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INCLUSIVITY OF UNIVERSITY FROM A MINORITY STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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'Inclusivity' in the Oxford English Dictionary is defined as "the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized." When asking whether a university is inclusive to its students, it is easy to say "yes." However, this is not entirely the case. The expectations and needs of minority students are always changing and the education sector's policies may only be suitable to those students without any physical or mental needs. In regard to Northumbria University, it is apparent that the staff actively seek new ways to change and improve how they reach minority students, and to ensure those students are provided with equal opportunities and quality of learning. Overall, universities are inclusive only to an extent. It is important that staff are provided with ways to ensure that any educational policy they are implementing can be tailored to meet the needs of all minority students.

Improving Inclusivity at University

Starting university for any student can be a daunting experience. For minority students there are further challenges which they have to take into consideration—whether that is ensuring a requirement for a disability is met or looking into what support is available to help with a learning difficulty. Northumbria University is actively seeking ways to improve equality and inclusivity for its students. I was provided with the opportunity to become one of the university's student inclusion consultants, working with different departments to find areas which could be improved, and provide recommendations for such improvements.

According to the UK government, in 2019/20 27.4% of students who started full-time or part-time undergraduate study in the UK were non-white (Ethnicity facts and figures, 2022). When I began my first year of university, I did not consider myself a minority student. Despite having a DSSR (Disabled Students' Support Recommendations report) in place for mental health problems, I did not know that being a first-generation student from a low-income background made me a minority student. Initially, finding this out did knock my confidence and I felt as though the opportunities that I would be offered would not be equal opportunities. I felt as though I was put in a position where I would have to work harder to prove myself to my professors. This was not the case.

We have all been affected by the coronavirus pandemic, and particularly so minority students. A study by Evans et al. (2021) looked at student well-being during the pandemic, exploring whether particular groups of students experienced heightened risks to well-being. While the study found that work-related burnout was lessened (because of the social isolation strategies associated with lockdowns), separation from loved ones proved to have a negative effect upon well-being. As such, this impacted students' studies.

A paper by Saenz, Wyatt, & Reinard (1998) looked into increasing the recruitment and retention of underrepresented minority students in higher education. The paper states that to recruit and maintain minority students, faculties in university training programs should increase their awareness of minority students' needs and expectations. The researchers suggested using a questionnaire to identify the needs of minority students and open up communication between the faculty and students. They provided an example of how the faculty of the Department of Communicative Disorders at California State University used such a strategy to improve the recruitment and retention of minority students—as there was a dynamic relationship between faculty, students, and institutional requirements.

Northumbria University provided me with an outstanding opportunity to work alongside academic staff across different departments to assess which areas could be improved in terms of inclusivity for minority students. I was shocked at how many requests we received from departments wanting student perspectives. It was encouraging to see that different departments truly cared about wanting to increase their inclusivity to minority students. It took away the feeling of university being a cold and isolating place. One area which surprised me the most about how much university had to offer minority students was the study abroad scheme. Before coming to university, I had completely ruled out the option of studying abroad for myself, due to lack of finance. When conducting the review, I extensively looked into the study abroad section of the university's website. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the study abroad scheme has multiple schemes and scholarships to help students financially. Although the information for minority students required quite a bit of effort to find, it was well written and easy to understand. In regard to students who may be physically disabled and may require further support, the information did not seem to be there. While there was the option to arrange a one-to-one meeting with people working within the department to gather information, this may not be practical for some students and, as such, limits the inclusivity. My recommendation for this was to rearrange the layout of the website to ensure that minority students can find relevant information easily and so are not discouraged because they cannot find it. I also found that in the student testimonies section, there were not any testimonies from minority students. Personally, I think this limits the inclusivity and equality of the scheme. Having those experiences available for minority students to read will boost their confidence in schemes such as this and heighten the percentage of minority students choosing to engage in the scheme.

Going forward, I think it is vital that the communication between the faculty and minority students continues to be encouraged and improved upon. From personal experience, even opportunities which are offered on most university courses, such as study abroad, are not really spoken about by the different departments. My course only briefly mentioned that study abroad was an option, not really giving any information about the procedure or what it would involve. I think this limited how inclusive such a scheme seemed. I think if a faculty is not communicating with its students about different opportunities across the university, the inclusivity of students is greatly limited. That is why internships such as the student inclusion consultant is a great asset to the university, as it allows for recommendations to be made directly from student experience.

A paper by Hamilton et al. (2021) researched the experiences of higher education for students with chronic illnesses. The researchers noted that such students reported misconceptions surrounding chronic illness, a sense of inequality, and of feeling undervalued. It was found that

many staff members lacked understanding, and enforced academic regulations rather than accommodating students' illnesses. Some students in this study reported that social groups acting as 'allies' helped them to deal with the emotional repercussions of such feelings. Overall, it appears to be vital that staff within education learn about chronic illnesses and are taught ways to make academic regulations accommodating to such students. The use of social groups is also something which should be considered, allowing students to have someone that they can share their feelings with.

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