

## **Exploring learning development from the perspectives of black students**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

There has been little research into student perceptions of learning development tutorials despite learning development having existed in most institutions for over twenty years. Analysis from annual demographic data from tutorial attendance at the University of Northampton shows that over 25% of tutorials are attended by students identifying as Black. More Black women use the LD provision than Black males and even fewer Black males under the age of 20 use the service. This mirrors the findings of Coulson and Loddick (2020) who acknowledged, in research on learning development and student attainment, that students from a Black ethnic background, particularly females, were more likely to attend tutorials. However, there has been little research into the reasons for this.

This presentation concluded the findings of an internally funded collaborative project to explore the perceptions of Black students and learning development.

Due to the nature of investigating a sensitive topic, it was deemed essential that a project assistant was employed who has lived experience and identifies as Black. The project assistant predominantly conducts the research with Black students and gains their perspectives during focus groups or interviews. The project has been planned to ensure that the project assistant influences the research by offering autonomy to design the project and recruit participants. It is hoped that this project will offer a unique perspective to inform learning development practice and provision. By the time of the conference the project will have finished and we will be able to offer an insight into the findings.

**Keywords:** learning development; perspectives; black students.

### ***Community response***

This session attracted positivity from the community, framing it as an insightful contribution to the ongoing discussions within learning development and the HE sector more broadly about the Black attainment gap and how students from minority groups view and interact with LD services. The research confirmed many of the assumptions made by the audience and appeared to be representative of experiences at other institutions. This allowed for meaningful consideration of the research project being presented through the audience questions.

Particular attention was drawn to the approach taken by the researchers. Having a student researcher present who could discuss the ways she had, and intended to, communicate with her peers throughout the project was also very engaging and encouraged me to think about the benefits of student-led research projects within our field and how these could be managed. While the presenters were in the initial stages of their research it will be interesting to hear more as it develops.

### ***Editorial comment***

It was encouraging to see this contribution to the important topic, especially through the use of a project assistant who identified as Black. This session outlined an internal project to investigate Black students' perceptions of, and engagement with learning development. The findings identified three aspects that impacted engagement. First, students don't like to 'reach out', instead preferring to talk to other students. Second, students would prefer tutors with a similar background to them: they want to see themselves in the staff force. Finally, students would prefer less formal conversations, with the structure and formality of learning development interactions being off-putting for some.

## ***Author's reflection***

Completing the research has brought insights and the amount of response received from the survey was great. I have been involved in all aspects of the project from questionnaire design, interviewing and writing the results. The topic is very important to the learning development provision as understanding the reasons for non-engagement is key. It is hoped that the research will outline ideas and strategies that will encourage more students from different communities to engage with the service which will support student attainment.

Prior to joining the team for this project, I had no knowledge of learning development and what it was about. However during this project, I have learnt what the provision does and have a better understanding of the type and level of assistance offered to students. Working on this project has refined my research and as well as my presentation skills as I used to be quite anxious prior to presentations; presenting at a conference definitely increased my confidence in public speaking.

When the insights and responses from this research are acted upon, I hope it will create a better experience for the students here at the University of Northampton.

## ***Acknowledgements***

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The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

## ***References***

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## **Further reading**

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## **Author details**

Kate Ikonte is a Masters student at the University of Northampton. She is a researcher for the funded project exploring the perspectives of Black students and learning development. Her main area of expertise is Information Technology with a focus on business analysis, which aims to bridge the gap between business objectives and IT Solutions.

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Beth Garrett is a Graduate Teaching Assistant at the University of Northampton, having previously served as the President of Northampton Students' Union, during which time she launched an initiative to recruit a team of Black Student Advocates at the University. Beth joined the Office for Students as a TEF Student Panel Member during the 2023 TEF exercise and has experience of governance in higher education. She is currently working towards a PhD, focused on student leadership in UK Universities. Her research interests include teacher identity, self-efficacy, the use of technology in education, Black students' experiences of education and leadership in education.

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