

Diversity and Innovation Project

REPORT – PHASE I (Enquiry)

August 2019

Mission Statement

To research diversity and belonging within the school in order to promote innovative ways of supporting our diverse student body. The Project aims to focus on a) recruitment and induction b) academic and pastoral support c) teaching and assessment d) initiatives to improve progression rates e) enhancing the student experience and f) graduate outcomes (employability). The project will be student-focused and the student voice will be captured through surveys and focus-groups in order to inform existing and new practices

The aim of the project was to understand the 'make-up' of the School of Law's undergraduate students in terms of diversity and attainment and devise innovative teaching practices to cater for their differing needs.

The School of Law at Royal Holloway, University of London (RHUL), was established in September 2015 and is a multi-disciplinary school with a number of undergraduate programmes. The school has three distinct undergraduate programme groups: LLB (including Law, Law with Criminology, Law with Sociology, Law with Politics, Law with International Relations), BSc Criminology and Sociology ('CrimSoc') and BSc Criminology and Psychology ('CrimPsych'). Each programme also has

a year in industry variant. The USP of the school is that we are interdisciplinary and so one of the challenges is to integrate the different academic approaches to teaching as well as the different disciplines and different outlooks of our students. The project was also driven by one of the aims in the RHUL Strategic Plan: "Royal Holloway seeks to attract independently minded students who will benefit from a personalised education and go on to be socially responsible leaders" (see Strategic Plan 2013 – 2020).

This project aims to help the institution support those aims and to prepare an interdisciplinary school for the challenges of change in the field of Higher Education as a result of the proposed Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TESOF) whilst retaining diversity, opportunity and choice for our student community.

Phase I of the project was an enquiry and began in June 2018 and concluded in May 2019.

The project team undertook both a quantitative and qualitative approach to data collection. The data collection was for the period 2015 – 2017 representing the first three years of the operation of the law school from both entry and exit of its first cohort of students. The findings are set out in a separate **findings report**.

Project Lead: Dr Rita D'Alton-Harrison

Project Team: Mr Stefan Brown, Dr Mastoureh Fathi, Dr Aislinn O'Connell, Dr Michelle Webster, Dr David Yuratich

Student Diversity Champions: Tatiana Costa, Tina Khorram, Sophie Malby, Sayaka Ono Idris, Dhillon Tanveer

Student voices were crucial to the project – our student champions facilitated our focus group discussions to ensure a safe space and collect accurate representations

Below: (L-R) team members Dr Aislinn O'Connell, Dr Michelle Webster, Dr Rita D'Alton-Harrison (project lead), and Dr David Yuratich.



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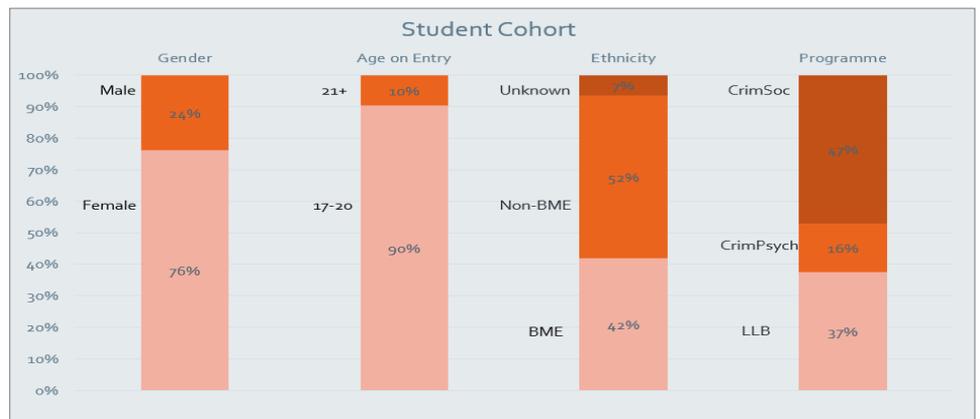
Diversity in Higher Education



The Equality Challenges Unit (now Advance HE) 2017 report provides the following statistics:

1. Students aged 26+ are more likely to study part-time than full-time
2. The proportion of students who have registered as disabled rose from 5.4% in 2003/04 to 11.3% in 2015/16; in 2015-16 there were more disabled students on undergraduate courses (12.8%) than postgraduate courses (7.3% taught and 7.6% research)
3. Students disclosing a mental health condition have risen from 1.3% in 2013/14 to 2.0% in 2015/16
4. There are more females (56.5%) studying in Higher Education than males (43.5%)
5. Marginally more women (75.1%) than men (70.7%) qualify with a first class degree
6. 21.8% of students disclosing ethnicity data identified as BME
7. Around one in three students studying law identified as BME

The School of Law has a much higher proportion of female students than the national average, and a lower proportion of mature students (age 21+ on entry). The proportion of mature students has also reduced in the last five years. Our proportion of BME students is much higher than the national average – almost twice as high. The intersectionality aspects of these factors also play a role in our investigations into student experiences and attainment.



Tell Us More About The Project



The project team undertook both a quantitative and qualitative approach to data collection. The quantitative data was for the period 2015–2017 representing the first three years of the operation of the School of Law from both entry and exit of its first cohort of students. We augmented this with a survey offered to all undergraduate students and focus groups drawn from students who indicated interest in participating.

More females than males responded to the survey – this may be indicative of the school profile where there are more females registered on courses across the school. This is also the profile across the College.

The survey data showed that our students described themselves as coming from diverse backgrounds e.g. 'European Latino', 'mixed race', 'Hispanic', 'Italian', 'Chinese' 'Mestiza' etc. This maps well onto our quantitative analysis, which shows our diverse cohort.

The majority of respondents were in the 18-20 age group.

15% of respondents indicated that they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or pansexual.

Approximately 10% of the respondents declared themselves to have a disability.

4% of respondents declared themselves as having caring responsibilities.

There was a low engagement by BTEC students in the survey

Approximately 40 respondents were living in halls of residence and 25 were living with family.

Whilst the vast majority of respondents had a commute that was shorter than 40 minutes, 14% of respondents had a commute that was more than 1 hour.

Students on the Criminology and Psychology programme were difficult to collect data from – both survey and focus group.

See our findings report for more detail

Literature Review: The BME Attainment Gap

In a review of the research literature around BME retention and success, Singh (2010) identifies "a shift away from a defensive posture associated with fulfilling legislative and regulatory requirements, to more proactive responses aimed at developing pedagogical strategies for addressing BME attainment".

(Thomas et al. (2009) reviews 129 submissions from HEIs in England including post grad institutions, and shows:

Lack of sensitivity to retention of BME: although 84% of HEIs identified BME students as a target group for access to HE, "only about half of these institutions (57, 44%) are sensitive to the retention, achievement and progression of these groups"

Two way factors mutually constituting each other: "differences between BME students and white students appear to relate to both **rate of retention or withdrawal and achievement**"

When is the right time to intervene?

Much of the institutional work to address differential retention and achievement **"is at an early stage"**;

Different forms of intervention: "the most popular type of intervention beyond data collection and analysis seems to be mentoring and **the creation of role models**"

The MacGregor-Smith Review (2017) found that BME individuals faced discrimination and bias throughout their career and even before it began. Again, leadership and culture is seen as 'enabling and crucial' as well as



openly discussing race.

The latest report from OfS states that black students achieve worse degrees than white students at almost half of universities.

Studies show that:

- BME students obtain poorer degree results than white students even when controlling for prior attainment, age, gender and discipline (Cotton et al. 2016).
- Female students achieve better than male students (Broecke & Nicholls, 2008).
- Entry qualifications, gender and type of institutions influence attainment. BME females do better than BME male students (Cotton et al., 2016)

What Do We Know About The Attainment Gap So Far?

Miller (2016) conducted a comprehensive literature review on the known research relating to BME/BAME attainment. The key themes were summarised as: 'building research to provide a base of evidence; raising staff knowledge and awareness; working with students as collaborative partners; the provision of safe spaces for discussion; and the use of language that revolves around success, empowerment, and aspiration' (104).

- There are more BME/BAME students in England (25%) than any other part of the UK and black undergraduates make up 7% of the total undergraduate student population in the UK (ECU, 2017)
- The gap between black and white students is 22% for 2016/17, as compared to 11% between Asian and white students (Office for Students 2018)
- The attainment gap is consistently worse for black students than other BME/ME students (Miller, 2016)
- The attainment gap exists even allowing for differences in prior attainment, type of institution, type of subject studied, age and socio-economic factors (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007)
- BME/BAME students, when surveyed, had a

different perception of the reasons for the attainment gap from reasons given previously by researchers. For example, they cited financial constraints that required them to work whilst studying and feelings of marginalisation (Cousins et al., 2008).

- Living at home can give a student a statistical disadvantage but this is reversed and seems to have a significantly statistical advantage for Asian students (Fielding et al., 2008)
- The attainment gap tends to be highest between students not studying SET subjects (science, education and technology) (Stevenson, 2012a)
- Research has found that BME/BAME students have a limited view of their 'future self' (Stevenson, 2012b)
- We should not look at BME/BAME as a homogenous group but consider each sub-group's needs (Miller, 2016)
- BME/BAME students can struggle on vocational courses with placements particularly in the area of social work due to literacy and maths skills as well as social barriers and 'credentialism' (qualification inflation) (Dhillon, 2011)
- BME/BAME individuals faced discrimination and bias throughout their career and even before their careers began. Leadership and culture is seen as 'enabling and crucial' as well as openly discussing race (MacGregor-Smith Review, 2017)
- Transformational change is best achieved using applied research to discover what strategies work best for an institution/school (Universities UK and NUS, 2019)



Methodology

Four goals and milestones were set by the project team with an interpretive approach:

Milestone 1 – starting the learning process of *understanding* our diverse student body, the team set out to first understand the diverse make-up of our students by interrogation of the literature and school/college data.

Milestone 2 – The next stage was to *Listen* to the student voice by issuing a survey to students. 121 students completed our survey. From this we identified 7 themes of belonging – see our **findings report**.

Milestone 3 – We then *Listened Further* to the student voice through focus groups. We asked the student union and our student reps to assist to help students open up to us and talk frankly by talking to another student.

Milestone 4 – We have delivered a **Report** to the school with recommendations as to innovative

approaches to offering an equitable learning experience for our diverse body of students.

We hope this methodology will assist other schools that wish to undertake similar work with their student body. Please contact any member of the project team if you would like any further information, help or assistance.

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We will begin to take our recommendations forward in phase 2 of our project from September 2019. This will include considering the new School structure

Quantitative Method

The quantitative data comprised data from the college's Dashboard system as well as pivot tables prepared by the college's Strategic Planning and Change department. These statistics addressed degree classification by ethnicity, gender, disability and age. However, surveys were relied on to capture details of sexuality, travel and caring responsibilities of students. The team considered three years' worth of data. The data related to the 2015-16 entry cohort up to and including the 2017-18 entry cohort. The survey design included questions relating to demographics as well as teaching and academic support. Open-text boxes were included to collect more detailed data.



Qualitative Method

The focus groups took a semi-structured approach to the interview process and student were provided with some broad questions for discussion. There were initially five focus groups (BME/BAME, LGBTQ+, LLB, CrimSoc, and CrimPsych). Unfortunately, the CrimPsych focus group did not go ahead as students failed to attend. The project therefore proceeded on the basis of the remaining four groups. The focus group interviews were conducted by student diversity champions who undertook research training provided by the project team.

Overarching themes were taken from the focus groups, to compare how different student groups perceived their experiences in the School of Law. There were some interesting parallels as well as clear contradictions between groups.

Each group's discussion was also analysed to pull out issues specific to their circumstances – programme or identity related. Actions going forward will take into account these different needs and priorities.

See our full bibliography in the Diversity and Innovation Project Report, or on our website at <https://www.rhul.ac.uk/research-and-teaching/departments-and-schools/law/news/diversity-and-innovation-project/>

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