

MINORITY COMMUNITIES LEARNING NEEDS AND PERSPECTIVES

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Higher Education Institutions' agendas for widening participation have a responsibility to embrace the perspective of diverse populations whose communities' faiths, cultures, and social and political backgrounds differ. Within Britain, each Asian community have settled as a unit in differing areas. For instance, the Sikh Punjabi community is concentrated in Southall, West London, whilst the Bangladeshi community is settled in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Also, Asian cultures vary according to factors that pertain to country of origin, rural or urban background of the household prior to migration, regional background, linguistic background and class position in the sub continent and in the British regional location. Therefore, widening participation strategies need to promote race equality, and consequently should involve planning of how to effectively target action, how the strategy is delivered and monitoring of the action. An institution's anti-racist strategy needs to have ownership from everyone, thereby ensuring that it is active and understandable. Turney (2001) and Law (2002) outline that widening participation requires higher education institutions to make institutional change in order to ensure there is access and participation for under-represented groups. This issue also falls within the requirements of the Race Relations Amendment Act of 2000.

From another perspective, the growth of the European Union and pressure to bring European states towards a common European identity conflicts with the growing demand for the independence or recognition of minorities, and the cultural diversity of Europe. Therefore, as Assister (1999) states, active citizenship is achievable to a certain extent through the promotion of social inclusion, established structures in legislation, policies, funding availability, educational opportunities and giving a voice to marginalised people, who view the world with different perspectives influenced by their various social, religious and cultural backgrounds.

I am going to give an account of work undertaken with Bangladeshi Muslim women and Indian Sikh women in East London. These communities' outlook on their life is influenced by their differing religions, languages and customs. Therefore, differing approaches have been undertaken to implement the widening participation agenda with these two Asian communities. Later, there will be an exploration of the need to recruit staff members from specific communities to deliver community based learning due to the changing communities' needs when collaborating with specific organisations. Most funding bodies require projects to work in partnership with other services in order to promote added value and effectively meet the learning gaps of the communities. This can be achieved through addressing partnership arrangements, management support and the Race Relations Amendment Act's requirements.

Bangladeshi Sylhet Muslim Women

The Sylhet community is from a rural region of Bangladeshi. This community tends to be orthodox with respect to the way they interpret Islam, and this influences their outlook on life, values, the acceptability and expectations of women, as well as issues of integration with other communities.

Within the community's cultural tradition, the male is considered to be the main breadwinner of the household and women are responsible for the family and domestic obligations. Women are not encouraged to engage in employment, as it is culturally expected that the man is the main provider for the family materially. However, there appears to be some contradiction for women in Bangladesh who are living in poverty and need to earn to feed and clothe their families, as Bangladesh does not have a welfare state similar to Britain. Women from rural areas receive no training from governmental organisations. Whilst some may gain employment in rural family planning and health care services and other public sector programmes in rural and urban areas (Jeffrey and Basu 1998), in rural areas for women to find work means public censure. For example, in Talukpur, a village in Sylhet, northeast of Bangladesh, women work as domestic workers, but this often has to be kept a secret.

In the UK, a large proportion of the Bangladeshi community face difficulties in finding employment and are largely excluded from the labour market, are located within low income categories, live in council housing, have young children (on average three children per family) and have low esteem. Therefore, issues raised within the course content were introduced through various interpretations from the Holy Quran, which reflected upon acceptance of Muslim women undertaking identified activities. Issues tackled included employability, confidence, assertiveness, legislation (especially those related to race relation and discrimination policies), the British education system, political achievements of ethnic minorities and various services available.

Bangladeshi women do realise the need to become self sufficient, but despite low economic and financial constraints, they will not question the norm of the accepted status of Sylhet women within their community. Once the women had reflected on the various Islamic teachings in relation to their upbringing, family situations and future aspirations, they began to understand the need for them to become more aware of their surroundings, current affairs and services. This means engaging as active citizens and in adult learning. The women felt they needed to find ways to achieve this, no matter how limited, whilst balancing their cultural expectations, and religious beliefs. Sudbury's (1998) previous research showed how by giving women knowledge of their rights, under Islam law, to education, divorce, property and money assisted them in gaining the support of Muslim communities and religious leaders, while at the same time challenging the practices of traditional mosques.

The women wanted to play a part in enabling their daughters to get an opportunity to take advantage of educational and career opportunities. The Sylhet community is worried about encouraging their daughters to continue their education due to fear they will lose their culture, religion and dishonour the family through culturally unacceptable actions. These anxieties have meant that many families send their children back home to Bangladesh with the intention of preventing them from losing their cultural identity. As a consequence, they return back to Britain in their teens having missed out on valuable years of a British education. This can in some respect affect these children's chances of accessing certain educational opportunities on their return to England. For example, Brah's study (1992) found those Muslim women who had come to England as teenagers had left school without achieving any formal qualifications due to English language difficulty.

Sikh Indian Women

The Sikh women's conference held at the University of East London highlighted that Sikhism advocated equal status for women and men in all areas of life. This means opposition to oppressive customs and the perceived inferiority of women, a notion which according to Gill (1995) can be dated back to medieval times when women had no identity of their own and were viewed as a commodity. This instigated the Sikh religion to make changes to the status of women, and has involved several factors, which have promoted equality. Kaur-Singh (2002) states that Sikhism opposed the systems of *sati* (burning of a woman with the dead body of her husband), as it was sinful. It had been traditional for widows to observe certain restrictions but Sikhism encouraged widows to remarry amongst Sikhs. Equality was promoted in the *Gurdwaras* (Sikh temples) where the *langar* (communal meal) system encourages men and women to cook, clean and serve food. There is no discrimination on the basis of caste, religion and everyone sits together to take part in the meal. Sikh women are forbidden to wear a veil. The birth of a girl in the family had been viewed as a liability, but the Sikh religion promoted the woman to be not only equal with men in social and religious affairs, but also an equal partner in the areas of war and peace. Equality was promoted through each Sikh man being given the name 'Singh', which means supremacy. Women were given the name 'Kaur' which is associated with the word 'Kanwar' given to the eldest son in a King's household. This gives a message that women are given equal respect as men in Sikhism.

The flexibility and equality promoted by the Sikh religion made it easier to introduce certain topics and issues amongst Sikh women. Hence the women in this study analysed the extent of inequality of everyday practice in relation to their own status within the community and how this contradicted Sikh religious teachings. It was felt that the social and cultural conventions followed by Sikh families make it impossible for Sikh women to enjoy equal rights and opportunities. Nonetheless there was a general belief that Sikh women do have a strong position in comparison to other Asian religious groups since they are brought up in a cultural environment where the notion of equality is an inherent part of their religion (Arora 2002).

Gender differences still remain given that parents assume responsibility until the woman is married and in-laws make decisions about the marriage. This places some difficulty upon women in planning their careers. Women report that they want improvement in the treatment of daughters-in-law and better communication between families and extended families.

Young Sikh women were generally happy to combine both English and Asian cultures, without losing their identity and history. It was understood that young people are more active in expressing their views and are not accepting arranged marriages, and are caught up in a generation gap and culture clash. Sikh parents acknowledge they need to listen, communicate and compromise, but at the same time they do not want them to lose their religion and identity. It appears this anxiety is also shared by some younger Sikhs. Singh and Dhillon (2003) state that the British Organisation of Sikh Students has emphasised that Sikh youth need to become more aware of their true identity and rich heritage. This organisation seeks to achieve this by organising *Gatka* (martial arts), *Nagar Kirtains* (Sikh religion processions) and Sikhi weeks for university students. Sikh women want greater participation in pursuing education, self

development and equality, as demonstrated through Sikhism, to be practiced in the 21st century.

Promoting Equality in Higher Education

The Race Relations Amendment Act of 2000 (Commission for Racial Equality 2002) implies that educational institutions need to value cultural diversity to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equal opportunities and good racial relations. The promotion of equality should be integral to all the institutions' corporate strategies, policies, objectives and processes. This also includes receiving of external funding. Changes need to come from top down. Over the years the higher education sector has considered issues around 'race equality' within general discussions, but examining the effects of racism and discrimination has not been fully explored through policies and in practice.

Higher Education Institutions are to a certain extent dependent on external funding to engage in developmental initiatives to deliver community based learning. External funders are usually keen to prioritise projects which include beneficiaries from identified Black and Asian communities who are not benefiting from accessing education and training opportunities and attaining employability. Bird *et al* (1992) foresaw that partnership arrangements involving multiple partners in projects with shared financing can encourage universities to specialise in the recruitment of non-traditional students, be more effective in doing so and discourage competition among institutions.

External funders' conditions emphasise partnership leading to added value and the promotion of equality during the delivery of the project activities, as well within the organisations' services. The Learning and Skills Council, a national statutory body, provides funding to increase the participation and achievements of learners at all levels. The Learning and Skills Council - London East aims to ensure equality and diversity, as well as initiating an environment where learners can contribute to the economy. It is recognised this is achievable through working in partnership with selected providers. However, the partnerships need to ensure they are promoting equality in utilising the skills of Asian and Black staff, who may be able to provide more effective delivery to local communities. This in effect means providers need to include in their bids how such staff would contribute to the delivery of project activities. However, the means by which this is operationalised needs to be scrutinised by the organisation. What is written in the bid may not reflect what is done in practice. Asian and Black staff can be used to gain ideas, access to specific communities and organisations, but be given little or no importance in the project. White staff may become the project co-ordinators who could then take credit for the project, without acknowledging the involvement of Asian and Black staff. Existing Asian and Black staff must be given the opportunity to lead projects, given internal support, be respected and have equal status in the delivery of activities.

Universities' middle and top management are usually predominantly white and may not be aware that their actions inequitable, even though the issues they create as a result are not acceptable. Brah (1992) states that white people are not at times conscious how their whiteness gives them power and privileges. However, in relation to the Race Relations Amendment Act, management is expected to receive training in relation to promoting equality. Modood and Acland (1998) have found that Black and

minority staff were concentrated in junior posts. Higher Education Institutions need to provide a service to a multi-cultural society where guidance given to students from specific communities need to reflect their communities' culture and expectations. For instance, Dale *et al* (2000) highlight that Muslim women graduates may experience difficulties in enhancing their employment potential due to barriers arising from negative attitudes based on religion, culture and race.

Even, the main funding body for HE, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) has a statutory duty to eliminate racial discrimination and to promote good relations between people of different racial groups. The HEFCE race equality scheme aims to implement universities' equality strategies. The Home Office responsible for the 'Connecting Communities' race equality grant aims to increase strong minority ethnic community networks and to assist minority ethnic communities to gain access to public services and have influence over policymakers and staff. These funders are sending a strong message that the Race Relations Amendment Act is being taken very seriously where organisations, including Higher Education Institutions, handling external funding have to adhere to its requirements.

The type of partners that HE links up with needs to be observed. Links made with the voluntary sector can enhance the quality of the delivery of the project activities. However, it is important for large institutions such as HEIs to ensure that the voluntary sector is treated as equal partners, both in planning and organisational tasks, and that it receives sufficient funding from the lead partner for the part it plays in the delivery of the project activities. When working with Asian and Black communities, it is vital that links are made with organisations that have grassroots networks with these communities. However, it is equally important that these organisations are not exploited. A Learning and Skills Council (2002) survey found that the voluntary sector has experience and expertise in partnership working, including with statutory agencies. The Home Office (2003) race equality grant endorses this by stating that it has learnt that in the past that grant projects had concentrated in delivering certain activities to achieve programme objectives rather than concentrate on using the most effective ways of delivering those objectives. The voluntary sector is engaged in local networks and various forums, where there is sharing of information. The voluntary sector acts as referral agencies or work with smaller community groups to access particular groups of learners. These types of relationships can provide learners with better support before starting a course as the voluntary sector provides innovative approaches to training to meet the needs of their client group and a service which is culturally acceptable. Projects such as the Newham Asian Women's Project and the Ashiana Project in East London deliver to Asian women courses which have led them to pursue employment and return to education, counselling, workshops and training for professionals to raise awareness about Asian women's issues.

In conclusion, the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 has brought Higher Education under scrutiny in its promotion of ethnic and cultural diversity. Higher Education has talked about the acknowledgement of how different communities' needs vary, but there appears to be gaps in these needs not effectively being addressed, even through external funding has been received. There is a need for in-depth understanding of the Black and Asian communities, and the employment of staff from these communities to be engaged in the delivery of learning. Finally, a genuine commitment is needed from management to ensure positive changes are

implemented where students and staff can actually admit that the policies developed are not simply paper policies, but everyone is working together in the promotion of racial equality and equal opportunities.

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