

THE IMPACT OF ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS ON BME STUDENT ATTAINMENT

Overview

This relatively small-scale study is the first to pose the question as to the difference that the quality of academic leadership can make to the attainment levels of black and ethnic minority (BME) students. With the aid of in-depth interviews and a survey, the study has started to build a picture of the under-explored relationship between leadership and BME outcomes. It finds that leadership style is one of the top four factors out of 14 that BME students believe influence their academic achievement (alongside motivation, fair treatment and fair assessment) and highlights the significant role that inclusive leadership could play in closing gaps. It paves the way for further research into the association between academic leadership behaviours and BME student productivity, motivation and well-being.

Context

The proportion of UK-domiciled black and minority ethnic (BME) (or non-white) students in higher education has increased steadily from 14.9% in 2003/4 to 20.2% a decade later, with a higher proportion now attending university than their white counterparts (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015).¹ However, research shows that, once at university, attainment levels begin to fall away. BME students with similar entry qualifications and from the same socio-economic and educational backgrounds as white students are less likely to achieve a degree, gain a first or upper second or to move on to graduate employment or study. Of the UK students graduating in 2016, 24% more of the white cohort received a 1st or 2:1, compared to the BME cohort.² This is in sharp contrast to the position in schools where most ethnic minority groups outperform white pupils (Burgess 2014, DfE 2015). Many studies have looked for the causes of this attainment gap in BME students' backgrounds with conflicting outcomes. These differences highlight the need for attention to shift away from 'deficit' models – emphasising factors such as entry qualification, socio-economic status, work and family commitments or cultural differences – and focus instead on the relationship between students and their institutions. A major review carried out for Hefce in 2015 did set out to isolate explanatory, institution-based factors influencing the achievement gap including types of curricula, student-staff relations and the psychosocial support of students by staff, as well as student financial hardship, assessment practices and student-student relationships. However, to date there has been no systematic exploration of how institutional leadership style and behaviours may affect BME attainment.

Many definitions of leadership behaviour exist. Barbara Kellerman, Harvard Professor in Public Leadership, has found no fewer than 1,400. Across these definitions, she found three elements to be consistent in guiding leadership behaviour: leader, followers and context. When it comes to the higher

education sector, one study (Davies, 2002) examining leadership styles and behaviours found an apparent absence of inspirational motivation and individual consideration. Instead the emphasis was on management by exception, a feature of Transactional Leadership commonly known as Command and Control Leadership. Beyond this, some studies have looked into leadership behaviours preferred by academic non-management staff, with the findings of the Leadership Foundation Higher Education Leadership and Management Survey (Peters and Ryan, 2014) noting their preference for an inclusive approach in which leaders would display attributes such as 'warmth and morality'. Another study (Tysome, 2014) calls for new approaches to leadership, including a 'light touch' style using good communication, persuasive argument and good interpersonal skills.

This Leadership Insight briefing provides a summary of findings from a research project that investigated the association between BME student academic attainment and academic leadership style, specifically Inclusive Leadership (IL). IL can be defined broadly as a leadership style that promotes collaboration, offers support, strives for perspective-taking and empathy and aspires towards individual growth for all followers.

Approach

The research consisted of two phases: qualitative interviews and a survey.

In-depth interviews. Homogeneous purposive sampling – a technique that aims to put together a sample of people with the same characteristics – was used to recruit BME respondents representing all three years of undergraduate study and a range of faculties and disciplines. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a self-selecting group of BME students who responded to an email invitation to participate in the research. They were interviewed on the personal and institutional (including leadership) factors that they thought might affect their attainment levels.

¹ According to the Equality Challenge Unit's 2017 Students Report, 21.8% of UK-domiciled students whose ethnicity information was known identified as BME in 2015/16.

² The ECU 2017 report found that 78.4% of white students received a first or 2:1 in 2015/16 compared with 63.4% of BME students, representing a BME degree attainment gap of 15.0 percentage points.

The intention was to understand issues from the students' perspective, with questions based on a literature review as well as on the new factor of multi-level leadership behaviours'. For every question, BME respondents were asked to comment on an issue such as academic language or sense of belonging, rate how much of an impact they felt that issue had on academic attainment and compare how that issue was handled at school and at university levels.

The survey. An analysis of the interview responses showed that students perceived leadership behaviours to impact their motivation to study and their academic success. These findings informed the shape of a 50-question survey which was distributed to both BME as well as white students to establish whether their responses differed.

There were three key research aims of the survey:

- i) To establish any associations between students' perception of the presence of multi-layered inclusive leadership and their self-perception of their own productivity, motivation and well-being.
- ii) To compare the responses of BME and white students.
- iii) To discover if there was heterogeneity in BME responses across different ethnicities.

Of the 50 survey questions, 38 sought perceptions of academic leadership behaviours within the university and 12 sought students' own perceptions of their academic productivity, motivation and well-being.

The survey was modelled on an inclusive leadership instrument that had been developed and tested in 10, large non-academic organisations, (Moss, 2016; Moss 2016 and Sims et al, 2016) with the language and concepts of the employee survey amended to suit an educational context.

Limitations

This was a relatively small-scale study: 10 students who self-selected in response to an email invitation took part in the initial semi-structured in-depth interviews and 104 students, 45 of whom were BME, returned completed survey responses in the second phase.

All the research took place at one higher education institution; generalisation to other higher education institutions and findings can be transferred to other parts of the sector via emerging themes in the higher education literature.

Although the study can claim that inclusive leadership was highly prioritised by the respondents, it was not significantly more important for the BME respondents than for the white ones. Research carried out with a larger sample or on a longitudinal basis would test the contribution that a sense of belonging and a feeling of motivation bring to the academic achievement of BME students in particular.

Further research could also widen the sample to more institutions and to different ethnic groups within the broader understanding of BME.

Key findings

Significance of leadership behaviour

The responses to the initial in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out among BME students suggested that the factors most likely to influence academic success were those related to self-motivation, fairness of assessment and treatment and the presence of what the students identified as ideal types of leadership across the hierarchy. These ideal types mapped closely to an inclusive style of leadership and the priority given to this style of leadership by BME students has not been identified in previous literature on the attainment gap.

Correlation between leadership styles and student outcomes

In the survey, a comparison of students' ratings of the extent to which multi-level academic leadership displayed inclusive leadership behaviours and students' ratings of their own productivity, motivation and well-being clearly reveals a strong linear association between these two variables. It should be noted that perceptions of inclusive leadership did not differ across the respondents' gender, faculty and year of study.

Visibility of leaders

When students were asked in the survey if they could put a name to their academic leaders, most respondents could name them at lecturer and personal tutor level but that recognition declined significantly in respect of senior leaders with only small percentages of respondents able to name the dean of the faculty (12.3%) and the vice-chancellor (5.7%). This suggests that senior academic staff are largely invisible to students, signalling a lack of inclusivity on the part of senior leaders.

Perceptions of leadership in students' minds

When asked which members of staff they had in mind when answering the survey questions on academic leadership behaviours, 85.9% indicated that they were referring to their lecturers, 68.9% to their module leaders and 67.0% to their personal tutors. Only 8.5% and 5.7% were thinking of the head of faculty or vice-chancellor respectively.

This finding suggests an apparent absence of inclusive leadership at senior levels of academic leadership, something that could act as a potential barrier to an inclusive culture. Further research could usefully be conducted on this point.

A sense of belonging

When asked in the in-depth interviews to compare their experiences at school and university, the BME respondents said that contact across the hierarchy occurred more frequently at secondary school than it did at university. This was one of the few factors where the school experience was regarded as surpassing that of university.

This is an important finding given that the attainment gap is much less evident at school than at university level (DfE, 2015, p.8). Although both BME and white students made positive associations between the presence of inclusive leadership and enhancements in their own achievements, the presence of inclusive leadership might be more highly prioritised by BME students given the emphasis on belonging and connection with the university's culture described by BME respondents in previous literature.

Conclusions

The evidence gathered in this research leads to the conclusion that inclusive leadership behaviours on the part of academic staff could have an important role to play in efforts to narrow the attainment gap for BME students.

The findings present evidence of a correlation between inclusive leadership and student academic productivity, motivation and well-being, complementing an earlier similar finding from an industry sample of employees (Moss et al, 2016; Moss, 2016; Sims et al, 2016).

The study also has the potential to contribute to current discussion on improved leadership practices at universities, including the thinking that senior figures should employ a 'light touch' and distributed approach to their style of leadership, using good communication, persuasive argument and good interpersonal skills.

Provocations and future research

The findings of the study suggest that the implementation of inclusive behaviours in a university context should be a priority. Leaders should use a consultative and collaborative bottom-up approach, as opposed to an authoritative, top-down style of leadership.

Higher education staff development and equality and diversity practitioners could ensure that inclusive leadership of students is central to leadership and management programmes for all levels of university staff.

Evidence of inclusive leadership and working with students should form the selection criteria for all roles, particularly middle and senior academic managers.

The most senior members of the university hierarchy, including vice-chancellors, need to act on good intentions about inclusive leadership if they want to close the BME attainment gap.

Sector bodies who need to deliver their Public Sector Equality Duty under the 2010 Equality Act must also strive to improve the inclusivity through regulatory frameworks, access agreement guidance and monitoring and impact exchange mechanisms.

Future research, perhaps drawing on best practice in industry, could investigate how to eliminate the 'invisibility' to students of the most senior members of the university hierarchy.

Key quotes:

“Boards of governors and vice-chancellors who are taking the attainment gap seriously need to set higher expectations of themselves and their senior teams in terms of understanding what inclusive leadership looks like in practical terms and acting on it.” Authors of the original research report

“[It is] very important to be able to communicate with people right up to vice-chancellor because it’s important to open up channels of communication otherwise people in leadership have no understanding of the student experience. I think that if they don’t understand what affects us, they’re not best placed to lead. I’ve never seen the vice-chancellor; I’ve met the dean once in 18 months. We’ve had a change of dean and I’ve never seen the new dean. These sort of things are quite important because they affect how much a student feels that they are cared about.” BME student interview respondent.

“Ultimately, the resources and encouragement to practise inclusive leadership need to be targeted at senior managerial levels where they can most effectively be communicated both across and down to all potential layers of influential higher education leadership, creating the context in which academic staff in proximal leadership positions can demonstrate these inclusive behaviours themselves.” Authors of the original research report.

“Given the importance that BME students attribute in achieving academic success to positive staff/student relationships and a sense of ‘belonging’, it is possible that while inclusive leadership may benefit all students, it may play a particularly significant role in supporting BME students and thereby reducing the attainment gap.” Authors of the original research report.

“[Senior academic staff should be] more approachable. If you’re walking in the corridor, being able to say ‘hello’ and ask how the course is going. This would make university life more like a family and would make senior people more aware of what is happening. If they don’t do this, then students become numbers.”
BME student responding to an interview question about ideal behaviours in academic leaders.

Key tables:

Table 1: The incidence of behaviours cited as ideal by BME interview respondents

Ideal leadership behaviour characteristic	Number of times this characteristic is volunteered in respect of academic staff		
	Lecturing staff	Senior staff	Totals
Approachable, friendly	5	3	8
Communication with students	2	1	3
Open-door policy	1	1	2
Frequent checking of emails	2	1	3
Available to answer questions	2	1	3
Kind, understanding, not dismissive	4	2	6
Viable	-	3	3
Encouraging and positive	2	1	3
Practical life experience	1	1	2
Subject enthusiasm	1	1	2
Interested in the student and able to assess their academic abilities and offer advice	1	1	2
Understanding students	1	1	2

Table 2: Average of students' ratings of the influence of particular factors on their academic attainment with the top four scores shown in bold

Topic	Average BME student rating for the extent (on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most significant) to which a factor is thought to influence their academic attainment
Culture that can connect with a feeling of belonging at the University	7.4
Feeling included	7.8
Students treated fairly and equally by all academic staff	9.1
Fair assessments	9.3
Lecturers' expectations in line with those of students	8.2
Representation of BME academics on the Faculty	4.6
An inclusive curriculum	5.8
An environment in which students are willing to ask questions	7.5
Approachability of lecturers	8.7
Academic language that can be understood	7.8
Self-motivation	9.4
Attendance at lectures	8.5
Behaviour of academic leaders at all levels of the hierarchy	8.0
Ideal academic leadership across the hierarchy	8.8

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The authors

Gloria Moss, PhD, FCIPD, professor of management and marketing at Buckinghamshire New University, led the current research project on leadership and the BME attainment gap. She is the author of five books and more than 70 articles and conference papers on management issues. She has a background both in research (including leadership, teamworking, diversity and customer centricity) and business, having had senior roles in training and development at Eurotunnel and Courtaulds. Her consultancy and research focus on the impact of nationality, gender and personality on leadership, teamwork, design and marketing. In 2016 she led a large study funded by the Employers Network on Equality and Inclusion on Inclusive Leadership and its impact on industry. She is now completing a book on Inclusive Leadership for Routledge.

Ceri Sims, PhD, PG Cert HE, CPsychol, MISCP, is senior lecturer in psychology at Buckinghamshire New University. She is chartered by the British Psychological Society and is on their register of coaching psychologists. She was a research scientist for the Medical Research Council and has taught and researched at Durham, Newcastle, London and Middlesex universities. She has written on a range of issues, from developmental disorders to multicultural perceptions of well-being. Ceri is on the International Advisory Board for the ISCP International Centre for Coaching Psychology Research. She is also, the International Advisory Editor for the journal 'European Journal of Applied Positive Psychology'

Nona McDuff, OBE, PFHEA, MSc, BA Hons is director of student achievement and the institutional lead on the BME Attainment Gap and Inclusive Curriculum at Kingston University which she is disseminating to 5 other institutions via a HEFCE catalyst project. Nona sits on the panel of the government's new Teaching Excellence Framework and is chair of the Higher Education Race Action Group, for which she has organised a number of sector symposiums and conferences on race equality. Nona has contributed to the ministerial Social Mobility Advisory Group and addressed the All Party Parliamentary Group for HE on diversity in academia. Nona is currently the chair of an advisory group overseeing an OFFA funded student related research project and is a member of an Advance HE advisory group overseeing a staff related research project. Her research to date has focused on race equality.

John Tatam, MA, MPhil, has more than 25 years of senior local government experience, including as director, deputy chief executive and acting chief executive of a London borough. He has undertaken a range of projects for the Institute of Community Cohesion at Coventry University and was interim director of the institute for a period. He has also undertaken work on diversity for the NHS in London and currently supports, as a consultant, the programme to reduce the BME attainment gap at Kingston University.

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