

Discrimination may be to blame for lower class degrees among black students

02 February 2007 Deborah Gabriel

Is anonymous marking the answer?

Last week the DFES reported that black and minority ethnic students are less likely to leave university with a first class degree because of **“an unexplained difference.”** Could racism be a factor?

The new study by the Department for Education and Skills (DFES) virtually mirrors a study two years ago which was reported on Black Britain. More black and minority people attend university yet they end up with lower class degrees, which obviously places them at a disadvantage in the job market.

The participation rate for white students at UK universities is 38 per cent, compared with 61 per cent among black students, 60 per cent among Asian students and 49 per cent among Chinese students. Yet despite this all students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are less than half as likely to get a first class degree.

In 2004 whilst 10.7 per cent of white students gained a first, only 2.9 per cent of African Caribbean students did and 3.3 per cent of African students. And whilst 48.9 per cent of white students gained an upper second, only 32 per cent of African Caribbean students managed to and 27.5 per cent of African students.

Yet 16.5 per cent of African Caribbean students were awarded a 3rd class degree, 23.5 per cent of African students whilst only 9.4 per cent of white students were awarded a third. Given the premium that higher class degrees carry in the job market, black students are clearly at losing out. But why?

Emy Onuroa of the BME Education Network told Black Britain that it is not surprising that BME students are under-performing at higher education level as this mirrors their experience at other levels of the education system, especially at secondary level.

But the surprise is that Chinese students, who are always assumed to be higher academic achievers are, along with African and African Caribbean students least likely to leave university with a first class degree. This is despite the fact that Chinese students outperform white students at GCSE level.

“More work needs to be done on why that is the case, clearly higher education is having a negative effect on their performance levels” Onuora said.

Higher education institutions are not reflective of world culture and the body of academic knowledge is based entirely on a Eurocentric view of the world. It is any wonder that when many revered academics claim that blacks are less intelligent than whites that they are gaining lower class degrees within the same higher education system?

Universities need to be more reflective of world culture

As Black Britain reported two years ago, when anonymous marking has been in place, black and minority ethnic students have attained higher grades. Therefore, is there an element of racism or an assumption of less intelligence when dissertations are marked? Black Britain posed this question to

Onuora:

“If there was ever a case for anonymous marking, this is certainly one of the things that should spark off a need to bring this in,” was his response. Onuora said that in terms of the ‘unexplained difference’ when all the other factors are taken into account: **“The only conclusion you can draw is that there is a level of discrimination going on.”**

The question that needs to be asked is what exactly is happening from the point when students enrol at university to the point when they graduate that results in the underperformance of BME students: **“Historically, many of the structures and systems that were established at universities to support students were set up for white middle class students,”** Onuora suggested.

Higher education institutions were originally established to support the sons and daughters of the middle classes and have not moved with the times to provide the same levels of support for black and minority ethnic students: **“There needs to be an analysis of what goes on in terms of student support. Are black students getting the right support and encouragement?”** Onuora questioned.

He said that it is also important to look at whether the expectations of tutors and educationalists are as high for black and minority ethnic students as they are for white students: **“There are loads of these reports being produced, but there is a lack of action,”** he charged.

Onuora told Black Britain that he fears that the result of this study will be words spoken about more needing to be done but a lack of decisive action by the DFES and the Higher Education Funding Council: **“This is yet another study that highlights the BME students experience and this is a big issue for our group and we will make whatever representations we can to make sure that this is addressed.”**

He said that there is no need for further research but strategies, ideas and concrete action: **“What needs to be looked at are issues around the curriculum, student support, research opportunities...to ensure that black students are not being discriminated against.”**

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