
Engaging BME students to support curriculum diversification - English Literature

The course team for English recognised the importance of having an honest conversation about their duty to listen and respond to their BME students' needs.

Area of Focus	Interventions to increase student engagement by making the English Literature undergraduate course more inclusive.
Context	The course leader had a sense that some students were able but disengaging. Success for All data highlighted concerns regarding low engagement and attendance on some modules. This led to a larger than average proportion of re-sits and lower success rates for the students, the majority of whom were from BME backgrounds. The data also revealed an attainment gap for both widening participation and BME students.
Approach	The course team carried out focus groups in order to better understand students' experience of the course in general, their module choices, their experience of assessments on the course, and their sense of belonging as students of English. The results of this data gathering revealed that the majority of BME students did not choose modules that were based around a particular historical period, but preferred theme-based modules such as those on Black Writing, and Post-Colonial literature.
Interventions	Using this insight from the students, it was decided to change a key level 4 module in order to encourage more BME students to choose this module: the focus was changed from a historical period to the theme of Ethnicity in American writing. In addition, two exam assessments on the course are being changed to essays that will allow for more creativity and self-expression for the students.
Initial Outcomes	Outcomes will be explored when these changes come into effect in 2019/20.
Challenges and next steps	<p>Challenges encountered along the way included persuading colleagues to consider strategies to support students from particular demographic groups. The course leader felt:</p> <p><i>"We need to be more explicit and honest about who we're helping and why—say this openly and say that we have a problem and that we have a duty to help the students."</i></p> <p>There was some resistance from colleagues about BME students feeling "singled out" if they were asked for their views as a distinct group. Some colleagues also felt discomfort in discussing issues such as race. Nevertheless, the course leader felt it important that the voices of BME students be heard. In this respect, she found it useful to draw on the support of colleagues in CADQ, who provided evidence from literature, primary research, and their own experiences in order to help make the case for BME-focussed discussions and strategies.</p>
Contact details	Stephanie Palmer, previously Course Leader for English stephanie.palmer@ntu.ac.uk