

21. The experience of Black people in Higher Education (HE) institutions

Conference notes with alarm and concern the steady decrease in numbers of first-time applicants to university which has decreased by 5% for UK students and 7% for the EU students. These figures are particularly concerning when broken down by age group where we will find the number of 19-year-old applicants has fallen by 9%, 20-year-olds by 9%, 20 to 24-year-olds by 15% and 25 and over by 25%. This is particularly acute for people from Black communities where statistically we know there is a higher concentration of Black applicants in older groups.

This is similarly reflected in the nursing professions where the proportion of older applicants on average is always higher in Black applicants. This figure in the UK has gone down by 23%, 10% of whom are from the Black population and generally for overseas students coming to this country figures have fallen by a staggering 98%.

It is clear that such a reduction into academia for Black students reduces our potential to hold higher POSITIONS in the career strands and limits our possibilities for work development and advancement in the political arena, the justice system, other professional occupations and society as a whole. Financial disadvantage and low socio economic status affects our standard of living, housing, health and in turn affects our children and their life chances.

Furthermore, the experience of Black students - our members amongst them- continues to be disproportionately negative (National Union of Students (NUS) report). It is reported by the NUS, that Black people are less likely to be satisfied with their educational experience and less likely to attain first class degree status in comparison to their white peers. It is said that there are institutional barriers and (critically) neglect of Black students.

A number of things are contributory factors to this poor experience for Black students poor socio-economic backgrounds, lack of academic skills and backgrounds in creating the level of debate required to argue at academic level, racial and cultural bias which exists from application right through to marking and this is reflected in first degree status. Black students have also stated that there can be an inability to have their perspective as Black students recognised.

The prevailing lack of Black lecturers in HE institutions contributes to a lack of empathy as to the experience of Black students who complain of the lack of support and constructive feedback. Many students feel marginalised and socially excluded. The inability of Black students on average to compete at the same financial advantage precludes them to increased stress and the requirement for additional specific support as they go through their studies, this however is deemed to be lacking and if it is provided, it is unlikely to be culturally sensitive.

Conference asks that this critical issue is highlighted and therefore calls upon the Higher Education Service Group Executive Committee to work with the National Black Members Committee (NBMC) to:

- a) Highlight the recommendations of the NUS Race for Equality report which suggests action on a number of barriers to the participation of Black students in education via UNISON media;
- b) Seek to support campaigns that highlight the decrease in numbers of students to university, including negative experiences and reported disadvantage of Black students;

- c) Continue to recognise and challenge racism at every level of education institutions just as UNISON has continued to do in other public sector occupations with its “Challenging Racism in the Workplace” toolkit;
- d) Highlight the impact of the institutional racism that prevails, and provide education as to the terminology of unconscious bias amongst the membership in Black Action and UNISON media;
- e) Request that regular audit be made of the employment levels of Black staff in further and Higher Education institutions via our own structures in these sector groups in order to inform our campaigning work and the wider political debate such as with the Higher Education and Research Bill in the House of Lords;
- f) Explore and discuss how to best document the experiences of Black students who have been supported via the UNISON bursary scheme and other financial initiatives which have enabled access into Higher Education and Further Education in order to gain more specific knowledge which could support improvements in the system;
- g) Continue to work with UNISON Learning and Organising team and NEC Black representatives to ensure the use of the bursary scheme is being widely encouraged within regions and branches and promote this via UNISON media.

National Black Members' Committee