Student views of diversity in two faculties at MMU

Susan Jacobs, Department of Sociology
Maureen Dawson, Centre for Learning and Teaching
Emily Falconer, Department of Environmental and Geographical Science

Introduction and background

MMU has a diverse student body, however ‘diversity’ is measured or conceptualised. The question of diversity is an aspect of the Widening Participation policy. This project set out to explore student understanding of the concept and reality of diversity, and to research views about the impact of diversity on teaching and learning and other aspects of student experience. The intent was to utilise the different vantage points of the two lead researchers (in social and natural science disciplines) to compare student views across two faculties. It was hoped that discussions with students in focus groups would provide the opportunity for a variety of different viewpoints to be expressed, and for different aspects of ‘diversity’ to be explored.

Part of the background to this study was research carried out by the Diversity Committee in the Department of Sociology. As part of this, Susie Jacobs carried out five focus group interviews in 2004-2005 with undergraduate sociology students to ascertain their views of diversity along different axes, the effects of studying in a diverse student body and any need for action within the department or the faculty (Diversity Committee, Dept of Sociology, 2006). These interviews were successful in that:

a) Sociology colleagues readily volunteered seminars that could serve as focus groups;

b) most of the students involved were interested in the subject and engaged fully in discussion, and

c) students had positive orientations towards different types of diversity within the student and staff body in general, although some conflicts also existed (e.g. between religious beliefs and feelings about sexual orientation).

Thus, this project extended the original work by exploring student views across a number of different departments within the Faculties of Science and Engineering (SE) and Humanities, Law and Social Science (HLSS).

Methods

The objective at the start of the project was to carry out three focus groups in each of six departments within the two faculties. Departments chosen for study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Departments involved in the study

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<th>Faculty</th>
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Permission to carry out the project was sought from the relevant Deans of Faculty and Heads of Department at an early stage. The departments were selected deliberately to reflect a ‘spread’ in terms of ethnic and gender compositions of the student body. For instance, Mathematics and Economics are seen as typically ‘male’ subjects; some departments, such as Biological Sciences have diverse student intakes along lines of ethnicity while the student bodies of others are more heavily white. We had to make an informed assumption that other aspects of diversity - for instance, disability, sexual orientation, transgender and age/generation - were randomly distributed. In any case we were not able to ‘control’ for the latter factors in the initial choice of departments to be sampled.

The final number of focus groups carried out was fifteen and these included one from an additional department. The total number of students in the sample was 108. Reasons for variance from the original objective are detailed under ‘Challenges’.

A questionnaire was devised for the semi-structured interviews and ethical permission obtained, from the ethics committee within SE. Interviews were carried out between Spring Term, 2006 and Spring Term, 2007.

The ideal situation for focus groups was to take seminars already in situ: this would avoid problems of non-

*During the course of the project this department merged with the Department of Chemistry and Materials to form the School of Biology, Chemistry and Health Science. All students interviewed were on programmes within the divisions of Biology and Health Science.
attendance as well as selection bias for students already very interested in diversity issues. However, this was not always possible, and some ‘stand-alone’ interviews were also conducted.

The interviews

The interviews lasted on average 40-45 minutes and most were held during seminar times. Two interviews were arranged specially, so that students were not interviewed within their seminar groups and knew in advance the purpose of the discussion. In two additional cases, as noted, researchers had to interview after a lecture and to ask for volunteers to stay behind after a lecture. Most interviews were recorded, with the consent of students. The average number of students per group was 7-8 but some groups contained 4 people and a number were larger, with between 10-12 individuals.

In each case the interviewers introduced the topic, explained the purposes of the project and asked for explicit consent both for participation and to record the proceedings. Students participating signed consent forms and were reassured that anything said would be anonymised.

Interview Questions

These were semi-structured interviews and so the order of questions varied somewhat. Those listed below were discussed in all cases.

Questions of individual experience:

• Do you feel that some groups of students are underrepresented in faculty/ department/ on your courses?

• If so which ones? eg. mature students, gender imbalance, race/ ethnicity etc.

• Have you ever encountered any issues of diversity/ exclusion/ discrimination at your time at MMU so far?

• How were these issues dealt with?

• Could anything have been done differently?

• What do you suggest? Does everyone agree?

Hypothetical questions for discussion:

• How important do you think it is that members of staff be familiar with and can deal with issues of diversity? (Give examples if necessary; it is important to not just concentrate on teaching staff but library, office etc)

• What role should the Faculty play in supporting students who encounter diversity issues/ exclusion/ discrimination?

• How far should issues of diversity be incorporated into the curriculum?

• Have you got any ideas for involving students more closely in diversity issues?

• Whose responsibility is it to ensure every student has an equal opportunity to learn?

• Are there any other issues you would like to raise concerning diversity and how this is dealt with in your department?

Findings

Conduct of the interviews:

The researchers found that the ‘atmosphere’ within interviews varied markedly. In some, students were interested and involved in the subject matter; in others, they were quiet; in one case were inattentive - laughing and giggling, seemingly embarrassed by the subject matter. One discussion was dominated by males with the females in the group silent throughout the interview. One researcher commented that the dynamics of the focus groups played a significant part in the interviews. This is frequently the case during focus group interviews (Carey, 1993; Brannen and Pattman, 2005).

Data from interviews: general observations

One of the most striking findings from this project was that many students interviewed evinced a deep ambivalence about diversity issues, and particularly about ‘race’ and ethnicity. We found this surprising, so it is unlikely that this is an artefact of any prior expectations on our part. This statement was supported by a quantitative measure, qualitative interpretations and discussions with the field workers.

Quantitative measure

A coding exercise was undertaken on transcriptions of each focus interview. Topics emerging were categorised, and statements made during the discussion coded as ‘positive’ towards diversity issues, ‘ambivalent’ or ‘negative’. Examples of statements and their coding are as follows:

‘Positive’ (toward diversity issues):

“I think that it is everyone’s job, especially teachers’. Because to be able to teach, they have to know what to teach…and to understand barriers.”

‘Ambivalent’

“It is important for members of staff…I reckon that being able to deal with some situations is essential because the university has to deal with lots of kinds of people, but I wouldn't blame them if they couldn't because it is a very difficult things to get to grips with…”

‘Negative’:

“It is a waste of our money and time to focus on diversity.”
Following the coding exercise, we counted the number of positive, ambivalent and negative statements made. Although we recognise that this is a crude measure, it does give some indication of the tenor of discussions overall. In total, the numbers of statements in the positive, ambivalent and negative categories were 70, 48 and 73 respectively.

Qualitative interpretations were based on close reading of the transcribed interviews, subsequent discussions of impressions of the two lead researchers, and extensive discussions with the fieldworkers, particularly the lead fieldworker, who carried out the majority of interviews. These concerned not only the content as recorded, but also interactions and general ‘atmospheres’ within the interviews. Based on the latter, interpretive methods, we found that the most prominent theme emerging was avoidance. That is, there existed reluctance to speak about some issues of diversity and particularly ones that affected anyone present within the group interviewed. No marked differences between faculties were found in terms of views expressed by students.

When introducing the interview, definitions and meanings of diversity were outlined by the fieldworkers. Amongst the various themes encompassed by ‘diversity’, those of ethnicity, ‘race’ and religion were seen as most sensitive; nevertheless, feelings and orientations were sometimes expressed inadvertently by referring to ‘other’ students as ‘they’ or as ‘belonging to other cultures’. It was notable that in one interview all students were South Asian women; however, ethnicity, religion and ‘race’ were never mentioned. Instead, discussion centred on nationality, gender and age. It is possible, of course, that reluctance to speak was due to unwillingness to, or worry about, discussion of ethnicity with a white interviewer. In several interviews, students interviewed focussed on experiences of international students.

Summarising the findings, which will be reported in more detail elsewhere, there appeared to be a relatively positive orientation to disability (or the problems faced by disabled students, and the presence of disabled students); neutrality on gender divisions; little discussion of sexual orientation but ambivalence or negativity towards discussion of ethnicity and associated sources of difference (‘race’ or phenotypical appearance; religion). In particular, when ‘race’ and ethnicity were discussed explicitly by ethnic majority students, there was at times an uneasy and defensive approach to the subject. For example:

“There is not a wide range of – well – multiculturalism or whatever the politically correct term is… but then it is still down to individual choice at the end of the day.”

This comment indicates a common theme (see discussion below) that racial exclusion is not a structural or institutional matter but down to personalities and to individual perception. It is possible that students felt that by mentioning issues of diversity, they would themselves be perceived as biased or as racist.

Visibly disabled students were present at only one interview and the student participating spoke freely about obstacles he had faced. In another instance, student discussion of difference displaced other issues by focussing on differences between northern and southern British students; however, this discussion had a jocular tone.

In other instances, discussions sometimes began with, for instance, mention of facilities for disabled students or their lack. The issue of age/generation was broached both by mature students when they were present and by younger students in groups without mature student participation. In general, students were more comfortable discussing issues such as library opening hours and effects upon students who were parents, or physical access and adjustments needed for disabled students than with the contentious issues of racial and ethnic marginalisation. A minority of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) as well as white students did discuss ethnicity, but the general impression was that ‘race’, religion and ethnicity were ‘unsafe’ areas.

There was relatively little discussion of curriculum issues in this sample. Students only discussed curriculum at length within one focus group, although this was mentioned more briefly in several others. Both positive and negative orientations to incorporation of ‘diversity’ into course curricula were evident.

Questions concerning who within the university, if anyone, should be responsible for diversity issues and around the importance of staff being able to deal with ‘issues’ arising were taken up in discussion in nearly all focus groups. To summarise, the majority view in this sample, at least among those who expressed an opinion, was that engaging with diversity issues was a specialised concern. Lecturers’ area of responsibility was solely or primarily academic, and some anxiety was expressed that work on diversity issues would relate only to minority and not to [ethnic] majority students. Lecturers’ efforts were best reserved for teaching and research. Some students expressed the view that specialised services within the University should deal with any issues arising from diversity or exclusion. The most sympathetic hearing or response in this respect concerned disability.

The overall orientation of most students was individualistic, in that they either said directly that students themselves were primarily responsible for dealing with issues affecting them, or else this was implied - since neither academic
nor other staff were seen as having responsibility, and alternatives were not offered. It is perhaps worth noting that we found this surprising. In the Sociology interviews carried out previously, widespread responsibility of all staff (as well as students) for diversity issues was virtually taken for granted. From the current research, it would appear that these views cannot be generalised across the student body.

Suggestions from students, and involving students in diversity issues

Although many students took an individualistic approach to diversity issues, a number of positive suggestions were made. One, from a mature student, was that there should be a physical space set aside for mature students to meet and to discuss any common problems. Another student suggested:

"It would be good to have one day in the week, for instance a Monday morning, called ‘Development’ where students could go to discuss things. Perhaps this could be done by departments….”

It was also suggested that staff could feed back on diversity issues following such sessions. A number of suggestions mentioned the advisability of having a forum to discuss diversity issues, although not necessarily involving dedicated space:

"There could be a forum at the end of the year where students can discuss these things."

"There should be a student forum for input into policies."

Other suggestions for inclusion of ‘diversity’ concerned central services.

"Diversity should be ‘mainstreamed’ into a University induction at the beginning of the year.”

"Diversity should be part of the university Counselling service”

"Children should be allowed into the building if they are quiet.”

A Combined Honours student noted that there were different services in different faculties, ‘so you don’t know which is for you. It is difficult to know where to go…’. However, this concern is already being addressed by changes already underway within MMU concerning the reconfiguration of administrative services, and the creation of the student HUBs which should ensure consistency across faculties.

Still other suggestions concerned teaching or assessment more directly:

“…Minority students would like anonymous marking to discourage staff prejudice. Discrimination is still there.”

It should be noted here that MMU regulations already cover anonymous marking of examinations and coursework (MMU, Assessment Policy and Practice, 2007)

"There should be compulsory training of lecturers [in diversity issues]; this happens in industry.”

Lastly, some students showed appreciation of the diversity initiatives undertaken by departments, faculties or by the University, for example, the Islam awareness week.

Challenges faced during the course of the research

This research threw up a number of challenges which relate to the conduct of research, which involves undertaking interviews with students during their teaching programme, and which crosses more than one faculty and department. These challenges are outlined below:

Ethics approval

The project required ethical permission before it could be undertaken. Although both faculties have ethical committees, the decision was taken to submit the form to the Faculty of Science and Engineering committee. Administrative problems within the committee (since rectified) resulted in an eight month delay before feedback was obtained and the project could be undertaken. This project has raised a number of issues around seeking ethical permission for projects which cross more than one Faculty and discipline: should the project be sent to one (and if so, which one?) or both? Experience of later projects submitted to HLSS and of a similar nature (such as the Shockabsorber), have shown the process to be speedier and more helpful.

Access to students during teaching time

The project has highlighted a number of problems with studies which rely on the availability of students for focus groups. Ideally, these groups should not be self-selected (to avoid bias), and using seminars in situ would facilitate this and avoid problems of non-attendance. However, pressure on teaching time often means that 45 minutes is too precious to lose, even if the project outcomes may benefit future students in general.

Enlisting staff engagement with the project sometimes proved difficult,
often despite having nominated key contacts. Reasons for lack of staff engagement with the project could reflect colleagues’ heavy workloads, or simply lack of time within teaching programmes. We are, however, extremely grateful to those staff who agreed to give up their teaching time to allow focus group interviews to take place.

However, even with staff engagement, difficulties often arose in arranging interviews. On several occasions, the fieldworker arrived at arranged interviews and was then asked to rearrange in non-teaching times (sometimes this could be arranged, but not always.) On other occasions we were offered interview slots but no students were present, either because they had been notified that no ‘real’ seminar was taking place, or else because the seminar took place during an examination revision period. Due to the setbacks outlined above, in one case we moved ‘outside’ the intended department to one with a similar student profile; in this case the department kindly set up a focus group with student representatives: this meant that students were selected in advance. In our project plan, we had intended to interview students at levels 1-3 [4-6] in each department, but this more systematic approach proved not to be possible.

Without minimising any practical difficulties, it remains possible that issues of diversity are seen as problematic. It is also possible as well, that we might have been perceived as having a surveillance role rather than trying to open out discussion. Although we foresaw many issues and sought to allay any anxieties by emphasising that interviews and their results would be both anonymised and confidential, this was perhaps insufficient as reassurance. We had most success when we contacted colleagues to whom we (including the lead fieldworker) were already known. The institution might wish to consider how institutional initiatives might facilitate research across faculties, and/or on ‘sensitive’ topics.

We feel that the overall achievement of fifteen focus groups was a good outcome, overall.

Conclusions

This research project has revealed interesting and sometimes unexpected attitudes to and feelings about diversity in the sample of students interviewed in 15 focus groups. No differences could be seen between the attitudes of students in the two faculties involved.

As noted, orientations to disability, especially visible disability, were generally positive. However, there appeared to be some unease and sometimes avoidance, concerning other aspects of diversity. This was particularly the case for ethnicity and racialised differences. Here, there existed some ambivalence and our perception was that many students were more comfortable discussing issues faced by overseas students than those affecting home BME students.

Many students in this sample felt that broaching issues of diversity was mainly an individual responsibility - ie it was up to students directly affected by ‘difference’. Moreover, most students interviewed felt that it was sufficient for diversity issues to be dealt with by specialised units within the University rather than (for instance) within academic departments generally. This view, however, was less pronounced with regard to disability.

The broad picture outlined above was, of course, not shared by all 110 students interviewed and a minority of focus groups interviewed were characterised by disagreement within the group.

The possibility that diversity issues might impact on outcomes for some students was recognised. For instance, students who felt themselves marginalised might decide to leave their courses: thus, problems in retention might result. This indicates that even if diversity is perceived to be a ‘hard to handle’ subject, nevertheless it is one that is central to student experience and therefore to MMU’s concerns. It is also well known that a sense of not ‘fitting in’ can lead to early dropout (see Yorke, 1999, and Yorke and Longden, 2007; Moxley, Dumbrigue, and Anwar, 2001)

A number of students made specific, positive suggestions concerning diversity issues and were appreciative of the diversity of MMU’s student body. We would add some general observations. The University should take a proactive approach with regard to diversity, continuing to build on existing initiatives and to support new ones. The ambivalence revealed within this research might be countered by an holistic understanding of ‘diversity’, not as an issue for ‘Others’ but as one shared by most students, including ‘white’/ethnic English, Welsh and Scottish, heterosexual and non-disabled people. Most people incorporate elements of ‘difference’ within their identities, and it would be advisable to build on such an approach to ensure that diversity is not externalised - a problem ‘out there’ except for visible minority people. Awareness of diversity, rather than being a ‘problem’ can be a real source of enrichment, offering the possibility of deeper learning and wider experience for both staff and students at MMU.

Note: ¹ The category ‘white’ can include less-visible minorities such as Irish or Jewish people, the Roma, light-skinned central Asian people, etc.
References Cited


Diversity Committee, Department of Sociology (2006) “Report: work on Diversity within the Department of Sociology”, Manchester Metropolitan University, January. Available at: http://www.sociology.mmu.ac.uk/doc/diversityreport06.doc


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