**Belonging in the School of Education**

A decolonial insight into the experiences of teaching and learning among minority ethnic students

Action Plan by

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# Executive Summary

This report is based on the data gathered by the Think Diversity Survey June/July 2022 and four focus groups with minority ethnic students in the School of Education (SoE), the University of Birmingham. It attempts to explore and develop an in-depth understanding of the learning experiences of minority ethnic students in SoE, with an ultimate aim of constructing a more inclusive and diverse teaching and learning environment for all.

The key findings extracted from the report are:

* Two in five minority ethnic students were **unable to see their race or ethnicity represented in the learning materials** of most modules they took.
* In regard to the accessibility of module contents, the majority (60%) of the minority ethnic students felt that they were facing either or both the **language barrier and cultural barrier in comprehending module contents**, which resulted in them often doing extra research and reading work.
* 62% of the respondents believed they were given **opportunities to explore controversial race and ethnic issues** in their programmes. The focus group discussion, nonetheless, revealed that a number of minority ethnic students were **unsatisfied with the modules’ exploration of controversial racial issues**; the visibility of the issues they considered as ‘controversial’ is low in some modules they took.
* In contrast to most survey respondents’ positive responses, the analysis of the focus groups revealed a **strong feeling of alienation and exclusion** experienced by participants during seminars. Many participants reported their problems in seminar discussions, especially with white students, during seminars due to their race and/or ethnicity.
* While the vast majority of minority students believed that **SoE staff hold an open attitude toward student comments and opinions**, the analysis of the focus groups revealed that **some minority ethnic participants feel more comfortable working with minority teachers**.
* 50% of minority ethnic students felt their **assignments did not focus on topics related to their race or ethnicity**. In particular, Muslim and/or mixed or multiple background participants felt they could not explore topics related to their race and ethnicity in their assignments.
* 46% of the participants believed their **minority ethnicity influenced their academic performance**. This influence may be due to multiple factors such as language, culture and religion.
* More than half of the **students at SoE believed they belonged to their programme learning community**. However, in the focus group, some students reported **difficulties in integrating** into classroom discussions, which resulted in their strong feeling of alienation.
* 64% of students said their **programme had prepared them well for a diverse employment environment**, and the vast majority were **satisfied with the level of academic supports offered by SoE**.

Based upon the outcomes of both the survey and focus group analyses including but not limited to the key findings listed above, the report is concluded with several recommendations for SoE to consider as measures to improve minority ethnic students’ teaching and learning experiences. These recommendations are outlined below. A detailed elaboration on each of the recommendations will be given in the final section of the report.

# Recommendations

**Recommendation 1. Module Contents**

1. Modules should **diversify the range of the controversial issues** covered, by including topics that are pertinent to different race or ethnic groups across the world.
2. The **reading lists of modules could be re-evaluated and adjusted**, wherever appropriate, to include more non-Western scholars’ perspectives.
3. Module contents, such as the case studies and images used in lecture slides could be re-designed to prevent constructing an unbalanced and binary white-minority ethnic representation.

**Recommendation 2. Class Participation**

1. Seminar tutors should ensure **minority ethnic students’ voices are also included** as part of the seminar discussions.
2. Seminar tutors should **ensure a safe environment for all to share their views** (especially those students who are known to be less confident) and take corresponding actions when/if unwelcoming attitudes towards minority ethnic students are observed (and vice versa).
3. For modules which set up group assignment for students, **a** **channel could be set up for minority ethnic students to report the difficulties they face during group work** as a result of their race or ethnicity.

**Recommendation 3. Staff**

1. As mentioned previously, the staff should ensure that the voice of minority ethnic student are also included as part of the seminar discussion.
2. Where possible, teaching strategies should be designed to **foster inter-ethnic communication and interaction**.

**Recommendation 4. Assignments**

1. **Assignment options and topics could be designed to be more diverse**.

**Recommendation 5. Student Voice**

1. **Regular meetings** could be held within the School to gather feedback from minority ethnic students. Feedback extracted from the meetings should be communicated with the corresponding programmes.
2. **Mid-module and end-of-module reviews** could include specific questions about students’ sense of belonging and the extent to which they may see themselves reflected in their modules.

**Recommendation 6. Academic Performance**

1. It is known that ethnicity (along with other intersecting factors) influence students’ academic performance. A **clear action plan** from the School could be communicated with students to raise awareness of key issues such as the awarding gap and discuss potential **strategies in collaboration with on-going discussions (e.g. updates, assessment)**.

**Recommendation 7. Sense of Belonging**

1. Lectures could **foster students’ sense of belonging** by including discussion of class values, such as respect for others in class, in the first session.
2. SoE could initiate **more activities for students across different ethnicities to connect socially** and have friendly interactions with one another.

**Recommendation 8. Employability**

1. SoE can organise more **inter-ethnic projects and activities** to learn from each other.
2. SoE could **strengthen the personal tutor's role** in helping students understand their career path better and support them with planning for their future career.

**Recommendation 9. Support from SoE**

1. A school review could be conducted to **bring staff together to discuss approaches** that the School could adopt to better respond to minority ethnic students’ raised or unraised needs in relation to their learning.

# Action Plan

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| **Recommendations for Teaching and Learning** | **Actions Planned** | **Owners** |
| **Short Term** |  |  |
| **R2 Class Participation**To ensure a safe environment for minority ethnic students to share their views: * A channel for students to report difficulties
 | Identify member(s) of staff for students to approach and speak to in confidence | SMT |
| **R3 Staff**To ensure staff implement pedagogical strategies to foster inter-ethnic communication and interaction during small group teaching sessions (e.g. seminars, tutorials, workshops):* Purposeful inter-ethnic student pairing/group formation for discussions, activities, assignments
* Group activities in first small group teaching session to support interaction through icebreakers
* Voices of minority ethnic students included in discussions
 | Teaching and learning guidance to clearly articulate strategies for inter-ethnic collaborations with clear examples that show how these can be applied in practice across different teaching sessions | SMTDirector of Education |
| **R5 Student Voice**To create channels for minority ethnic students to provide feedback on their academic and social experiences | Specific questions in mid- and end-module reviews on belonging and extent to which students see themselves reflected in their modules | SMTProgramme/module leads |
| **Long Term** |  |  |
| **R1 Module Contents**To decolonise content* Include range of topics pertinent to different ethnic groups across the world
* Include country-specific case studies to reflect diversity of student groups
* Reading lists to include multitude of perspectives beyond white and/or Eurocentric authors and up to date with latest research

Supporting material to offer balance and non-binary group relations (e.g. images on slides, videos shown during teaching) | Time given to staff to support research and other work required to decolonise modules (this recognises the on-going process involved in implementing a decolonial agenda)End of year module reviews and peer-observations to include specific sections on decolonisation of the module contentStaff resources to support reflections on module reviews | SMTDecolonisation Lead |
| **R4 Assignments**To offer independence to students fostering diversity and inclusion* Essay questions/topics designed to provide opportunities for students to conduct research on a country/topic/group of their interest
 | Teaching and learning guidance to clearly articulate strategies for assignment development/review with clear examples that show how these can be applied in practice across different modules | SMTDirector of EducationDecolonisation Lead |
| **R5 Student Voice**To offer continuous space for minority ethnic students to engage with staff and share their views* Student representatives invited to programme and departmental meetings and/or teaching and learning forums
* Student representatives to meet programme and module leads
* Students to share views on materials and topics discussed in modules and seminars
 | Create paid role(s) for minority ethnic student representative(s) akin to student and EDI student ambassadors  | SMT |
| **R6 Academic Performance**To actively involve students in matters related to their academic performance* Raise awareness of key matters such as awarding gap at start of first academic year
* Communicate to students/student representatives/ThinkDiversity a clear action plan to address awarding gap
* Collaborate with students/student representatives/ThinkDiversity on action plan
 | Explore opportunities during induction weekInvite student representatives/ThinkDiversity to contribute to key meetings (e.g. APP, EDI, SMT) at School and College level | Programme leadsStudent Experience officerDecolonisation LeadSMTAPP, EDI leads |
| **R7 Sense of Belonging**To foster and strengthen sense of belonging to the School’s learning community * Inter-ethnic social activities
* Successful implementations of R1-5
 | Provide resources for organisation of activities (e.g. funding, identify member of staff, recognise workload implications)Survey students on activities and/or other projects they may like to see | SMTDecolonisation leadThinkDiversity |
| **R8 Employability**To help all students understand their career path better and support them with planning for their future career* Programme specific events with Careers Network team in first academic year and repeat in subsequent years
* Programme specific event with Alumni
 | Develop events with Careers Network Team and Alumni | Programme leadsStudent Experience officer |
| **R9 Support from the School of Education**To bring together staff to discuss teaching and learning strategies and reviews * Discussions of above recommendations
* Involvement of student representatives/ThinkDiversity in shaping staff discussions
 | Undertake survey of staff to better understand their position in relation to the decolonial agenda and support they may need to implement the above recommendationsCreate dedicated forum for staff to come together and discuss the above recommendations  | SMT |