**Understanding the BAME attainment gap at the OU by means of quantitative and qualitative data analytics**

**Tracie:** The eSTEeM project that we're working on is in reference to the awarding gap, not only at The Open University but also at other institutions in the UK which can be upward of 30 percent at different points in the student's journey. So, this project was about finding a way to use learning analytics, which are large-scale computational algorithms that take traces of student behaviour in an online learning environment, in addition to legacy data and other data that we might have about students, to identify key points where that awarding gap might emerge and to then go back to students and educators to find out what might be the meaning of the data that we're seeing.

So, let's talk about the data. First as a reminder The OU uses learning analytics to help predict which students might need support looking at whether or not they're predicted as likely to turn in an assignment or likely to get a good grade or a passing grade. The system sends a prediction to the tutor and then it's up to the tutor to get in touch with the student to have an intervention with the student. So, our first task was to disaggregate our current learning analytics approach by ethnicity and to see how the predictions function for students from a non-white British background. What we found was that the algorithm has much higher error rates predicting Black students as being more likely to be at risk of not handing in an assignment or not getting a good grade than is actually the case. Likewise, the system was more likely to incorrectly predict an Asian student as submitting an assignment or getting a higher grade than was actually the case, so we wanted to know from students and from educators at The OU why they think that might be. Our second task was to then take this data and look at where the awarding gap arises and while we see differences in white and non-white British students right from the very beginning of their studies with the OU, when it comes to passing a module or even getting a good grade on that module, that awarding gap really widens. Our third task was to disaggregate the impact of OU Analyse predictions by ethnicity looking at how the impact of the tutor intervention then impacted the student's ultimate grade and what we found was that interventions through OU Analyse appear to be most impactful for students with multiple forms of marginalization So, we were very interested in understanding from students and educators what this might mean.

**Fidele:** Thank you Tracie. So, we did we decided to do interviews with the students. So, we interviewed three students and then we hosted three focus groups, one focus group with students and two focus groups with OU staff who are student facing. How did the interviews and the focus groups run? So, we started by asking particularly the students their experience at the OU before we introduced the OU Analyse data and then ask them to discuss and tell us what they think about the data. We concluded the focus groups and interviews with some sort of questions about what the OU can do to deal with Black student award gap, but also what we can do in general to make the experience of Black students as best as it can be at The Open University.

**Tracie:** Fidele, are you able to say something about the themes that emerged in our interviews and our focus groups?

**Fidele:** Yes, I can and maybe I start with a story which I have taken from the project itself, which was a student who was doing his sixth year at The Open University who told me, and I quote, that I was the first Black person they met in their interactions with The Open University over the last six years. That one took me a little bit back because I'm aware that yes, we can do more of diversity, but we also have diversity maybe you need to do more to demonstrate that The OU is diverse. So, the theme of diversity came up very strongly.

Another theme which came up was immigration. So, when we say we have Black students it is a wide spectrum of students and it will be difficult to group everybody and assume that everybody has the same need. So, if somebody immigrated to the UK and somebody was born and brought up here their experience with the UK education is completely different and we need to disaggregate the data if you want to compare like with like rather than assuming everybody has got the same experience.

The third point which came up relates to the socio-economic status as well as the lack of family support. We met some people who may for example have children they are here on their own, so if they are minding the kids, they are studying time and studying experiences slightly differ from a young person born in the UK who has got the whole family support, and who can also get some money from their grandparents if they are stuck with finance.

Another point which came up very strongly was what you would call cultural capital. I just mention two three two issues with it. One is the study skills, different cultures study differently. So, if you are used to cramming, for example, you go in a society you're supposed to write an essay it's not that straightforward. The other thing which came up in terms of cultural capital, is some cultures they differ to the authority, so they don't ask questions even when they are struggling. So, assuming that a Black student who may have come from that culture will seek help if and when needed may actually be far-fetched, and we need to do slightly more to raise awareness and encourage people to seek up if needed.

The fifth and final point I'm going to make relates to what is happening outside the university. So, it was interesting that Black Lives Matter, for example, came up during the discussions and how it reminded our Black students how it felt to be Black in the UK, and that's an issue which obviously you have different students from different background, the racism outside the university in the community may affect how students perform, and there are more so we are still working on the data and I'm very sure I'll be coming up with very interesting findings and we'll be making very good recommendations for The Open University to make a Black student experience better than it has been so far.