education (HE) system, and nationality does not indicate whether a student has been resident in the UK or not. Consequently, ethnicity is being combined with domicile (the country of residence of a student immediately prior to registration), which may indicate the level of any prior engagement with the UK education system. Similarly, as noted above, Anglia Ruskin delivers courses in a number of geographically distant and diverse locations. Ethnicity is also being combined with location (i.e. core, region, overseas, Faculty) to determine whether this may influence differences in outcome.

Degree Attainment
In line with other similar external projects, the title of the project refers to 'degree attainment'. However, this only refers to one of a number of possible exit routes of our students, and it refers to students following an undergraduate degree programme in particular. Other types of students on other types of courses are, by definition, excluded from consideration. This project, therefore, explores how student ethnicity interacts with all exit routes from our University. These are:

Reason for Leaving Institution/Completing Programme
- Successful completion of course
- Academic failure/left in bad standing/not permitted to progress
- Transferred to another institution
- Health reasons
- Death
- Financial reasons
- Other personal reasons and dropped out
- Written off after lapse of time
- Exclusion
- Gone into employment
- Other

These categories are defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), and all HE Institutions (HEIs) are required to submit the numbers of students in each category. The final category of 'Other' is currently under review at our University to provide a richer understanding of the reasons why some of our students decide to leave.

Until the new tool is available, the following table shows student numbers of the 'Reason for Leaving' within each of the current ethnicity categories.

A striking example of the differences between ethnic groups is highlighted by the figures for the 'White-British' and the various 'Black or Black British' groups under the headings of 'successful completion of course' and 'academic failure/left in bad standing/not permitted to progress'. Those students in the 'Black' groups are up to 8% less likely to successfully complete their course and as much as four times more likely to fail. These figures are of sufficient magnitude to warrant the further investigation that this project is undertaking.

Handout 1: Reasons for Leaving by Ethnicity

		Successful completion of course	Academic failure	Transferred to another institution	Health reasons	Death	Financial reasons	Other personal reasons and dropped out	Written off after lapse of time	Exclusion	Gone into employment	Other	Unknown	Total
White	n	27	2									11		40
	%	67.5%	5.0%									27.5%		100%
White - British	n	4946	209	57	92	2	42	35	10	10	130	552	3	6088
	%	81.2%	3.4%	0.9%	1.5%		0.7%	0.6%	0.2%	0.2%	2.1%	9.1%	0.0%	100%
White - Irish	n	104	3		1		1	1			2	13		125
	%	83.2%	2.4%		0.8%		0.8%	0.8%			1.6%	10.4%		100%
White - Scottish	n	8												8
	%	100%												100%
Other White Background	n	746	19	8	4		7	3	1	1	3	38		830
	%	89.9%	2.3%	1.0%	0.5%		0.8%	0.4%	0.1%	0.1%	0.4%	4.6%		100%
Black or Black British - Caribbean	n	147	29	2	2	1	2		1	3	1	4		192
	%	76.6%	15.1%	1.0%	1.0%	0.5%	1.0%		0.5%	1.6%	0.5%	2.1%		100%
Black or Black British - African	n	288	43	2	4		5	2		3	2	40		389
	%	74.0%	11.1%	0.5%	1.0%		1.3%	0.5%		0.8%	0.5%	10.3%		100%
Other Black Background	n	24	3		1					1		1		30
	%	80.0%	10.0%		3.3%					3.3%		3.3%		100%
Asian or Asian British - Indian	n	173	16	1		1	1			1	1	7		201
	%	86.1%	8.0%	0.5%		0.5%	0.5%			0.5%	0.5%	3.5%		100%
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	n	42	7	1	3		1			1		3		58
	%	72.4%	12.1%	1.7%	5.2%		1.7%			1.7%		5.2%		100%
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	n	25			1			1				4		31
	%	80.6%			3.2%			3.2%				12.9%		100%
Chinese	n	235	8	3	1						2	8		257
	%	91.4%	3.1%	1.2%	0.4%						0.8%	3.1%		100%
Other Asian Background	n	171	15		1		1	1		1		20		210
	%	81.4%	7.1%		0.5%		0.5%	0.5%		0.5%		9.5%		100%
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	n	15	4		1		2			1				23
	%	65.2%	17.4%		4.3%		8.7%			4.3%				100%
Mixed - White and Black African	n	10	2	1								2		15
	%	66.7%	13.3%	6.7%								13.3%		100%
Mixed White and Asian	n	23	3	1			2				1	2		32
	%	71.9%	9.4%	3.1%			6.3%				3.1%	6.3%		100%
Other Mixed background	n	110	22							1	2	3		138
	%	79.7%	15.9%							0.7%	1.4%	2.2%		100%
Other Ethnic background	n	149	7		1	1	2	1		2		5		168
	%	88.7%	4.2%		0.6%	0.6%	1.2%	0.6%		1.2%		3.0%		100%
Not Known	n	12					1			3		1		17
	%	70.6%					5.9%			17.6%		5.9%		100%
Information refused	n	304	20	5	4		4			5	3	30		375
	%	81.1%	5.3%	1.3%	1.1%		1.1%			1.3%	0.8%	8.0%		100%
Total	n	7559	412	81	116	5	71	44	12	33	147	744	3	9227
	%	81.9%	4.5%	0.9%	1.3%	0.1%	0.8%	0.5%	0.1%	0.4%	1.6%	8.1%	0.0%	100%

It is important to note that the category 'successful completion of course' refers to all students who receive a formal award at the end of their period of study. The HESA definition of this category states that:

"If a student gains a qualification after completing a programme of study, but not the qualification they were aiming for, then they should be coded…as 01 'Successful completion of course'. If the student does not complete a programme of study but leaves early with a lower qualification then a different code should be used, such as 07 ['Other personal reasons and dropped out'] or 10 ['Gone into employment'] or whatever is most appropriate to the student's circumstances, including 'inability to progress', which should be coded as 02 'Academic failure/left in bad standing/not permitted to progress' or 11 'Other'."

<div align="right">(HESA, 2008, online)</div>

Thus, this category includes, for example, students who originally registered for a BA and graduate with Undergraduate Credits. It also includes those who leave with higher qualifications than originally intended. This category will, therefore, be subject to more detailed examination to determine whether any ethnic groups are more or less prone to fall into any particular area.

Undergraduate degree classification is generally used as the 'acid test' of university performance. HESA only keep records of the classification of undergraduate degrees, and so the grading of other courses is unavailable for study. Of the various classifications of undergraduate degree defined by HESA, the ones used at Anglia Ruskin in the 2006/7 academic year are:

- First class honours
- Upper second class honours
- Lower second class honours
- Third class honours
- Pass – degree awarded without honours following an honours course
- Ordinary (to include divisions of ordinary, if any) – degree awarded after following a non-honours course

Using the current ethnic categories for illustration purposes, the following table shows how many students in each of the ethnic groups achieved each of the undergraduate degree classifications.

As with the previous table, the figures for the 'White-British' and the various 'Black or Black British' groups show marked differences. A higher proportion of 'White-British' students were awarded first class degrees and students in the 'Black' groups appeared in greater proportions in the lower classifications (i.e. lower second class and third class). Although the actual numbers of students in the 'Black' groups are quite small, the differences in the proportions are significant enough to be of concern.

Handout 2: Undergraduate Degree Classification by Ethnicity

		First	2.1	2.2	Third	Pass	Total
White	n			1		1	2
	%			50.0%		50.0%	100%
White - British	n	215	678	488	59	85	1525
	%	14.1%	44.4%	32.0%	3.9%	5.6%	100%
White - Irish	n	2	12	6	1		21
	%	9.5%	57.1%	28.6%	4.8%		100%
White - Scottish	n	1	2	4		1	8
	%	12.5%	25.0%	50.0%		12.5%	100%
Other White background	n	53	109	88	16	12	278
	%	19.1%	39.2%	31.7%	5.8%	4.3%	100%
Black or Black British - Caribbean	n	2	42	40	6	12	102
	%	2.0%	41.2%	39.2%	5.9%	11.8%	100%
Black or Black British - African	n	4	18	21	6	4	53
	%	7.5%	34.0%	39.6%	11.3%	7.5%	100%
Other Black background	n		2	2	1		5
	%		40.0%	40.0%	20.0%		100%
Asian or Asian British - Indian	n	9	35	24	5	3	76
	%	11.8%	46.1%	31.6%	6.6%	3.9%	100%
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	n	1	2	7		3	13
	%	7.7%	15.4%	53.8%		23.1%	100%
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	n		5	4		1	10
	%		50.0%	40.0%		10.0%	100%
Chinese	n	13	52	64	18	7	154
	%	8.4%	33.8%	41.6%	11.7%	4.5%	100%
Other Asian background	n	5	8	17	5	7	42
	%	11.9%	19.0%	40.5%	11.9%	16.7%	100%
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	n		5	3		2	10
	%		50.0%	30.0%		20.0%	100%
Mixed - White and Black African	n		2		1		3
	%		66.7%		33.3%		100%
Mixed White and Asian	n	1	3	4			8
	%	12.5%	37.5%	50.0%			100%
Other Mixed background	n	2	27	24	4	13	70
	%	2.9%	38.6%	34.3%	5.7%	18.6%	100%
Other Ethnic background	n	4	28	44	7	6	89
	%	4.5%	31.5%	49.4%	7.9%	6.7%	100%
Not known	n		2				2
	%		100.0%				100%
Information refused	n	2	66	72	5	18	163
	%	1.2%	40.5%	44.2%	3.1%	11.0%	100%
Total	**n**	**314**	**1098**	**913**	**134**	**175**	**2634**
	%	**11.9%**	**41.7%**	**34.6%**	**5.1%**	**6.6%**	**100%**

Conclusion

The headline figures derived from using HESA-defined ethnic categories suggest that non-White students are underachieving in comparison with their White counterparts at our University. This mirrors the national picture. This project, however, is reappraising those ethnic categories to develop a more sophisticated tool that is 'fit for purpose' in an HE context. This tool is designed determine whether, and to what extent, this experience is real or a consequence of broad categories that act as 'blunt objects' in determining the possibility of a causal relationship.

Next Steps

As the above description indicates, developing different ethnic categories is very complex and even though ethnicity has been combined only with nationality and partly with domicile, over 100 pages of tables have been produced so far.

Even when these dimensions have been fully explored, further investigation is required into gender, age and disability to explore the possible existence of multiple stratification hierarchies.

As Einstein pointed out, 'not everything that can be counted, counts, and not everything that counts can be counted', and once the quantitative phase is complete, the project will embark on the qualitative phase. Focus groups, interviews, and case studies will be employed to uncover individual experiences and motivations.

Notes

1 Ethnicity for a further five students is 'uncoded'.

2 The other two are in the group 'Not known'.

References

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