

Section D: Student engagement with equality and diversity

Embracing diversity – watch your language: understanding student sports teams' awareness of protected characteristics and the concepts of inclusivity

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Abstract

The student experience extends beyond the curriculum. Engagement with student sports teams can enrich aspects of university life while also developing graduate attributes. However, there have also been reports of discriminatory behaviour and poor use of language in university sports teams. Abertay University's sports team members were surveyed regarding their knowledge of, and attitudes toward, protected characteristics in advance of awareness-raising interventions that included students working with a group with protected characteristics in the community. The survey was then re-administered. The results of the survey revealed that Abertay University sports team members responded significantly differently to their Scottish peers in the general population on questions about whether equal opportunities for women, for BME groups, and for gay men and lesbian women had gone too far. They also had significantly different responses to questions regarding positive action to enable employment for BME groups, for gay men and lesbian women and for those who had experienced depression.

Introduction

Poor behaviour of university sports teams has attracted adverse media attention (Denholm 2013; Ellis-Peterson 2014; Horne 2014; Mohamed 2014). The cohesiveness of sports teams can be integral to their success, but there are also reports of sexist and discriminatory behaviour (Fink et al 2011). Exposure to poor behaviour can be damaging to other students' university experiences and can lead to impaired wellbeing as well as potential withdrawal from studies (Wilcox et al 2005). Some of

this poor behaviour is manifested in printed texts, including on social media platforms, thereby leaving a lasting footprint for the author which could have a negative impact on the graduated student's future employment prospects (O'Keefe and Clarke-Pearson 2011).

More than a third of the world's population now use the internet, and social media is used regularly by 91 per cent of online adults. Further, almost a quarter of adult online time is spent engaging with social media (Internet World Stats 2012). Student populations are considered keen consumers of social networking technology (Barkhuus and Tashiro 2010), and it could be contested that universities have an obligation to educate them toward responsible use.

It is widely acknowledged that universities are expected to produce employable graduates (Knight and Yorke 2003; Schomburg and Teichler 2006), who have the ability to adapt and manage their future careers (Bridgestock 2009). The term graduate attributes refers to qualities, characteristics and skills that universities will develop in their students (Bowden et al 2000). These are now an integral part of many university mission statements and concepts of responsible citizenship can be voiced within them. Therefore, it could be an expectation that employable graduates should be able to apply the principles embedded within equality legislation.

Taking this into account, the aim of this project was to examine the knowledge, attitudes and social media behaviours of Abertay University's sports teams before and after specific inclusiveness interventions.

Method

The project team were granted ethics permission to do an initial scoping of Abertay University's 18 sports teams' Facebook pages. Any use of non-inclusive language was noted.

The next phase of the project involved administering a questionnaire designed to test knowledge and attitudes toward protected characteristics. It contained a mixture of case study questions, as well as ones adapted from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSAS). Team captains were approached at a varsity event and teams were invited to participate in the study.

Consent forms, participant information sheets and questionnaires were left with the teams for voluntary completion, with a member of the project team returning to collect completed forms later in the day.

Students from a variety of teams ($n=129$: 56 per cent men; 44 per cent women) completed the pre-intervention questionnaire.

A two-week intervention phase was launched with an evening event to which all sports team members were invited. A video showcasing some sports team members working with a local wheelchair sport group opened the evening, with the Scottish Government Minister for Health, Wellbeing and Sport in attendance. A number of high profile ambassadors from a range of sports also attended and took part in a tabled question and answer session. In the subsequent period, the Abertay Students' Association signposted the students to materials designed to educate communities toward inclusivity.

Students were given the opportunity to take part in a post-intervention survey prior to a sports team social event. Additional questions were added to gauge student engagement with project materials, and to garner knowledge about levels of interest in undertaking potential equality training. The post-intervention survey was completed by 75 students (45 per cent male; 55 per cent female). The pre-intervention and post-intervention subject groups were not matched.

Results

The initial scoping of the sports teams' Facebook pages during a 12-week period found seven pejorative references to protected characteristics: five were sexist, one referred to religion, and one to sexual orientation.

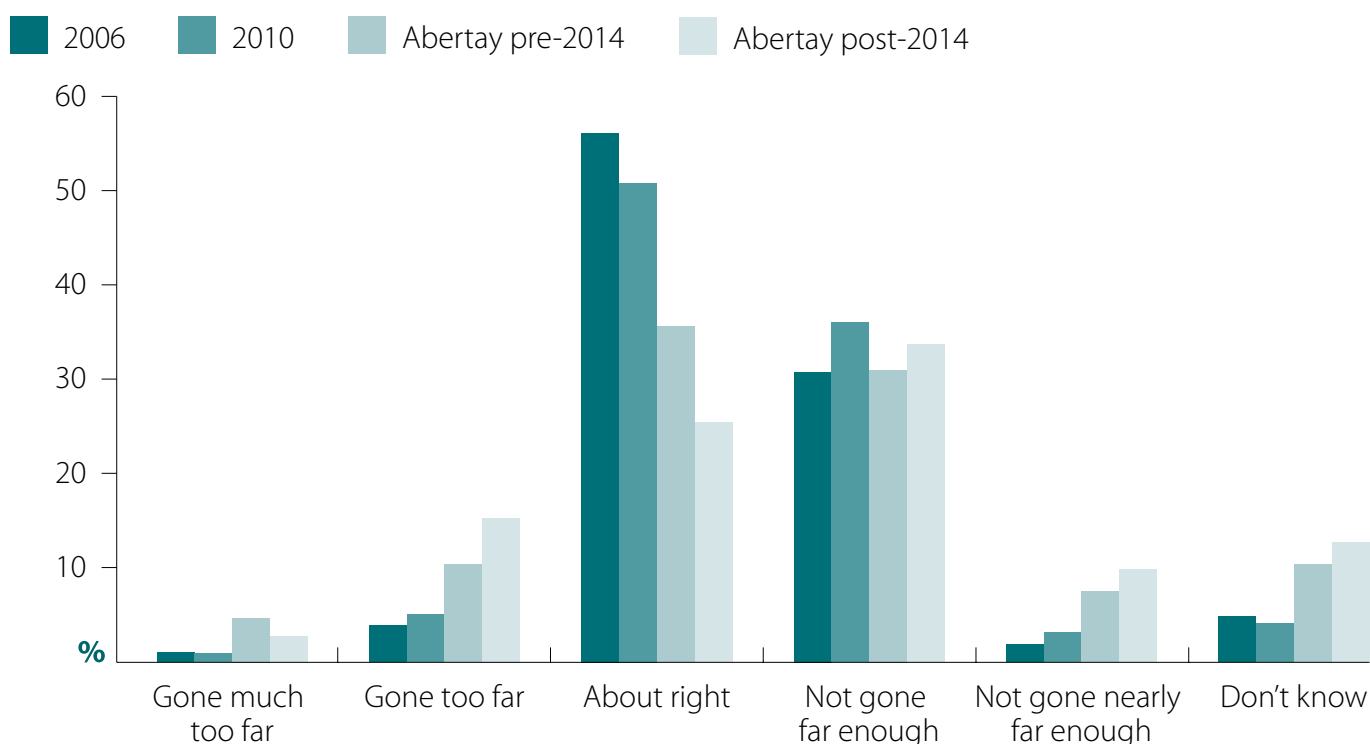
When surveyed, 60 per cent of the students prior to the intervention knew that there were nine protected characteristics outlined in the Equality Act 2010; this compared with 56 per cent in the post-intervention survey.

Two-thirds (both pre- and post-intervention) gave the correct answer when asked what toilet a gender re-assigned female would be eligible to use.

A number of questions were drawn from SSAS allowing the sports teams' results to be compared with the general population as well as with a matched age group.

Figure 1: Comparing sports team responses to SSAS data (2006/2010) on equal opportunities for women

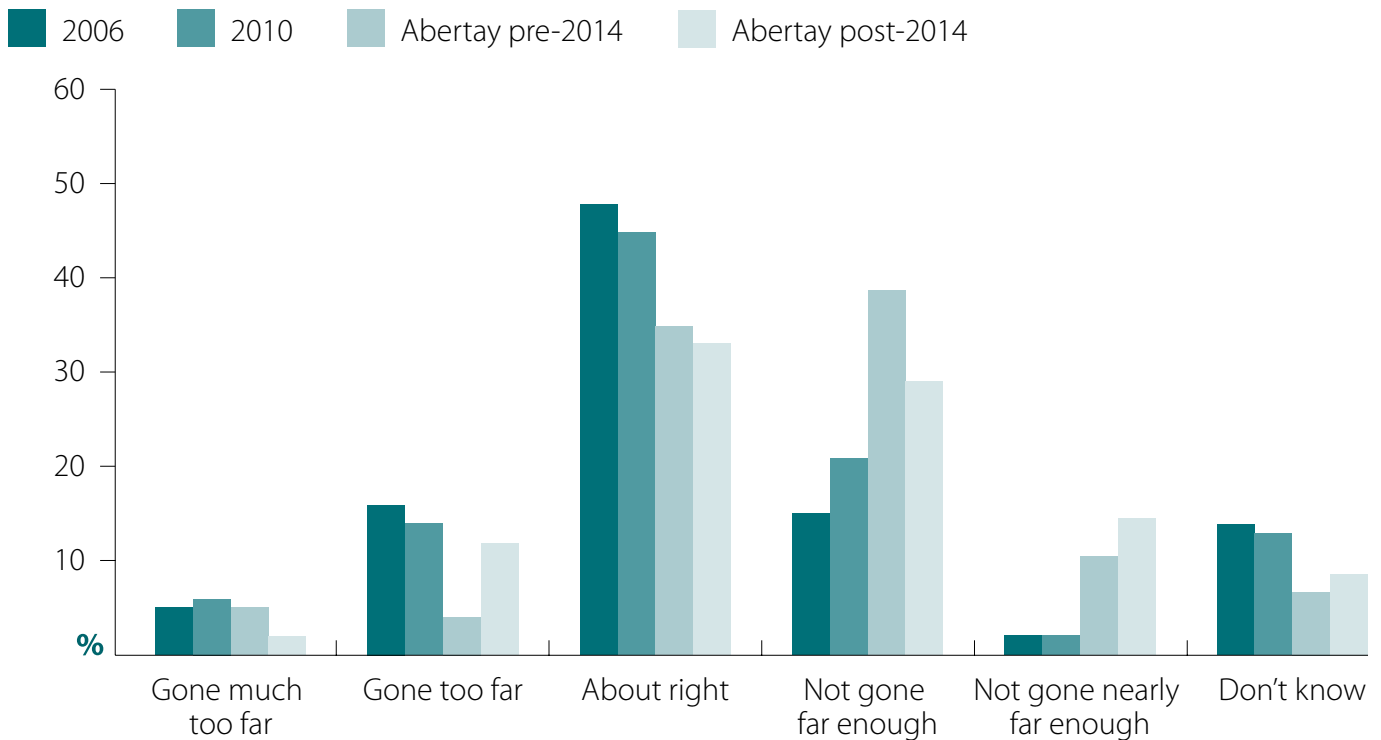
Attempts to give equal opportunities to women has... (96 per cent response)



The students surveyed, both before and after the intervention, differed significantly in their responses when compared with previous SSAS data. As figure 1 illustrates, the sports team students were significantly more likely to say that equal opportunities for women had 'gone too far/much too far' ($\chi^2 = 11.7, p < 0.05$, pre-intervention; $\chi^2 = 14.7, p < 0.05$, post-intervention). Conversely, sports team students were significantly more likely to say that equal opportunities for women had 'not gone nearly far enough' ($\chi^2 = 5.03, p < 0.05$, pre-intervention; $\chi^2 = 7.89, p < 0.05$, post-intervention).

Figure 2: Comparing sports team responses to SSAS data (2006/2010) on equal opportunities for gay men and lesbians

Attempts to give equal opportunities to gay men and lesbians in Scotland has... (96 per cent response)



As figure 2 shows, the students prior to the intervention were significantly less likely to say that equal opportunities for gay men and lesbians had 'gone too far/much too far' ($\chi^2 = 4.2, p < 0.05$, pre-intervention; $\chi^2 = 1.26, p > 0.05$, post-intervention) when compared with previous SSAS data. There were no differences between the populations in the post-intervention period. Sports team students were also significantly less likely to say that they would be 'unhappy/very unhappy if a close relative was in a long-term relationship with someone of the same sex' ($\chi^2 = 3.98, p < 0.05$, pre-intervention; $\chi^2 = 5.89, p < 0.05$, post-intervention).

Figure 3 illustrates how the students prior to the intervention were significantly less likely to say that equal opportunities for BME groups had 'gone too far/much too far' ($\chi^2 = 7.18, p < 0.05$, pre-intervention; $\chi^2 = 2.58, p > 0.05$, post-intervention) when compared with previous SSAS data. There were no differences between the populations in the post-intervention period; however, there were significant differences in the sports teams' responses to this question between the two surveys: $\chi^2 = 12.4, p < 0.05$. Sports team students prior to the intervention were, as shown in figure 4, also significantly less likely to say that positive action to aid employment for BME groups was 'bad/very bad use of government money' ($\chi^2 = 4.87, p < 0.05$, pre-intervention; $\chi^2 = 2.58, p > 0.05$, post-intervention).

Figure 3: Comparing sports team responses to SSAS data (2006/2010) on equal opportunities for BME groups

Attempts to give equal opportunities to BME groups has... (96 per cent response)

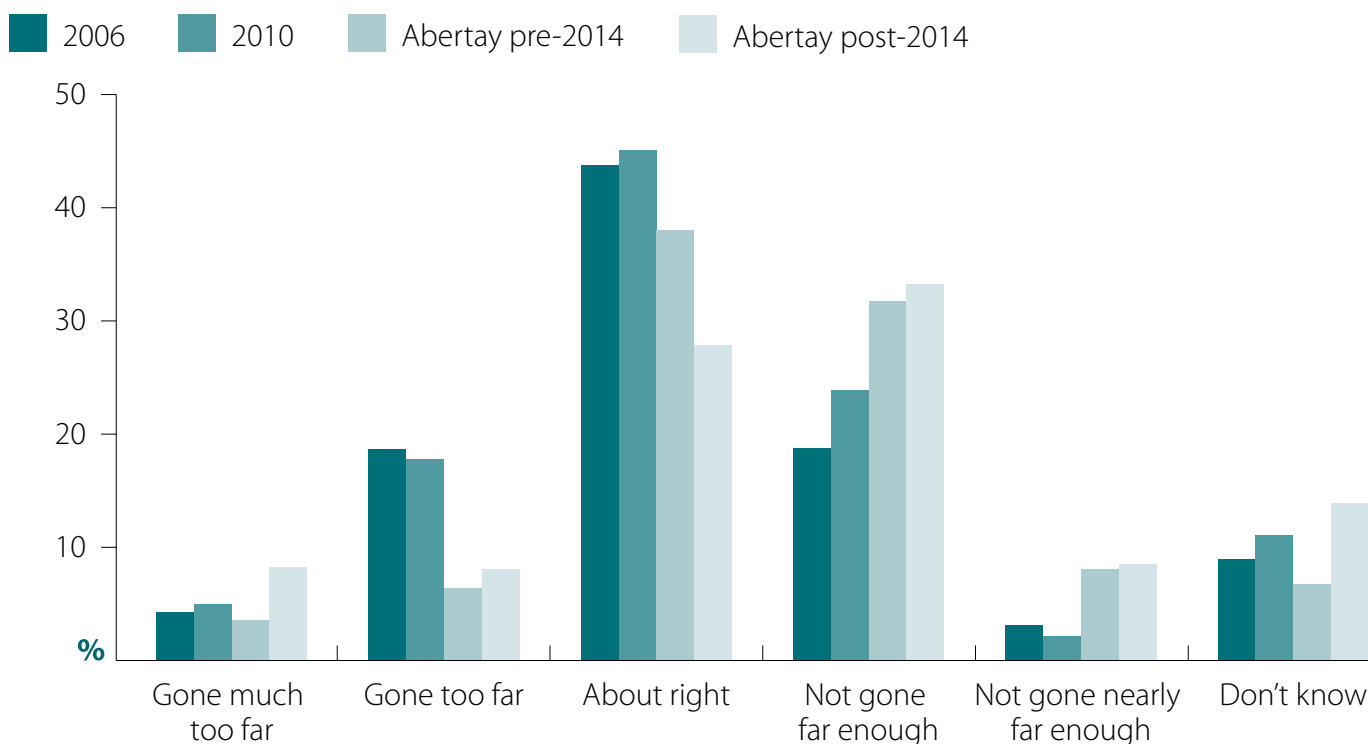
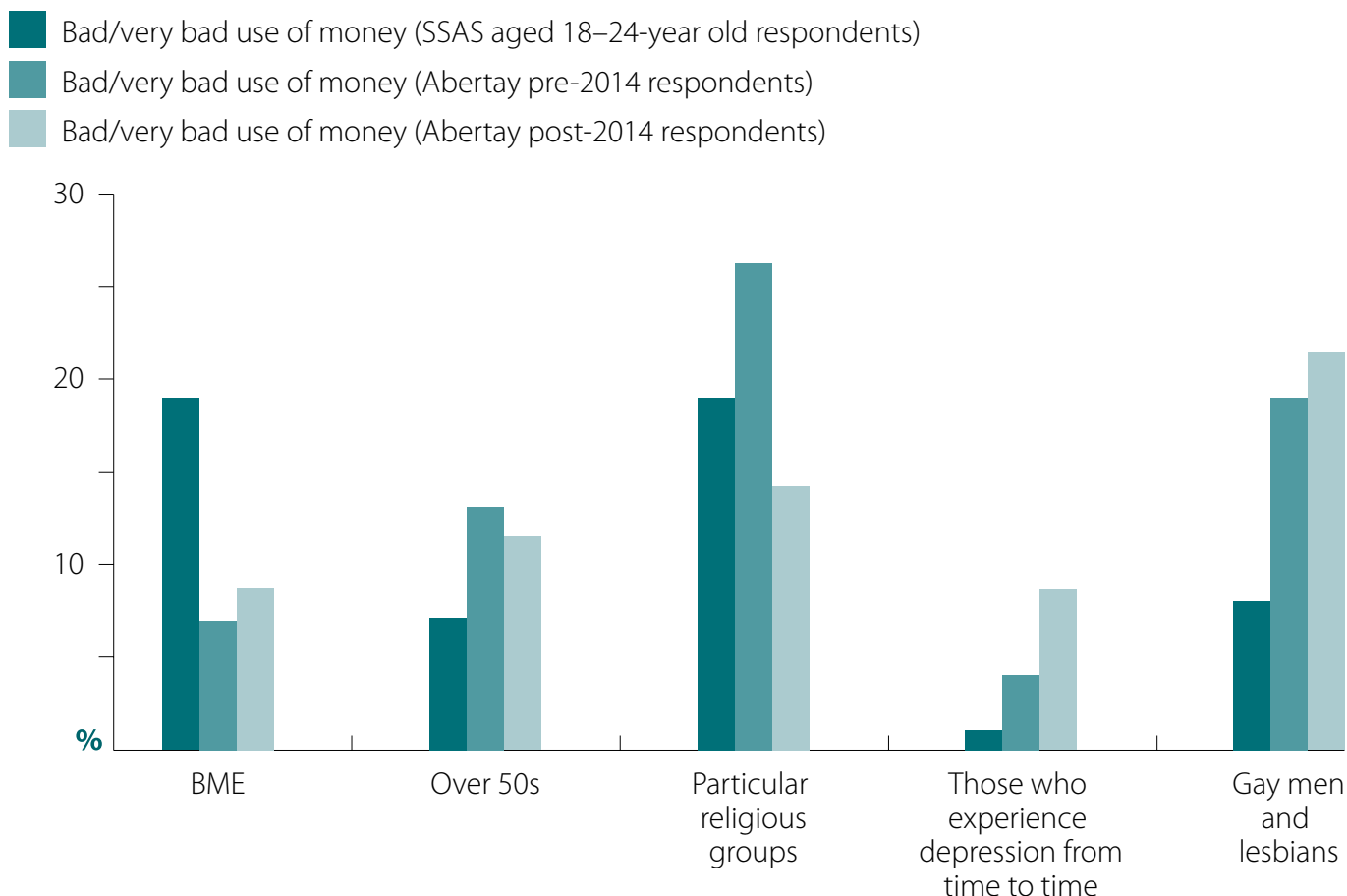


Figure 4 further shows how the students were significantly more likely to say that positive action to aid employment for gay men and lesbians was 'bad/very bad use of government money' ($\chi^2 = 4.2, p < 0.05$, pre-intervention; $\chi^2 = 5.75, p < 0.05$, post-intervention). Post-intervention, they were significantly more likely to say that positive action to aid employment for those who experience depression from time to time was 'bad/very bad use of government money' ($\chi^2 = 0.98, p > 0.05$, pre-intervention; $\chi^2 = 5.89, p < 0.05$, post-intervention).

Figure 4: Comparing sports team responses to SSAS data (18–24-year olds) on positive action and government spend

Attitudes to positive actions targeting different groups (per cent response)



Those that attended the launch event stated that they found it 'educational' and 'beneficial'. However, only about 20 per cent of those surveyed post-intervention attended, others saying that they 'didn't know it was on' or were 'busy'.

Approximately half felt that the sports teams should have an equality officer and sign a sports pledge/charter and 60 per cent said they would take part in an equality training event. The comments that accompanied this also revealed a mixture of feelings, with some saying that this would 'ensure that everyone has an opportunity to join in' while others felt that there was 'no need' or that it was the 'job of the captain' to ensure that issues of equality were addressed.

Discussion

It is acknowledged that there are evident limitations in the data owing to the brief period of the intervention and the non-matched nature of the pre- and post-survey groups. Further, the nature of the survey questions meant that respondents had limited opportunity to explain their answers. However, the surveys reveal some particularly interesting differences in the sports teams' responses when compared with the general population.

Responses were most polarised in respect to the 'equal opportunities for women' question. It was also sexist remarks that were of the higher volume on the Facebook postings. Adverse media reports regarding sports team behaviours (Denholm 2013; Ellis-Peterson 2014; Horne 2014; Mohamed 2014) tend to focus on specific misogynistic commentary. Since 92 per cent of employers use social media to recruit (Jobvite 2012), it could be argued that, if universities have a responsibility for producing employable graduates (Knight and Yorke 2003; Schomburg and Teichler 2006), then they need to ensure that students are aware that posting or producing materials with sexist commentary could have adverse consequences for future employment (O'Keefe and Clarke-Pearson 2011).

However, it is of note that only 60 per cent of respondents were interested in equality training, with some stating that there was 'no need', and a number commenting that only the team captain should undertake this. The 'no need' comment was also accompanied by several other responses where students had stated that they were already 'inclusive' – though when part of a social group, there can be a lack of awareness of those who may be being excluded (Sayed, 2003). Unfortunately, there were

no questions within the survey asking respondents to provide details of their sexual orientation, ethnic origin or religion; therefore, it is unknown how diverse the sports teams were.

Nevertheless, responses to questions around equal opportunities for gay men and lesbian women and BME groups appear to suggest that the sports team members are more inclusive than their counterparts in the general population. However, the questions around positive action to enable employment produced less favourable responses from the students with respect to gay men and lesbian women as well as with respect to those who suffer from episodic depression. Positive action exists in employment law to encourage underrepresented groups to apply for vacancies and to create a more diverse workforce. Yet, positive action is still a contentious topic with some viewing it as 'undue favouritism' (UKREN 2009), and, as with the sports teams' responses, reactions to it being mixed depending on the protected characteristic concerned and the nature of the actions (Ormston et al 2010).

Many universities have citizenship as a feature of their graduate attributes (Hounsell 2011) with the intention that these qualities are encouraged or nurtured during a student's time at university. It is of some debate whether the advancement of graduate attributes extends beyond the curriculum into students' associations and associated societies (Barrie 2007), and therefore what influence university executives have over this broader student experience. However, Jackson (2011) argues that universities should be acknowledging the co- and extra-curricular experiences of their students since this life-wide learning could develop graduates that are more able to handle real world complexity.

It is known that individuals with certain protected characteristics can find university more challenging and that they are consequently more likely to drop out of their studies (ECU 2011). Therefore, the development of a tolerant, engaged and inclusive community – in extra-curricular as well as in-curricular activities – that supports and nurtures students, and encourages them to challenge and not ignore 'banter' (Guasp et al 2014) is to be lauded.

Key findings

The emergence of negative reports regarding sports teams' non-inclusive behaviour was the original driver for the intervention at Abertay University. Initially, the scoping exercise of Facebook postings identified limited pejorative commentary on the teams' non-private pages. However, replicating questions from the SSAS revealed some quite significant and less positive differences in student responses to questions around equal opportunities for women and on positive actions to aid employment for gay men and lesbian women as well as those who periodically suffer from depression.

Recommendations and next steps

If it is the responsibility of universities to produce employable graduates who can make a real contribution to society, then those who lead on teaching and learning should consider whether educational and/or experiential interventions to broaden the inclusiveness of our student populations should be embedded in curricula.

At Abertay University, we intend to extend the survey, including to student societies with protected characteristics to ascertain how able they feel to participate in sports team activities. We also intend on continuing to work with the students' association and its societies to try to create opportunities to embed inclusiveness in their operations. Outwith Abertay, other universities' and colleges' sports unions have been approached to ascertain whether they would allow the survey to be conducted with their students with the intention that this broader set of results can be used to inform student association equality action plans.

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Capturing student perspectives to address the BAME attainment gap in higher education: a case study at Swansea University

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Key words: assessment and feedback; belonging; ethnicity degree attainment gap; student experiences; students as partners

Abstract

Existent literature points toward a considerable attainment gap between black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students and their white counterparts at a national level. In Swansea University, the latest equal opportunities annual report indicated that while 79.4 per cent of students of white origin received a good honours degree in the 2013/2014 academic year, this is only true of 57.6 per cent of their BAME peers. Across the UK, a number of initiatives have been implemented with the aim to close this gap, some of which have been considerably successful.

This paper presents the results and conclusions drawn from a consultation exercise carried out in partnership between a students' union and its university, led by the BME officer at Swansea University's Students' Union. The officer consulted with BAME students on their experiences of higher education, their insights into and perspectives on the attainment gap at Swansea University, as well as potential strategies for reducing, and ultimately closing, it. This paper illustrates the importance of the student voice in identifying causes and solutions for closing the attainment gap and thus makes a case for increased partnership between universities and students' unions in the creation of learning and teaching experiences that advance equality of opportunity.

Introduction

Existent data indicates a considerable attainment gap between black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students and their white counterparts across the UK and beyond. A report by the ECU revealed that in the 2010/2011 academic year there was a difference of 18.4 per cent between white students who achieved a 'good degree', that is a first or upper second-class degree, and their BAME peers (ECU 2012: 82).⁷ To further illustrate this gap, Richardson calculated that, based on attainment records for the previous 15 years, the odds of a non-white student obtaining a good degree are about half those of a white student (Richardson 2013: 280). More recently, ECU (2014: 136) reported that, since the 2011/2012 academic year, the ethnicity degree attainment gap has narrowed marginally in England (by 1.7 per cent) and Scotland (by 1.1 per cent), but widened in Northern Ireland (by 4.3 per cent) and Wales (by 2.9 per cent). This means that in 2012/2013, only 54.3 per cent of BAME students in Wales achieved a good degree, which compares poorly with the 67.7 per cent of white students. There are, furthermore, considerable differences between the ethnic groups within the BAME category. The same ECU report (2014: 138) shows that the attainment gap is lower for certain ethnic groups such as Asian Pakistani (13.8 per cent) and larger for others such as Black African (26.8 per cent). These outcomes place BAME students at a significant disadvantage when seeking graduate-level employment, which is reflected in the fact that the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey shows 59.1 per cent of white leavers in full-time work compared with 51.0 per cent of their BAME peers for the 2012/2013 academic year (ECU 2014: 148).

In Swansea University, the 2013/2014 equal opportunities annual report indicated that while 79.4 per cent of students of white origin received a good honours degree, this is true for only 57.6 per cent of BAME students (Swansea University 2015: 15). To an extent, the attainment gap can be linked to differences in attainment prior to higher education (Broecke and Nicholls 2007). However, this is not the only factor: Richardson (2008) statistically controlled for differences in entry-level points in his analysis and found that differences pre-university account for only half of the existing gap. Given the need for more insight in this area, we undertook to explore BAME student perspectives

⁷ This data is limited to UK-domiciled students since universities are not required to collect ethnicity data from non-UK domiciled students.

at Swansea University focusing on three main areas:

- = BAME students' experiences of higher education, particularly with respect to how it differs from pre-higher education and to previous assessment and feedback practices
- = BAME students' insights into the nation-wide attainment gap between BAME students and their white counterparts
- = BAME students' ideas as to how this attainment gap can be addressed with a view to reducing and ultimately closing it

This paper presents the results of this exploration and makes a case for increased partnership between universities and students' unions in order to create opportunities for BAME students to be actively involved in their learning and so to close the attainment gap. The crucial point is, as put by Coleman (2015), we need to urgently address the 'gap in belonging'. Only then will it be possible to address the gap in attainment.

Aims and methodology

This small study aimed to capture Swansea University students' perspectives on the attainment gap between BAME students and their white counterparts. Namely, why it exists and how it may be closed. As previously mentioned, participants were asked to consider the following:

- = their experiences of higher education
- = their insights into the nation-wide attainment gap
- = their ideas to address the attainment gap

The data was collected in partnership with Swansea University's equal opportunities team and as part of a black students' forum held on Thursday 5 March 2015. This forum was attended by 15 home and international students who self-identified as BAME. The students were asked to split into three focus groups which were facilitated by the authors,⁸ as well as Misbha Khanum

⁸ Robiu Salisu was, at the time of data collection, the part-time BME officer at Swansea University students' union. He is now the full-time education officer, representing all students with respect to academic matters. While Salisu's official title in this former role was BME officer, the authors felt that the term BAME was more appropriate for the purposes of this paper. As such, BAME is used in general and BME when referring to Salisu's role and the forum at which the data was collected. Sara Correia was then the student experience research coordinator at Swansea University Students' Union and is now a PhD candidate at the College of Law and Criminology at Swansea University.

(Swansea University's equal opportunities officer) and Alison Braddock (Swansea University's strategic project manager for widening access). The notes collected by facilitators were then thematically coded with the aid of NVivo under the three broad themes mentioned above.

The aim of this small research project was to conduct an initial exploration of themes emerging from BAME students' own perspectives. However, this was limited to a small sample of 15 students and restricted by having to keep focus groups to one hour. A further limitation was that the analysis is based on notes taken by facilitators rather than on transcribed recordings of the focus groups. Nonetheless, a variety of themes emerged from the data which provide an insight into BAME students' experiences at Swansea University and a starting point for dialogue and action to address the attainment gap at Swansea and beyond.

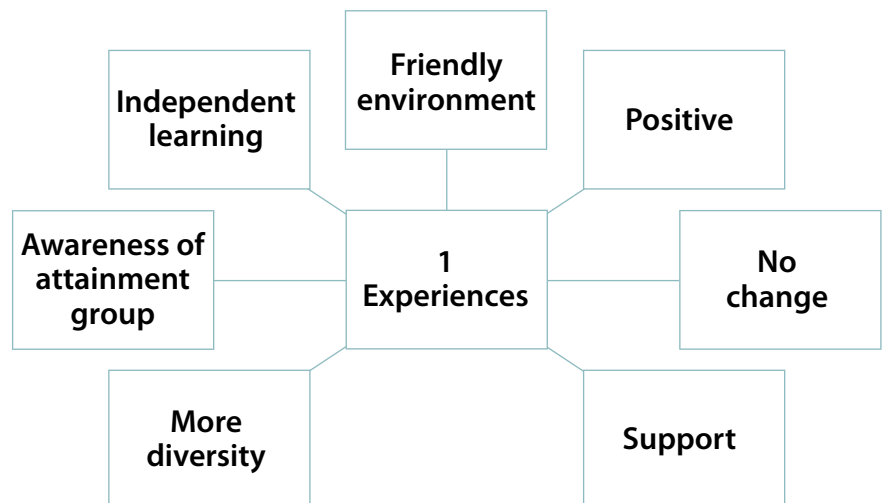
Findings and discussion

Experiences of higher education

The students taking part in this study had faced a variety of experiences of higher education, which suggests the complex nature of devising strategies to improve the student experience. Nonetheless, a number of overall themes emerged, which are illustrated in figure 1.

Most students taking part in the focus groups described their overall university experience as positive. It was further highlighted that an element of this positive experience was the diversity of the student body. In other words, having the opportunity to pursue independent learning in a diverse and friendly environment contributed towards a positive student experience. One of the participants also mentioned having been well supported throughout their time at university – although this support was perceived as more holistic in their final year. However, as will be discussed below, overall, participants in these focus groups felt that the support they received was not always adequate to their needs and/or did not reach BAME students.

Figure 1: Experiences of higher education – the themes arising from the focus groups



Participants were aware of the existence of an attainment gap between BAME students and their white counterparts either through the work of the BME officer or through attending conferences (eg NUS Wales' black students conference and NUS UK's black students conference). Others guessed that there might be a gap from their own experiences and anecdotal evidence, especially from international BAME colleagues. The authors note that the response to the BME officer's open invitation to the BME forum was very positive. This demonstrates that students were interested in this topic and willing to discuss and share their views. This has also highlighted the importance and the role students' unions and universities can play in providing BAME students with a safe space for open discussion. The authors believe that the more awareness and consciousness there is among BAME students of the existence of the attainment gap, the more these students will contribute with solutions that work for them and/or help themselves. This method stands in contrast to the more traditional top-down, one-size-fits-all institutional approaches to change. Students understand their own situation and, as demonstrated by the suggestions these participants made (explored below), students will contribute with tangible solutions when given the chance. Students' unions can play an important role, as they are well equipped to enable and support student-led activities and the student voice. Working in partnership with students' unions, universities can harness the student voice and address complex issues such as the attainment gap between BAME and white students.

How higher education differs from pre-higher education

Figure 2: The differences identified by participants between higher education and pre-higher education study

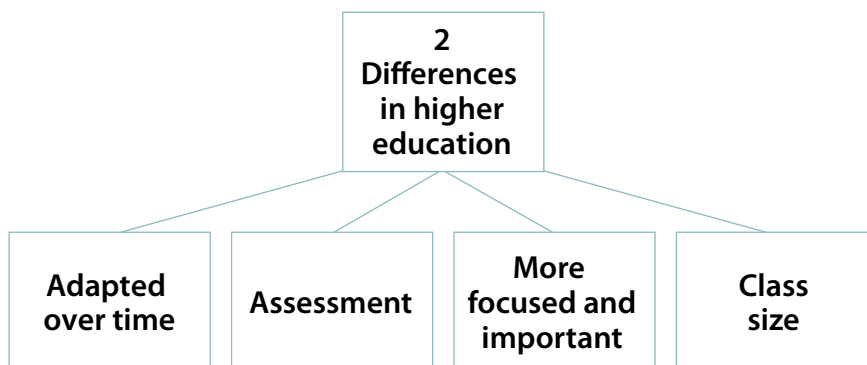


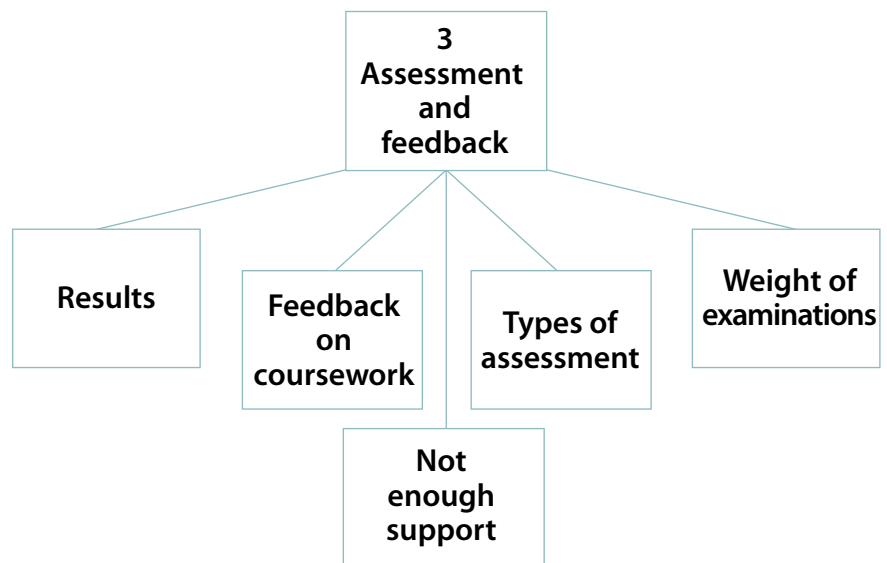
Figure 2 summarises the main differences identified by the BAME student participants between their experiences of higher education and those pre-higher education. The main themes that emerged include the impact of larger class sizes at university and the way in which student performance is assessed. As will be further explored below, the participants believed that large class sizes had a negative impact on their learning since there was less opportunity to discuss issues with lecturers face to face and/or on a one-to-one basis. At the same time, higher education requires students to be more focused and was perceived by participants as having a greater importance and a greater bearing on their future than their education up to this point. Nonetheless, some participants indicated that they felt able to adapt to these differences over time. These are, of course, issues that are common to all students transitioning into higher education. Thus, ensuring a smooth entry to university will help all students regardless of ethnicity.

Assessment and feedback

When considering educational attainment, assessment and feedback are essential contributing factors for the measuring and improving of student performance. As has already been mentioned, assessment and feedback were of great importance to the students participating in these focus groups. We found that students had taken part in a number of different types of assessment including coursework, group work and examinations. The themes that emerged on this topic are illustrated in figure 3.

In two out of the three focus groups, participants expressed concern with respect to the weighting of examinations vis-à-vis the weighting of other types of assessment. It was felt that examinations, especially when they were worth the totality of the final mark on a particular subject, led to a lot of pressure and did not facilitate learning – particularly since they usually yield no feedback. It was noted that some participants had not experienced examinations weighted in such a way prior to higher education study and that they felt better able to perform with a variety of assessment methods. Furthermore, participants felt that examination, and exam-type, assessments were often based on memorisation and therefore highlighted only one aspect of learning. Finally, in one focus group, it was mentioned that some perceived the support available to students struggling with examinations as inadequate.

Figure 3: Participant perspectives on assessment and feedback – the key themes



Student perspectives on the attainment gap

Asked to consider why there is an attainment gap between BAME students and their white counterparts, the participants suggested a series of potentially contributing factors. These can be organised into five main themes, which are summarised in table 1.

Table 1: Participants’ suggestions regarding factors contributing to the attainment gap

Theme	Summary
Access to support	<p>Coming from traditional backgrounds, some BAME students may be less likely to access formal support vis-à-vis support from family and friends. This may also occur where BAME students feel they cannot relate to staff.</p> <p>BAME students are less aware of the support services available to them and therefore do not access them as much.</p> <p>Access to one-to-one support is seen as scarce since there are few opportunities to speak to staff in large lectures and since some staff can take too long to reply to emails – or fail to reply altogether.</p>
Cultural differences	<p>International BAME students have to overcome the cultural shock associated with attempting to integrate into a different culture.</p> <p>There is a negative attitude towards BAME students which is manifested when staff speak slowly and/or patronisingly to them. BAME students are not encouraged to succeed but instead expected to fail, which is demotivating.</p> <p>There can be a lack of integration between BAME and white students: for example, students clustering along ethnic lines for seating arrangements in lectures and group work.</p>
Language barriers	<p>Although some participants did not think language barriers were the main issue, this was seen as a potential contributing factor.</p>
Inadequate services	<p>The students’ union was not felt to appeal to BAME students.</p>
Western-centric curriculum	<p>Some students felt that BAME students could not relate to what was being taught: for example, the literature used in English literature courses came only from UK and Europe, with no examples from other countries. In humanities subjects, it was felt that there were opportunities to explore authors and subjects that were not Western centric, although not in first year. In subjects like engineering, it was felt that this was not so much of an issue, although the heritage of Arab mathematicians was rarely celebrated.</p>

Table 1 sheds some light on the issues which students taking part in this study perceived to be at the core of the attainment gap between BAME and white students. It is important to note that the term BAME encloses within it a considerable diversity. As such, these factors may weigh more or less for individual students and can have a compounding effect: for example, a combination of large class sizes and being unable to relate to lecturers could combine to have a greater alienating effect on some BAME students. The section below presents a summary of the participants' suggestions for strategies to reduce this attainment gap.

Student perspectives on closing the attainment gap

Figure 4: Overall themes deriving from focus groups according to frequency

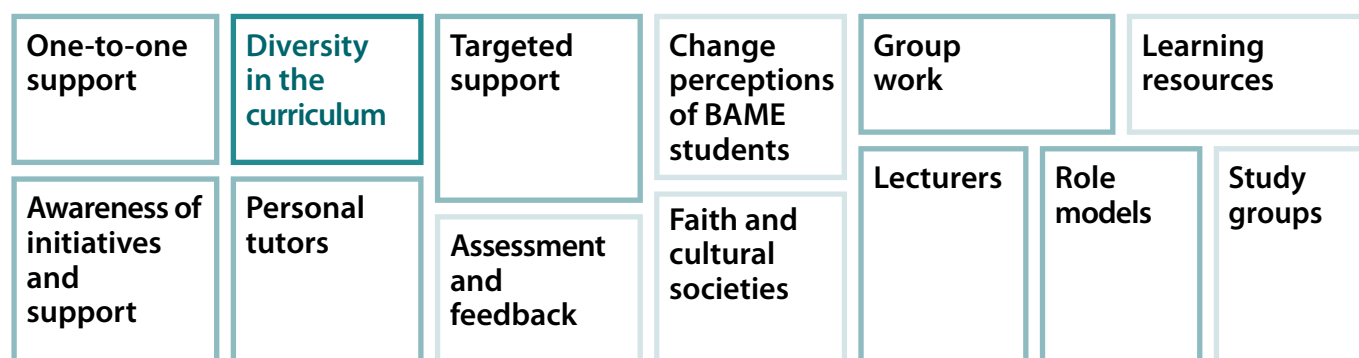


Figure 4 illustrates diagrammatically all of the themes which have emerged from our study. The size of the rectangles represents the number of focus groups in which the theme occurred, whereas the gradient colour represents the overall number of individual references to each theme. Each of these is summarised in table 2.

Table 2: Overall suggestions for reducing the BAME/white attainment gap

Theme	Summary
One-to-one support	More office hours, more individual support, and more opportunities for one-to-one contact with lecturers.
Assessment and feedback	Make sure assessment criteria are clear and explicit.
Awareness of initiatives and support	Raise awareness of support services and university-wide initiatives among BAME students.
Change perceptions of BAME students	Address the negative perceptions of BAME students through campaigns and teacher training.
Diversity in the curriculum	Reflect diversity in the curriculum, celebrate non-Western knowledge and authors, and allow for, and encourage, engagement with non-Western literature.
Faith and cultural societies	Increase the visibility of, and support the development of faith and cultural societies within students' unions.
Group work	Utilise group work to promote integration between BAME and white students.
Learning resources	Make sure learning spaces are adequate for a positive learning environment.
Lecturers	Ensure lecturers are welcoming and encouraging/expecting more of BAME students.
Personal tutors	Appoint personal tutors from either a BAME background or who can relate to BAME students. Improve the personal tutor role since students generally feel that their personal tutors do not know them well enough and that time spent with them is limited. Make processes less formal and more personal.
Role models	Increase the visibility of BAME staff and invite BAME speakers.
Study groups	Encourage mixed informal study groups.
Targeted support	Increase targeted support for BAME students, making sure lecturers are aware of the issues faced by BAME students.

Conclusions

In line with previous research, participating students identified a number of reasons which, according to their experiences, may explain why an attainment gap exists between BAME students and their white counterparts. Although entry-level points have been shown to represent 50 per cent of the existing gap (Richardson 2008), no participants in any of the three focus groups identified this as a reason for BAME students' underperformance. Instead, participants felt that they did not relate to the institution or academic staff in the same way as their white counterparts. As such, we suggest that a cultural shift within institutions is needed in order to make sure they are truly inclusive. This is not only beneficial for black students, but for the whole university community as a home for learning and sharing. We conclude that institutions cannot tackle the attainment gap without first addressing this gap in belonging.

At Swansea University, the results of this project will be presented and disseminated internally with the support of its equal opportunities team, the Swansea Academy for Inclusivity and Learner Support (SAILS), as well as the Swansea Academy for Learning and Teaching (SALT). This small research project has highlighted the benefits of working in partnership with student officers in order to reach BAME students and to be able to draw on their experiences. Students' unions and their officers are important resources for understanding the experiences of BAME students and for engaging with them as active learners. This requires working with students as partners in identifying the issues and developing solutions, and then acting on student insights and feedback. Finally, more research and monitoring of initiatives is necessary so we can better understand the barriers faced by BAME students as well as what might bring about improvements.

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