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| **Beds SU Policy Ideal: More representation for black students – as well as a designated BME scheme – in Beds student support services** |
| ***Beds SU believes*** *that the UoB should commit to implementing a designated BME scheme within its student support service, as well as commit to hiring black staff to ensure that black UoB students feel adequately represented in a space that often alienates them.* |
| **What are the facts?**  A student has recently made the SU aware of diversity concerns within the student support team at the University of Bedfordshire, particularly a lack of black staff available on the counselling team. As it currently stands, the University of Bedfordshire student support team is comprised of the following staff demographics: 2 White females and 1 Asian female on the counselling team, as well as 1 White female and 1 Asian female on the Mental Health support team.  The issue of mental health or pastoral support and BME communities has gained significant traction in the higher education sector in recent years, owing largely to the tense relationship between ethnicity and mental health. For example, a study[[1]](#footnote-1) by the Mental Health Foundation UK found that people from black and ethnic minority groups living in the UK are:   * More likely to be diagnosed with mental health problems * More likely to experience a poor outcome from treatment * More likely to disengage from mainstream mental health services, thereby rendering them more susceptible to experiencing a deterioration in their mental health   Further still, a student survey[[2]](#footnote-2) carried out by Cambridge Student Union found that 79% of BME respondents felt that they would benefit from seeing a BME counsellor. Further analysis of qualitative data (50 responses) cited a general lack of in-depth understanding of issues about ethnicity on the part of non-BME counsellors, which commonly deters BME students from opening up to counsellors, or from seeking help in the first instance.  Recognising the need for increased pastoral support for BME communities specifically, a growing number of universities – including the University of Cambridge and the University of Sheffield[[3]](#footnote-3) – have recently taken steps to embed BME focused support services into the broader student support system. Nevertheless, despite the positive nature of these schemes in terms of recognising the need for more BME focused pastoral support, some critics have pointed out that there has perhaps been a tendency to treat the BME community as a homogenous group, rather than looking at specific nuances within it.  Of the issue of mental health, black communities in particular experience high rates of mental health disorders and have a particularly fraught relationship with seeking treatment. For example, a UK wide survey[[4]](#footnote-4) conducted by the NHS in 2014 found that Black British women were 8% more likely than White British Women to experience a common mental health disorder – such as depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Perhaps even more staggeringly, the same survey reported that black men were 10 times more likely to experience a severe mental health condition – or psychotic disorder than white men. Yet despite Black men and women reporting the highest level of severe and common mental health problems respectively, they are the least likely ethnic group to seek treatment[[5]](#footnote-5).  Nearly a quarter (22%) of UoB students are black, as per 2022 student records data. What’s more, as the below section illustrates in more detail, the UoB has a considerable black awarding gap, with only 50% of black graduates gaining a 2:1 above in 2020, compared with 83% of white graduates. As such, it is clear that further interventions need to be taken by the UoB to ensure that black students are adequately supported – and improving access to student support services could be an important step in the right direction. |
| **How does this impact students?**  Not only can poor mental health be an extreme detriment to students in and of itself, but so too does data suggest that poor mental health can impact students in two key aspects of their academic journey – namely retention and attainment.  For example, an OfS study[[6]](#footnote-6) found that in 2017-18, graduates who had reported a mental health condition were 3 percentage points less likely to stay in higher education, and 1 percentage point less likely to graduate with a 2:1 or above. Nevertheless, black students with a declared mental health condition were shown to have the lowest continuation and attainment rates of all groups under study. For example, in 2017-18, just 53% of black students with a declared mental health condition graduated with a first or 2:1, compared to 77% of all students declaring a mental health condition. What’s more, in 2016-17, 87% of students with mental health conditions continued their studies after their first year – yet for black students with a mental health conditions, the rate was only 77%.  Indeed, data published by the UoB[[7]](#footnote-7) of the 2019/2020 cohort mirrors the awarding gap as per the above data, with black UoB students the least likely to graduate with a 2:1 or about (50%), compared with 61% of Asian students and 83% of white students. Whilst this problem at the UoB cannot be definitively linked to mental health via the existing data, nationwide data and research suggest a correlation between poor mental health and poor educational outcomes in black students. Thus, to corroborate the university's ongoing efforts to improve retention and narrow the awarding gap along racial lines, it would be advisable to take the mental health support available to BME students – are more specifically black students – more seriously. |
| **What is the Beds SU ideal?**   * That the UoB implements a designated BME scheme within the student support service – as has been done in the likes of the University of Cambridge and the University of Sheffield – whereby students can directly request to speak to a BME counsellor if they so wish * Nevertheless, taking into account that BME students should not be treated as a homogenous group, the UoB should seek to have more representation of black staff in student support services, in line with the high proportion of black students at the UoB and the strong links documented between poor mental health and poor attainment in black students in particular – to ensure that black students specifically are represented in a space that oftentimes alienates them * The UoB commits to the provision of transparent information about its support services – i.e. details on the BME student support scheme, and the representation of the diversity of staff should be made available to and publicised to, students to not deter them from seeking support if they feel they will not be adequately represented in the student support space * The UoB student support team commits to monitoring engagement levels with academic welfare support across demographic groups, to provide further necessary data on the issue |

1. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-black-%20asian-and-minority-ethnic-groups> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.race-equality.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/the_bme_mh_toolkit.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://forgepress.org/2021/05/04/university-counselling-service-introduces-bme-students-support-group/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/health/mental-health/adults-experiencing-common-mental-disorders/latest> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/health/mental-health/adults-receiving-treatment-for-mental-or-emotional-problems/latest> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/mental-health-conditions-compound-equality-gaps-in-higher-education/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.beds.ac.uk/about-us/our-governance/public-information/transparency-information/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)