

The Leadership Course: A Pilot EDI Initiative for black Asian and minority ethnic PGR students

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Outline

- Background
- Local context
- Methodology
- Findings
- Conclusions

Background

Student retention, attainment and persistence vary between ethnic groups

- White supremacy in HE, micro-aggressions, teaching methodologies, expectations and attitudes of teachers (Mahmud and Gagnon, 2023; Wong et al., 2021).
- Engineering culture, disengagement from social issues (Cech, 2014)

Disparities persist throughout stages of education and into employment

- 9% minority ethnic in engineering occupations (Engineering UK, 2018)

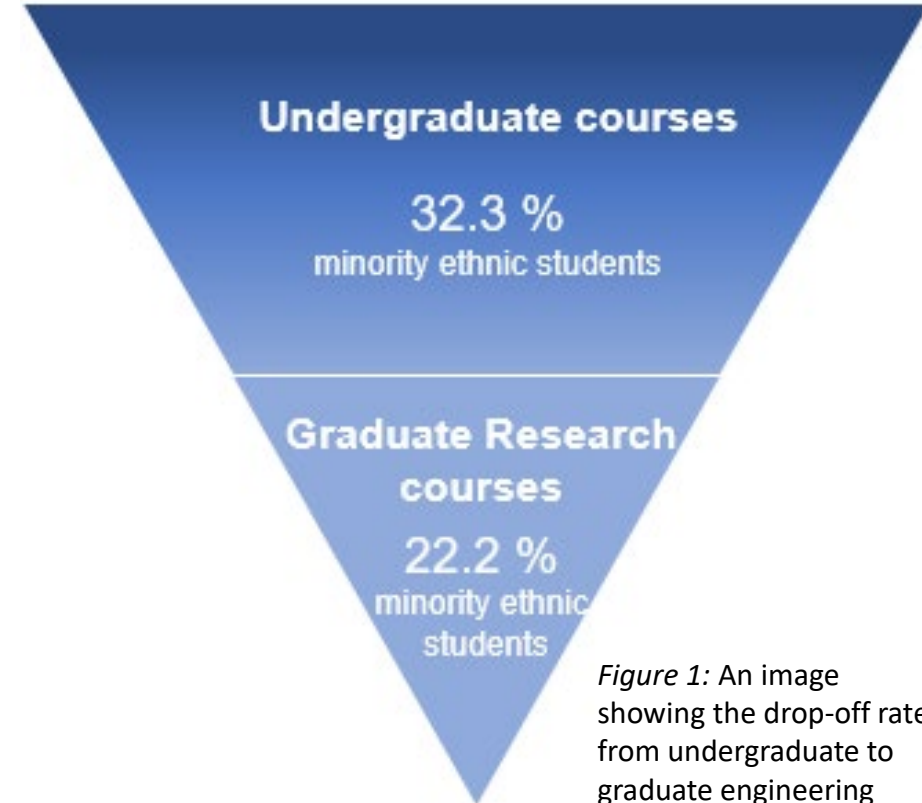
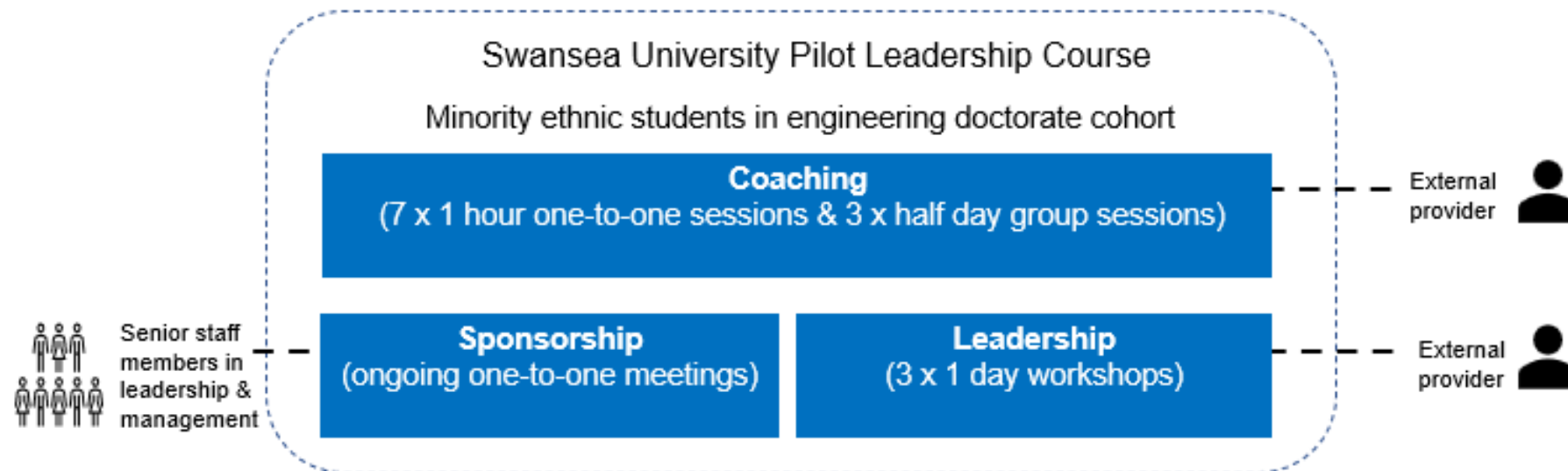
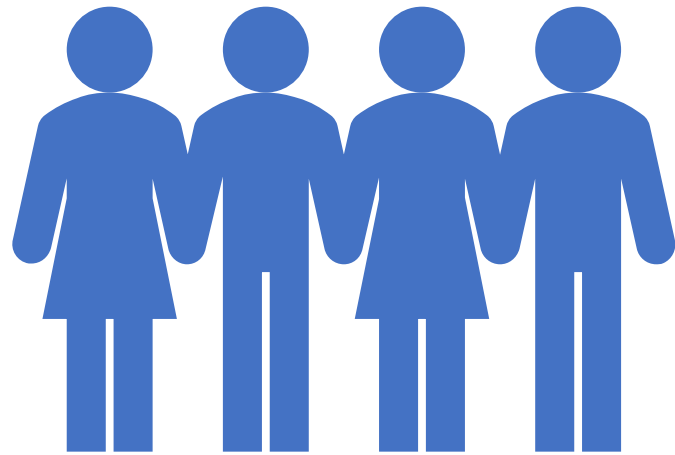


Figure 1: An image showing the drop-off rate from undergraduate to graduate engineering courses for minority ethnic students (Engineering UK, 2019)

Local context

- Various EDI initiatives implemented to address race inequity in HEIs.
- Pilot Leadership Course implemented to address disparities in career progression





Methodology

- Case study approach
- Research questions
 1. *What is the institutional culture at the university?*
 2. *How do minority ethnic students feel their racial identity impacts their professional experiences?*
 3. *What factors led to the course being instigated?*
 4. *What was the aim of the course?*
 5. *What were the decision-making processes that took place regarding running the course?*
 6. *What were the perceived benefits and limitations of the course?*
- Primary data: Semi-structured interviews
 - Staff who implemented the course, external providers who delivered the course, staff who became sponsors & students who participated in the course
- Secondary data: Course documentation
- Thematic analysis

Key findings: Addressing student needs

- Aligning EDI initiatives with student needs
 - Viewed course as “waff”
 - Perceived absence of EDI issues in lives – no need for “leg up”
 - How you are impacted by race and racism “depends on your mindset”
 - Talking about race “uncomfortable” as they “don’t see race” and “don’t see myself as different”

Key findings: Beneficial aspects of course

The course appeared to meet many aims:

- Increased confidence and sense of empowerment – felt “able to achieve things I wouldn't really think about possible otherwise”.
- Identifying and using personal strengths and cultural assets to “be an effective leader”
- Being aware of “structures of power and influence” & identifying “who can make things happen”
- Sponsorship as “a shared journey” - “break(ing) down barriers and biases”, “eyes are a bit more open to injustices”.

The course provided additional benefits:

- Safe space – people hold “pain” that they “work hard to hide”

Key findings: Limitations of course

- Addressing self-limiting factors problematises students and encourages assimilation to White power structures
 - “a lot of self-reflection is needed if you're going to be a successful leader” in order to “understand how you’re received”
 - “do I behave right or do I communicate right?”
- Sponsorship impact can be limited if sponsors lack engagement/ understanding of issues.
 - “they probably sent me the PowerPoint slides, which I probably, quietly ignored”.
 - “in terms of BAME issues, very rarely we discussed anything”

“It was about, okay, we are aware of your barriers and you need to accept it, and you need to overcome it. And that's what I liked about the course more than the four month training. So, these are your barriers. [...] And you need to accept it. And that's important. And then, how to move. That's the last thing, you need to move, not to struggle or get like isolated like okay, I am really sad, I'm struggling, I don't have power - no, you have the power, but if you don't use it, you will, you will struggle all the time or you'll feel sad. So we got some power. And how to improve your personal skills or interpersonal skills like, okay, do I behave right or do I communicate right? Or just look to blame the other side? So sometimes we need to blame ourselves as well. [...] Blame yourself first. See what you do, and improve and see the result”.

Figure 2: An excerpt from a student interview

Key findings: Lack of institutional backing

- Lack of understanding of race-related EDI issues
 - “if you’ve got two people, run it with two people. If you don’t think it’s cost-effective, don’t run it”
- Perceived performativity
 - “I know I shouldn’t say this but...”
- Conflicting attitudes towards EDI efforts
 - “They are in charge of their own destiny”

Conclusion



Coaching made students feel empowered and confident



Leadership sessions increased awareness of navigating career paths



High potential benefit of sponsorship if enacted correctly



Lack of focus on systems and structures



Genuine institutional commitment needed for impact

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Thank you!