1. Background information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seminar title</th>
<th>Higher Education Students and Ethnicity: Lessons from Research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution(s)</td>
<td>Kingston University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Professor Mary Stuart (Kingston University)</td>
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2. Abstract

Please provide a brief abstract of the seminar delivered (maximum 200 words).

This seminar will address the impact of social identity, cultural capital and informal learning on different ethnic student groups at university. There is evidence that minority ethnic students do less well in higher education than their white British counterparts. Quantitative and qualitative evidence (based on research funded by the ESRC, 2007-2009) will be presented, revealing which factors affect a positive student experience and enable successful outcomes for students from different ethnic groups in the UK. There will also be time for discussion to explore how findings from this research can inform institutional policy and practice on supporting different student groups to both enjoy and succeed in their studies.

3. Rationale

Please provide the background context of the seminar/research including institutional context, internal and external drivers, and contributory factors.

Barriers exist for undergraduate students entering UK HE in terms of social class, being first generation students in HE, fear of debt, and differences in cultural/social capital and habitus. Students from minority ethnic groups face further barriers in terms of HE experiences and outcomes. Previous research has focused on inequalities in degree attainment and student satisfaction, and suggested that racial identity and a sense of belonging/alientation may be important factors for these students’ university experience.

This research was informed by a life history approach and the belief that
researchers must take into account students’ life history and its interpretation, their social and cultural background, the community context in which they live, students’ stage in personal development and the political and economic climate. This approach leads to a more rounded sense of the learner and allows a more holistic approach that gives importance to informal learning beyond the university classroom.

The research was also informed by theories of social identity\textsuperscript{11}, cultural capital\textsuperscript{4}, social capital\textsuperscript{12} and institutional habitus\textsuperscript{13}.

4. Generation of evidence

Please outline the process by which the research evidence was generated (e.g. developmental, research methods).

The research was funded by an ESRC grant (2007-2009). We aimed to explore different ethnic groups’ experiences of social identity and belonging in UK HE; factors affecting a positive HE experience (for various student groups); and factors affecting degree marks. The research was informed by theories of social identity\textsuperscript{11}, cultural capital\textsuperscript{4}, social capital\textsuperscript{12} and institutional habitus\textsuperscript{13}.

The first phase of data collection involved a large-scale survey (n=766) that was distributed in lectures to 2\textsuperscript{nd} year students at 4 HEIs (two post-92 universities in London; one 1960’s university in southeast England; and one specialist medical institution in London). Students were asked to complete existing and adapted measures including a wide range of demographic factors (e.g. family HE experience and social class\textsuperscript{14}), academic self-esteem\textsuperscript{15}, well-being at university\textsuperscript{16}, peer support\textsuperscript{17} and marks (self-reported and actual). Students were also asked to complete our two new measures of comfort zone and university identification. Comfort zone measured how physically comfortable students feel in and around campus\textsuperscript{4,18}. University Identification measured a positive sense of connection with the university including feelings of pride and identification with peers\textsuperscript{19}.

The second phase of data collection involved student focus groups (n=46) and educational life history interviews (n=8), and the final phase involved a follow-up survey of students’ 2\textsuperscript{nd} year exam results.

5. Related key terms and concepts

Please list up to 5 key words which closely describe the topic of the seminar. These will facilitate the search functionality.

Widening Participation; Cultural Capital; Social Identity Theory; Ethnicity.

6. Existing evidence
Please describe the existing research evidence reported in the seminar.

Research evidence was presented showing that barriers exist for undergraduate students entering UK HE in terms of social class\textsuperscript{1,2}, being first generation students in HE, fear of debt\textsuperscript{2} and differences in cultural/social capital and habitus\textsuperscript{3}. Students from minority ethnic groups face further barriers in terms of HE experiences and outcomes\textsuperscript{4,5}. Previous research has focused on inequalities in degree attainment\textsuperscript{6} and student satisfaction\textsuperscript{7,8}, and suggested that racial identity\textsuperscript{9} and a sense of belonging/alientation\textsuperscript{10} may be important factors for these students’ university experience.

Previous HEA-funded research by the authors was also presented on widening participation in postgraduate education through identifying barriers and creating success\textsuperscript{21}. This research looked at 1, 073 students in two southeast HEIs in UK and found that students from minority ethnic groups were the highest in postgraduate intentions, but also in debt worry and actual debt, and they were lower in family HE experience. Other HEA-funded research on student diversity, extracurricular activities and perceptions of graduate outcomes\textsuperscript{22} looked at 749 students studying at four diverse HEIs and found demographic patterns of participation in extracurricular activities. White students spent significantly more time seeing friends and visiting bars and pubs; Asian students spend significantly more time in the library, in prayer and in university clubs/societies; and Black students spend significantly more time in the library, praying and in paid employment.

7. Research findings / New evidence

Please describe any new findings or evidence reported in the seminar/research.

University identification and comfort zone were key predictors for all students’ positive university experience. These two new variables predict students’ peer support at university, their academic self-esteem and their sense of well-being at university, and even predict Black & White students’ marks. However, comfort zone is more important for minority ethnic students’ positive experience and outcomes, whereas university identification more important for White students’ positive experience and outcomes.

Further ethnic group differences were found whereby Black students reported more academic self-esteem & university identification than their white peers and less peer support than all other ethnic groups. Asian students reported less well-being at university than their white peers, with Asian females reporting the lowest well-being and marks. Mixed Race students reported less comfort zone than all other ethnic groups and less university identification than all other minority ethnic groups. All minority ethnic groups of students (but particularly Arab/Persian students) reported less comfort zone if they were from lower socio-economic groups.

Findings from the focus groups and interviews further illustrated how students’
educational experiences (early & HE), mediated by demographic factors, affect their focus on study and/or friendship at university; their expectations, knowledge & uptake of peer, teacher and institutional support; their sense of comfort zone around campus; and their identification with the university.

8. Application / Outcomes of research findings

Please identify any application or outcomes of research findings. This box may be particularly relevant to those seminars which use research to inform practice.

The research findings presented regarding extracurricular activities and graduate outcomes (HEA grant 2007-08) suggest ways in which students’ activities outside the classroom can impact on their university experience, degree marks and employment outcomes. These findings are currently being compiled into a booklet of guidelines for universities to be published by the HEA.

Other research findings presented (ESRC grant 2007-09) highlight the importance of students’ identification with, and physical comfort zone within their universities for key academic outcomes such as academic self-esteem, peer support, well-being and marks. The strength of our comfort zone measure, which appears to be a better predictor of positive academic experience than existing measures, was of great benefit to the project. This provides a useful avenue for future research, particularly the development of interventions promoting a positive university experience for all ethnic student groups at university.

These findings also suggest fruitful avenues for further research into students’ experiences of teaching and learning across different institutional contexts. Our findings indicated significant differences in teaching and learning preferences across “old” and “new” universities, between “traditional” and “non-traditional” student groups, and between religious and non-religious students (with many ethnic minority students highlighting the importance of religious beliefs to their academic and social life at university). This may suggest a divide between older institutions and new universities where non-traditional students are more represented (e.g. ethnic minority, religious, mature and lower SES students). Further investigation is therefore needed to examine the affect of institution type on students’ teaching and learning.

9. Implications for policy and practice

Please identify any implications for policy and practice for different stakeholder groups such as academics, widening-participation/disability/equality and diversity practitioners, senior managers, policy makers, students, sector organisations.

There is currently considerable interest in the attainment and progression of ethnic minority students in UK HE. The DfES, HEFCE and the HE Academy have all commissioned research into ethnic minority student outcomes and
institutional practices. This research project complements and extends upon this body of work. Our findings have considerable importance for policy makers, institutional managers, student groups and academics, by highlighting factors which both promote and undermine a positive experience for ethnic minority student groups at university.

The seminar was specifically designed to provide a forum for the dissemination and discussion of research, evaluation and other evidence from the HE sector to inform institutional policy and practice, to address the diversity agenda and to support success for all students. Interventions to promote comfort zone and university identification were discussed such as the use of ICT and online social networking sites. Interventions to promote more inclusive teaching and learning practices were also discussed such as the provision of more accessible opportunities for group work and collaborative peer-supported learning at University, and the increased use of supplementary teaching materials and new technologies such as online resources.

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<th>10. Institutional change</th>
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The research evidence presented indicates that students from different ethnic and social backgrounds are experiencing different levels of comfort zone and university identification, which impact on a wide range of outcomes including degree marks. Our findings highlight the importance of students’ differing levels of awareness of (and therefore uptake of) available support from their institution, their peers and their teachers, which lead those from certain backgrounds to miss out on opportunities for developing social capital at university and feeling like they “fit in”. Therefore, interventions need to focus on promoting a sense of belonging to the institutions and a sense of identification with peers and teachers. At the policy level there is a continued need to put strategies in place for equal access, selection, recruitment, retention, payment and career progression of ethnic minority, female and lower SES teaching staff. At the practice level institutions need to provide students with equal access to and opportunities for capitalising on social support networks at university.

Findings also suggest that different ethnic groups of students have different teaching and learning preferences, highlighting the need for universities to listen to students’ learning preferences and to offer them a wide range of teaching formats, including group study skills provision and opportunities for more social, collaborative learning.

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<th>11. Emerging themes</th>
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<td>Please detail the discussion topics or themes that were raised by delegates during the course of the seminar.</td>
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Group Discussion: Delegates were asked if they had similar/different experiences at their institutions. They were also asked about possible strategies to address these inequalities. Below is a summary of the themes that were raised by each group.

Group 1
- Experience of distance/blended forms increasing - what mediates engagement and identification with this form of studies?
- More than just outcome - successful completion doesn’t mean you enjoyed it and will continue.
- Range of ways of engaging with study, need to value models outside full-time “immersion”.
- SES central factor
- Is education about giving people what they want?

Group 2
- Levels of engagement - project with Student Union looking at engagement with SU.
- Examine different subjects - levels of engagement.
- Effects of mature students/living on campus/geographical location (campus) - impact on engagement.
- SES - cost and sacrifice - need to complete.
- Why are the White students performing better when they have a more active social life? Is it to do with “comfort zone”?
- Lack of peer support/network to check out where they’re at and what help is available.
- Cultural stigma (gender) of seeking help/support.
- Academic support - accessing by students who have need for such support.
- Communal peer pressure - positive cohorts motivate each other and vice-versa.
- Mature students and group work: mature students are often role models = positive experiences in group work.
- Certain Asian groups of students won’t go to the SU for help - not all about alcohol.

Group 3
Differences:
- Black students’ attitude to study/social and their self-esteem do not follow this pattern at our institutions.
- Other factors are involved - University effects, SES, International = COMPLEX!
- Trajectory is important - how does it change Yr 1-3?
- Also important to remember these are successful students!
- How do we involve students who don’t attend/drop out in our research?

Strategies:
- Using facebook to involve students (hard to involve students, especially low achieving ones).
- Equal opportunities section for each module.
- Learn from other courses.
- Role models.
- Motivations and aspirations.
- Use staff experience.

**Further research:**
- Longitudinal - link experiences and achievement.
- What is sanctioned by curriculum?
- Include staff and students together - how do they all experience culture.
- Impact of wider professions on learning environment (values of the workplace filtering through).

**Group 4**
Some recommendations:
- University/departmental responsibility to explain the benefits of collaborative work.
- Similar to “employability” skills.
- Identify mechanisms and channels for looking at attainment.
- Want to identify what schools/departments are doing on the ground - departmental statistics.
- Small figures effect - difficult to use for “ammunition”.
- Role models.

**Group 5**
- Satisfaction of BME students lower in terms of university experience.
- Awareness of help/services.
- Personal tutors: same background?

### 12. Bibliography / references (preferably annotated)

Please list any references mentioned in or associated with the seminar/research. Where possible, please annotate the list to enable readers to identify the most relevant materials.

Please note that footnotes also correspond to our PowerPoint slides available online through the HEA website.

**References**


