Addressing differential degree awarding through critical-race methodologies

Dr Lucy Ansley and Dr Melanie Crofts, De Montfort University

In UK Universities, white students are 13.6% more likely to be awarded a good honours degree than students of colour[[1]](#footnote-1). Historically, a deficit perspective has been used across the sector to counter this reality, rooted in the *“view that the problem lies with the students and that it is some attribute of the student that means they attain less well, rather than because of an institutional factor such as curriculum design/development” [[2]](#footnote-2)*. This approach not only fails to acknowledge the role the institution plays in differential degree awarding, but also ignores the body of research which shows that even when a range of factors (including prior attainment) are controlled for, an unexplained difference still occurs between students of colour and white students (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007[[3]](#footnote-3); McDuff *et al*., 2018[[4]](#footnote-4)). This suggests that further exploration of the experience of students of colour is required.

At De Montfort University, the Freedom to Achieve project aims to address differential degree awarding through a multi-faceted programme of individual projects designed to enhance our cultural diversity and support success for all. A core element of the project to date has been the implementation of student consultations, which allowed for further exploration of the lived experience of the curriculum for students of colour. Underpinned by a Critical Race-Grounded Methodology, these consultations sought to unearth the non-dominant narratives of student experience at De Montfort University.

Of particular interest are the findings from these sessions which suggest that a focus upon the curriculum alone is not sufficient to impact student experience on campus. Therefore, this paper will share the findings of the Freedom to Achieve project and will use these to illustrate why initiatives aimed at addressing differential degree awarding needs to include work around the curriculum, but also around a sense of belonging, relationships, community and student development.

1. Advance HE (2018) Equality + Higher Education: Students Statistical Report 2018. Available [online](mailto:https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-05/2018-06-ECU_HE-stats-report_students_v5-compressed.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Miller, M. (2016) The Ethnicity Attainment Gap: literature review. Sheffield: The University of Sheffield Widening Participation Research & Evaluation Unit. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Broecke, S. and Nicholls, T. (2007) Ethnicity and Degree Attainment. DfES Research Report RW92. London: DfES. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. McDuff, N., Tatam, J., Beacock, O. and Ross, F. (2018) ‘Closing the attainment gap for students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds through institutional change.’ Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 20(1), 79-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)