The Ethnicity Attainment Gap: Literature Review

Miriam Miller

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This book is intended to be read as a whole. However, for ease of access, the table below indicates which sections will be most relevant to people in different roles within the university.

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Executive Summary

The phrase ‘ethnicity attainment gap’ refers to the difference between the proportion of White UK-domiciled students who are awarded a 1st or 2:1, and the proportion of UK-domiciled Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students who are awarded the same degrees. This paper provides an overview of the key areas of research concerning differential degree attainment for BME students. It explores some of the key issues that students from BME backgrounds face in Higher Education (HE), and looks at ongoing work from other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to address these issues and to narrow the attainment gap.

This report follows the preferred language of the BME Students’ Committee at The University of Sheffield Students’ Union in using the term Black and Minority Ethnic (BME). The committee represents students of African, Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Middle Eastern, Latin American and Mixed Race descent and, given the current absence of a corresponding staff group or network, is currently best positioned to advise on the preferred self-definition of this group of people within our own institutional context. Accordingly, the term BME is used here, with the caveat that it may be subject to change in the future if the students and staff it aims to represent collectively decide on different preferred term, as staff and students at some other institutions have done.

The ethnicity attainment gap is also known as the BME attainment gap, and is referred to as such throughout the literature referenced here. We have used the phrase ‘ethnicity attainment gap’ in the same way as HEIs might refer to a ‘gender gap’, in order to put the focus on the gap itself and what causes it, rather than to suggest the reasons for the gap existing are the responsibility of BME students.

This report consists of five sections.

Section 1: Overview

The first section contains an overview of the attainment gap across the HE sector, drawing mostly on statistics produced by the Equality Challenge Unit and a previous literature review by Dr Gurnam Singh of the Coventry University. This section also contains a snapshot view of the attainment gap at other Russell Group university in order to provide a baseline benchmark for comparison with peer institutions.

Key findings:

- The most recent attainment gap figure for the HE sector in England is 15.2 percentage points for 2013/14.
- One study controlled for a wide range of other factors that might influence student attainment and concluded that even though the gap was reduced, ethnicity was still a significant factor in differential attainment.
- While there is an attainment gap for all ethnic groups, it is consistently worst for Black (Black African/Black Caribbean/Other Black Background) students across the HE sector.
Section 2: Challenges for narrowing the gap.

The second section presents some of the challenges that are associated with the work to narrow the ethnicity attainment gap, along with some suggestions for overcoming these challenges.

Key findings:

- BME students are not a homogenous group and while it is useful to look at commonalities within all BME students, it is also sometimes necessary to analyse data by relevant sub-groups. However, it can be difficult for individual HEIs to break down data into sub-groups as the dataset can become too small to be of statistical significance.
- There is significant overlap between BME students and students from WP backgrounds, suggesting that any future interventions to address differential attainment should be mindful of both factors.
- There are ethical concerns about what, when, and whether to tell students about the attainment gap, bearing in mind there is a risk of students internalising the issue and performing less well as a result.

Section 3: Key themes in the literature: Pre-HE experiences and their effects on attainment

The third section looks at key themes which emerge in the wider literature on attainment in HE. While this looks largely at the literature on attainment gaps for BME students, it has also proved useful to look at gaps for students from other backgrounds, particularly backgrounds that are classed as widening participation (WP) groups, as these have some overlap with the BME group.

This section is split into two sub-sections. The first sub-section looks students’ experiences prior to their time in HE, which can influence their degree attainment. The second subsection looks at the way these experiences can influence their HE choices.

3.1 Educational Background and Prior Attainment

Key findings:

- Attainment gaps also exist in schools, though pupils from Chinese, Indian and some mixed backgrounds do better than White British students at GCSE. Black Caribbean and Traveller communities have the lowest GCSE attainment.
- The subjects and grades for GCSE and A-Level may affect what institutions and/or subjects students can apply to study at HE level. Black students are less likely to take science or maths, but more likely to study arts. Students from White backgrounds favour the three main foreign languages (French, German, and Spanish) more than any other ethnic group.
The quality of information, advice and guidance (IAG) given in schools and colleges affects student choice. BME students from lower income backgrounds and state schools are more likely to describe their IAG as ‘poor’ or ‘could have been better’.

3.2 Making decisions about HE

Key findings:

- Black students are more likely to be mature students than other ethnic groups and less likely to enter HE with A-Levels. The attainment gap for mature BME students has traditionally been higher than for young BME students.
- BME students are concentrated in a smaller number of institutions than White students. Black students are more likely to come from and study in London than other ethnic groups. Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students are more likely to study at low entry profile HEIs. There is some evidence to suggest Black students may prefer to study where there are other Black students and Black culture/history on the syllabus.
- Engineering, architecture and science subjects attract a greater proportion of young Pakistani and Bangladeshi, Chinese and Indian and other Asian students compared to students from other groups. In particular, these subjects attract a much larger proportion of Chinese students. Students from White and Mixed and Other backgrounds are more likely to study languages at HE level. Black and Pakistani and Bangladeshi students are more likely to study law than White and Chinese students.
- BME students are more likely to come from deprived areas, areas of low HE participation, and working class family backgrounds.
- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be first generation entrants. (This pattern is not specific to BME students). First generation entrants are more likely to stay at home than live independently, usually due to financial reasons. Parents of first generation entrants are also less likely to be in a position to give comprehensive IAG, which can be compounded if the school or college also gives poor IAG.
- ‘Social debt’ plays a part in considering HE study – BME students are more likely to be funded by parental contributions, which can foster a feeling of needing to pay them back in kind.

Section 4: Key themes in the literature: HE experiences and their effects on attainment

The fourth section continues to examine key themes from the wider literature on attainment in HE. Again, it has also proved useful to look at gaps for students from other backgrounds, particularly backgrounds that are classed as widening participation (WP) groups, as these have some overlap with the BME group. Likewise, research into inclusive learning and teaching practices has also been useful for understanding the issues BME students experience with their curriculum and its delivery.
The fourth section is split into two subsections. The first subsection looks at the pressures of university life and how these impact on student attainment. The second subsection looks at the way in which the curriculum is designed and delivered, the overall institutional culture within HEIs, and how the sector’s policies and practices affect BME students.

4.1 Pressures of university life

Key findings:

- BME students are the least likely to take out loans, they are more likely to live at home, and are more debt-averse.
- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to take on part time work. The more hours a student works in term time, the lower their attainment is likely to be.
- Expected course costs and debts influence the choices made about where and whether to study. While this is not unique to BME students, these factors may have a larger impact on BME groups due to their increased likelihood of coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, and the higher rates of debt-aversion.
- Arriving at university and noticing differences between you and your peers (material wealth, previous educational experience, parental experience of HE) can negatively affect how prepared students feel for university.
- Insufficient IAG can lead to higher numbers of drop outs and transfers for BME students.
- Feeling isolated or alienated (by both students and teachers) is a significant explanatory factor for BME students being dissatisfied with their courses.

4.2 Institutional culture

Key findings:

- There is a sector-wide lack of staff awareness of BME issues, which amongst other things includes a tendency to frame the issue of differential attainment by problems associated with the student (the ‘deficit model’) rather than problems relating to the organisation itself.
- BME students highlight a lack of role models available to them and a lack of BME perspectives in course material. However, they also warn against the promotion of BME role models in a tokenistic fashion.
- Academics are encouraged to work to both understand the effect of institutional racism on education and to critically examining Whiteness and White privilege in order to further the academic endeavour and ensure genuine equality and diversity.
- Hidden curricula need to be brought out into the open, discussed and critiqued. Education will always involve elements of hidden expectations related to the process of learning and the value of certain kinds of knowledge, but these should not go unchallenged.
BME students stressed the importance of having their perspectives included, and being allowed to help shape the content of their courses. The NUS survey showed that BME students did not feel they could bring their perspectives to their education, and had experienced feelings of alienation and exclusion at their institutions.

BME students have two important concerns about marking bias – both that their names will give them away as BME and they will therefore get lower marks, and that academic work on race and ethnicity is not valued as highly as other work.

BME students also have concerns about lack of academic support; they are also less likely to come forward for help and want lecturers to reach out to them instead.

Research into inclusive learning and teaching suggests offering genuine equivalent alternatives for assessing students and ‘universal design’ (building flexibility into a course or module).

Section 5: Initiatives to address differential attainment in other institutions

The fifth section contains an overview of some of the work being done to close attainment gaps at other institutions, with case studies from a range of HEIs. It also looks at two recent overviews of these and similar initiatives, which evaluate what the sector is doing to address this issue of differential attainment, and identify the work that needs to be done in order to progress this area further.

Key findings:

• Common tactics for reducing the attainment gap include: building research to provide a base of evidence; raising staff knowledge and awareness; working with students as collaborative partners; the provision of safe spaces for discussion; and the use of language that revolves around success, empowerment, and aspiration.

• Shared ownership of this work with BME students, and recognition of the BME student voice are seen to be particularly important, with students frequently being used as a source of knowledge about the institution, as a support network for other students, as research subjects, and as conference participants.

• A ‘post-racial’ approach is used in some institutions whilst a target approach focusing on BME students is popular in others. The choice of approach appears to be informed by the feelings of staff and students within each given institution.

• The importance of embedding this agenda is also apparent, with both the pervading sense that this work has to occur at all levels of an institution, raising the awareness, skills and confidence of all staff, and ensuring that this agenda is included in strategic vision, strategic plans, and the work of various university boards and committees.

• Lack of long-term funding can be an issue when it comes to successfully embedding the work in the institution.
Many HEIs have taken a multi-faceted approach and whilst this appears to have led to a decrease in differential attainment, it is difficult to separate the interventions that have worked from the ones which have not. The lack of robust evidence to demonstrate the impact of many interventions on differential attainment shows a clear need for planning, including strategies for monitoring and evaluation, when designing any future intervention.

Section 6: Toolkits

This section looks at a range of toolkits produced by individual HEIs and other HE organisations. Some of these toolkits aim to provide HEIs with a theoretical framework to start this work from scratch, while others share examples of what has worked in their institution.

Key findings:

- Providing separate guides for staff and students, and making them clear and distinct from each other appears to be the most useful approach.
- Tailoring the guidance to staff and students separately avoids exposing students to the idea that they may be less likely to succeed (and thus risking students internalising this and doing less well as a result), whilst also giving academics the information and skills they need to start closing the attainment gap.

Section 7: Areas of future related research

The fifth section gives a brief overview of some other areas of research relating to BME students which, while outside the scope of this paper, are worth further investigation. A list of suggested further reading is provided for each area. Additionally, some potentially useful resources for future work into differential attainment, including possible collaborative partner organisations, are provided in this section.

Key findings:

- Four areas of related research interest are identified; these are
  1) Admissions,
  2) Progression to postgraduate study,
  3) Progression to employment, and
  4) BME academic staff and the Research Excellence Framework (REF).
- Three resources for future work are also identified. These are
  1) Funding,
  2) Collaborative partners, and
  3) Accreditation.
1 The ethnicity attainment gap: an overview

Key findings:

- The most recent attainment gap figure for the HE sector in England is 15.2 percentage points, for 2013/14.

- One study controlled for a wide range of other factors that might influence student attainment and concluded that even though the gap was reduced, ethnicity was still a significant factor in differential attainment.

- While there is an attainment gap for all ethnic groups, it is consistently worst for Black (Black African/Black Caribbean/Other Black Background) students across the HE sector.
This section gives an overview of the ethnicity attainment gap. Statistics on differential attainment are provided for the whole of England, along with a brief history of the attainment gap, in order to present the national context. Finally, some key drivers for addressing the gap are presented.

**Selection of key research:**


Using data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), this report presents an analysis of the gender, ethnicity, disability and age profiles of the students across the UK during the 2013/14 academic year, with the aim of focussing attention on areas where the HE sector needs to act to achieve an inclusive culture for all staff and students.

2. **Broecke, S. and Nicholls, T., (2007). Ethnicity and degree attainment.**

This study looked at 65,000 English domiciled HE entrants in 2002/03 and attempted to control for a fuller range of factors when looking at the attainment gap for BME students. These factors included prior attainment, subject of study, age, gender, disability, deprivation (using IMD), type of HE institution, type of level 3 qualifications, mode of study, term time accommodation and ethnicity.

This report finds that even after controlling for the above named factors, being from a minority ethnic community is still statistically significant in explaining final attainment, though the attainment gap was significantly reduced. The attainment gap is largest (before and after applying the controls) for Black Caribbean, Black African, and Chinese students.


This report was commissioned and funded by HEA. It provides an overview of the academic literature on differential attainment up to 2011 and identifies some key themes across this work, such as the need for inclusive curricula, students’ perception of their preparedness for higher education and the need for sector-wide and institutional responses to the issue.

This report acknowledges the significance of overall differential attainment across the sector, whilst also drawing attention to the need to further understand the complexity of the issue, particularly with regard to other causal factors such as socio-economic class and institutional discrimination. Singh suggests that the next phase of
work on the ethnicity attainment gap should be to expand on small-scale studies at individual institutions and disseminate findings across the sector.

1.1 The ethnicity attainment gap across England

The phrase "ethnicity attainment gap" refers to the difference between the proportion of White British students who are awarded a First or Upper Second class degree and the proportion of UK-domiciled BME students who are awarded the same degrees.

Each year, the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) presents an analysis of the gender, ethnicity, disability and age profiles of students and staff across the with the aim of focusing attention on areas where the HE sector needs to act to achieve an inclusive culture for all staff and students. Table 1 shows their most recent data on the attainment gap in England.

**Table 1:** UK-domiciled first degree undergraduate qualifiers in England 2014/15, by degree classification and ethnic group:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First</th>
<th>2:1</th>
<th>2:2</th>
<th>Third/Pass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>49695</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>115455</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BME Total</td>
<td>8305</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>28315</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1595</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>7475</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3910</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>12760</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>1250</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>1830</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>5395</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>1435</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>58000</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>143770</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In England in 2013/14, 75.6% of White students who qualified for their degree were awarded a 1st or a 2:1, compared with 60.4% of BME qualifiers, leaving a gap of 15.2 percentage points (ECU, 2015).

The attainment gap also differs among sub-groups of BME students, with Black students being the least likely group to be awarded a 1st or 2:1 across the whole of the UK. The proportion of students awarded a 1st or 2:1 in England in 2013/14, broken down by ethnicity, is as follows:

- 66% of Chinese students (a gap of 9.6 percentage points compared to White students)
- 62.8% of Asian students (a gap of 12.8 percentage points compared to White students)
• 49.5% of Black students (a gap of 26.1 percentage points compared to White students) (ECU, 2015)

Even after controlling for the majority of other factors (including prior attainment, and socio-economic status), a study by Broecke and Nicholls (2007) shows that being from a minority ethnic community is still statistically significant in explaining final degree awards, though the gap is significantly reduced.

**Figure 1:** Degree Classification by Ethnicity – original probabilities.


**Figure 2:** Degree Classification by Ethnicity – “controlled” probabilities.
Table 2: Attainment gaps for original and controlled probabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>% of students with 1st or 2:1 – original</th>
<th>% point difference from White and UK Irish Category - original</th>
<th>% of students with 1st or 2:1 - controlled</th>
<th>% point difference from White and UK Irish Category - controlled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White and UK Irish</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Other</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>-7</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>-13</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>-13</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>-13</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>-17</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Caribbean</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>-21</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black African</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>-23</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown / Refused</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The controlled factors account for just 1 percentage point of the differential attainment for Asian students, and for between 6-11 percentage points for the other groups.

Black Caribbean and Black African students had the highest attainment gaps before and after the controls, with the Black Caribbean students going from a gap of 21
percentage points to 13, and Black African students from 23 to 14 (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007). Chinese students actually saw increases in differential attainment after the controls were applied, going from 13 percentage points to 14. Black students are also the least likely to be awarded a first class degree before controlling for other factors (3%) and after (5%).

1.2 Phases of work to address the ethnicity attainment gap in the HE sector

In his A Synthesis of Research Evidence – BME Students’ Participation in HE (2011), Singh describes three historical phases of attitudes in the HE sector towards the attainment gap for BME students:

Phase 1 - pre-1990
Singh characterises the first phase by suggesting that it was exemplified by widespread ignorance and apathy, coupled with what he describes as ‘self-delusion’ from liberal academics who would not acknowledge the possibility of institutional racism or discrimination.

Phase 2 – 1990 - 1999
Phase 2 covers a period of mass expansion of HE and the WP agenda. Singh notes that the focus on getting more young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds into HE inadvertently had a positive impact on the number of BME students coming to University and this drove a series of HEFCE projects in the mid-2000’s to identify good practice with regards to diversity.

Phase 3 - 2000 - 2011
Singh notes that the 1999 Macpherson Report on the death of Stephen Lawrence¹ provided a catalyst for the third phase. This report highlighted institutional racism in the police force in particular, but this drove work to expel racism from other public sector institutions as well. Singh suggests that it is still the case that many HEIs remain in a state of denial about the ethnicity attainment gap, or try to reduce it to a deficit model, where the presumption is that there is something ‘wrong’ with the student, rather than the institution.

Phase 4 – 2011 onwards
Singh suggested that a fourth phase was emerging at the time of publication— one which begins to expand on the work done by individual institutions and embed effective mechanisms for tackling the gap across the sector. Several HEIs are currently underway with developing their own projects and resources to address the gap, and have participated in a number of summits and think tanks to disseminate the findings. Some institutions have already been successful in narrowing their gaps and have set institutional targets for closing it altogether. This work is discussed in section 5 Initiatives to address differential attainment.

¹ Stephen Lawrence was a young Black man who was murdered in an unprovoked racist attack in 1993.
Despite the move towards research and the process of engendering change in the third and fourth phases, the attainment gap between White and BME students has not decreased significantly over the last decade; it peaked in 2005/06 at 18.8 percentage points and it is currently at its lowest at 15.2, having fallen since last year (16.8) which was the lowest since 2003/04 (17.2). (ECU, 2014; Stevenson, 2012)

1.3 Reasons to tackle differential attainment

There are a number of reasons why HEIs need to work to address this gap. Firstly, if BME students are being disadvantaged by their HE providers, this is in contravention of the legal obligations for universities and other public institutions as set out in the Equality Act 2010 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. The degree attainment of students is also not an isolated issue – Broecke and Nicholls note that there is a labour market premium attached to a ‘good’ degree (which they identify as a 2:1 or 1st), so the attainment gap also potentially disadvantages BME students economically (DfES, 2007). This is a source of concern for HEIs who use graduate employment as an indicator of success.

With over 80 graduates applying for every graduate job (AGR, 2011), and almost three large graduate employers now routinely demanding that applicants have a minimum of an upper second class degree in order to sift out applications (Snowden, 2012), addressing the attainment gap is an ethical, social and economic imperative.

(Stevenson, 2012)

Indicators of student satisfaction outcomes and destinations are recognised as critical to student recruitment, not least for the recruitment of international students. In this context, the NSS shows that BME students, on average, are less satisfied with their student experience than their white peers (Surridge, 2008) student groups across areas of satisfaction measured by the NSS are particularly complex when examined by ethnicity. The research evidence also demonstrates that ethnic minority graduates do comparatively worse in the labour market than white graduates in securing full-time employment, particularly on graduation (Machin, 2009). Degree attainment is of direct relevance here. Institutional reputation is likely to be of particular concern where an institution has a significant number of BME students and/or has an institutional focus on disciplines that attract a higher than average number of BME students. The fact that young Black, Chinese, Pakistani and Bangladeshi entrants to HE are more likely to come from low-participation backgrounds (when compared to white entrants and those from other minority ethnic groups (HEFCE, 2010))

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2 The Equality Act 2010 puts an obligation on HEIs not to discriminate against students on the basis of any of the listed protected characteristics, which includes race. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2010 also gives public bodies, including universities, a duty to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups.
and therefore attract additional funding further underlines the potential importance of institutional reputation for the recruitment (and retention) of BME students.

(HEA/ECU 2011)

Furthermore, of UK-domiciled students in UK HEIs with a known ethnicity, the proportion of BME students has increased from 14.9% in 2003/04 to 20.2% in 2013/14 (ECU, 2015). The proportion of White students over the same time period has decreased from 85.1% to 79.8%. Ethnic minorities are predicted to make up one-fifth of the UK population by 2051 (Wohland et al., 2010), which indicates that the proportion of BME students may also increase. These students are likely to make choices based on quality of provision, value for money and graduate outcomes (Stevenson, 2012); institutions that have an attainment gap and are not attempting to close it may be less likely to attract these students, which could have a significant impact on student numbers and institutional diversity.

Recommendations from Causes of Student Differences (HEFCE, 2015) propose that HEIs be required to report on the attainment gap in the near future. Other recommendations include requiring HEIs to report on their students’ progression through their degrees by ethnicity, and measuring their progression against expected benchmarks; for HEFCE to support HEIs to do this; and for HEFCE to develop a Diversity Charter Mark. As this report looked at differential outcomes for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, BME students and disabled students, the recommended ‘Diversity Charter Mark’ mentioned here might be expected to have a wider focus than just BME students. However, as noted above, ECU have recently developed and piloted the Race Equality Charter Mark, which is now available for all institutions following a successful pilot in 2015.

Finally, the recent government proposals in the HE Green Paper, Fulfilling our Potential (BIS, 2015) for a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) stipulate that the TEF “will recognise those institutions that do the most to welcome and support students from a range of backgrounds”. It also suggests that the metrics against which teaching excellence is assessed should be broken down into student cohorts from disadvantaged backgrounds and under-represented groups. Finally, the Green Paper specifically mentions issuing new guidance to the Director of Fair Access to focus on the progression and success of particular groups, with BME student success being highlighted as a key issue (BIS, 2015).

Further reading


This green paper proposes changes to Higher Education with a focus on raising teaching standards, and giving students more information for making their decisions.
These reforms are primarily centred on the Teaching Excellence Framework but this document also set out the government’s wider vision for the shape of the HE sector.
2 Challenges for narrowing the gap

Key findings:

• BME students are not a homogenous group and while it is useful to look at commonalities within all BME students, it is also sometimes necessary to analyse data by relevant sub-groups. However, it can be difficult for individual HEIs to break down data into sub-groups as the dataset can become too small to be of statistical significance.

• There is significant overlap between BME students and students from WP backgrounds, suggesting that any future interventions to address differential attainment should be mindful of both factors.

• There are ethical concerns about what, when, and whether to tell students about the attainment gap, bearing in mind there is a risk of students internalising the issue and performing less well as a result.
Useful definitions - Race and Ethnicity

Racism

Racism - Any act that links tendencies, affinities, behaviours or characteristics to an individual or community based on innate, indelible or physiological attributes, intended or not, is an act of racism. Racism is also the prejudice, hierarchical differentiation, discrimination and so on that results from these essentialized understandings of race as an innate factor that determines human traits and abilities. Racism may be manifest individually, through explicit thoughts, feelings or acts, or socially, through institutions and practices that reproduce and essentialize difference and inequities (see essentialism; cf. apartheid).

(The Dictionary of Human Geography)

Black

The way that people of African descent describe themselves in countries such as South Africa, the US and parts of Europe. In the UK the term was also used (and can still be) in a political sense by other minority ethnic groups, especially Asians, who feel that their common experience of racism outweighs cultural differences.

(Institute of Race Relations)

BME/BAME

Black and Minority Ethnic or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic is the terminology normally used in the UK to describe people of non-white descent.

(Institute of Race Relations)

Ethnic minority

Definitions of what constitutes an ethnic group or an ethnic minority are subject to much discussion. ... In British government research, minority ethnic groups are differentiated based on a combination of categories including 'race', skin colour, national and regional origins, and language. ... [T]he fact that ethnic monitoring categories in a British policy context have been modified over time points to the contested and changing nature of ethnic identification. What has remained fixed, however, is the assumption of an ‘ethnic majority’ that is White, of British origin, and English-speaking. Bulmer's (1996) definition of an ethnic group is as follows:

An ethnic group is a collectivity within a larger population having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus upon one or more symbolic elements which define the group’s identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality
or physical appearance. Members of an ethnic group are conscious of belonging to an ethnic group.

Berthoud, Modood and Smith (1997)⁵ define ethnic group as follows:

In principle, an ethnic group would be defined as a community whose heritage offers important characteristics in common between its members and which makes them distinct from other communities. There is a boundary, which separates ‘us’ from ‘them’, and the distinction would probably be recognised on both sides of that boundary. Ethnicity is a multi-faceted phenomenon based on physical appearance, subjective identification, cultural and religious affiliation, stereotyping, and social exclusion. But it is not possible in advance to prescribe what the key distinguishing characteristics might be; the components of ethnicity will be different in Britain compared with, say Northern Ireland, Belgium, Bosnia, the United States, Rwanda, India or Singapore. So it is necessary to adopt a flexible and practical approach to choosing the specific criteria to identify the important ethnic boundaries in any particular society.


**Ethnicity**

Ethnicity is one of the most difficult concepts in the social sciences to define: researchers disagree on the meaning of the term; social groups differ in their expressions of ethnicity; and some theorists challenge the credibility of the concept in the first place (see Banks, 1996). The etymology of this term dates back to ancient Greece, where the word ethnos was used to refer to a distinct ‘people’. The word ethnic originally entered the English language as an adjective applied to non-Judeo-Christian peoples. The first instance of the word ethnicity used as a noun occurred in the early 1940s, when researchers sought to find a replacement for the word ‘race’ once it had become associated with the genocidal policies of the Nazi party (see genocide). In contemporary usage, ethnicity is seen as both a way in which individuals define their personal identity and a type of social stratification that emerges when people form groups based on their real or perceived origins. Members of ethnic groups believe that their specific ancestry and culture mark them as different from others. As such, ethnic group formation always entails both inclusionary and exclusionary behaviour, and ethnicity is a classic example of the distinction people make between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (cf. difference; other/otherness; subject).”

(The Dictionary of Human Geography)
There are a number of key challenges associated with the work to address differential attainment between White and BME students, as well as ways in which we might respond to those challenges.

2.1 Challenges

2.1.1 Defining BME

As the Equality Challenge Unit data and much of the research on differential attainment uses the term Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), this offers a useful umbrella term, as it allows for the continuity of ideas and also enables comparisons between our institution-specific data and the rest of the sector. However, there are some important considerations when using this definition.

- Membership of an ethnic group or groups is self-defined. In most of the literature, ‘Black and Minority Ethnic’ is used as an umbrella term to incorporate a range of minority communities who live in the UK. This includes people who describe themselves as Black, Asian, Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups, or Other; these are categories that reflect the UK census questions on ethnicity. It is important to note that there are sub-groups within these categories, for example Asian/Asian British includes options for Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, and Any Other Asian Background. The census does not however allow for people to select multiple ethnicities – therefore someone who defines as both Scottish and Black may only be able to select one of these ethnicities.

- In addition to this, people do not always use the same terms to refer to the same, or similar, categories of people. For example, TUoS staff and students generally use the term BME, with the student committee recently updating its name from Black Students’ Committee to BME Committee in order to be more inclusive. However, the NUS uses ‘Black’ to include those of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean descent and states that “The NUS Black Students’ Campaign uses the term ‘Black’ in its political sense. Whilst acknowledging the immense diversity in and between the African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean communities, it also recognises that the commonalities and basis of our experiences are also marked by racism and the under-representation of our communities in all institutional structures.” (NUS, 2007). Furthermore, some HEIs use the term ‘ethnically minoritised’, in order to indicate the difference between the implied finality of the phrase ‘being a minority’ and the process of being or becoming minoritised.

- Burton et al. (2008) note that the concept of ethnicity can be approached in a number of ways; “as commonalities within a group, or as differences from ‘other’ groups”. The work done to date on the ethnicity attainment gap mostly takes the ‘difference’ approach, by attempting to distinguish which factors affect BME students in comparison to their White counterparts. However, BME students are not a homogenous group so it is...
also useful to investigate exactly where any commonalities amongst this group do lie, and to break these down into the relevant sub-groups where necessary. For example, Black students are significantly more likely to be mature students than other minority ethnic groups (HEFCE, 2010).

Further reading


This paper highlights issues related to the way ethnic identity is reported and measured in the UK, using qualitative research and drawing on existing literature on the topic.

2.1.2 Limitations of the data

Crucially, although BME students are not a homogenous group, it is often difficult for individual institutions to break down their data into sub-groups as this can make the dataset too small to be of any statistical significance. This makes detailed and robust analysis of the issues challenging.

Additionally, the tendency to compare ‘like for like’ students means that much of the current research has focused only on students with A-Levels, even though Black students are more likely to enter HE with other qualifications (DfES, 2007). Moreover, in much of the available work, there is also a tendency to focus only on universities in England because different entry qualifications, student finance models, and course lengths and structures make direct comparisons with Scotland, Wales, and Ireland more complicated.

2.1.3 The relationship between BME and WP indicators

As the WP agenda is thought to have had a positive impact on the number of BME students coming to university (Singh, 2011), this suggests that there is likely to be a potentially complex inter-relation between ethnicity and other WP indicators. Knowing exactly which of these factors cause and/or maintain the gap will help HEIs to develop suitable strategies for closing the gap.

A study by Broecke and Nicholls (2007) demonstrated that ethnicity is statistically significant to attainment, even after controlling for other factors. They controlled for prior attainment, subject of study, age, gender, disability, deprivation, type of HE institution, type of Level 3 qualifications, mode of study, and whether students lived in University accommodation. Though the gap was significantly reduced after
controlling for these factors, it still existed. Factors they did not control for included the type of prior institution the students attended, whether or not they were engaged in term-time work, parental income and other attributes, and English as an additional language (EAL). The report notes that they would also expect these factors to impact on attainment, but they could not control for these due to a lack of available and robust data.

They key outcome of this work strongly suggests that there is something specific about ethnicity, which has a significant impact on degree attainment within individual institutions. The authors of this paper state that these findings do not automatically imply ethnic bias within HE (DfES, 2007). However, it is important to note that:

- An attainment gap for BME students still exists when taking into account a wide range of other potential factors.
- Students who fall into one or more of these WP groups are at a disadvantage and this is having a significant effect on BME students. Thomas and Quinn (2007), for example, argue that socio-economic factors should not pre-determine a students’ academic ability, so where they do create a disadvantage, HEIs should also be working to address this.

Analysis undertaken by the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit (WPREU) of the relationship between BME students and WP indicators (see appendices 4a and 4b) focused on the 2013 cohort of home (UK/EU) undergraduate students who entered TUoS for the first time in 2013. Of 4463 students, 558 (12.7%) of these were BME. This study looked at several different measures of socio-economic status:

**POLAR – Participation of Local Areas**
This is a HEFCE measure which analyses the rate of progression of young people into HE by census ward. POLAR quintile 1 contains areas with the lowest HE participation rates, and POLAR quintile 5 contains those with the highest HE participation rates.

Based on HEFCE data (2010), a greater proportion of young Pakistani and Bangladeshi, Black, and Chinese students come from quintiles 1 and 2 (areas with the lowest rate of HE participation). For Pakistani and Bangladeshi students, 32% came from quintiles 1 and 2, for Black students, 30% and Chinese students 28%. For White students the figure was just 20%.

This is not always highlighted when HEIs discuss the recruitment and achievement of students from low participation neighbourhoods and the University should be conscious of the over-representation of BME students in low participation neighbourhoods when conducting further research into differential attainment and/or widening participation numbers.

**IDACI – Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index**
This measures the proportion of children under 16 who live in low income households within a local area. IDACI quintile 1 contains those areas with the highest
proportion of children in low income households, and IDACI quintile 5 contains those areas with the lowest proportion of children in low income households. The IDACI can be used as a supplementary measure to the IMD, as can its counter-part the Income Deprivation Affecting Older People Index (IDA0PI).

The 2014 HEFCE study found that using IDACI, 77% of those from the most advantaged areas with ABB at A-Level gained a 1st or 2:1. This figure drops to 67% for students from the most disadvantaged areas (HEFCE, 2014). They also achieved similar results using POLAR data.

**NS-SEC**
NS-SEC stands for National Statistics Socio-economic Classification and is a measure of social class by occupation. There are eight categories, ranging from “Higher managerial and professional occupations” to “never worked and long-term unemployed”. These can also be grouped into three broader categories; Higher, Intermediate and Lower occupations.

Unlike some other measures of socio-economic status, occupation is usually self-declared. This gives some cause for caution when using this data – it is estimated that in 2007 over 25% of applications were not assigned the correct NS-SEC category, with ‘not given’ and missing results likely being from respondents who would otherwise be classed in the lower classification levels (Hatt and Harrison, 2009).

**IMD**
The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score provides a relative measure of deprivation at small area level across England. It includes seven different dimensions of deprivation as well as an overall composite measure of multiple deprivations. A total of 40 separate indicators span 7 ‘domains’ of deprivation; income deprivation; employment deprivation; health deprivation and disability; education deprivation; crime deprivation; barriers to housing and services deprivation; and living environment deprivation (data.gov.uk). There are also IMD measures for Scotland, Wales and Ireland but each uses a different number of indicators, making it difficult to compare results across the UK.

The 2007 study, *Ethnicity and degree attainment* (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007), controlled for deprivation using the IMD, amongst many other factors, and found that ethnicity was still statistically significant, even though the gap had been reduced. (See section 1.1 The ethnicity attainment gap across England for more detailed information on the results of this study).

Overall, this research demonstrates that there is a significant overlap between being from a BME background and being from a lower socio-economic class. It seems likely then that both race and class-related factors are impacting on attainment for BME students, which suggests that any future interventions should be mindful of both factors.
2.1.4 Sensitivity and ethics

In 2008/09, Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) and Higher Education Authority (HEA) hosted a summit for HEIs focussing on issues of ethnicity and degree attainment differentials. Participants highlighted their considerations around ethics and sensitivity when carrying out work to address the attainment gap:

- Ethics of research – if research into the attainment gap is being conducted with BME students, questions arise about what we should tell the students who participate in this research. There may be a risk of students internalising the issue, thereby causing a pattern of self-replicating behaviour which will lead to poor performance and therefore lower degree attainment. [In addition to this, there are further ethical concerns that arise if an institution is (or becomes) capable of identifying which students are at risk of performing less well; should this information be communicated to those students, or to staff, and if so, how? (HEFCE, 2015)]
- How to avoid creating a culture of blame – the need to mitigate against the risk that raising the issue of differential attainment might make some staff feel like they are at fault, either through ‘poor’ teaching practice and/or institutional racism. Another risk to mitigate against is making it seem like the problem is to do with the student (i.e. using the deficit model) and thereby compounding negative expectations.
- There are also issues around managing the institutional reputation – the desire to preserve good relationships with the BME student population, and the local BME community, whilst also acknowledging institutional failings.

Additionally, in his summary of work in this area, Singh (2011) distinguishes between two broad categories of the way in which ‘success’ is interpreted, referring to these as ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ measures. Hard measures relate to objective indicators that can be statistically analysed (e.g. degree attainment, exam or assignment marks, and post-graduation employment rates). Soft measures on the other hand are more subjective and relate to a student’s personal experience and expectations (e.g. their sense of personal accomplishment, or satisfaction with their HE experience).

Students’ own perceptions of how well they are doing at university may be very different to the objective measures used to monitor their ‘success’. A student may be happy with their progress even if they are not gaining ‘good’ marks, or they may be dissatisfied with their progress even if they are. HEIs may need to work to ensure students have the same understanding of success that they do, before talking to students they perceive as ‘less’ successful, or may wish to find additional ways of measuring success that are based on subjective experiences.

2.2 Responding to these challenges:
2.2.1 Defining BME

It is useful to define which students the University needs to focus on when undertaking work to address differential attainment. In terms of being able to compare nationally available data and literature, this would mean looking at UK-domiciled, home fee status BME students in England. Though A-Levels are one form of prior attainment, we should be aware that BME students are less likely to enter HE with A-Levels and more likely to be mature students when they enter HE (HEFCE, 2010) (see section 3.2.2 Non-traditional routes and mature students for further information). Accordingly, including alternative entry qualifications in research undertaken at TUoS will be an important part of our analysis. We should also be mindful of any difference in part-time vs full-time patterns, which may be influenced by larger numbers of mature BME students.

2.2.2 Limitations of the data

We should remain alert to the limitations of using data by itself, as it does not tell us enough about individual students’ experiences. It is important to make sure the future work progresses beyond looking at statistical data and includes qualitative data and the student voice. Moreover, we need to be aware of the risks of ‘distraction by data’ (HEFCE, 2015), which may inhibit the progression of outcomes into action.

We should also be aware that current data on attainment is broken down by final degree classification. This represents a strong indicator and allows for benchmarking and comparison with other institutions, however, at the same time it may only provide a limited picture of the academic experience of students and their outcomes. It may be useful in future therefore, to consider further analysis of year-on-year, or term-by-term data, alongside data on student progression (withdrawals, leaves of absence, re-sits and resubmissions) to help understand what causes the gap. In this way, we may gain more understanding of the whole student journey.

2.2.3 The relationship between BME and WP indicators

When interrogating the data it is helpful to be aware of other factors, particularly WP indicators, which may also have an impact on degree outcomes. However, at the same time, we should be wary of taking too granular an approach with the data since this may leave us with such small numbers of students that we cannot draw any significant conclusions.

2.2.4 Sensitivity and ethics

With regard to sensitivity and ethics, the ECU/HEA summit report recommends promoting the success and achievement of BME students, with language and activities being tailored to suit this focus. It also suggests that making sure the institution is seen to both acknowledge the attainment gap and to be genuinely acting
towards narrowing it as a way of relieving the reputational tension with students and the local community.
3 Key themes in the literature: Pre-HE experiences and their effects on attainment

Key findings:

- Attainment gaps also exist in schools, though pupils from Chinese, Indian and some mixed backgrounds do better than White British students at GCSE. Black Caribbean and Traveller communities have the lowest GCSE attainment.

- Students’ subject choices and grade awards for GCSE and A-Level may affect what institutions and/or subjects students can apply to study at HE level. Black students are less likely to take science or maths, but more likely to study arts. Students from White backgrounds favour the three main foreign languages (French, German, and Spanish) more than any other ethnic group.

- The quality of information, advice and guidance (IAG) given in schools and colleges affects student choice. BME students from lower income backgrounds and state schools are more likely to describe their IAG as ‘poor’ or ‘could have been better’.

- Black students are more likely to be mature students than other ethnic groups and less likely to enter HE with A-Levels. The attainment gap for mature BME students has traditionally been higher than for young BME students.

- BME students are concentrated in a smaller number of institutions than White students. Black students are more likely to come from and study in London than other ethnic groups. Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students are more likely to study at low entry profile HEIs. There is some evidence to suggest Black students may prefer to study where there are other Black students and Black culture/history on the syllabus.

- Engineering, architecture and science subjects attract a greater proportion of young Pakistani and Bangladeshi, Chinese and Indian and other Asian students compared to students from other groups. In particular, these subjects attract a much larger proportion of Chinese students. Students from White and Mixed and Other backgrounds are more likely to study languages at HE level. Black and Pakistani and Bangladeshi students are more likely to study law than White and Chinese students.

- BME students are more likely to come from deprived areas, areas of low HE participation, and working class family backgrounds.
- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be first generation entrants. (This pattern is not specific to BME students). First generation entrants are more likely to stay at home than live independently, usually due to financial reasons. Parents of first generation entrants are also less likely to be in a position to give comprehensive IAG, which can be compounded if the school or college also gives poor IAG.

- ‘Social debt’ plays a part in considering HE study – BME students are more likely to be funded by parental contributions, which can foster a feeling of needing to pay them back in kind.
This section explores the issues affecting BME students before they enter HE which can influence both their choices regarding subjects and institutions, and their final degree outcomes. It also looks at issues which affect a broader range of students from other disadvantaged backgrounds.

The aim is to provide an overview that will enable staff to better understand BME students, particularly students who are from both BME and other disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, some of the information presented here may foster an improved understanding of students who are not necessarily BME but nonetheless come from a disadvantaged background. This section is broken down into two thematic sections; Educational background and prior attainment, and Making decisions about HE.

This section draws upon a range of research, some of which focuses directly on the attainment gap, and some of which focuses on other areas (such as students’ socio-economic background, or whether they are first time entrants to HE), which are indicated as relevant by the attainment-specific research. Themes discussed in this section relate to a) students’ choices with regards to HE subjects, institutions, and subsequent employment and how those choices might impact on their retention and attainment whilst in HE, and b) factors which affect the lives of students before they enter HE, which may have an impact on final degree awards.

**Selection of key research**


   This paper covers the whole educational cycle from school to adult/lifelong learning. It looks at the key stage progression and GCSE attainment, the role of post-16 education (particularly for young black men), access routes to HE for BME students and HE attainment gaps.


   This paper presents a statistical analysis of GCSE and A-level pupils’ subject choices, by ethnicity. While the report finds a number of differences in subject choice at both levels across the various ethnic groups, it also notes that the different socio-economic profiles and geographical location of some groups may also play a part in subject choice.
3. HEFCE (2010). *Student ethnicity: Profile and progression of entrants to full time first degree study.*

This report compares, by ethnicity, the characteristics of the UK-domiciled entrants to full-time, first degree courses in 2002/03 as well as their progression routes through their first degree studies.

In addition to revealing an attainment gap for both young and mature BME students, it found that first year continuation rates were higher for White students than BME students; that BME students take longer to complete their degrees; and amongst mature students, those from a White background were more likely to qualify with a degree.

3. HEFCE (2014). *Differences in Degree Outcomes: Key Findings.*

This study looks at 18 and 19 year old English domiciled entrants to HE in 2007/08 who hold three or more A-levels and their final degree outcomes. It examines the effects of a student's background on their attainment, focussing on ethnicity, gender, GCSE attainment, and postcode-based measures of determining socio-economic background. This study is also an update and extension to previous research which looked at the 1997-8 cohort.


Particularly chapter 1, Factors influencing entry to FE and HE, pp.12-18, and corresponding recommendations, pp.59-60.

This report is the product of a research project by the National Union of Students (NUS) in response to the ethnicity attainment gap, which involved a literature review, an online survey of 938 Black students and three focus groups. It explores the experiences of Black students (which includes those of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean descent) in HE and FE, with a particular focus on institutional culture, learning, teaching and assessment practices, and feelings of belonging and inclusion.

Chapter 1, Factors influencing entry to FE and HE, looks at students' previous education opportunities, parental support and socio-economic background. Respondents were asked what influenced their FE and HE choices and how they felt about the information, advice and guidance (IAG) they were given.
3.1 Educational background and prior attainment:

3.1.1 Schooling: Prior attainment

One way in which students’ choices can be constrained with regard to the courses and HEIs they apply to is their prior educational attainment, which might be reflected in their GCSE and A-Level results. Attainment at both these levels is can be affected by ethnicity, socio-economic background and various other socio-demographic factors.

When it comes to GCSE attainment, 2011/12 statistics for state schools show that whilst Chinese pupils are the highest attaining ethnic group, pupils from all Black backgrounds are the lowest attaining ethnic group. Pupils who are eligible for free school meals (a proxy for low-income families), pupils who have English as an additional language (EAN), and pupils who have Special Educational Needs (SEN) also consistently perform less well than their peers (ONS 2012). Pupil progress between curriculum Key Stages has also historically differed by ethnicity, resulting in greater attainment inequality by the time these pupils leave compulsory education than there was upon their entry to school (DfES 2003).

Figure 3: Percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at Grade A* to C or equivalent including English and mathematics GCSEs or IGCSEs\(^3\) by broad ethnic group categorisation, for 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11.

Source: ONS (2012) – GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England

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\(^3\) IGCSE stands for International General Certificate of Secondary Education. Both this and the GCSE qualification can be taken in the UK or overseas; but the IGCSE is a linear course whereas the GCSE is currently modular. University admissions services will generally treat IGCSE and GCSE as equivalent qualifications.
In 2010/11, the national level of pupils achieving 5 or more A* - C grades at GCSE or equivalent, including English and mathematics, was 58.2%. For White pupils the figure was 58%, for Black pupils, it was 54.3%, and for Asian pupils it was 61.8%. Chinese students are the best performing group overall, with a figure of 78.5%.

However, the broad ethnic group categorisation figures mask significant inequalities within those groups.

Figure 4: Percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at Grade A* to C or equivalent including English and mathematics GCSEs or IGCSEs by narrow ethnic group categorisation, for 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11.

Source: ONS (2012) - GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England

For example, the broad White category includes White British, Irish, Traveller of Irish Heritage, Gypsy/Roma and Any Other White Background. While the proportions of White British and Irish students with 5 or more A* - C grade GCSEs are 58.2 and 65.9% respectively, the percentages for those who declared their ethnicity as Traveller of Irish Heritage or Gypsy/Roma are the lowest of all ethnic groups, at 17.5% and 10.8%. Similarly, the Asian category includes Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Any Other Asian Background. The proportion of Indian pupils achieving the same outcome is 74.4%, but 59.7% for Bangladeshi pupils, and 52.6% for Pakistani pupils.

4 For those interested in who is included in the White ethnic group and why, two essays in Garner’s *Whiteness: An Introduction* are illuminating: ‘How The Irish became White (again)’ and ‘Whiteness at the margins’ which looks at the concept of dominant Whiteness and how this plays out, particularly in relation to Jewish people and people of Irish traveller, Gypsy, or Roma heritage.
Across the three years reported (2008/09 – 2010/11), attainment levels have consistently increased for almost all ethnic groups\(^5\) though changes in differential attainment are not similarly consistent.

\(^5\) ...bar those who identified as Traveller of Irish Heritage or Gypsy/Roma, though the number of pupils for each group (137 and 595) represents a very small fraction of the total number of pupils (566,932).
Figure 5: Percentage changes in differential attainment at GCSE over time, 2008/9-10/11

Source: ONS (2012) - GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England
The Black African, Black Caribbean, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Any Other Black Background groups have seen a consistent reduction in the GCSE attainment gap over time, as measured against the (broad) White group. Of these, Bangladeshi pupils are now narrowly out-performing the (broad) White group, and the gap for Black African pupils has reduced to 0.1%. However, the Gypsy/Roma group has seen a consistent increase in the attainment gap as measured against the (broad) White group, rising by 5.6 percentage points across the three years.

For all other ethnic groups, there has been some year on year fluctuation, though some groups have remained relatively consistent, such as Indian pupils, who consistently average 16.4 percentage points higher than the (broad) White group at GCSE level.6

**Figure 6:** Percentage of students aged 19 in 2014 cohort attaining Level 2, Level 2 with English and maths, and Level 3, by ethnicity.

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6 Note that both the GCSE and A-Level (Level 2/3) figures do not give any breakdown of the actual grades achieved at A-Level, so there may still be some disparity between ethnic groups in terms of grades achieved.
Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) attainment shows the least disparity across ethnic groups, with all ethnicities bar Traveller of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma in the 81 – 97% range. Disparity between ethnic groups increases for Level 2 with English and Maths, and again for Level 3. Chinese and Indian pupils out-perform all other ethnicities at every level, while Black Caribbean and White and Black Caribbean pupils under-perform at both the Level 2 with English and Maths and Level 3 stages.

In addition to the issue of differential attainment at GCSE and A-Level, there are patterns in the subjects that students from different ethnic groups choose to study at GCSE and A-Level. Pupils from Chinese, Indian, and White and Asian backgrounds prefer English literature compared to other ethnic groups. Pupils from Chinese, Indian, White and Asian and any other Asian background prefer separate sciences (biology, chemistry, physics) while Black pupils are less likely to take these subjects and more likely to take the single award in science. Pupils from Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Caribbean and White and Black Caribbean backgrounds are the least likely to study a modern foreign language (Vidal Rodeiro, 2009).

The Russell Group produces the Informed Choices guide, which lists the subjects considered as 'facilitating', i.e. subjects most likely to be required or preferred for entry to degree courses. These are Maths, English Literature, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Geography, History, and Languages (Russell Group, 2015/16). Black pupils are less likely to take Science and Maths subjects at A-Level and more likely to study Arts subjects, while the reverse is true for Pakistani, Indian, Chinese and Bangladeshi pupils. Less than 1% of African, Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils study the three main foreign languages (French, German and Spanish) while pupils from a White background favoured languages more than any other ethnic group. Chinese, Indian, Pakistani and pupils with other Asian background are less likely to take the 'less effective preparation' subjects (i.e. less 'academic' subjects such as business studies or performing arts) while Caribbean pupils and those with a mixed White and Black background are more likely to take these subjects at A-Level (Vidal Rodeiro, 2009).

The choices students make about which GCSE and A-Level subjects to study, along with their grades for these qualifications, will impact on the subjects and institutions they can successfully apply to at HE level. There are also differences by ethnicity in subject choice at GCSE and A-Level, including how likely students are to take the 'less effective preparation' subjects, which will also have an impact on their HE choices. Understanding these issues around students’ prior attainment and subject choices is important to help understand patterns in HE applications and experiences.

3.1.2 Schooling: Information, advice and guidance

The institution a student attends, and the information, advice and guidance (IAG) they are given there, can affect which subjects and institutions they choose for further study.
When asked to rate the IAG they received when choosing their FE and HE options, 25% of BME\(^7\) student respondents in the NUS report *Race For Equality* (2011) felt it was ‘poor’ or ‘could have been better’. While 75% of respondents rated it as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’, the qualitative evidence from respondents’ answers indicated that the type of institution the respondents attended, along with their socio-economic background, and the expectations of their teachers, had a significant impact on the answers BME students gave to this question. Though information about the type of schools and colleges respondents attended was not included to preserve anonymity, the following statements were included in the NUS report as examples of poor IAG BME students had experienced:

As an FE student, my classmates and I were pretty much left to ourselves to decide what we wanted to study and where we wanted to study... I went to a college where the aspirations of Black students were low and there were conflicts (inter-racial and BNP). The college did not attempt to reach out to the Black students who were frustrated by their society, peer pressure and family.

Other Asian respondent, HE

I did not feel they [staff] truly supported me and made comments making me feel I had already been rejected [by HEIs]. They could have done so much more and did so for a non-ethnic pupil in a similar position. I feel my sixth form doesn’t encourage people to seek the best in themselves and many people, even potential high achievers, slip under the cracks and go to universities well below their ability.

Indian respondent, HE (NUS, 2011)

The *Race for Equality* (NUS, 2011) report also highlighted that researching where to study could be more difficult for BME students whose parents had no knowledge of university admissions processes, or who did not want them to attend university. This difficulty was then compounded by insufficient IAG provisions in their schools and colleges.

### 3.1.3 Schooling: Type of Institution

In addition to the provision of IAG impacting students’ choices about where and what to study, a study by HEFCE (2015) found that the type of school students attend prior to entering HE can affect their final degree outcomes, though there are some more surprising results here:

- Of students with the same prior A-Level attainment, those who attended state schools tend to do better in their degree studies than those who attended independent schools.

---

\(^7\) The original NUS report used the term Black, rather than BME, as NUS uses the term Black to encompass all students of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean descent. Here, I have replaced this with the term BME to avoid confusing Black African and Black Caribbean students (who elsewhere in this paper are referred to under the umbrella term Black) with students from all BME backgrounds.
• Of students with the same prior A-Level attainment, those from low-performing schools are as likely to be awarded a 1st or 2:1 as those who attended high performing schools.
• Yet, on average, a student with BBB at A-Level from a school with a CCC average will do better than a student with BBB from a school with an AAA average.

The last finding in particular indicates that students who experience a learning environment where they are perceived to be doing less well compared to others may be less likely to be awarded a 1st or 2:1 (and vice versa). This gives us additional reason to avoid assuming the deficit model of differential attainment, where the presumption is that there is something ‘wrong’ with the student, as forming a negative perception of students may also impact on their attainment.

3.2 Making decisions about HE

3.2.1 Cultural differences in participation

Participation in HE varies across all ethnic groups. While the proportion of BME students in the UK has increased from 14.9% in 2003/04 to 20.2% in 2013/14 (ECU, 2015), there are notable differences in participation within the BME category.

For example:

• More BME women enter HE than BME men.
• Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi participation rates are half those of Black African and Indian participation rates.
• Black students are older than other BME students as well as being older than White students.
• The highest proportions of BME students are found in Medicine and Dentistry (32%) and Law (31.2%) (Stevenson, 2012).

Further differences in participation regarding subject choices and non-traditional routes can be seen in the following three sections.

3.2.2 Non-traditional routes and mature students

As access to university is generally predicated on students’ prior achievement, it is important to consider whether BME students are entering via non-traditional routes and/or as mature students, and how this then affects the choices these students make about where and what to study.

Davies et al (in Smith, 2009) identify the following factors as particularly important to mature students:
• The institution being geographically accessible – relatively small distances were sometimes a crucial issue, particularly for students who had constraints on their mobility.
• Course structure, availability, location and reputation - course structure was ranked particularly highly by part-time students.
• Availability of vocational or professionally accredited courses.
• The behaviour and practices of staff in relation to mature students
• Clarity and transparency of admissions procedures.
• Timetabling information – many students wanted this earlier in their decision making processes rather than after they had accepted an offer.
• “Fitting in” – under-represented students tend to choose institutions where they felt they would not be seen to be ‘different’.

When it comes to differential attainment amongst mature students, the HEFCE (2010) study showed that the proportion of students gaining a first or upper second class degree was significantly lower for every group other than White students. Just 25% of mature Black final-year students were awarded a first or upper second class degree, compared to 61% of mature White finalists. The 2002/03 cohort’s sector-wide attainment gap for Black mature students was therefore 36 percentage points, more than double the sector average\(^8\) for non-mature students (HEFCE 2010).

Table 3: Degree classifications for mature UK finalists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree Classification</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Pakistani and Bangladeshi</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indian and Other Asian</th>
<th>Mixed and Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>2,775</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Second</td>
<td>8,130</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4,850</td>
<td>845</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclassified</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No degree</td>
<td>1,995</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>18,380</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,750</strong></td>
<td><strong>460</strong></td>
<td><strong>170</strong></td>
<td><strong>665</strong></td>
<td><strong>675</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Classification</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HEFCE (2010) – Student Ethnicity: Profile and progression of entrants to full-time, first degree study

The types of qualifications students enter HE with differ across all ethnicities, but there are particular patterns in non-traditional pathways for both young and mature BME students.

\(^8\) This currently stands at 16.1% for 2012/13, and was 17.2% for 2003/04 which is the closest year’s data available for this cohort.
### Table 4: Entry qualifications for young 2002/03 UK entrants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry Qualifications</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Pakistani and Bangladeshi</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indian and Other Asian</th>
<th>Mixed and Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – 120 tariff points</td>
<td>3,195</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121 – 240 tariff points</td>
<td>25,750</td>
<td>1,105</td>
<td>1,470</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>2,380</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>241 – 360 tariff points</td>
<td>50,625</td>
<td>1,075</td>
<td>1,495</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>3,015</td>
<td>1,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 360 tariff points</td>
<td>48,880</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>2,230</td>
<td>1,195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational A-Levels</td>
<td>10,620</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>1,650</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access Course</td>
<td>3,885</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6,555</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>18,920</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>805</td>
<td>505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>171,965</td>
<td>4,945</td>
<td>6,245</td>
<td>2,350</td>
<td>11,395</td>
<td>5,155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A-Level qualification**  
90%  81%  90%  87%  91%  87%  

Source: HEFCE (2010) – Student Ethnicity: Profile and progression of entrants to full-time, first degree study
Table 5: Entry qualifications for mature 2002/03 UK entrants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry Qualifications</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Pakistani and Bangladeshi</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indian and Other Asian</th>
<th>Mixed and Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – 120 tariff points</td>
<td>1,285</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121 – 240 tariff points</td>
<td>1,865</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>241 – 360 tariff points</td>
<td>1,095</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 360 tariff points</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational A-Levels</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access Course</td>
<td>7,095</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>4,705</td>
<td>905</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4,825</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>6,820</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>28,325</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,730</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,020</strong></td>
<td><strong>320</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,350</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,345</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A-Level qualification</strong></td>
<td><strong>23%</strong></td>
<td><strong>10%</strong></td>
<td><strong>26%</strong></td>
<td><strong>20%</strong></td>
<td><strong>23%</strong></td>
<td><strong>20%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HEFCE (2010) – Student Ethnicity: Profile and progression of entrants to full-time, first degree study

In 2002/03, young Black students were the least likely to enter HE with A-Level qualifications (81%) compared to entrants from other ethnic groups (87% - 91%). For non-vocational A-Levels only, the White and Chinese groups had the highest proportion of students entering with over 240 tariff points (77%). The lowest was for Black students (53%). (HEFCE 2010)

A lower proportion of the same cohort’s mature Black students (10%) entered with an A-Level qualification compared to other ethnic groups (20–26%). Furthermore, a sizeable proportion of mature students entered with an Access course (35% of Black students and 24% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi students) (HEFCE 2010).

3.2.3 Institution choice

One study, ‘Why are you applying there?: ‘race’, class and the construction of higher education ‘choice’ in the United Kingdom (Shiner & Noden, 2015), looked at the experiences of young Black men in post-16 education. This study suggested that further education colleges offer the chance to re-enter education for young people who have been alienated by their previous experiences of school. In particular, college provides space where young Black men are supported by a community of other Black students, an opportunity to study a curriculum that celebrates Black
cultures and histories and to develop positive relationships with tutors who are perceived to care more about their students (DfES 2003). This effect may also be replicated in HEIs if Black students are attracted to institutions with larger numbers of Black students, or that offer opportunities to study Black culture and history, because of a perception of such institutions providing a Black community and a support system for Black students.

This is supported by the 2010 HEFCE study, *Student Ethnicity: Profile and progression of HE entrants*, which showed that BME students were concentrated in a smaller number of institutions than their White counterparts, who were more evenly distributed across the HE sector. Overall, 20% of young BME entrants both came from and studied in London, compared to just 3% of white entrants, suggesting that young BME entrants are more likely to stay in areas they already know well, particularly areas with an ethnically diverse population. 8% of young White students studied in London, compared to 39% of young Indian and other Asian students and 50% of young Black students. This changes to 14% of White mature students, 49% of Indian and other Asian mature students and 67% of Black mature students. Additionally, the proportion of mature students from the two lowest entry profile institutions was also greater than the proportion of young students at those institutions, and was greater again for mature BME than for mature White students: 67% compared with 47%.

Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi entrants were also more likely to study at institutions with lower entry qualification profiles than White entrants, and other minority ethnic students. Shiner and Noden (2015) showed that the prior attainment of BME students could not on its own explain the lower rate of applications to high-profile institutions compared to their White counterparts. In particular, Black Caribbean, Black Other, Mixed White and Black Caribbean and Pakistani applicants were more likely to target non-elite universities, even after controlling for other factors including prior attainment, suggesting a pattern of self-exclusion from elite institutions. This pattern is also shown in the same study to affect students from working class backgrounds, with those candidates who did not come from the higher professional and managerial family backgrounds being more likely to target non-elite universities (though this was also influenced by the schools they attended and the subjects taken at A-Level).

Avenues of further research into students’ choices about where to study might include looking at the decliner’s survey to determine if there are any patterns related to ethnicity amongst the students who are offered a place at TUoS but decide not to accept it. This could incorporate which institutions they choose instead, their reasons given for declining, and their motivations for applying to TUoS in the first place.

For additional research related to students’ sense of belonging, see section 4.1.3 *Inclusion and belonging*. 
3.2.4 Subject choice

As with institutional choices, there are also differing patterns of participation by ethnicity across the subjects studied at HE level.

The 2010 HEFCE study, *Student Ethnicity: Profile and progression of HE entrants*, looked at the subject choices of those entering UK HE for the first time in 2002/03, further broken down by ethnicity and whether the students were classed as young (under 21) or mature (21 and over):

**Table 6:** Subject group for young 2002/03 UK entrants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Group</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Pakistani and Bangladeshi</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indian and Other Asian</th>
<th>Mixed and Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creative Arts</td>
<td>20,160</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Languages</td>
<td>6,695</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>34,430</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>30,275</td>
<td>1,345</td>
<td>1,340</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>3,115</td>
<td>1,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>44,830</td>
<td>1,105</td>
<td>2,225</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>3,655</td>
<td>1,235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering and Architecture</td>
<td>11,745</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>23,836</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>1,365</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>2,160</td>
<td>710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>171,965</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,945</strong></td>
<td><strong>6,245</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,350</strong></td>
<td><strong>11,395</strong></td>
<td><strong>5,155</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HEFCE (2010) – Student Ethnicity: Profile and progression of entrants to full-time, first degree study

Engineering, architecture and science subjects attracted a greater proportion of young Pakistani and Bangladeshi, Chinese and Indian and other Asian students compared to students from other groups. In particular, these subjects attracted a much larger proportion of Chinese students.

The report also found that:

- Computer Science attracted 23% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi students, compared to 18% of Indian and other Asian students and 6% of White students.
- Students from White, and Mixed and Other backgrounds were more likely to study languages (9% and 10% respectively) than students from other groups (less than 5%).
- Black and Pakistani and Bangladeshi students were more likely to study law (10% for both groups) than White and Chinese students (5% for both groups).
Table 7: Subject group for mature 2002/03 UK entrants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Group</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Pakistani and Bangladeshi</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indian and Other Asian</th>
<th>Mixed and Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creative Arts</td>
<td>4,165</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Languages</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>6,235</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>2,820</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>5,600</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering and Architecture</td>
<td>1,545</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7,450</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>28,325</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,730</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,020</strong></td>
<td><strong>320</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,350</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,345</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HEFCE (2010) – Student Ethnicity: Profile and progression of entrants to full-time, first degree study

For mature entrants, the proportion of students doing engineering, architecture or science subjects was greater for every minority ethnic group than for White students. Indian and other Asian students were most likely to take these subjects (42%) compared to Black students (29%) and White students (25%).

Other findings include:
- As for young students, a greater proportion of minority ethnic mature students studied computer science than White students; notably 23% of Indian and other Asian students chose this subject compared to 6% of White students.
- Business Studies was more popular among Chinese students (24%) compared to Black students (19%) and White students (6%).
- Chinese students were also more likely to study creative arts and design (17%), compared to 14% of White students and 4% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi students.

Note that this data is based on the subjects students enrol in, rather than the ones they graduate in. This might present a useful avenue for further research; given that BME students have historically been more likely to change course and/or institution. For the 2002/03 cohort examined in the 2010 HEFCE study, 10% of BME students changed course and/or institution compared to 6% of White students. Pakistani & Bangladeshi students were the most likely to change course and/or institution (12%) and White students were the least likely to.
3.2.5 First generation entry into HE

Another way in which socio-economic and educational background may affect HE choices is through being a first generation entrant to HE.

A student is a first generation entrant to HE if none of their parents/guardians have had access to university and completed a degree, at any stage of their life. These students are more likely to have lower socio-economic class backgrounds, although this is not always the case (Thomas and Quinn, 2007). Whilst little quantitative research has been done into the effects of being a first generation entrant to HE, there is some evidence to suggest that where first generation entry and socio-economic status are considered together, first generation entry is the better indicator of inequality in HE (Thomas and Quinn, 2007).

Thomas and Quinn (2007) also suggest that first generation impact has a significant effect on university study, with first generation entrants often choosing the happiness of the family as a whole over staying at university and making themselves or their families unhappy in some way. HE was seen as a way of doing something useful, rather than as a means of self-improvement – despite the prevailing discourse in the UK where HE is framed as meritocratic method of social mobility. First generation entrants were also more likely to stay at home due to financial constraints and their parents less likely to be able to give informed guidance on HE choices or how to navigate university life once they were there. Students also generally showed a more flexible attitude to learning; desiring an approach to education that did not limit them in terms of time or money to finishing a degree within a set timeframe.

One of the recommendations put forward by Thomas and Quinn is that HEIs do not make any assumption that students or their families will have ‘insider knowledge’ of HE and so all systems, procedures, and essential curriculum information should be made transparent and understandable. They also suggested that a much more flexible HE system needs to be developed; one which recognises the needs of the student in regards to the family (and vice versa) as well as one which provides more flexible methods of learning. This applies to young students without caring responsibilities as well as mature students and student carers, although it is noted that the type of family responsibility will differ for these groups.

3.2.6 Family influence

Parents were rated as the most influential source of help when making decisions about entering HE by all ethnic groups, but particularly Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi, and Indian students (Connor et al., 2004). Parents were also seen as a more important influence for BME students generally than for White students.

The research by Connor et al. (2004) included a survey of the parents of minority ethnic students. The results showed a clear ambition for their children to stay/do well at school, a commitment to providing support for schoolwork, including extra tuition in some cases. Parents also generally held the assumption that their children
would go on to University, partly as a way to fulfil their academic potential and partly
as a means of improving their future employment opportunities. For some of the
parents, a university education was an opportunity they hadn’t had themselves and
so they wanted to make sure it was an opportunity for their children.

Parental influence on the actual decision of where to study or subject choice
appeared limited, though parents were actively involved in the process by
accompanying their children to campus visits and discussing the options with them
(Connor et al., 2004).  

Additionally, the concept of “social debt” may play a part in students’ choices and
attainment:

Although we have no specific evidence from our research to expand
upon this, some people have suggested that as minority ethnic students
are more likely to be funded through university by parental contributions
(from their own savings) than White students... they may feel they will
owe more of a 'social debt' to their parents. They may feel they should
pay something back to their parents in kind, rather than financially (e.g.
helping younger siblings get to university, looking after older relatives),
or feel they have to live up to family expectations.

(Connor et al, 2004).

Perceptions about this kind of debt can impact on students’ choices in a number of
ways. The NUS (2011) report suggests that students may choose to stay closer to
home in order to fulfil family obligations, apply to universities with lower fees in
order to reduce the cost to the family, or choose a subject and/or career path that
meets family expectations. In turn, these factors can impact their attainment.

3.2.7 Recommendations

Few specific recommendations have been made in the above literature, but there are
several suggestions for further research to explore these issues in more depth.
These are listed below.

Schooling (prior attainment and type of school)
- Research what schools are doing to improve attainment of BME pupils,
  particularly Black pupils where attainment has improved significantly over
time. This research could be used to inform practice in HE.

Subject Choice
- Further research into students’ movement between courses, departments
  and faculties in order to build a picture of whether students are making the
  best initial choices for themselves and what the disparity is between BME and

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9 This only measures the parents’ direct influence. Parents are still likely to have an indirect influence,
perhaps by helping their children to choose GCSEs and/or A-Levels which then ‘lead to’ particular
subjects or institutions.
White students. This could suggest further avenues for outreach work in schools with BME students to ensure they are making informed decisions.

First Generation Entry to HE

- Research first generation entrants at TUoS to identify the effect of first generation entry on our students, and use this research to inform what, if any, interventions are necessary for first generation entrants.
- Avoid making any assumptions about students’ knowledge of HE and ensure all systems, procedures and essential curriculum information are made transparent and understandable.
- Create more flexible options for undergraduate study, in order to suit students with family commitments.

NB: For additional recommendations related to socio-economic status, see sections 4.1.1 Financial issues and 4 Recommendations.
4 Key themes in the literature: HE experiences and their effects on attainment

Key findings:

- BME students are the least likely to take out loans, they are more likely to live at home, and are more debt-averse.

- Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to take on part time work. The more hours a student works in term time, the lower their attainment is likely to be.

- Expected course costs and debts influence the choices make about where and whether to study. While this is not unique to BME students, these factors may have a larger impact on BME groups due to their increased likelihood of coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, and the higher rates of debt-aversion.

- Arriving at university and noticing differences between you and your peers (material wealth, previous educational experience, parental experience of HE) can negatively affect how prepared students feel for university.

- Feeling isolated or alienated (by both students and teachers) is a significant explanatory factor for BME students being dissatisfied with their courses.

- There is a sector-wide lack of staff awareness of BME issues, which amongst other things includes a tendency to frame the issue of differential attainment by problems associated with the student (the ’deficit model’) rather than problems relating to the organisation itself.

- BME students highlight a lack of role models available to them and a lack of BME perspectives in course material. However, they also warn against the promotion of BME role models in a tokenistic fashion.

- Academics are encouraged to work to both understand the effect of institutional racism on education and to critically examining Whiteness and White privilege.

- Hidden curricula need to be brought out into the open, discussed and critiqued. Education will always involve elements of hidden expectations related to the process of learning and the value of certain kinds of knowledge, but these should not go unchallenged.

- BME students stressed the importance of having their perspectives included, and being allowed to help shape the content of their courses.
BME students have two important concerns about marking bias – both that their names will give them away as BME and they will therefore get lower marks, and that academic work on race and ethnicity is not valued as highly as other work.

BME students also have concerns about lack of academic support; they are also less likely to come forward for help and want lecturers to reach out to them instead.

Research into inclusive learning and teaching suggests best practice is to offer genuine equivalent alternatives for assessing students and ‘universal design’ (building flexibility into a course or module).
This section builds on the previous one by looking at factors which influence student retention and attainment during their time in HE. Some of the issues explored in the last section are interlinked with these, for example a student’s socio-economic background can have an impact on the financial pressures they may face at university. This section is broken down into two thematic sections; pressures of university life, and institutional culture.

The aim of this section is to provide an overview of the experience of HE from the perspective of BME students and/or students from other disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to develop both staff understanding of these issues and to suggest ways in which the student experience could be improved for these groups of students.

**Selection of Key Research**

1. **NUS (2011). Race for Equality**

Particularly chapter 2, *Teaching and Learning*, pp.19-33, and corresponding recommendations, p.60

This report is the product of a research project by the National Union of Students (NUS) in response to the ethnicity attainment gap, which involved a literature review, an online survey of 938 Black students and three focus groups. It explores the experiences of Black students (which includes those of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean descent) in HE and FE, with a particular focus on institutional culture, learning, teaching and assessment practices, and feelings of belonging and inclusion.

Chapter 2, *Teaching and Learning*, looks at the perceptions of Black students in terms of their academic achievement and satisfaction with their courses, highlighting problems with the curriculum, learning teaching and assessment practices, and the support available to them.


This book comprises a collection of essays on the way colleges and universities contribute to and/or maintain hierarchies of race, class and gender. Thought the book doesn’t offer any particular recommendations, it provides a useful insight into how a curriculum or HE agenda can be hidden and why. It also explores several different approaches to dealing with a hidden curriculum. Chapters 1 -3 provide a general overview of what constitutes a hidden curriculum, and later chapters look at specific issues. For example, chapter 5 deals with issues around the function of mentoring and chapter 9 discusses the hidden gender curriculum in Engineering.

This report provides an overview of the academic literature up to c.2010 on inclusive learning and teaching practices up and identifies some key themes across this work, such as inclusive curriculum design, inclusive curriculum delivery, inclusive assessment, and institutional commitment to and management of inclusive learning and teaching.

4. HEA (2012) Black and Minority Ethnic Student Degree Retention and Attainment

This report is one of the outcomes of a summit the HEA delivered on retention and degree attainment. It presents the findings from institutional research which was undertaken as part of the summit; the responses from HEI summit delegates to this research; and a set of guiding principles which are intended to underpin any further recommendations.

5. HEA and ECU (2011). Improving the degree attainment of Black and minority ethnic students

This publication draws on the strategies and experiences of 15 HEIs who participated in a national summit that looked at the issues of attainment in relation to ethnicity, run by HEA and ECU. The aim of the publication is to support HEIs by disseminating this work throughout the sector.


This book explores four key themes in research on racism in higher education – challenging racism in HE; the experiences of minority ethnic students in H; agendas for change; and theories of racism and its persistence. The book also acts as an accompanying text to the Anti-Racist Toolkit written by the same authors.

4.1 Pressures of university life

4.1.1 Financial issues

The cost associated with studying for a degree can impact on both the decisions HE entrants make with regards to their course of study, and how well they are likely to do in their degrees as a result of taking on paid work to support themselves financially.
Connor et al. (2001) showed that recent and potential HE entrants from lower socio-economic backgrounds found the decision to enter HE, and what/where to study was not an easy one. This decision usually involved weighing up two sets of factors – the positive benefits of gaining a higher qualification (e.g. job prospects, improved earnings, self-development, social mobility) versus the negative impact of the costs involved (not just the cost of a degree and the associated costs of studying, but the fact they would not be earning or achieving their own financial independence until they had finished studying).

BME students are the least likely to take out a loan to pay for their course and maintenance costs. They are also more likely to live at home than White students, which in turn affects the amount of student loan they are entitled to. The greater availability of work in the London area may also be having an impact on the number of BME students choosing to study in London (Connor et al., 2004).

The University Lifestyle Survey 2014\(^{10}\) reports that 26% of students hold down a part-time job during term time. Of these, 53% work between one and ten hours per week, 36% work 11-20 hours, 9% work 21-30 hours and 2% work 40 or more hours. While this report does not differentiate by ethnicity, we do know that students from lower socio-economic classes are more likely to take on part-time work (61% of students from households engaged in routine and manual work, compared to 51% of those from intermediate professions and 50% of those from managerial and professional households (Universities UK, 2005). Reducing the amount of loan borrowed to support their studies is particularly important to BME students (46%, compared to 24% of White students), Muslim students (47% compared to 27% of students from other religious backgrounds), and students living at home (40% compared to 20% of students living independently) (Universities UK, 2005).

The Universities UK (2005) study found that the more hours a student worked during term time during their third/final year, the lower the mark they achieved. Factors identified as having an impact on attainment included: students missing contact hours; producing poor quality work; missing deadlines; and having difficulty accessing university library and computing facilities. Students also spoke of a lack of uninterrupted self-study time causing them to feel that they haven’t had the time to do thorough or in-depth work.

At TUoS, research on post-2012 entrants has shown that the need to take term-time jobs to pay for basic living expenses, and the impact of this on students’ academic work, is unevenly distributed across the student cohort, affecting students from lower income backgrounds more than others (Crockford et al., 2015). An additional survey showed that students at TUoS reported that they had less time for reading and studying independently as a result of needing to work part time, with 67.5% of respondents saying they spent less time on studying independently, and 72% saying they spent less time reading. (Simms, 2015)

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\(^{10}\) This is a survey of 2000 HE students conducted using an online questionnaire with full-time undergraduates at all years of study. Third year students at the point of interview would have been the last cohort before the introduction of £9,000 per year fees; future surveys may therefore be a better reflection of the opinions of students who are all paying £9,000 per year.
While for many students a part-time job provides opportunities to gain relevant work experience or to save additional funds to broaden their future experience, for others who need to work to cover living costs, it can also have significant implications for their ability to engage in the value-added, self-directed elements of their studies and therefore, potentially, on their final outcomes.

(Crockford et al., 2015)

Financial costs may impact on students’ degree and institution choices as well as overall career plans. A total of 23% of students said the amount of debt they expected to incur had affected their career choice (University Lifestyle Survey, 2014). This number is significantly higher than the 15% who gave the same response in the survey two years previously, when all the students surveyed would have been paying the lower £3,000 per year in tuition fees).

Recommendations for institutions to consider, arising from the Universities UK (2005) study included:

- Helping students to manage their money by offering help with budgeting, financial advice and debt-counselling.
- Ensuring students are aware of all the financial support/resources they may be entitled to.
- Considering how best to help students in financial difficulties that cannot be tackled by one-off hardship payments.
- Developing a jobs policy. Student employability gives a reason to encourage part time work, but its impact on students’ attainment suggests caution. Approaches to policies in other HEIs have included providing guidance on the number of hours students work during term time (usually around 15 hours), negotiating jobs for students with local trade unions and students’ unions, and allowing students to earn credit for learning and skills they gain in term-time work.

While TUoS offers financial support services and has a policy that students should not work more than 16 hours per week if they are studying full time, there may be scope to establish a broader jobs policy. Developing advice for students on how to study around their work commitments could be useful. This might include offering tips for effective study in short amounts of time, or working with trade unions to offer guidance on successfully negotiating hours of work so as to minimise disruption to their studies.

The study, Financing the first year of university education in 2013/2014 (Hordósy, 2015), provides some insight into how TUoS students employed by the university view this employment. Students cite good rates of pay compared to other casual work, and a greater relevance to their course as reasons for taking on employment with the University. Students generally regard the flexibility of work and the availability of weekend shifts (e.g. for Student Ambassadors) highly, however there are also issues with the long wait for payment caused by submitting a time sheet at the end of one month, for payment at the end of the next.
4.1.2 Preparedness for HE

Singh identified ‘preparedness for success’ as one of the key themes spanning the literature around the attainment gap. As we have already seen, BME students felt that they had inadequate sources of information when selecting courses (see section 3.1.2 Schooling: Information, advice and guidance for more details). This may then have an impact on the higher rate of drop outs and transfers for BME students (see section 3.2.4 Subject choice). Singh also expressed the importance of integration into university life and culture, particularly for students who lived at home and tended to do less socialising in the evenings. Finally, the differences in material wealth, previous educational experiences, parental involvement and experience of HE and social and cultural capital were all identified as factors that negatively affected how prepared BME students felt for HE.

The 2012 HEA report found that when BME students were made aware the attainment gap, most students felt that their own under-attainment had “little to do with culture, ethnicity or racism”, but instead felt that it came from their lack of preparedness for HE. Again, factors they considered particularly relevant included class, poverty, prior schooling, and parental lack of experience and understanding of HE. 11

Even though they recognised the need for additional help, the students interviewed as part of the HEA research were against the idea of targeted interventions for BME students. They felt that such targeting would be perceived as inadvertently racist, although they did not perceive a similar issue with targeted interventions for international, disabled, or mature students. Their preference was for all students to have support made available to them, with the mechanisms of support being more diverse and varied in order to encourage more students to access them and enable staff to reach out to particular students or groups of students who might be reluctant to access mainstream support (Stevenson, 2012).

Many of the strategies that might help students feel more prepared for HE will be related to curriculum design and delivery, which are discussed in the next two sections. In addition, some further recommendations for HEIs to consider from the HEA research include:

- Making student support systems more diverse to ensure students can access support in a way that they find helpful. Only singling out BME students for targeted interventions in exceptional circumstances.
- Ensuring that all staff are given the skills and confidence to build successful relationships with all of their students in order to make it clear what is expected of them, and to ensure all students know how to seek support.

11 It is debateable whether or not poverty, for example, really has nothing to do with race. While the factors the students identified do appear to have more to do with social-economic class than race per se, the UK’s history of colonialism and imperialism certainly goes some way to explaining why BME people are more likely to be in a lower socio-economic class in the first place. (See Hesse, B., Discourse on Institutional Racism: the genealogy of a concept, in Law et al., 2004)
• Providing clear and transparent assessment guidelines; offering a choice of assessments; providing exemplars of first class assignments; aligning module marks against dissertation marks; implementing anonymous marking; scrutinising assignments and marking for cultural biases. In addition, assignment briefs should always be provided in the context of a discussion-based activity.
• Offering early feedback and giving students the opportunity to discuss anything they don’t understand about the feedback, and support to make good use of it for future assessments. Offering practice sessions on appropriately referencing work before submission.
• Using peer-assisted learning and peer-mentoring systems as well as giving students some examples of good coursework at all levels.

Students who took part in focus groups as part of the Sheffield Student 2013 Longitudinal Tracking Project noted the benefits of having a non-credit bearing first year in terms of finding their academic feet (Hordósy, 2014).

With regard to the above recommendation to only target BME students for intervention in exceptional circumstances, HEA refer to this as a ‘post-racial’ approach. There are criticisms of post-racialism which argue that it fails to challenge White normativity and obscures the issues of race and racism that BME people face (Cho, 2009), making this an area of work which needs to be handled with caution and sensitivity. The aim should be to find the right balance between acknowledging the effects of race and racism without undermining the stated needs of BME students to not be made to feel as though they are being targeted.

Further reading


This project is tracking 34 students who entered TUoS in 2013 in order to compare the experiences of students who come from different backgrounds. The final report is also due after July 2016 and expected to include further analysis by ethnicity.


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12 Post-racial: Designating a time period, society, etc., in which racism is no longer institutionalized or no longer exists. (Oxford English Dictionary). In a HE context, this phrase is often used to mean an approach which avoids targeting BME students specifically, instead preferring to make any interventions part of the institution’s mainstream provision.
This paper looks at student responses to the readiness and expectations questionnaire (REQ), which assesses first-year students’ expectations and preparedness for their first year in university. This study looked at responses from the Netherlands and New Zealand so may provide a useful comparison tool.

4.1.3 Inclusion and belonging

HEFCE and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation ran a ‘student retention and success’ programme and published an accompanying report in 2012. This looked at seven different projects to ensure student retention, with 22 HEIs working collaboratively to deliver these projects. These projects were then evaluated to determine the most effective practices. One of the key findings was that a sense of belonging is crucial to both retention and success.

In response to questions about why Black students are less likely to be satisfied with their educational experience and less likely to be awarded a 1st or 2:1, those who responded to the NUS survey repeatedly mentioned feelings of discomfort, isolation, being ‘the odd one out’, feeling ‘unwanted’ or having a sense of not belonging (NUS, 2011).

In addition to adjusting to an environment dominated by White students and staff, respondents also commented on a range of other challenges they and other Black students faced, such as finding it difficult to integrate with other students and develop personal relationships, as well as not being able to identify with peers and teachers.

Being in the minority in an institution or on a course left many respondents feeling that their views and experiences were unappreciated and unwelcomed. Consequently, some felt unable to share and discuss aspects of their ethnic and cultural identity.

(NUS, 2011)

Another issue highlighted by students was the perceived level of ‘deception’ in HEI’s marketing materials (Stevenson, 2012) which present images of diversity that promote unrealistic expectations of how diversity really plays out on campus.

If you go on the website of the university there’s a photo at the beginning of like a Black guy, with a White girl, and a Chinese guy and you think ‘wow’ but when you get here [the others are all laughing] … there is some people who kind of mix like that. But if you see a lecture theatre, sometimes in tutorials, you see the African students sitting together … it shows that everyone kind of chills with each other when they don’t. People get on perhaps but they don’t socialise that much, I don’t think.

- Student 11, Russell Group, Black British (Other), Male, 28, 2nd generation, Chemical Engineering PhD

(Stevenson, 2012)
Furthermore,

An image analysis of the website, leaflets and information guides, including prospectuses, was conducted at Leeds Metropolitan University. The results showed that BME students are over-represented, giving rise to fears that the predominance of images of BME students as academically successful might serve to mask the reality of degree attainment inequalities and consequently prevent strategies being put into place by the University to address them.

(HEA/ECU, 2011)

The following actions are recommended to help engage BME students and develop a sense of inclusion (NUS, 2011):

- Work with BME students to understand how they feel while studying at the institution, what areas of their experience are problematic, and how these should be addressed.
- Take steps to support better integration of students. Strategies for this could include increasing discussion and interactive work and organising events targeted at all students that celebrate cultural diversity.
- Promote existing support networks for Black students.

One potential avenue for further research at TUoS might be to determine the expectations of new/prospective with regard to diversity at this institution, or to survey outgoing students about their initial perceptions of diversity compared to the reality of studying here. The decliners’ survey could also be examined to see if there are any insights or patterns in the responses from BME students. This might help to find an acceptable line between honesty and aspiration in the University’s promotional imagery.

4.2 Institutional culture

4.2.1 Institutional culture

A students’ sense of inclusion and belonging is strongly tied to the overarching culture at their institution (NUS, 2011). This section looks at some issues HEIs may experience in relation to institutional practices and policies and their impact on BME students, and ways to resolve those issues. It starts by examining institutional culture, particularly with regards to a perceived lack of understanding of the experiences of BME students, and the lack of BME staff in HE more generally. It then goes on to explore the concept of institutional racism, as this is a term that is often referred to explicitly in the literature (e.g. Singh, 2010; HEFCE, 2015) and sometimes implicitly by BME staff and students who have taken part in qualitative research (e.g. NUS, 2011; ECU, 2011 and 2012).
4.2.1.a Lack of awareness of the issues impacting on BME students

The HEA report, *Black and Minority Ethnic Student Degree Retention and Attainment* (2012) highlights several themes around the lack of awareness HE staff have of the issues that impact their BME students. This report included interviews with senior staff, teaching staff, Student Union Officers and home BME students from a cross-section of HEIs.

The first theme relates to confusion over how BME students are defined. The HEIs involved were allowed to select the staff and students to be interviewed for the HEA research. About a quarter of the students put forward for interviews were international students, despite the research brief including only home BME students. Furthermore, some HEI staff spoke of BME students' as though they were international students, referencing inadequate English language skills, differences between UK and overseas school systems and culture shock of studying in a new country.

A second theme that emerged from this report is the lack of awareness of issues affecting BME students in HE. In general, HEI staff were aware that the attainment gap was a sector-wide issue, but did not know what the gap was in their own institution, occasionally believing that a) there was probably no gap because they personally weren’t aware of it, or b) that this work was done ‘elsewhere’ in the institution, but with no specific knowledge of where, or what work was being done. Staff were generally also unaware of the percentage of BME students and staff at their institution, or any specific interventions in place for BME students.

Interviewees spoke of their concerns around talking about race – there was a common worry of ‘saying the wrong thing’, but also a concern that formally raising the issue would mean committing resources (time and money in particular) to addressing it, and that once a HEI committed to the issue it would have to be for the long-term.

A third theme centred on the way staff framed the issue of attainment. Some of the staff involved in the HEA interviews tried to identify the cause of the problem as being something to do with the student or their background. For example, students having an ‘inadequate academic background’ (linked to attendance at state schools rather than independent schools), having non-traditional qualifications, or coming from lower-socio economic backgrounds. This approach runs the risk of assuming a ‘deficit model’ – a view that the problem lies with the students and that it is some attribute of the student that means they attain less well, rather than because of an institutional factor such as curriculum design/development.

One of the risks of using the deficit model is that staff attitudes towards their students can become self-fulfilling prophecies. This can work two ways – a ‘Pygmalion effect’ where students who are treated like high achievers go on to achieve well, or a ‘golem effect’ where students who are treated like low achievers go on to achieve poorly (Rowntree, 1996).
Finally, the over-reliance on statistical data is also identified as an issue. Though the collection of data is crucial to building understanding of the issue, Singh and Cousin caution against over-reliance on data analysis to identify a solution. They cite a known phenomenon called ‘distraction by data’ (HEA/ECU, 2012). They warn that HEIs may be in danger of missing what’s wrong with their pedagogical practice and/or institutional structures by placing too much emphasis on what else the attainment gap data reveals about students, such as whether they are from low participation backgrounds or state schools. Singh and Cousin suggest that these categories don’t actually tell us anything about the HE experience of the individuals concerned, and that it is by trying to understand the individual experience that we are more likely to find ways of improving performance.

4.2.1.b Lack of BME Staff

This section explores the impact of the lack of BME staff in HE on the learning experiences of BME students, and the perceptions of BME staff of both HE in general and their own institutions. It looks at Home BME and International BME figures, as both the NUS (2011) report and the Equality Challenge Unit’s report (2014) include international students and staff in their definition of BME.

Participants in the HEA/ECU summit identified that a lack of BME staff limited their capacity to address the attainment gap. For example, it limits the amount of staff available to act as mentors and role models, puts HEIs at risk of overburdening their BME staff with these roles, and may encourage the unwanted perception that supporting BME students is the sole responsibility of BME staff. The team from the University of Greenwich also noted perceptions among some BME staff that there were insufficient numbers of BME staff to create a ‘safe space’ for the discussion of race and pedagogy. They also noted that a lack of BME staff in leadership roles can mean there are fewer members of staff likely to champion the changes needed to narrow the gap (HEA/ECU, 2011).

The ECU produces an annual statistical report on the HE workforce. The following figures are for the academic year 2013/14 and give an overall picture of the number of BME staff at UK HEIs:

- Of all HE staff with a known ethnicity, 6.7% were UK BME and 5% were non-UK BME.
- There was a notably higher proportion of BME staff among non-UK staff (28.5%) than UK staff (8.2%).
- The proportion of UK BME staff was markedly lower among managers, directors and senior officials on academic contracts (2.9%) and strikingly higher among professional and support staff in sales and customer service occupations (13.5%).
- The proportion of UK Black professorial staff (4.5%) was lower than for any other ethnic group. The proportion of Black non-UK academic staff who were professors (2.2%) was also lower than for any other ethnic group. (ECU, 2015).
The percentage of BME academic staff does not reflect the percentage of BME students and this leads to many BME students feeling like they have a lack of role models:

In my last term, a Black lady came into science. And it was weird to me because I had never seen a Black teacher in my life before, which is not good! But because I saw that woman in that role, I thought, 'Ooh!' I felt really empowered, I thought, a Black woman in that role? I felt proud. And I thought, 'If she can do anything, I can do anything'.

Black Caribbean focus group participant, HE (NUS, 2011)

The lack of BME academic staff will also have an impact on some of the other issues discussed here, particularly staff awareness of BME issues, as highlighted by a student response in the NUS report:

Through my experience, a lot of my teachers have been Caucasian which I think can make it hard for students to relate to [them]. The lack of ethnic diversity in the teaching system means that some pupils may find it hard to approach members of the teaching team because they will feel that they won’t understand a student’s situation.

Indian respondent, FE (NUS, 2011)

The NUS report recommends increasing the diversity of staff as one of its student-led solutions. It suggests that Universities need to improve the diversity of their staff to better reflect the diversity of the student body, and to ensure that invited speakers and guests also come from diverse backgrounds (NUS, 2011).

However, not all students feel that promoting BME role models is appropriate:

The moment you racially profile in such a way that you say 'there are not enough role models' people feel that there should be more role models and the moment that they feel there aren’t enough role models for them to look up to they then don’t look up to anyone and therefore actually that leads to a failure in their own perceptions and about why Black people aren’t doing well enough, ‘oh, I don’t have anyone to look up to, what should I do?’ which isn’t necessarily the case … I think the argument for role models is very annoying because no-one ever talks about White role models.

Student 8, Russell Group, British Black African, Male, 23, 2nd generation, History (Stevenson, 2012).

As indicated above, although there are fewer BME staff in HEIs, only bringing in or highlighting the work of BME staff to serve a function as a ‘role model’ can be considered by students to be tokenistic, and more work needs to be done on the
genuine increase in recruitment and progression of permanent BME staff to all levels across the institution.

**Further reading**


and


Both of these reports draw on surveys, interviews, focus groups and in-depth fieldwork with BME staff and non-BME staff across a range of HEIs across England in order to identify key issues which affect BME staff, particularly with regard to their experiences of racism and how this can impact on their career progression.


This paper examines factors which cause BME academics to leave, or to consider leaving, the UK and what the UK HE sector can do to prevent people leaving or encourage them back.

The findings and recommendations focus on the importance of prioritising race equality in the academy, addressing micro-aggressions, inequalities and subtle forms of racism, recruitment and promotion, coaching and mentoring, workload and development opportunities, networking and addressing isolation.

4. ECU (2015). *Unconscious Bias (guidance and resources for HE staff).*

This web-based resource gives a short overview of the concept of implicit, or unconscious, bias:

“Implicit or unconscious bias happens by our brains making incredibly quick judgments and assessments of people and situations without us realising. Our biases are influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences. We may not even be aware of these views and opinions, or be aware of their full impact and implications.”

(ECU, 2015)

This guidance from ECU highlights some of the research which shown that unconscious bias can impact on recruitment decisions, the salary of the individual hired, and the amount of time and development that is subsequently invested in
them. Publications linked from the website include a literature review which looks at this research, a training pack aimed at colleges and HEIs to help them address unconscious biases with their institutions, a report for vice-chancellors and principals on how to lead changes relating to equality and diversity, and a report on improving the experiences of international staff in UK HE.

http://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/employment-and-careers/staff-recruitment/unconscious-bias

4.2.1.c The concept of institutional racism

This section explores the concept of institutional racism, including related qualitative research involving BME staff and students (e.g. NUS, 2011; ECU 2011 and 2012). It provides a brief outline of the term and how it is used in relation to HE.

The term ‘institutional racism’ dates back to 1967 and was coined by Black activists Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton. They used this term as a way of highlighting the difference between individuals who hold racist attitudes, and the much larger collective impact an organisation can have in maintaining racist structures within society (Law et al., 2004). Institutional racism need not be the product of a group of individuals in an organisation who each hold racist attitudes, but can be the result of uncritically maintaining organisational structures, policies and procedures which largely benefit White people and therefore marginalise and disadvantage those from non-White backgrounds.\(^\text{13}\)

The 1999 Macpherson Report looked in detail at this concept, and produced a definition of institutional racism that has been widely used in the UK since:

\[T\]he collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.

‘Unwitting racism’ was also defined in the report as follows:

Unwitting racism can arise because of lack of understanding, ignorance or mistaken beliefs. It can arise from well-intentioned but patronising words or actions. It can arise from unfamiliarity with the behaviour or cultural traditions of people or families from minority ethnic communities. It can arise from racist stereotyping of black people as

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\(^\text{13}\) See Hesse, B., “Discourse on Institutional Racism, the genealogy of a concept” in Law et al. for a critical look at how the modern concept of racism has evolved. Hesse argues that the modern concept of racism is based on a post-WWII anti-fascist context, as opposed to an anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist one.
potential criminals or troublemakers. Often this arises out of uncritical self-understanding born out of an inflexible police ethos of the "traditional" way of doing things. Furthermore such attitudes can thrive in a tightly knit community, so that there can be a collective failure to detect and to outlaw this breed of racism.

Though the Macpherson report was primarily addressing the police force, it had a much wider impact, with various racist organisational cultures being subsequently exposed in institutions ranging from professional football clubs to the immigration service (Law et al., 2004).

While proving useful in setting a race equality agenda at government level, this concept of institutional racism has nonetheless been contested and critiqued. Recently, Coretta Phillips has argued that whilst there are some ambiguities in the definition set out in the Macpherson report, the concept should be retained. She further argues that the concept needs to be expanded so that we can understand institutional racism within a multilevel framework which incorporates the way different groups of people are racialised (Phillips, 2011) at all levels, and the way in which those levels may interact with each other. She describes macro, meso and micro levels of racialisation, using educational attainment as one example – on a micro level, individual teachers may racially stereotype their pupils, on a meso level, routine institutional practices such as school regulations (for example, dress codes) may discriminate against certain ethnic groups, and on the macro level, the neoliberal approach to education as a way of entering the labour market has led to a system of tests and targets that ultimately discriminate against students on the grounds of both race and class. The recent HEFCE report, Causes of Differences in Student Outcomes, echoes Phillips’ recommendation as it too makes recommendations for change at macro, meso and micro levels (these are discussed in more depth in a later chapter).

The issue of institutional racism in relation to HEIs is examined further by Law et al. They specifically note that institutional racism in HEIs can exist even when the institution has a range of anti-racist and inclusive policies and practices and that these opposing forces are likely to conflict with each other (Law et al., 2004). Some of the examples of institutional racism highlighted across the various chapters include:

- The under-representation of Black staff in senior positions such as Vice Chancellor, Professor, and Senior Lecturer.
- Differences in the proportions of White and Black staff/students reporting a) perceptions of institutional racism, b) incidents of racial harassment, and c) unfair treatment in interviews or when applying for promotion.
- Race initiatives being marginal to institutional life, such as one-off cultural diversity events rather than the concept of diversity being embedded throughout the institution.
- The attainment gap for BME students.
The authors argue that these sorts of outcomes represent the presence of structural
disadvantage which needs to be tackled, and the previous section makes it apparent
that such problems do clearly exist within HE. Still, the concept of institutional racism
can be difficult to take on board, particularly for the members of staff who do
strenuously advocate their institution’s anti-racist policies and practices. Les Back
acknowledges this difficulty:

For many academics the face of racism is that of the moral degenerate,
the hateful bigot. So it is unthinkable that such an ugly word could be
directed at a genteel, educated and liberal don such as themselves. Even
raising the issue of institutional racism tentatively produces responses
like ‘how could you’ or ‘how dare you’ make such accusations? This
reaction goes deeper than a response to being accused of something.
What raises their blood pressure is that something is being taken away. It
is the theft of all that is mannerly about liberalism, knowledge and
educational progress. To accuse educators of racism is – in their minds –
tantamount to taking their education away from them. And this is why it
is so difficult to have a measured and open debate about racism in the
academy.

(Back, in Law et al., 2004)

Back recommends that instead of entering into a state of denial, academics are
encouraged to acknowledge and further research the damage racism has done to
academic endeavour and education in general, making the critical examination of
Whiteness and its associated privilege a part of the strive towards academic
excellence. By doing this, Back argues that the initial feeling of loss or theft which can
sometimes shut down further discussion is instead reshaped into a positive inquiry
with the potential to engage rather than antagonise staff.

Further reading


This is an introductory text on the concept of Whiteness. It is written from a
sociological perspective and incorporates multi-disciplinary sources in order to
engage those from a non-sociological background, with the aim of allowing students
(and staff) to unpick the concept of Whiteness and critically examine its impact on
society.

In particular, this text discusses the political stakes of using whiteness as a tool and
emphasises the importance of using it only in an anti-racist context, in order to
understand the problems associated with whiteness. It should be used to
acknowledge that whiteness is also a racialised identity, not a neutral state, however
it is unusual for being the normative racialised identity, against which other identities
are measured.
Chapter 3, *Whiteness as values, norms and cultural capital* is particularly relevant to discussions around whiteness in education, where values and norms can influence both the explicit and implicit curricula, and therefore shape the expectations placed on students as well as the expectations and experiences of the students themselves.

2. Black Youth Project (2014). *This video explains the difference between being “non-racist” and “anti-racist”.*

This short video explains the difference between being ‘non-racist’, which is a passive state, and anti-racist, which is an active state. Though not directly related to the concept of institutional racism, this video may be useful to those who want to better understand the difference between a passive, “non-racist”, uncritical approach, and an active, “anti-racist”, critical approach.


4.2.2 Curriculum design

There are two ways to look at the curriculum, and this section focuses on the content of the curriculum, on what is taught, rather than how it is taught (which is dealt with in the next section). It looks at data gathered from students, particularly by the NUS and the National Student Survey (NSS), alongside academic research into inclusive learning and teaching and the idea of the ‘hidden curriculum’. Some of the key questions for this section are whether or not the HE curriculum reflects diversity, whether BME students are satisfied with their curriculum content, what is being taught and why, and what improvements can be made that could raise the attainment of BME students.

There is no statistical analysis of curriculum content across the HE sector available, largely because such data would be incredibly difficult to gather. What is available is qualitative analysis of BME students’ perceptions of the curriculum, and national data on student satisfaction, which can also be disaggregated by ethnicity.

Overall, 42% of Black students\(^{14}\) responding to the 2011 NUS survey answered “No” to the question, “Do you feel the curriculum on your course reflects issues of diversity, equality and discrimination?” Student comments focused on the concept of a ‘mainstream’ way of thinking which excluded students from diverse backgrounds, and a lack of courses focusing on BME-specific content.

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\(^{14}\) The NUS uses the term Black to encompass students of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean descent. This survey included FE and HE students, part-time and full time students and home and international students.
Often, programmes are heavily focused on what is considered ‘mainstream’ and may not adequately cater to students of diverse backgrounds.

Black Caribbean respondent, HE

There is a standard way of thinking that is hegemonically White and students from ethnic minorities either have to get with the programme or do worse.

Black African respondent, HE

(NUS, 2011).

Results from the NSS also show differences in levels of satisfaction for different ethnic groups. In 2013, BME students were less likely than White students to be satisfied with their HE courses, and Black-Caribbean, Black-African and mixed ethnic origin students had the lowest levels of satisfaction (HEFCE, 2015). In all nine years (2005-2013), two particular questions demonstrated significant differences between White and Black students. These were question 2, “Staff have made the subject interesting”, where Black students gave scores between 5.5 and 7.8 percentage points lower than White students, and question 10, “Received sufficient advice and support with my studies”, where Black students gave scores between 4.1 and 8.5% lower than White students. The 2015 HEFCE report suggests that these differentials within the NSS responses suggest that white students seem to be better served by the HE curriculum and engage more positively with HE staff.

Respondents to the NUS survey expressed the importance of their perspective being included in the learning environment, which is also consistent with the findings of the HSBC Student Survey 2010, which found that 49% of Black African and Caribbean respondents, 47% of Asian respondents and 80% of Mixed race respondents expressed a desire to be involved in shaping the content, curriculum, or design of their course.

These findings lead to questions about which perspectives are being taught, and who is deciding which perspectives are worth being taught – or what knowledge is worth knowing. Apple argues that ‘what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power struggles among identifiable class, race, gender and religious groups’ (Apple, in Hockings, 2010), and Hockings points to various differences that manifest as a result of such power struggles, such as difference in students’ subject choices, participation patterns and educational and career trajectories (Hockings, 2010). For further information about student choices, see section 3.2.4 Subject choice.

Hockings points to two options to address the issue of the curriculum excluding certain students, or groups of students. One way is to make the curriculum more inclusive, and this is discussed in more detail later. The second is to scrutinise the ‘hidden curriculum’ in order to discover what elements of the curriculum privilege some students over others (Hockings, 2010).
The concept of a ‘hidden curriculum’ refers to the values, dispositions and social and behavioural expectations that are learned by students alongside the academic content of their course (Margolis, 2001). The term is generally acknowledged to have been introduced by Philip Jackson in his book *Life in Classrooms* (1968).

[Jackson] argued that the hidden curriculum emphasized specific skills; learning to wait quietly, exercising restraint, trying, completing work, keeping busy, cooperating, showing allegiance to both teachers and peers, being neat and punctual, and conducting oneself courteously (Jackson 1968, 10 -33) These features of school life and requirements had little to do with educational goals, but were essential for satisfactory progression through school.

(Margolis, 2001).

However, Gair and Mullins argue that while the phrase ‘hidden curriculum’ may seem to imply something intentionally obscured or concealed, it is often ‘hiding in plain sight’, since a hidden curriculum results from a given set of values and expectations.

Values are at the very basis of education... Just having a curricular requirement is a value. We can’t escape values; they are embedded in everything we do. What we can do is to ignore the value questions and act as if they don’t exist... which is what I think we have been doing.  
(Astin, quoted by Gair and Mullins in Margolis, 2001).

Gair and Mullins (in Margolis, 2001) suggest that though the presence of values may be inescapable, some institutions may be unwilling or unable to perceive or understand questions of what is valuable and why, and can act as though these are not in fact working in the background to influence both what and how students are taught.

In particular, they draw on research by Michael Apple, who argues that there are institutional values that form part of a ‘hidden curriculum’ which can lead to the exclusion of BME people.

As [an institution] becomes increasingly white, those people of color who come to feel as if there is no community for them ... They see very few people like themselves there, the lived culture of the institution makes them feel like “the other”.

(Apple, in Margolis (Ed.), 2001)

Apple also contends that the hidden curriculum is not simply imposed on passive students who are then controlled by an institution, but that students act in creative ways that contradict expectations in order to produce various ‘arenas’ of conflict in which students are active participants (Apple, in Margolis, 2001). He recommends that the best way to approach a hidden curriculum is to bring it out into the open in order to critically analyse it in a way that invites people to participate in the discussion and that allows them to speak openly and honestly about their views on the institutions underlying values.
At universities the hidden curriculum must be brought to an overt level, it must be thought about, it must be talked through and the kinds of norms and values you want to organize the workplace... All of that should be brought to a level where people can participate in it, struggle over it, talk about it but it’s got to be done in a way where people feel they can speak honestly and where the norms that are supposed to be usually hidden are democratic, participatory, and organized around critical intellectual and pedagogic work.


This is also echoed in most of the recommendations in literature on the attainment gap, which include safe spaces for discussion of race and ethnicity (e.g. Stevenson, 2012; Law et al., 2002), involving students in curriculum design (e.g. Hockings, 2010; NUS, 2011, and embedding the work on differential attainment in institutional culture (e.g. HEA/ECU, 2012; Law et al., 2002; HEFCE, 2015).

As noted earlier, HEIs can also work on making their explicit curricula more inclusive, as well bringing the hidden curriculum out into the open. For example, one of the student-led solutions included in the NUS report was to include diverse perspectives at course and module level, particularly in subjects such as history, arts and politics.

[The curriculum could be improved by] more BME-related courses – BME history, arts, politics etc. More BME lecturers, more support for BME students.

Black British respondent, HE

[Diversity could be facilitated] by curricula being more diverse – Britain colonised most of the world and played a heavy role in the slave trade – how can you understand contemporary Britain without acknowledging this history or understanding how the rest of the world shaped it?

Black African respondent, HE
(NUS 2011)

However there is also scope to diversify the curriculum in other subjects, as highlighted by this respondent’s experience:

We were learning about mortgages and I was finding it difficult at the time to fully grasp the concept. Where I come from, a lot of people buy their own land and build their own homes and these are passed down to their kids. Any new developments are also usually bought outright and so the issue of mortgages and repayments does not usually occur. When I asked the teacher to please explain the concept again so I could understand it, one of the other students said, during the class, that obviously I wouldn’t understand mortgages because after all, the people in my country still live in trees. The teachers did not necessarily
reprimand the student after the comment was made. I found that very insulting.

Black African respondent, HE
(NUS 2011)

As well as highlighting the possibility of diversifying the curriculum in non-social science subjects, these findings demonstrate a need for lecturers to be able to respond to the challenges that might accompany teaching a more diverse curriculum, and highlight the importance of anti-racism and sensitivity training for academic staff.

However, Sharma highlights a problem with characterising students as ‘diverse’ or ‘different’.

The inclusion of differences of Others is what characterises the curriculum as multicultural. But an educational praxis that seeks merely to include ‘other knowledges’ or reveal the truth about ‘other cultures’ is doomed to failure, as it ultimately serves to reproduce existing hegemonies of cultural authority and racialized knowledge (Sharma, in Law et al., 2004).

One inclusive approach to the curriculum that may circumvent the problem of characterising some groups of students as ‘other’ is to design a curriculum that learners can customise to suit their own needs and interests. Hockings refers to this as ‘universal design’.

The universal design approach is to both involve students in the development of the curriculum, and to anticipate their different needs by designing flexibility into the course that will allow students to choose their own pathways. The concept of universal design has already been adopted by those interested in developing inclusive curricula for disabled students, but it can be used to make a flexible curriculum for other groups as well.

[J]ust as it is more cost-effective to include ramps and include accessibility into the design of a new building, it is also more cost and time effective to consider the flexibility of learning materials when designing a course than in trying to provide individual accommodations after the fact.

(Johnson and Fox, quoted in Hockings, 2010).

Further reading

1. Why Is My Curriculum White?

This is a student-led campaign at York University which aims to ensure that compulsory first year modules include content that exposes students to diverse perspectives.
2. Dismantling the Master’s House

This is an ongoing project by a community of students and staff at UCL who are committed to interrogating Whiteness and Anglocentrism in HE and righting racialized wrongs both at UCL and in the wider community. The project involves (but is not limited to) academic output, social media campaigns, and public events, including a recent conference on Critical Philosophy of Race and a panel discussion on the subject of ‘Why Isn’t My Professor Black?’

http://www.dtmh.ucl.ac.uk/

3. Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) project

This is a US-based peer-led leadership development project which engages with college faculty, teachers and community leaders to create inclusive forms of education. There are three key concepts. Firstly, that curricula and teaching methods should be fair, equitable, and create the most effective learning environment for all students. Secondly, that educators, parents and community leaders can create such environments by critically examining their own schooling. Thirdly, that being at the centre of your own growth as an educator or parent helps to foster understanding of the growth and development of students.

http://www.nationalseedproject.org/


This book looks at the concept of universal design applied to higher education, with particular focus on students with disabilities, and provides examples of best practice which those with learning and teaching responsibilities may find useful.

4.2.3 Curriculum delivery / learning and teaching issues

This section focuses on the delivery of the curriculum, on how the content is taught, through various forms of teaching, learning and assessment. This section looks at data gathered from students and staff, with particular reference to the NUS’ Race for Equality report and the HEA’s Black and Minority Ethnic Student Degree Retention and Attainment. It also looks at a synthesis of academic research into inclusive learning and teaching, and other research into the 'hidden curriculum', as discussed in the previous chapter. Some of the key questions for this section include; what are
BME students’ perspectives of the learning and teaching environment, are BME students able to bring their perspectives to lectures and seminars, do BME students feel adequately supported in their studies, and do BME students feel they are assessed fairly.

Overall, 33% of students responding to the NUS survey answered “No” to the question, “Are you able to bring in your perspective as a Black student during lectures and/or tutor group meetings?” Respondents also cited their frustrations that courses were designed and taught by white teachers, often without taking into account diverse backgrounds and views, and that their own perspectives on the course material were not recognised or acknowledged.

Related to this, respondents to the NUS survey also cited feelings of alienation and exclusion within their classrooms; feeling left out of discussions and debates, or being ‘invisible’ to lecturers. A significant minority of students described their learning and teaching environment negatively, with 23% describing it as ‘cliquey’, 17% as ‘isolating’, 8% as ‘hostile’ and 7% as ‘racist’ (NUS, 2011). These feelings can have an effect on students’ attitudes towards their education.

[Feeling excluded] tends to make me less engaged in the learning process. I generally go to classes and complete the necessary work but rarely engage in class discussion.

African American respondent, HE

Well, you dread going into class every morning. And you can’t wait until it’s all over.

Black African respondent, HE

Isolation, left feeling as an intruder, rather than having the right to be here.

Black British respondent, HE

I feel as if I’m on the edge, not quite part of the experience, the team, or taken as a valued member with something important to say.

Black Caribbean respondent, HE (NUS, 2011).

Students put forward suggestions for how staff could work to rectify these issues, largely focused on staff working with diverse groups of students and trying to understand them, rather than imposing a ‘correct’ way of thinking upon them:

Educators should realise that they may have many qualifications in their subject area, but they cannot possibly know all the past experiences of life that a student had before coming to their institution. If they try to know us better, they may be able to teach us from the correct angle. Often they just do not want to know, but there are exceptions, rarely, and students like us put all our hopes into those teachers.
Bangladeshi survey respondent, HE

Not being able to express or hear [our] own experience in learning – especially with a discipline as subjective as English, being told ‘you are wrong’ at the slightest transgression from the norm, or for not conforming to ‘group think’, or for questioning the assumptions of other students and teachers. Is this not the process of learning? Questioning the deeply-held sentiments and cultural beliefs, attitudes and ideologies of teachers can only lead to trouble, hostility, and behaviour verging at times upon gross professional misconduct. I felt that teachers were trying to fit me into a mould, and if I was resistant then they desired to ‘correct’ my way of looking at the world. Surely, they should be working with the diversity and different eyes, mind, and experiences that I could bring to their discussion, and/or development of the research areas of the discipline.

Mixed race respondent, HE (NUS, 2011).

These students’ suggestions are in line with the opinions expressed by HE staff interviewed in the HEA paper, where most of the staff also believed that learning should work as a partnership between staff and students, with greater equity in relation to power and the production of knowledge. This approach is further backed up by research into inclusive learning and teaching: “…in order to be as inclusive of as wide a range of students as possible, teachers need to engage meaningfully with student diversity within the context of the subject.” (Hockings, 2010)

I think we have to shift that back, lecturers have to be facilitators and in terms of ‘right, we’re equal, you and I are here to learn together, I may know a little bit more than you but I can learn from you and we can expand your knowledge’ so putting the emphasis on the students and expand their own knowledge.

Staff 19, Million+, Senior Academic, White Other, Female (Stevenson, 2012)

An important issue for students was fair assessment and transparent marking procedures. Students were concerned about cultural bias in marking in terms of both identifiable BME students receiving lower grades for their work than White students, and staff awarding lower marks to work that focused on issues of race and ethnicity compared to work which did not broach these issues.

If your name is a foreign-sounding name then you’re more than likely to get less marks than someone with a Western-sounding name.

Mixed race focus group participant, FE
The lecturers are very culturally biased and hold low expectations for non-White students. I got a really low grade in an essay which was far below my average and my lecturer greeted me with disdain. I don’t want to assume it’s because I am a 6 foot tall, working class male, with a working class accent but his equation of me and my grade as being good enough for me despite my previous essay being graded by another lecturer awarding me a first was disheartening to say the least.

Black British respondent, HE

If we write about race issues in our work and from an area that the lecturer does not agree we can be marked down.

Mixed race respondent, HE

(NUS, 2011).

One of the recommendations to emerge from the NUS (2011) research was for the implementation of anonymous marking. In the responses recorded in the HEA (2012) report, however, anonymised marking received mixed comments from those staff interviewed. Some HEIs had implemented anonymous marking schemes but the majority had not, with one reason for this being that it is only possible for certain forms of assessment. Furthermore, staff had differences in opinion as to whether learning and teaching practices should be adapted to the needs of a diverse student body, and if so, to what extent, or whether it was the responsibility of their students to adapt to particular forms of practice (Stevenson, 2012).

Moreover, the implementation of anonymous marking is unlikely to have an effect on the other concern students had around the devaluing of work on race and ethnicity issues, since the content of the work is still subject to cultural bias (cf. Apple in Margolis, 2001).

The students involved in the HEA research were clear that there were some practices which disadvantaged some groups over others. Students of all ethnic groups criticised “dull and boring” lectures, poor academic and personal tutoring, too tight deadlines for assignments and inadequate feedback (Stevenson, 2012). They also raised their lack of preparedness for different types of assessment methods and were critical of the ways assignment briefs and requirements were explained as these could act as a barrier to students less familiar with specific academic styles of writing. Students also criticised the lack of individual time with academic staff.

Hockings (2010) highlights that provision for disabled students is typically an adjusted form of traditional assessment – longer time for exams, or leniency in written work for dyslexic students – rather than any significant challenge to the way students are assessed as a whole, which results in a system of assessment that remains largely unchanged despite the increase in students from non-traditional backgrounds. Her research into inclusive learning and teaching suggests that applying the principle of fairness should therefore result in more varied types of assessment. Rather than students being expected to adopt traditional assessment practices, which favour some students over others, an inclusive approach would include
genuine equivalent alternatives for assessing students’ knowledge and skills. This applies to all disadvantaged students, not just those with disabilities.

With regards to students’ perceived lack of preparedness for different types of assessment, Coventry University have produced a guide entitled *Designing Assignment Briefs: A Guide for Lecturers*, which is included in the Toolkits section of this report. This aims to help lecturers to design assignments which can be easily understood, and gives several suggestions for ways to encourage understanding, including how to formulate questions and assessment guidelines which are easy to follow, and ways to give both formative and summative feedback to allow students to develop their academic writing skills.

Academic support is also an issue to consider. In the NUS survey, 24% of respondents did not feel adequately supported by their academic tutors, and 22% also expressed dissatisfaction with the support given by their personal (pastoral) tutor:

> [There is] not enough support. Culturally, as a minority ethnic student myself, I may be more shy about asking for help as tutors do not appear to have the time, and I feel not to bother them. In other words, they adopt an unapproachable manner. I know that more support can make a great deal of difference in the way of encouragement and positive feedback. This is not always forthcoming, especially where tutors already may hold preconceptions about the student... In my experience, where tutors do not identify in any way with the person they are trying to help, I feel it may be an impossible task to expect any improvement.

Black British respondent, HE

> I want to reach out to my personal tutor, but I don’t want to feel the guilt that I’m taking her time away for myself. I want to talk to a wiser person about life and about my career but I want to feel that the person wants to talk to me, and for some reason I don’t feel comfortable around my own personal tutor.

Arab respondent, HE

(NUS, 2011).

Both Singh and Hockings highlight the additional importance of academic and pastoral support for students, not just in their assessed work, but in developing their own academic identities, and confidence in those identities. The University of Wolverhampton and Coventry University’s *Disparities in Student Attainment* project from led a small scale research project into students’ academic identity, which found that the majority of students taking part saw an increase in their academic self-perception. However, due to the nature of the study there was no control group which may have helped to determine if these changes transferred into improved academic performance.
4.2.4 Recommendations
The following sets out the recommendations for HEIs to consider from the literature discussed in this section:

Financial issues:
- Help students to manage their money by offering help with budgeting, financial advice and debt-counselling.
- Ensure students are aware of all the financial support/resources they may be entitled to.
- Consider how best to help students in financial difficulties that cannot be tackled by one-off hardship payments.
- Develop a jobs policy.

Preparedness for HE:
- Offer diverse student systems to support students of all backgrounds, with targeted interventions for BME students only to be used in exceptional circumstances (so as to avoid inadvertent racism).
- Ensure that staff are trained to support all students and students know how to access support.
- Provide clear and transparent assessment guidelines and a range of types of assessment.
- Offer feedback early and ensure students have opportunities to question and learn from it.
- Use peer-assisted learning and peer-mentoring systems.
- Consider making the first year non-credit bearing to allow students to get used to university assessments.

Curriculum design and delivery

Broad principles:
- Embed the concept of race equality in the curricula.
- Acknowledge the importance of an inclusive approach to learning and teaching which actively welcomes the views of all students.
- Create safe learning environments in which students can express themselves freely in an atmosphere that is respectful and empathetic.

Involve students in curriculum development:
- Establish learning and teaching committees to allow students to provide input into the curriculum and assessment and feedback mechanisms.
- Create student-focused ‘universal’ programmes, modules, and lessons that engage all students meaningfully by encouraging them to draw on and apply their own and others’ knowledge.

Fair assessment procedures:
- Provide clear guidance on assessment procedures and implement anonymous marking. Allow for re-marking if a student has concerns about bias in assessment.
• Provide adequate formative feedback that allows students to improve their future work.

Support services:
• Set clear expectations for students and staff about asking for, and providing, academic and pastoral support.
• Train tutors in how to deal with issues related to ethnicity, to establish effective channels of communication with students, and be willing and able to meet with their students regularly.
• Provide skill-building workshops and training opportunities to help students improve academically, and to develop confident learner identities. This could include peer-to-peer support, such as mentoring schemes.

Institutional changes to Learning and Teaching:
• Create an environment whereby the institution, especially academic staff, can anticipate, recognise and provide for individuals’ specific physical, cultural, academic and pastoral needs, particularly at critical periods (e.g. transitions, examinations).
• Recognise the need for shifts in negative beliefs about, and attitudes towards, student diversity that currently inhibit the development of inclusive learning and teaching.
• Acknowledge the importance of challenging and changing policies, practices, systems and standards that inhibit the participation of students in any subject or constrain teachers’ capacity to engage all their students.
• Recognise the need for adequate time, resources and a safe environment in which staff at all levels can develop a shared understanding and commitment to student diversity and inclusive practice. Such understanding and commitment should be a key component of staff recruitment, training, development and reward.
• Plan for and champion for adequate and relevant central services to support students and staff; integrating strategies for teaching and learning, widening participation and disability; and co-ordinating the efforts of academics and specialist support staff in central service centres.
• Plan for and champion collection and analysis of institutional, quantitative and qualitative data for the evaluation and improvement of inclusive learning and teaching strategies, policies and practices.

Inclusion and Belonging:
• Research a) the perceptions of new and/or prospective students’ with regard to diversity at this institution and b) survey outgoing students about the reality of studying at their university.
• Work with BME students to understand how they feel while studying at the institution, what areas of their experience are problematic, and how these should be addressed.
• Ensure better integration amongst all students. Strategies for this could include increasing discussion and interaction in learning and teaching methods and organising events targeted at all students that celebrate cultural diversity.
• Promote existing support networks for Black students (e.g. at TUoS this could include Sheffield Students’ Union’s Black and Minority Ethnic Students’ Committee).

Institutional Culture

Responding to challenges
• Adopt a standard definition to use as a baseline for examining attainment data – this should include UK-domiciled, home fees BME students, with any type of prior attainment.
• Decide what the comparison needs to be – sector-wide, Russell Group, or other.
• Ensure progression from data analysis to qualitative research to action
• Focus on the language of success and achievement when working to address the gap
• As an institution, acknowledge the gap, tackle it, and be seen to be tackling it.

Combatting Institutional Racism
• Encourage academics to research racism and critically examine Whiteness.
• Set targets relating to staff/student satisfaction, staff training and recruitment/progression and monitor progress towards these, making sure there is high-level accountability if progress is not made.
• Embed anti-racism and cultural diversity in the curriculum and provide opportunities for students that foster social inclusion.
• Challenge racism and promote equality.
• Review institutional culture – talk to staff and students and provide safe spaces for them to discuss their experiences.
• Provide support for BME staff to form networks which suits their needs.
• Survey BME staff to determine what further support they would find useful.
5 Initiatives to address differential attainment

Key findings:

- Common tactics for reducing the attainment gap include: building research to provide a base of evidence; raising staff knowledge and awareness; working with students as collaborative partners; the provision of safe spaces for discussion; and the use of language that revolves around success, empowerment, and aspiration.

- Shared ownership of this work with BME students, and recognition of the BME student voice are seen to be particularly important, with students frequently being used as a source of knowledge about the institution, as a support network for other students, as research subjects, and as conference participants.

- A ‘post-racial’ approach is used in some institutions whilst a target approach focusing on BME students is popular in others. The choice of approach appears to be informed by the feelings of staff and students within each given institution.

- The importance of embedding this agenda is also apparent, with both the pervading sense that this work has to occur at all levels of an institution, raising the awareness, skills and confidence of all staff, and ensuring that this agenda is included in strategic vision, strategic plans, and the work of various university boards and committees.

- Lack of long-term funding can be an issue when it comes to successfully embedding the work in the institution.

- Many HEIs have taken a multi-faceted approach and whilst this appears to have led to a decrease in differential attainment, it is difficult to separate the interventions that have worked from the ones which have not.

- The lack of robust evidence to demonstrate the impact of many interventions on differential attainment shows a clear need for planning, including strategies for monitoring and evaluation, when designing any future intervention.

- The HEFCE report identifies five distinct phases of work, which are Confirming, Exploratory, Awareness-raising, Interventions, and Review.
• Of these, the review phase comes under the most scrutiny due to a lack of robust evidence to demonstrate the impact of most of these interventions. Extensive recommendations are provided for reviewing this work in future.

• The HEA report found that students and staff differ in their perceptions of who is responsible for the gap, with students wholly attributing responsibility to institutions and staff for the most part recognizing the need for institutional change, but also acknowledging the influence of societal factors outside their control.

• The HEA report offers a list of ‘guiding principles’, in recognition of the fact that there is no single universal approach to reducing the attainment gap. It also provides a set of reflexive questions that HEIs can use as a starting point for understanding and tackling their own attainment gaps.
Section 1 provided a sector-wide overview of the attainment gap and section 2 explored some of the issues surrounding it, including recommendations for improving the experience, retention and attainment for BME students and students from other disadvantaged backgrounds. This section now explores some of the initiatives that have been implemented by other HEIs to close the attainment gap, as well as looking at two overarching reports that look at this work and make recommendations for HEIs undertaking similar work in future.

5.1 Work in individual HEIs

The work undertaken by each HEI generally tries to address a combination of the factors that can influence attainment. This can make it very difficult to evaluate the outcome of these interventions, as the multifaceted approach makes it difficult to identify causal factors. This and some other concerns relating to the evaluation of this work are addressed in the summary of this section.

It is worth noting that there are a variety of types of HEI engaged in this work and this may be relevant when considering whether or not to adopt the approaches mentioned below. TUoS is a Russell Group university, where A-Level entry requirements range from AAA to BBB and our proportion of home BME students is 12.7%. Similar background information is included for the institutions below as a comparison tool.

5.1.1 Kingston University

*Developing an Institutional KPI for the BME Attainment Gap*

[https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bljbZbBJHpbkpLCutrRWQ1ZU0](https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bljbZbBJHpbkpLCutrRWQ1ZU0)

Kingston is a post-1992 university and a member of the Million+ and University Alliance groups. Overall, 51% of its students are BME, the largest population of BME students at any UK university. The average tariff points for first degree entrants in 2013/14 was 297, (approximately BBB at A-Level) although entry requirements vary from course to course and the University accepts a range of other entry qualifications. Kingston offers vocational and creative courses as well as traditional academic subjects. In 2011/12 Kingston’s ethnicity attainment gap was 30 percentage points and by 2013 it had reduced to 23 percentage points.

Through externally run research, Kingston discovered that the majority of their staff were unaware of the attainment gap, and had a tendency to rationalise this via the deficit model. In order to raise staff awareness of the issue and encourage staff buy-in, they spent 6 months developing a robust metric for measuring the gap. Ultimately, they decided to use a Value Added Score, which measures actual attainment against the expectation of each cohort as derived from their entry qualifications, field of study, and 5 years of comparable sector data.

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15 Entry requirements are taken from The Complete University Guide.
In 2012/13, 64% of [Kingston’s] BME students were expected to get a good degree. Ultimately, only 51% did, giving a Value Added Score of 0.792. In contrast, while 68% of our White students were expected to get a good degree, 73% did, giving a Value Added Score of 1.072. (Kingston University, 2014).

Kingston then set a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) target to raise the BME student Value Added Score to 1.0 by the end of 2018/19. The action plan to achieve this target takes a multifaceted approach and includes:

- **Changing institutional processes:**
  - Including questions about Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in course monitoring reports.
  - Including EDI in the quality assurance process and academic promotion criteria.
  - Referencing the ethnicity attainment gap in the Education and Quality Assurance Committee Terms of Reference.

- **Improving staff knowledge and skills:**
  - Delivering unconscious bias workshops.
  - Providing equality training.
  - Providing EDI in the curriculum workshops.

- **Focussing on student success and achievement:**
  - Running the “Beyond Barriers” mentoring scheme, which is targeted at BME students, women in STEM, students with disabilities and students who are the first in their family to attend HE.
  - Offering oral and written skills workshops and academic progression workshops.
  - Running the “Compact” scheme – giving those from under-represented groups access to bursaries; a single point of contact for advice throughout the admissions process and the duration of their course; life and study skills workshops; and alerts to extra-curricular opportunities.

**Kingston project: Exploring Race and Ethnicity in the Curriculum**

A lecturer in sociology introduced a new module on researching race and ethnicity. This was presented as a critical project for students of all ethnicities, and it explored the idea of whiteness as well as exploring non-white literatures throughout the course.

> It’s been hard but good. It’s the first time I’ve actually had to think about whiteness.

Student taking module on researching race and ethnicity. (HEFCE, 2015)

The sociology module led to a further interdisciplinary initiative between the sociology and drama departments, called Taking Race Live. This included field trips to
Taking Race Live allows students to think critically about their own position in the world, to try to think intersectionally about their identities and social structures, and how those interact in their everyday lives.

Sonya Sharma, Lecturer in Sociology (HEFCE, 2015)

Outcomes from the projects included students gaining new skills, and meeting new people, gaining experience of being part of a performance, and new knowledge on critical race theory. There are future plans to develop additional interdisciplinary programmes, for example between sociology and music.

Though Kingston have so far been successful in reducing their attainment gap by 7 percentage points, it is not clear which of the many actions in their strategy have been instrumental in bringing about that change, and which were unsuccessful. For example, there is some limited research which indicates that introducing anonymous marking (something TUoS has already done) does not in fact have any impact on the attainment gap (HEFCE 2015)\(^{16}\), though it may nonetheless have an impact on students’ perceptions of whether or not they are treated fairly (NUS, 2011). Further evaluation seems necessary in order to understand exactly which interventions work, and how, in order to progress further.

\subsection*{5.1.2 University of Wolverhampton and Coventry University}

\textit{Disparities in Student Attainment (DiSA) Project}


Coventry University is a post-1992 institution. Their A-Level entry requirements range from AAB–BCC, (340 – 260 UCAS points) depending on the subject, and they also accept a range of alternative qualifications. The University of Wolverhampton had declined providing requirement information to The Complete University Guide.

The DiSA project is a joint study between the University of Wolverhampton and Coventry University exploring the attainment gap across the two universities. The project was awarded National Teaching Fellowship Scheme funding in 2010.

There are five key outputs for the project:

- Identification of characteristics of successful attainment

\(^{16}\) This finding comes from research at two institutions, University of Wolverhampton and Coventry University. It would be useful to have more research available across the sector in order to show conclusively whether anonymous marking has an effect as this may vary by type of institution, proportion of BME students/staff and other factors.
So far there have been several small-scale research projects aimed at understanding both the causes of differential attainment and potential solutions (two of which are highlighted below), and delivering a one-day conference and a one-day interdisciplinary seminar. The website has a resources section containing reflexive papers from the research projects, materials from the conference and seminar and further relevant research.

**DiSA Project 1: Raising Aspirations and Intellectual Capability**

This project developed out of an awareness of the correlation between students’ self-perception of themselves in terms of academic identity, and their attainment. It explored the possibility of closing the attainment gap by raising students’ perceptions of their own identity as intellectually minded and capable people.

There were three stages to this work. At the beginning of the module, students were asked to rate their behaviours and abilities out of 100. Then, these students participated in a workshop on the importance of nurturing an intellectual identity, the danger of stereotype threat, and the importance of academic confidence in relation to academic performance. At the end of the module, students were again asked to rate their behaviours and abilities, and to think about how their perceptions of themselves had changed and what this might mean for them. Both sets of responses were collected for analysis.

Of 40 respondents, 36 recorded an increase in their self-perception, which ranged from a few points up to 40 points. This suggests that it is possible for educators to change students’ perceptions and behaviour. However, the project was not able to determine whether these changes in self-perception also transferred into changes in performance as, due to ethical limitations, there was no comparison or control group.

There was no conclusive data to suggest that changes were more pronounced among different ethnicity or class groups, however this is a small sample size and the distribution of ethnic groups was uneven, which makes it hard to draw any robust conclusions. The report suggests that further research with a larger sample and control groups would be useful in order to determine whether low performing students might benefit the most from having their aspirations and self-perception of their intellectual capacity raised.

**DiSA Project 2: Reflexive co-inquiry with students: Consensus Oriented Research Approach (CORA)**

This project was built around the idea of consensus conferencing, which promotes the voice of lay people and stakeholders in the process of decision making. Students were invited to take part in a conference on differential attainment and asked for their input into further research activities and potential solutions.
At the conference, the problem of differential attainment was introduced to students and explored with a panel of experts, with immediate access to further information and support if needed. The students then helped to identify areas of potential further research with the experts in a safe environment and were empowered to identify useful solutions to the issues they had identified. At the end of the conference, the research team behind the project set out some future directions based on the discussions throughout the day and offered students further opportunities to get involved in these next steps.

The exercises used as part of the conference included a curriculum design exercise, where students designed a curriculum that would facilitate either low or high achievement, giving examples of good and bad practice as a basis for identifying issues and solutions. This approach informed two further reports; The Power of the Teacher-Student Relationship, which explores the relationship between staff and students and their expectations of each other, and The Student Psychological Contract, which explores the differences in the unspoken expectations of students and the effect of low cultural and social capital on their perceptions of the institution as a whole.

Other research arising from the Disparities in Student Attainment project includes:

- **Ethnic categorisation** – research into students’ understanding of the purpose of ethnic monitoring.
- **Influence on subject choice: folk psychology** – testing the assumption that BME students have less ownership over their subject choice and the effect of this assumption on staff expectations for student achievement.
- **Challenges in academic writing** – exploring how academics develop and write assignment briefs and how students interpret and respond to those briefs. The corresponding toolkit is discussed further in the ‘Toolkits’ section.
- **English language development for undergraduate biomedical and bioscience students** – evaluation of a ten week optional module for students, titled Easy ways to improve your scientific English language, focusing on ways to improve English literacy outside of their chosen subject.
- **Making the grade: student attitudes to choice in assessment** – giving students choice in their forms of assessment (written work or audio recording/podcast) and evaluating the decisions students made in response.
- **Low levels of disparity: Lecturers’ perspective** – in modules that had low levels of disparity between White and BME students, lecturers were asked for their perspectives on what makes for a successful teaching approach.
- **Student voices: Perceptions of learning, assignments and achievement** – qualitative interviews with students from all years, in order to capture the students’ perceptions of factors which impact on their learning and assessment.
- **Pilot peer mentoring scheme** – exploring students’ attitudes to formal mentoring schemes coordinated by the University, using data on mentee attendance and qualitative feedback from the mentors.
• The effect of assessment regimes on the performance of BME students studying mathematics-based courses – examining whether disparities in attainment can be explained by different forms of assessment.

Links to these research papers can all be found here: http://www.wlv.ac.uk/about-us/internal-departments/centre-for-academic-practice/wolverhampton-learning-and-teaching-projects/disparities-in-student-attainment-disa/project-dissemination/

5.1.3 Coventry University

Reflexive Paper from Coventry University for the HEA Summit

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/coventry_bme_reflective_paper.pdf

In addition to the joint project with the University of Wolverhampton, Coventry has engaged in several other projects related to differential attainment. The Reflexive Paper details the initiatives undertaken between 2008 and 2010, which included:

• Participating in the HEA Summit Programme on BME attainment – this summit produced a report, Black and Minority Ethnic Student Degree Retention and Attainment.
• Taking forward mini projects funded by Coventry and Warwickshire Life Long Learning Network CWLLN, totalling £80,000.
• Writing a synthesis paper for HEA – this paper, a synthesis of research evidence. Black and minority ethnic (BME) students’ participation in higher education: improving retention and success, by Dr Gurnam Singh.
• Supporting a PhD student working on the issue of BME progression and attainment.
• Forming a new Equality and Diversity (E and D) Committee and writing a new E and D Strategy, which included as one of its eight objectives, “Reduce imbalances in progression and degree level attainment when analysed by ethnicity”.
• Joining the National Mentoring Consortium for BME students – mentors were from the public and private sectors and a range of different professional backgrounds. Students were given support for personal, academic and professional development.
• Delivering staff training and introducing Diversity Champions – one or two individuals in each department who take a lead on raising awareness of the issues surrounding the attainment gap for BME students. These staff were given training and support and became members of a cross-university Diversity Champions support group which organised follow-up/evaluation activities and opportunities to share best practice.
• Establishing a ‘Community of Practice’ approach – a website was for staff to share good practice, and the mini-projects used a system of ‘critical friends’
for staff to share constructive criticism before, during, and after each of the mini projects.

- Achieving successful bids for externally funded projects (totalling approximately £220,000).
- Developing outreach activity – delivering conference presentations to share good practice.

Coventry Project 1: **Mini Project in the Faculty of Engineering and Computing – supporting students before their arrival on the course.**


This project aims to support new students in the Faculty of Engineering and Computing before they arrive at Coventry to start their course. Support was initially offered through a website which was designed, created and operated by current students in the faculty, who were employed part-time as Student Advocates. The Student Advocates also handled queries from new students by phone, email and face to face once the new students arrived on campus and received mentor training in order to support them in this role.

Though the project stemmed from a desire to improve the transition of BME students into HE, the website was not designed for or targeted specifically towards BME students. This was because the development team (made up of students, with a postgraduate student with a computer science background as team leader) felt that any effective pre-arrival resource would be of benefit to all students, not just those from BME backgrounds.

The vision for the website was to provide a student-friendly and relevant interface, structure, and content and for this to be accessible to all faculty students as well as their friends and family. Three levels of information were made available – faculty, departmental, and detailed course information. The site also included “Ask a student advocate” and “ask a tutor” sections where new students could submit questions online and have them answered by the relevant person.

The project was initially funded by CWLLN, with additional funding from the HEA Engineering Subject Centre in 2010 which covered the costs of employing Student Advocates and allowed for further development. In 2011, the resource was relocated to the central university website.

Coventry Project 2: **Designing Assignment Briefs: A Guide for Lecturers, which includes ‘A Toolkit and Resources on Writing Assignment Briefs’**

Summary:
This guide is aimed at academic teachers and lecturers with some prior experience of learning and teaching in a HE environment. It presents the viewpoint that students’ acquisition of academic writing skills is a developmental process, and provides...
resources for teachers and lecturers to support students’ academic literacy. This includes a checklist for designing assignment briefs, best practice for giving feedback on students’ writing, and a list of external resources that can help to support students’ development of academic writing skills.

For further information, see the Toolkits section.

5.1.4 University of Kent

Student Success Officers

See case study 2 in HEFCE, Causes of Differences, 2015 https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bljbZhBJHpYkxZX1I0ZXFVVYmM

The average UCAS tariff score of new entrants for the University of Kent in 2013/14 was 359 UCAS points (roughly AAA at A-Level) though their website also states that “The University recognises that not all applicants have had an equality of educational opportunity and will consider applicants in the light of the opportunities available to them. The University will admit candidates who have the potential to succeed at degree level.” (University of Kent, 2013).

The Student Success Project started with an analysis of student data to ascertain what the institution-specific attainment gap for the University of Kent was. Data analysis was shared in faculty meetings so that senior academic staff were aware of the issue. From these meetings, a project was designed where schools were asked to bid for resources to do further research, and/or put interventions in place and evaluate them. One of these interventions included recruiting new for new staff positions, called Student Success Officers (SSO), initially employed for two years and based within the nine pilot schools (academic departments).

The role of SSOs differs slightly between the pilot schools involved but includes some common tasks. For example, all SSOs were asked to look at the ‘Welcome Week’ activities within their school and evaluate how well these helped students from all backgrounds to acclimatise to university life. Other aspects of the role are tailored to the particular school the SSO is based in. For example, one school noticed a rise in the number of Black African students and so the SSO was tasked with tracking their experiences to understand this change. The SSO’s position within a school gave them ethnographic research access to students as the SSO can get to know them and observe their interactions with each other and their use of student spaces such as common rooms. The work of these SSOs has formed part of a cross-institutional analysis.

The SSOs have taken up their positions within the last six months so the impact of these new posts is yet to be evaluated. One of the challenges the project faces is how to ensure continuity if the pilot is successful – whether these posts continue, or if the work needs to be embedded elsewhere. Certain factors have been identified as essential for enabling the work of the SSOs; collaborating with at least one academic
in their school who can then act as an advocate for their work in the wider school/departmental community, being supported by the project leader, and regularly sharing practice with each other. The SSOs also need opportunities to ask wide-ranging questions and make evidence-based challenges to existing practices or assumptions.

5.1.5 Nottingham Trent University

*Understanding, development and implementation: Strategies at Nottingham Trent University for closing the BME attainment gap*

[https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bIjbZhBJHpWFNfa21WdzFFMUE](https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bIjbZhBJHpWFNfa21WdzFFMUE)

Nottingham Trent is a post-1992 university. A rough estimate of their typical entry requirements is around 260 UCAS points (approximately BCC at A-Level), or DMM for a BTEC Extended Diploma.

In the first year of their project (2014), Nottingham Trent focused on developing staff awareness of differential attainment. Staff were given sector-wide data and data for their own schools and asked to identify a research question that could be evaluated during the academic year, with the aim of developing an evidence-based approach that could then be shared with other schools.

At the time of writing, this project was half way through its first year so no overall evaluation was available. This information has been requested from the project lead, and may be available from WPREU in future.

5.1.6 University of Derby

*Practical Recipes for Student Success*

[https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bIjbZhBJHpXT0lxN0tidzg](https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bIjbZhBJHpXT0lxN0tidzg)

University of Derby is a post-1992 university. Entrance requirements range from 220-300 UCAS points (CCD-BBB) and the average entry tariff for 2013/14 was 288 points (BBC-BBB). Overall, 1 in 5 students at the University of Derby define themselves as BME (though this includes Home, EU and International students). Derby had an attainment gap of 26 percentage points between BME and non-BME students in 2011/12, which reduced to 14 in 2013/14. The proportion of both BME and non-BME students gaining a 1st or 2:1 increased over this time, but the increase for BME students was much larger, changing from 35% to 52%, whereas the non-BME group changed from 61% to 66% (Mutton, 2013).

One of the steps to close the attainment gap at University of Derby is the development of the *Practical Recipes for Student Success (PReSS) Pack*. This is a collection of resources for learning and teaching practitioners. It comprises a
selection of one-page guides on interventions to encourage student success. It is still being developed as a resource, but nonetheless contains a good range of material for both students and staff. This resource is available online at https://uodpress.wordpress.com and the content of each guide is discussed further in the 'toolkits' section.

5.1.7 University of Birmingham

Be More Empowered

https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/collaboration/equality/students/getinvolved/bme/index.aspx

The University of Birmingham is a Russell Group university. Average UCAS entry tariff in 2013/14 was 425 (A*A*A* at A-Level, or 3 As plus one A at AS-Level). Around 28% of students at the University of Birmingham are BME, (though this figure also includes international students), which is the largest proportion of BME students at a Russell Group institution outside of London (University of Birmingham, 2015 a). Their attainment gap is around 12 percentage points but this varies by faculty (Bouattia and Tope, 2014).

The University of Birmingham has a dedicated page on their intranet site aimed at supporting BME students. It is contained within the Equality and Diversity pages in the student section and sits alongside other support pages for different groups of students, including LGBT students and students with disabilities. The page for BME students includes links to information on:

- A BME Mentoring Scheme, which was founded in 2010 and initially funded by the Alumni Giving Fund. It provides opportunities for BME students to meet and network with business and community leaders. There is also a peer mentoring scheme which pairs 2nd and 3rd year BME mentors with new first year BME students, to help them settle in and feel part of the student community.

  With regards to targeted mentoring, it doesn’t mean you’re being handed help, it just means you are being given support from someone who can relate, or who has been through what you are going to be going through or have been through. Even if that is not the case, you have someone there to ask questions, someone to turn to. That boosts your confidence, even if just a little bit. You can really rely on them for a reasoned answer if they have been through the same thing as you. So yes, peer-to-peer mentoring is so valuable.

  Ololade Saromi, BME Peer Mentor
  (University of Birmingham, 2015 b)
• Black and Ethnic Minorities Association (BEMA) – a student-run association which operates through Birmingham Guild of Students and represents BME students on issues of welfare, and social and political needs. The association also holds a range of events to celebrate diversity, including Black History Month, Alternative Freshers’ Week, and non-alcoholic socials. It is affiliated with the NUS Black Students’ Campaign.

• Student case studies – case studies of successful BME students at The University of Birmingham, including links to their publications and interviews.

• The experience of BME students in HE. This includes some of the reports referenced here, such as Singh’s synthesis paper and the HEA summit report. Information also links to a reading list on race, provided by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

• A section titled ‘Finding Support in Birmingham’, with links to student support services such as counselling, student funding office, and chaplaincy services.

• A section titled ‘Enjoying Birmingham’, which gives links to other community groups external to the university, and diverse cultural events happening across the city.

• A section titled ‘Your rights’, which gives students information on relevant equality legislation as well as links to representative student groups, such as BEMA and the NUS Black Students’ Campaign.

• A BME Ambassador toolkit – a guide for staff and students who wish to employ, or become, BME Ambassadors. BME Ambassadors are students who volunteer to be the contact for BME students within their department and/or faculty. They organise events for BME students to come together and socialise, providing a safe space for discussion about race, culture and ethnicity. This scheme is discussed further below.

• Contact details for the student and staff Diversity Advisers at the University.

Across these pages, there are frequent mentions of research which suggests there are particular issues that BME students face, coupled with reassurance that the University is signposting support information a) to help student success and b) so that all students know what support is available.

Birmingham Project: The Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Student Ambassador Toolkit

https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bljbZbHJHpNkxdkltTk5zRGc

This toolkit developed through collaboration between the University of Birmingham’s Equality and Diversity Adviser and the NUS Black Students’ Officer, Malia Bouattia, not only in response to the attainment gap for BME students but also in response to the student-led “I Too Am Birmingham” campaign, which highlighted the need for BME safe spaces to ensure BME students feel represented and heard. The focus of the toolkit is on supporting the success of BME students by understanding the barriers they face and working to remove these.
BME Ambassadors are students who volunteer to be the contact for BME students within their department and/or faculty. They organise events for BME students to come together and socialise, providing a safe space for discussion about race, culture and ethnicity.

The toolkit introduction comprises:
- An overview of why the ambassadors are needed, including details of the attainment gap across the sector, and at the University of Birmingham.
- Guidance on the importance and role of a BME ambassador as someone who can enable students to voice their concerns, create meaningful dialogue with staff in order that these concerns can be addressed, and to represent students on various committees.
- The importance of BME safe spaces so that BME students feel represented and heard in a predominantly White space, and the sort of forms a safe space might take (including events, Facebook groups, email threads, and the presence of ambassadors).

The toolkit for new Ambassadors includes:
- First steps – Ambassadors receive training at the beginning of term, from the University of Birmingham’s Equality and Diversity Advisor. Each ambassador has a meeting to discuss potential ideas for their school/faculty, and is asked to produce an action plan and timeline for their activity. In the pilot, meetings also included the NUS Black Students’ Officer.
- Engaging with BME students – Ambassadors receive the resources for organising an event within schools/faculties, such as booking rooms, finding appropriate faculty contacts, advertising events, and using meetings to share information about other support available such as the BME mentoring scheme.
- Notes on the pilot of the scheme – a pilot took place in the School of English, Drama and American and Canadian Studies in 2013/14. Included in the toolkit is an email summarising the ideas from an initial focus group, and a students’ review of her role as a BME Ambassador at the end of the pilot.
- Feedback – a guide for students in how to provide feedback to the Equality and Diversity Advisor, via the use of progress sheets and any notes from the sessions you have organised (with the students’ permission).

The student who reviewed her role as an Ambassador in the pilot stage of the project made several suggestions for improvement. As she was in the school of English, Drama and American and Canadian Studies, they had used a book group to attract students:

> [E]vents should require as little preparation as possible for our audience. Shorter books, popular films, etc. Requiring more prep could deter students from out events as they would feel as if they should not/cannot attend. And by starting off with more popular material, students will recognise it, so more people might show up and have an opinion on the topic.
I think that any event we organise needs to be right at the start of the year – maybe during Welcome Week so that we do have a group of students who are there to make friends and are more likely to settle into this idea and group. ... I think that the BME Ambassador role needs to be planned in as much detail as possible before or during the start of the academic year. If we don’t (like last time), then it is difficult to decide what to do and when to do it, meaning time is wasted, which is not good at all during the start of the year. By having a vague plan of events, things like advertising and scheduling can be taking into consideration ASAP, resulting in a smoother, improved cycle.

University of Birmingham BME Ambassador
(Bouattia and Tope, 2014)

This is the only evaluation of the project contained within the toolkit. If a similar system were to be developed at Sheffield, further evaluation of the impact of the project for both Ambassadors and the students they represent would be useful.

5.1.8 De Montfort University (DMU)

Retention and Attainment of Ethnic Minority Students (RAEMS) Project


De Montfort University is a post-1992 institution. Their typical entrance requirements are between 260-320 UCAS points (BCC – ABB), and the average UCAS tariff score of new entrants in 2013/14 was 305 (roughly BBB). Half their students come from BME groups (DeMontfort University (DMU), 2014), though it is not clear if this figure includes EU and international students.

The initial aim of the RAEMS Project group was to find ways of listening to the student voice. The project group has worked with representative groups within De Montfort Student Union (DSU) such as the African Caribbean Society, Hindu Society, Krishna Society, Muslim Society, and the Sikh Society. They also used cross-faculty workshops to discuss students’ experiences of DMU, highlight areas of concern and ask the students for their thoughts on how best to solve any issues.

From the cross-faculty workshops, the group found that asking “In what ways can DMU better help you achieve your expected level of academic performance?” did not immediately result in students talking about ethnicity, and students needed to be prompted to discuss this. Once prompted, aspects relating to ethnicity were raised in relation to their experiences of studying.

In the student union based focus groups, BME students were asked about their experiences of education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. This revealed an
educational journey pervaded by discrimination and institutional racism. The students who took part in the focus groups were engaged in their education at the University and felt that HE gave them more opportunities to thrive, although they also identified some areas for change, namely recognition by the University of the specific issues BME issues face and the provision of support and resources to address these issues.

As a result of these focus groups, DMU now plans to establish a Centre of Excellence Hub for culturally responsive learning and teaching, with the aim of reducing the attainment gap, and improving the retention and employability of BME students. The Centre will:

- Provide a peer support and mentoring system for BME students
- Develop learning contracts
- Build a culturally responsive teaching framework
- Provide an academic preparation programme
- Support the establishment of our university wide Personal Tutoring System, ensuring that it is appropriate for BME students. (DMU, 2014)

This centre is planned for development in 2015/16 and has therefore not yet been evaluated.

5.1.9 University of the Arts (UAL), London

*Shades of Noir*

http://shadesofnoir.org.uk/about
https://twitter.com/ShadesofNoir

UAL is made up of six colleges: Camberwell College of Arts, Central Saint Martins, Chelsea College of Arts, London College of Communication, London College of Fashion and Wimbledon College of Arts. The University recruits a large proportion of students through one-year foundation courses or portfolio work though the average UCAS score of entrants in 2013/14 was 311 (BBB-BBA).

*Shades of Noir* is a key strand of UAL’s efforts to tackle differential attainment, which are reflected in the aims of their strategy. This strategy includes:

- Exploring issues of Race and ethnicity in arts, design and communication HE.
- Promoting discussion and debate across the University community, nationally and internationally.
- Supporting the development of pedagogical and assessment practice and curriculum that seek to narrow the degree attainment differential.
- Developing a platform for review and support cultural currency, and narratives of the contributions BME communities have made to Art, Design and Communication.
Shades of Noir is an ongoing project and has recently entered its second phase. Phase One (2011 – 2015) aimed to support the “transformation of minds and actions”. Phase One work included debates, where colleges within UAL have provided safe spaces for discussions on race and ethnicity. These debates have resulted in pilots of anonymous marking, a review of institutional resource lists in order to promote inclusivity, and the instigation of further staff opportunities for discussion. Phase One also includes the 2012 *Happening to Be* exhibition, which was the first all-Black exhibition of UAL alumni from high profile creative fields. The exhibition was attended by students, staff, local schools and members of the general public.

We are proud that our black alumni have achieved the type of stellar success that ‘Happening to Be’ represents. But we are aware that, like most Higher Education institutions in Britain, we need to raise the average level of degree classification for our black and minority ethnic students, which is significantly below that of white UK students. There is no disparity in talent, and we are researching why there are disparities and how to reduce them. Greater awareness of the breadth and brilliance of black artistic achievement will help to raise expectations and broaden horizons.

UAL Dean of Students, Mark Crawley

I had to go the extra mile to prove my talent, as good was not good enough for a person of colour to succeed.

Professor Andrew Ramroop, OBE, *Happening to Be* exhibitor.

*(Shades of Noir, 2015)*

The *Happening To Be* exhibition also included an event called *A Soiree*, organized in collaboration with GEMS (Group for the Equality of Minority Staff). *A Soiree* was an evening dedicated to discourse on the future of BME academics, held in the exhibition space. This was an opportunity for members of GEMS to engage with Shades of Noir, to network, and to share experiences. It also included a presentation by Dr. Gurnam Singh.

Phase One of the Shades of Noir initiative also included the development and delivery of “Inclusive Learning and Teaching in Higher Education”, which was an assessed component of the teaching qualification MA in Academic Practice. Students on this unit are required to make a collaborative intervention (with students, peers and/or alumni) and reflect on it. The assessment looks at the quality of their reflections and their considerations for development.

The project has recently entered Phase Two, which puts more emphasis on consultation with, and involvement of, students. Staff training programmes have been developed and conducted in order to raise awareness of the attainment gap, and to help develop new teaching methods that will tackle the issues of diversifying the curriculum.
The Shades of Noir website, http://shadesofnoir.org.uk, was another outcome of Phase One, though it has been completely redesigned and updated as part of Phase Two, and is now an extensive resource. The website contains details of past and future events (at UAL and in the wider community); interviews with students, alumni and other notable BME people in the creative arts; relevant news articles, and opportunities for networking and exhibiting work. The website is a means of sharing knowledge and practices which contribute to the enhancement of students’ cultural capital, and has outlets on Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo and Instagram in order to also engage students via social media. The website was re-launched in June 2015 with a special event featuring talks from staff, graduates, and student union representatives, and performances from BME artists from a range of creative fields.

UAL has seen the following changes during the time Shades of Noir has been active:

- A 4 percentage point reduction in the attainment gap during 2011/2012
- A 50% increase of BAME staff across University of the Arts London joining the Group for the Equality of Minority Staff (GEMS) network within UAL during 2012/2013

As with the work done at Kingston University, it is not clear which of these actions were instrumental in bringing about the above change, and which were unsuccessful.

5.1.10 Common approaches and common issues

The work done so far by other HEIs shows that there are several common tactics for reducing the attainment gap. The examples included here demonstrate a sector-wide acknowledgement of the importance of; building research to provide a base of evidence; raising staff knowledge and awareness; working with students as collaborative partners; the provision of safe spaces for discussion; and the use of language that revolves around success, empowerment, and aspiration. This is also backed up by the recommendations from the overarching reports discussed in the next two sections, which both make recommendations for ways this work can move forward in future.

Themes also emerge in terms of the sort of resources being used to carry out this work, with a key feature being the inclusion of students. Across the projects listed here, students are used as a source of knowledge about the institution for other students to access, as a support function in their role as mentors or ambassadors, and as collaborative partners in focus groups, as research subjects and as conference participants. This ties in to the idea of shared ownership between staff and students, which is also a recurring theme across these reports.

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Some caution should be exercised in terms of employing students to take on these roles, bearing in mind that attainment can also be affected by part-time work, as discussed earlier in section 4.1.1 Financial issues. BME students and students who work may need additional support as it is; BME students who undertake this particular kind of work may be additionally vulnerable to differential attainment if the correct support mechanisms are not in place to help them avoid internalising the issue.
The concept of a ‘post-racial’ approach is popular in some organisations (e.g. Derby, DMU) whilst a targeted approach focussing on BME students is popular in others (e.g. Birmingham, UAL). This appears to be informed by the feelings of students within each institution, with some preferring one approach over another. Where institutions take a targeted approach, they have worked with student representatives and student unions in order to make the purpose of targeted interventions clear (Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Coventry, UAL).

The importance of embedding this agenda is also apparent, with both the pervading sense that this work has to occur at all levels of an institution, raising the awareness, skills and confidence of all staff, and ensuring that this agenda is included in strategic vision, strategic plans, and the work of various university boards and committees. It is also apparent that lack of long term funding can be an issue, as with the student success project at Kent. Successfully embedding this work is likely to require not only staff time and commitment, but long-term financial resources.

Another theme that emerges is a lack of evaluation in terms of how each project impacts on the attainment gap. In part, this is down to many of the projects listed being relatively recent. It is also true that where HEIs have seen a reduction in the gap, this usually follows a multi-faceted approach, which makes it difficult to separate the interventions which work from those that do not. Lack of evaluation could cause problems for HEIs if these projects need to demonstrate impact, or if they need to show cost-benefit analyses in order to progress with an intervention. This may be particularly relevant to institutions which require external funding to develop or sustain initiatives.

Planning is another key theme, and making sure that plans for interventions include clear strategies for monitoring and evaluation is stressed several times. The importance of planning in order to engage students early is also highlighted, particularly by the University of Birmingham student who took on the role of BME Ambassador.

The next two sections look at two over-arching reports which also examine some of the work being done in HE to address differential attainment, with particular focus on how to evaluate the work and make positive changes in the sector. Both these reports contain a series of recommendations which might be useful in the consideration of possible initiatives at TUoS.

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18 A ‘post-racial’ approach in this context is one which does not single out BME students for special attention but rather offers support to all students in the hope that take-up from BME students will happen regardless. See section 4.1.2 Preparedness for HE for a brief explanation, and criticisms, of post-racialism.
5.2 Sector-wide reports on initiatives to address differential attainment

This section looks at two overarching reports on the work being done across the HE sector to close the attainment gap and presents the comprehensive recommendations contained within those reports.

5.2.1 HEFCE, Causes of differences in student outcomes


https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/0B6bIjbZhBJHpfkZFVDJhaXBJSwjU3bUNVMjVlekhIMUtFSIsVVBLN1hqQXg2bUVBTUdIZm8

This report looks at differential outcomes for students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds, BME students and disabled students. It contains a review of published literature, a review of ‘grey’ literature collected from 23 institutions on efforts to address the attainment gap, interviews with stakeholders, comparative studies from the US, Australia, Germany and Denmark, and in-depth case study research into work other HEIs are doing to narrow the attainment gap.

The report conceptualises the causes of the attainment gap as occurring on three levels; the macro, meso and micro level. On the macro level, there exist socio-historical and cultural structures which determine the global environment in which HEIs and students operate. On the meso level, there are individual institutions, which generate the social context in which student outcomes are produced. Finally, on the micro level there exists the interaction between individuals (staff and students) which contribute to patterns of difference. These levels do not operate independently – for example, the global environment structures how individual institutions, and individuals within them, act. The report also identifies four types of explanatory factor; curricula and learning; staff/student relationships; social, cultural and economic capital; and psychosocial and identity factors.

Nine institutions were selected for the fieldwork aspect of this research and five are included in this report as case studies – University of Birmingham, University of Kent, Kingston University, and University of Derby, all of which are mentioned in the preceding sections here. Their inclusion in the HEFCE report is to represent the current range of thinking and practices across HE, and is not meant to indicate that these practices are necessarily unique, or ideal.

Conclusions

Five phases of work are identified, and these are:

- Confirming – statistical analysis of differential attainment within the institution, and comparison with the sector.
• Exploratory – hypothesising the causes of differential attainment, perhaps drawing on more nuanced statistical analysis or qualitative research.
• Awareness-raising – use of staff on institutional committees, as ‘champions’, or as project officers, to develop levels of staff understanding across the institution.
• Interventions – initiating an activity, or programme of activity, which aims to reduce the attainment gap. This can include ‘quick wins’, often using existing activity that has already been shown to work, or testing a range of approaches within an experimental research framework.
• Review – evaluating or observing the impact of interventions. (HEFCE, 2015)

The review phase is the one which comes under the most scrutiny. As highlighted in the previous sections here, there is a lack of robust evidence to demonstrate the impact of most of these interventions. One reason for this is the unlikeliness of discovering one single unified approach to the attainment gap, as highlighted by one of the interviewees:

We do not know yet what is the magic bullet. And I don’t think we ever will get that position, because we’re too big a university. I think in any one area, so, for example, what might work in economics, I don’t think will work in drama necessarily, or in engineering. So I think it’s quite dangerous if we say there’s only one strategy we’re going to employ to tackle where there is a difference in attainment.

Institutional fieldwork interviewee
(HEFCE, 2015)

This report suggests that another challenge for evaluating projects successfully is the number of weaknesses in the base of evidence. These weaknesses include:

• Availability of data – data is not necessarily collected for every factor HEIs might want to analyse. Furthermore, not everything HEIs might want to analyse is directly measureable - the concept of social mobility, for example, cannot be reduced to a single question. Sometimes, qualitative research is also needed in addition to the data in order to provide analysis at a more granular level.
• Quality of research – due to practical and ethical limitations, the research HEIs can conduct into differential attainment may be less than the ‘gold standard’ required in other fields. Limits include the lack of randomised control trials, small numbers of observations (especially at department or module level) leading to a lack of robust conclusions, and the availability of data placing restrictions on what can be analysed – e.g. there may be more available data on full time students, and this may lead to focussing only on those students and not those who choose part-time courses.
• Resources – there can be costs associated with accessing some data, plus there are cost implications for the staff time used to analyse data, and there may also be a lack of staff expertise for data analysis in some HEIs.
• Interpretation – once the data has been analysed, it is then subject to interpretation. One concern is that some factors may be used differently,
depending on context, either as a predictor of differential outcomes, or as another issue that needs to be explained.

- Ethical issues – what HEIs can and should do with this information once it has been collected, analysed and interpreted. In particular, if an HEI can identify which students are likely to under-perform, should they tell those students? Should staff (academic staff, personal tutors, and student support staff) be told? And how would doing this, or not, be ethically justified? (HEFCE, 2015).

Recommendations

The report makes several recommendations with regard to the collection and analysis of data and the methods of evaluation. These are:

Using data for monitoring purposes:
- Set a strategic question that can be answered using quantitative data, e.g. “what is the difference in degree attainment for different groups of students”. Align institutional data collection and analysis to this question.
- Apply multiple methods for identifying potentially disadvantaged students, though institutions should be aware this adds complexity to data analysis.
- Check individual responses for self-declared information, which may be incorrectly reported or under-reported where students are concerned about declaring information which may prejudice their application.
- Ensure the institution has ethics policies and data handling guidance to avoid inadvertently contravening data protection legislation.

Using data for evaluation projects:
- Baseline data should be collected at the start of any project in order to provide comparison data, and data collection and analysis should be an integral part of project design and planning.
- Data used for targeted interventions should be relevant to the targeted groups and/or phenomena.
- As randomised controlled trials are not often feasible in HE settings, thought could instead be given to comparison groups when trying to analyse the effect on an intervention.
- Where interventions target a small number of students, qualitative evaluations may be more useful than quantitative analyses. (HEFCE, 2015)

The rest of the recommendations are split into five key areas and within each category recommendations are made at macro, meso and micro levels. Included here are only those recommendations directed at HEIs, which are largely those at the meso level. However, the full list of recommendations is also worth reading as there are a number of suggestions for HEFCE which TUoS may wish to support, and recommendations for sector-wide reporting which TUoS may wish to be aware of.
The report recommends that HEIs consider each of the following actions:

**Enhancing the evidence base**

**Meso level:**

- Using their own data on differential attainment to refine the sector-wide research for use in their own contexts.
- Differential outcomes should be routinely considered as part of an institution’s Equality and Diversity committee and/or Learning and Teaching Committee’s remit. Work should be joined up wherever possible.
- Institutions should consider taking some action to reduce the attainment gap, even if this is initially a small scale experimental approach. HEIs should avoid only concentrating on the exploratory stage and use resources for implementing and evaluating interventions.
- All initiatives should include evaluation strategies and impact assessment procedures as part of the project outline.

**Micro level:**

- Qualitative research should be undertaken with the aim of developing an understanding of student perspectives on HE. This includes their perspectives on the underlying causes of differential outcomes. This research should then be used to inform changes in institutional and pedagogic practices.
- Engage in research to identify existing student involvement in opportunities to develop and enhance learning and teaching. Evaluate how student involvement then impacts on a) student outcomes in general and b) the students who are involved in learning and teaching development opportunities.
- Mentoring needs to be more robustly evaluated in terms of its effectiveness, as it is a common approach across the sector but there is not yet a strong evidence base to support its use.

**Awareness raising and information sharing**

**Meso level:**

- Raise awareness of differential attainment amongst staff at all levels, and students. Academic and professional staff should be supported to participate in sector-wide knowledge exchange and networking opportunities.
- Enhance existing celebrations of achievement and networking opportunities to promote this agenda.
- Undertake contextualised interventions which are based on evidence of issues students are facing in their own institutions.
- To increase the representation of under-represented groups in all professional and academic roles, particularly senior positions, and to do so by both supporting current staff and encouraging new applicants.
Embedding the agenda

Meso:

- Raise awareness amongst staff and students to promote a shared ownership of the agenda.
- Consider meaningfully embedding diversity training across the institution, with particular attention to disciplinary practices.
- Consider including the commitment to reduce the attainment gap in strategic policy
- Consider support for “‘micro-adjustments’ (lots of little things collectively)”, and the way in which these can be linked together in a strategic fashion in order to facilitate culture change.
- Promote awareness of and commitment to this agenda among employers who wish to interact with students. Transparent selection processes accessible-to-all internships are an important part of this.

Staff as change agents:

Meso level:

- Consider broadening discussions of curricula to include what is taught, how it is taught, and for what purpose. ‘Inclusive curricula’ should include all learning, teaching and assessment practices.
- Value accomplishments in learning and teaching on a par with those made in research. Annual staff reviews and criteria for promotion should reflect this.
- Consider how best to encourage active staff involvement. Projects should include a variety of stakeholders, including students, and be led by different groups. ‘Mini-projects’ can be one way to increase awareness and interest.
- Share resources and celebrate successes – methods might include staff networks, staff announcements, learning and teaching conferences, and awards.

Students as change agents:

Meso:

- Encourage the idea of students as partners who can help to identify barriers and enablers for inclusive learning experiences. Create a climate where students feel safe to discuss potentially sensitive or personal issues and empower them to make changes
- Consider funding ‘mini-projects’ led by students as a way of increasing awareness of the issues and empowering students to make changes.
- Consider how best to create a climate where students are able to maintain diverse individual identities.
Consider how the influence of students’ family and friends is recognised and consider opportunities to engage with wider networks and communities.

Identify how peer-support and student networks are developed and can be supported.

Micro:

- Students, representative groups, sabbatical officers and students’ unions should push for the importance of this agenda at national and institutional levels (including departmental, course and classroom levels).
- Student representatives (at institutional and course level) should seek information about how differential attainment is monitored and what measures are being taken to address this.
- Student unions should support representatives to understand the issues of differential outcomes, in order to empower them to raise concerns with their institutions.
- Individual students should also consider leading mini-projects themselves, or in partnership with their institutions.

5.2.2 HEA, Black and minority ethnic student degree retention and attainment

HEA (2012) *Black and minority ethnic student degree retention and attainment.* Higher Education Authority Summit Report

[https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/0B6bIjbZhBJHpkJaXBSjU3bUNVMIYekhIMUf5IhsVVBLN1hqQXg2bUVBTUdlZm8](https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/0B6bIjbZhBJHpkJaXBSjU3bUNVMIYekhIMUf5IhsVVBLN1hqQXg2bUVBTUdlZm8)

This report gives an outline of institutional research which was undertaken as part of a learning and teaching summit programme delivered by HEA in 2012. It also details the responses to this research by at a two day residential event, as well as their responses to sector-wide reports on attainment. Interviews with staff and students at a series of HEIs also took place, to establish awareness of the gap and any strategies being undertaken to address it.

The internal institutional reports used as part of the summit programme included reports from UAL, Wolverhampton, Birmingham (all included here), Bath, Open University, Gloucestershire and Portsmouth (not included due to not being publicly available).

Feedback from the summit programme is summarised as a set of guiding principles that should underpin changes designed to reduce the attainment gap, in recognition of the fact that there is no single universal approach to doing so.

**Conclusions**

The summary of the HEA report centres on the level of understanding of the issue of the ethnicity attainment gap, which was discussed in more detail in section 2 above.
Staff and students differed in their perceptions of who was responsible for the gap, with students wholly attributing responsibility to institutions and staff for the most part recognizing the need for institutional change, but also acknowledging the influence of societal factors outside their control. Even so, both agreed that closing the gap would require greater commitment to integrating students of all ethnic backgrounds, greater diversity of learning and teaching practices, particularly with regards to assessments, and a diversification of student support mechanisms with academic and pastoral support being available to all students and targeted interventions for BME students only where absolutely necessary.

These are some of the reflections which emerged from the summit, as provided in the HEA report:

- The attainment gap issue is one of social justice and social mobility, and is “at the heart of what a university is for”.
- HEIs can use a business case to help drive change – focusing on HE as a competitive marketplace in which students expect to be supported to succeed.
- Change should be led from the top-down and included in institutional strategies.
- Institutions should adopt a “post-racial” approach, making sure support is a mainstream provision for all students and promoting inclusive learning and teaching.
- The need for a partnership approach between staff and students, including Students’ Unions and the National Union of Students, and the need for consultation with students to be systematic.
- All staff need skills and confidence to build relationships with all students. This might require clear guidance for all personal tutors, making clear to students what is expected of them and what support is available, and empowering students to clarify feedback, and make changes where they identify poor practice.
- Measures of “success” should be broad, encompassing participation, belonging, attainment and retention.
- The curriculum needs to be relevant to all students, including non-White and non-Western perspectives.
- Institutions should implement fair marking practices. This includes having clear, transparent assessment guidelines, offering a choice of assessments, giving students examples of first class work, anonymous marking, checking assignment briefs and marking for cultural biases, and making sure assignment briefs are given in the context of a discussion-based activity. Some of these activities could also be incorporated into peer mentoring and peer-assisted learning.
- Students should be given early feedback and opportunities to discuss anything they don’t understand about it. Plagiarism could also be ‘decriminalised’ with more focus on training students how to avoid it, rather than disciplinary measures after the fact.
- Employability issues are based on students’ low social capital, as well as race. Institutions need to work on aspiration raising and employer engagement as early as possible.
Recommendations

Recommendations from the HEA report are given in the form of a list of guiding principles, in recognition of the fact there is no single universal approach to reducing the attainment gap. These are:

- The need for change must be recognised and supported at institutional strategic level, ideally championed by the PVC for LTA; reducing the attainment gap should also be enshrined as an institutional key performance indicator, underpinned by robust data.
- A holistic, longitudinal approach should be taken to reduce the attainment gap, from pre-entry “aspiration raising” activities through to progression to post-graduation study and/or employment.
- Interventions should be “post-racial”. Where targeted interventions are deemed to be desirable, a clear rationale for such activity should be communicated to both staff and students.
- Initiatives designed to reduce the attainment gap should, in principle, be based on clear evidence and have timely and measurable outcomes. However, implementing faster and more substantial change may require a degree of risk-taking.
- All students should be viewed as partners in the educational journey and systematically involved in the design and implementation of inclusive learning, teaching and assessment activities.
- Institutions should put strategies in place to ensure staff feel able, and empowered, to develop effective relationships with all students; these relationships should be built on a sharing of power and responsibility.
- Regular and effective monitoring and evaluation strategies should be initiated alongside the implementation of both mainstream and targeted strategies. Results should be disseminated appropriately, including where no change has been effected; where change has occurred strategies need to be put in place to ensure such change is sustained.
- Academic development and support should be largely mainstreamed and students should be encouraged and empowered to draw on these existing mechanisms; however, institutions also need to implement alternative strategies to support those students who are unable or unwilling to access mainstream provision.
- Institutional strategies should be implemented to enable staff to develop sufficient confidence to deal with issues of race and racism; both staff and students should be afforded “safe spaces” within which to discuss race and racism.
- All teaching staff should set local targets for reducing the gap; good practice in teaching and learning, leading to enhanced student success, should be recognised and valued institutionally.

Additionally, a set of reflexive questions that HEIs can use as a starting point for understanding and tackling their own attainment gaps is provided by the HEA report. These are:
• To what extent does the institution monitor the retention, progression, completion and attainment of all groups, including specific groups such as BME students? What plans are in place to enhance retention, progression, completion and attainment?
• To what extent are staff and students across the institution, at all levels, aware of the ethnicity attainment gap? Is the evidence openly available, regularly monitored and discussed?
• To what extent have targets been set to reduce the attainment gap? What strategies are in place to ensure success?
• To what extent are strategies based on clear evidence? Have plans to monitor and evaluate the impact of any such strategies been put in place?
• To what extent have teaching and learning practices, in particular those relating to assessment, been evaluated, including by students, to minimise possible bias and discrimination?
• To what extent do staff feel skilled and empowered to build effective relationships with all students? Is high quality learning and teaching rewarded within the institution?
• To what extent have approaches designed to improve the success of all students been mainstreamed? To what extent are all students accessing academic, pastoral and other support services?

(Stevenson, 2012)
6 Toolkits

This section looks at a range of toolkits produced by individual HEIs and other HE organisations. Some of these toolkits aim to provide HEIs with a theoretical framework to start this work from scratch, while others share examples of what has worked in their institution.

Key findings:

- Providing separate guides for staff and students, and making them clear and distinct from each other appears to be the most useful approach.

- Tailoring the guidance to staff and students separately avoids exposing students to the idea that they may be less likely to succeed (and thus risking students internalising this and doing less well as a result), whilst also giving academics the information and skills they need to start closing the attainment gap.
The previous section explored some of the work being HEIs have developed to narrow the attainment gap. Some have produced toolkits for sharing examples of what has worked in their institution, while other organisations have designed toolkits which provide HEIs with a theoretical framework to start this work from scratch.

These toolkits are discussed below with the aim of giving staff some starting points for their work on the attainment gap, providing both theoretical and practical toolkits since either/both may be appropriate depending on the departmental or faculty context.

The first two toolkits are largely theoretical, though they also include some practical guidance for HEIs which is largely centred on fulfilling their legal obligations as set out in the Equality Act 2010 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. The toolkits that follow focus primarily on practical tips for both staff and students.

6.1 Building the anti-racist university: a toolkit, Law et al.

https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bIjbZhBJHpOEV3Wkg2cFBFTzQ

Summary:
This toolkit was developed at Leeds University c.2003 in conjunction with HEFCE. It is aimed at HEIs that are making their first concerted efforts towards establishing working and active policies of anti-racism, and those whose policies are already underway but in need of further development. It is not intended as a ‘quick fix’, but is about making fundamental changes with long-lasting effects and therefore makes recommendations for all levels of HE staff.

What’s in it?

- Conceptual tools – explaining theoretical concepts such as institutional racism, eurocentrism and how to unpack Whiteness, developing an understanding of why an anti-racist strategy is needed, and providing further reading recommendations.
- Legal and organisational tools – explaining the legal requirements on HEIs, guidance on setting and monitoring equality and diversity targets, and giving some indicators of good and bad practices on EDI policies.
- Anti-Racist Strategies – how-to guides for developing an anti-racist policy, getting staff on board, recruiting and developing BME staff, dealing with harassment and bullying, embedding anti-racism in learning and teaching, and making sure student recruitment, support and transition to employment do not disadvantage BME students. This section includes checklists you can use to make sure equality and diversity and anti-racism policies are made a priority and given sufficient time and attention.
- Reviewing the organisation – how to plan and run interviews, open forums and focus groups to discuss issues of race and ethnicity with staff and students. Includes templates for email questionnaires that can also be sent to staff/students.
Toolkit Sample: Example Email Questionnaire to send to students (Law et al., 2002)

This is provided as a first step HEIs can take, in order to get a snapshot view of attitudes around racism and race equality at their own institution. It is designed to obtain some basic ideas of agreement/disagreement with the statements included, and to encourage students to elaborate where they feel comfortable. Note that some of the questions may be worth updating so as to encompass all students; for example the question on gender should have options for those who do not identify as male or female, and a question to identify mature students may also be valuable.
Sample Student Questionnaire

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:
1=very strongly, 2=strongly, 3=moderately; 4=barely; 5=not at all

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Agree Options</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel I have equality of opportunity as a student at this University</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Please delete as appropriate, if you can, please elaborate on your answer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measures to improve race equality are necessary at this University</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Please delete as appropriate, if you can, please elaborate on your answer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel welcome and part of student life at this University.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Please delete as appropriate, if you can, please elaborate on your answer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This University caters for cultural and religious differences.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Please delete as appropriate, if you can, please elaborate on your answer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I have come across racial discrimination or racist attitudes directed at others whilst at this University.

Do you agree 1 2 3 4 5 Don't Know

(Please delete as appropriate, if you can, please elaborate on your answer)

I have personally experienced racial discrimination or racist attitudes as a student at this University.

Do you agree 1 2 3 4 5 Don't Know

(Please delete as appropriate, if you can, please elaborate on your answer)

1. I am a 1st year / 2nd year / final year undergraduate student / taught postgrad / research postgrad (please delete as appropriate)
2. I am male/female (please delete as appropriate)
3. I am a home/overseas student (please delete as appropriate)
4. Finally, please could you tell us your ethnicity in the space below?

If you do not want to give us this information could you please tell us why?

If you have any further comments to make please add them below.
The toolkit also provides advice on following up on this evidence with interviews, open forums and focus groups. This advice includes:

- Conducting interviews with students from a broad range of departments and faculties
- Contacting Students' Union groups and societies (e.g. national and faith societies)
- Contacting BME support groups, within your institution and beyond.
- Organise sessions for students to come and discuss the issues that concern them.

There is also a similar survey to send to staff included in the toolkit.

6.2 The race equality toolkit, Universities Scotland

http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/raceequalitytoolkit/

Summary:
Universities Scotland first published the Race Equality Toolkit: Learning and Teaching in 2006 in response to demand from Scottish universities for guidance on meeting their statutory obligations in terms of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. The Equality Act 2010 introduced a revised public sector Equality Duty, so this toolkit has also been revised accordingly. It has a particular focus on learning, teaching and assessment issues for racially diverse institutions.

What’s in it?
- Curriculum – ways to: make equality and diversity part of the core curriculum rather than an ‘add-on’, provide opportunities for students to critically engage with concepts of racism, give students the tools to address any prejudices they might have. It also includes some examples of this work from academics across Scotland.
- Learning and Teaching – ways to: make sure all students feel equally valued, meet the needs of bilingual students, address racism within the classroom, maximise participation and academic achievement for all students, design field trips/practical activities/social activities in ways that take race and faith into account.
- Assessment – ways to: ensure that assessment requirements are understood by all, particularly those with English as an additional language, adapt assessment to allow engagement with non-White and/or non-Western perspectives, make sure scheduling of assessments and examination makes allowances for non-Western religious calendars, ensure all students understand plagiarism. This section also contains a checklist of good practice that institutions can refer back to if necessary.
- Institutional Action – a checklist of possible action steps which will demonstrate the university’s leaders and managers are driving equality and diversity work as well as academic and learning and teaching staff.
Assessment criteria could be more inclusive of different learner and learning styles e.g. the ability to engage with critical reflection could be assessed as well as the ability to summarise information from a variety of sources.

1. Consider continuous assessment, where possible.
2. Make explicit the grading scheme for the course.
3. Implement anonymous marking or double marking, particularly for project work.
4. Assessment criteria could be focused on what is central to the module or course element.
5. When assessment demands coherence of structure, evidence of critical engagement with concepts, and ability to posit arguments intellectually, explicit briefs could be provided as to what these mean in terms of assessment tasks so that all students are conversant with the requirements.
6. Student performance/attrition rates could be monitored across different ethnic groups. Monitoring ethnicity is a specific duty requirement under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.

[Case Study:] School of Medicine

Acknowledgement and understanding of potentially diverse values, perspectives and doctor/patient circumstances are assessed both through written work (modified essay/problem-solving and extended matching questions) and as part of structured clinical examinations throughout the undergraduate course. Specific scenarios are posed to ascertain if students have actively engaged with the issues as part of their learning.

Some examples include:

1. Requesting informed consent for a patient who is of a particular faith who is about to undergo abdominal surgery for repair of an aortic abdominal aneurysm (members of this faith have deep religious convictions against accepting homologous or autologous whole blood, packed red blood cells, white blood cells, or platelets)

2. Explaining the need for a pelvic examination to the parents of a teenage girl whose upbringing comes from within a modest tradition (some traditions and cultures are very sensitive to any perceived violation linked to virginity).
6.3 BME ambassadors toolkit, University of Birmingham

https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bljbZhBJHpNkxodkltTk5zRGc

Summary:
This toolkit came out of work done collaboratively with the NUS Black Students’ Officer, Malia Bouattia (a former student at Birmingham University), after the "I Too Am Birmingham" campaign highlighted the need for BME safe spaces to ensure BME students feel represented and heard. The BME Ambassadors are students who volunteer to be the ambassador for BME students within their department and/or faculty. They organise events for BME students to come together and socialise, providing a safe space for discussion about race, culture and ethnicity.

What’s in it?
- An overview of why the ambassadors are needed including details of the attainment gap at University of Birmingham.
- The training provided to BME ambassadors, which includes what a safe space can look like, organising events for BME students and producing a plan of action for the year.
- A student’s evaluation of these activities.

Toolkit Sample: Guide for students on the role of a BME Ambassador

The importance and role of a BME ambassador

As a BME ambassador you will be responsible for creating BME safe spaces so that students in your School and Department are able to voice their concerns, seek guidance and support, and feel represented because often the sense of being a minority is very prominent.

You will also be responsible for creating a dialogue with staff members so that the issues which may be faced by BME students in your School can be addressed.

Your role is to be representative and raise issues of concern, or for change at School committees and other fora.

You will call meetings for students within your School and be prominent because you will have a student ambassador T shirt!

You will be paid a small sum as a ‘thank you’ for your involvement.

Why is it important to create BME safe spaces?

'A BME safe space can be anything from an event for self-defining students, to a Facebook group/email thread, or even your presence as a BME ambassador.'
On a campus which is mostly attended by white students, and a staff population which is also reflective of this, it is important for minorities to feel represented and heard because in reality, barriers such as racism and other forms of prejudice continue to exist. The presence of autonomous spaces are a recognition of these issues and are implemented so as to alleviate some of these social and systematic burdens on groups who are most affected.’

This section of the toolkit then goes on to provide students with additional contact information for various BME networks in the University and the wider community at this point, but these are specific to the University of Birmingham. In section 7.2.2 Collaborative work below, contact details are provided for a range of BME organisations at Sheffield University and beyond.

6.4 Assignment brief guide, Coventry University

Available publicly soon from [http://www.coventry.ac.uk/study-at-coventry/student-support/academic-support/centre-for-academic-writing/](http://www.coventry.ac.uk/study-at-coventry/student-support/academic-support/centre-for-academic-writing/)

Advance copy also at
[https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bljbZhBJHpTWhsdTIUUnQ2SFk](https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bljbZhBJHpTWhsdTIUUnQ2SFk)

Please do not circulate without permission from the authors.

Summary:
This guide is aimed at academic teachers and lecturers with some prior experience of learning and teaching in a HE environment. It presents the viewpoint that students’ acquisition of academic writing skills is a developmental process, and provides resources for teachers and lecturers to support students’ academic literacy. This includes a checklist for designing assignment briefs, best practice for giving feedback on students’ writing, and a list of external resources that can help to support students’ development of academic writing skills.
**Toolkit Sample:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time-friendly Ways to Engage Students with Feedback on Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This section presents time-friendly approaches to boost lecturers’ ability to provide feedback and students’ capacity to act effectively on feedback to develop their academic writing skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Why might students not act effectively on feedback?**

**Ten common reasons students give as to why they don’t or can’t act on feedback on writing**

1. Students have a heavy workload: for example, a number of summative assessments from different modules may be due within a short time frame;
2. Feedback is not sufficiently timely;
3. Students find it difficult to interpret the feedback comments to understand what they have achieved or how to put right what they have done wrong or inadequately;
4. There is a lack of shared understanding between academic staff and students regarding the academic discourse underpinning the language of the assessment criteria and of feedback;
5. Feedback focuses on justifying the grade or diagnosing a problem rather than providing guidance for improving learning;
6. There is a wide variety in feedback and feedback can have different purposes within and across the disciplines. This can give rise to confusion and a mismatch of expectations between lecturers and students;
7. There is a wide variety in the design and type of assignment briefs, assignments and tasks students experience across modules. As a consequence some students find it difficult to feed-forward (transfer) lessons from feedback to future assignments they will write;
8. Students consciously work to identify individual lecturers’ particular values for written work, and write assignments accordingly. This strategic practice might inhibit seeking the relevance and applicability of feedback from one lecturer or module in approaching work for a different lecturer;
9. Lack of self-efficacy impacts on a student’s preparedness to find out more and to be able to act on the feedback given;
10. Providing a grade first can draw students’ attention away from feedback comments.

What institutions can do to improve students’ engagement with feedback on writing:

**Programme-level planning:**

Planning at this level enables degree programmes to achieve greater coherence in the scheduling, purposes and nature of assessment in order to promote formative
learning opportunities and greater transparency for students in understanding the relationship of assessments to learning outcomes. Programme level planning is a key recommendation influenced by the work of the Transforming Student Experience through Assessment (TESTA) research project on assessment practices (2009-2012). The TESTA project conducted research on 8 programmes across 4 institutions to map assessment environments, to develop interventions and to evaluate the interventions. The TESTA methodology for evaluation of assessment practices is now used in a number of UK universities, including Coventry University.

Programme-level benchmarking on assessment standards and feedback practices:

Marking standards and criteria are not a permanently fixed and stable entity. Standards are dynamically co-constructed within the academic discipline as the knowledge base moves forward. Assessment practices are also inevitably locally and contextually situated, and ultimately a tacit and individual practice that lecturers need to discuss and check with colleagues. There is a judicious balance of subjectivity in what individual lecturers may value in assessing writing assignments, and professional knowledge in concurrently arriving at a consensus with colleagues in awarding grades (Bloxham and Boyd 2012).

Students may experience variations in applying marking and assessment criteria as an issue of relativity. This can lead to perceptions of the need to customise the assignment towards the stance of an individual lecturer, and to student reports of variation in the types of feedback given by different lecturers.

Suggestions to enhance students’ sense of self-reliance in the development of their own voice in writing assignments and to motivate their engagement with feedback are:

Ensure transparency over assessment procedures: Students may not be aware of the rigour of moderation and quality assurance procedures in assessment. They may be reassured that the audience for their assignment is not a sole lecturer working in isolation, but a wider community of practice;

Promote diversity of thinking as a core value of academic culture:

Transition to university learning and teaching entails firstly understanding academic writing as a social practice (Street and Lefstein 2008), and explicit training and feedback to enable students to develop their own voice and stance in their writing for academic purposes and audiences;

Schedule benchmarking and development meetings:

These provide an opportunity for lecturers to liaise on their marking and feedback practices, and provide acculturation for new staff (Bloxham and Boyd 2012).
Fostering Supportive Relationships:

Findings of three HEA and HEA/HEFCE-commissioned, cross-institutional studies on student retention and success indicate that identifying as a participant member of the university community is a key marker of student success (Cousin and Singh 2012, Stevenson 2012, Thomas 2012). Sustained and continuous academic and social engagement with lecturers and peers, who are the primary contacts, together with habitual use of the various social, administrative, academic and academic support facilities at university lead to a sense of belonging. In turn, having a sense of belonging promotes academic engagement, the habit of persistence, and confidence in one's own ability as a successful HE learner. The findings of these studies indicate that supportive relations between lecturers and students and within the student learning group can be fostered by:

1. Student-centred learning, which increases opportunities for interaction and affords more information to lecturers on individual students;

2. Being an approachable lecturer: Students find lecturers approachable if they are seen as keen to educate; if they are prepared to answer questions and if they anticipate difficulties;

3. Encouraging peer co-operative working and peer collaboration, and validating this approach through assessment and feedback;

4. Setting high, but realistic, expectations for student performance.

6.5 Practical recipes for student success (PReSS), University of Derby

https://uodpress.wordpress.com/

Summary:

This toolkit is aimed at learning and teaching practitioners. It is presented as a selection of one-page guides on interventions to encourage student success. It is still being built up as a resource, with a dedicated section for work still in progress, but nonetheless contains a good range of material for both students and staff. It is worth noting that there are a number of contributors to the material and this means the tone differs from guide to guide, and there are no separate sections (yet) for staff and students.

What’s in it?
• For students: Assignment Checklist, Guide to Plagiarism, Professional Behaviour in the Classroom, Professional Behaviour for Placement Students, Study Skills for Successful Students, Top Tips for Academic Writing, Understanding the Assignment.

There are a lot of different skills that you can develop to make yourself a more effective learner:

Based on your experience of which areas you handle well or need to improve, pick out four or five areas that you want to develop:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study skill</th>
<th>PDP?</th>
<th>Study skill</th>
<th>PDP?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Doing a project</td>
<td></td>
<td>10. Writing essays and dissertations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Finding, using and analysing information and evidence</td>
<td></td>
<td>11. Writing reports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Handling time pressure</td>
<td></td>
<td>12. Dealing with other people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Making notes</td>
<td></td>
<td>13. Discussions; face to face and online</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. PDP</td>
<td></td>
<td>14. Working in a group or a team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Plagiarism and referencing</td>
<td></td>
<td>15. Action planning; identifying actions; making recommendations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Presenting your work; making it look good</td>
<td></td>
<td>16. Succeeding with exams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Reflecting on your learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>17. Giving a presentation, viva or being observed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Solving problems and making decisions</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The study skills department can support you in developing all these skills:
https://ulib.derby.ac.uk/backed_up_php/lib_guide_tutorials.html

Chris Gascoyne & Kevin Merry
This paper identifies common reasons why students fail, withdraw or do not achieve to their full potential. These are pitfalls for you to watch out for, drawn from real life experiences, as identified by staff and students.

- They do not know you or who to go to when in trouble or may be reluctant to come forward and ask for help.
- They do not attend lectures and tutorials or do attend but do not engage.
- They may be easily distracted.
- They do not understanding what is meant by plagiarism – and the consequences.
- They do not know about module learning outcomes and how these relate to the assessments.
- They do not read the assessment criteria.
- They do not understand the importance of reading the module and/or programme handbook.
- They do not keep to deadlines.
- They do not know how to reference work properly.
- They fail to maintain a positive attitude or have good motivation.
- They do not proof read their work.

They are bamboozled by jargon – here are some key terms you could share

**Stage:** This also means what year of university are you in, for example ‘1st year’ or ‘Final year’

**Degree Classification:** 1st degree, 2.1 degree, 2.2 degree and an ordinary degree

**Learning Outcome:** What you are assessed against in a module

**ALF:** Access to Learning Fund is for students who are having financial difficulty

**Careers Service:** Located at the bottom floor of the library which helps in study skills

**SEA:** Student Employment Agency helps students get part time work

**Skill Builder:** Help your employability by helping you put a CV together

**Blackboard/UDO:** Your course resources and basic university communication

**Credits:** There are 360 credits for a 1st degree, a typical module has 20 credits and there are 120 credits per year.

**What causes students most anxiety about handing in assignments?**

- Past failures
- Time management
- Scheduling of assessments across modules and other assignment clashes
- Lecturers cancelling lectures and tutorials
- Having due dates pushed forward
- Can they reflect the right academic tone in their writing?
- The killer question – “Am I good enough?”

*Jean Mutton*
6.6 Summary

These toolkits contain guidance targeted at both staff and students. Providing separate guides for staff and students, and making them clear and distinct from each other appears to be the most useful approach. Tailoring the guidance to staff and students separately avoids exposing students to the idea that they may be less likely to succeed (and thus risking students internalising this and doing less well as a result), whilst also giving academics the information and skills they need to start closing the attainment gap.

6.7 Recommendations

A toolkit similar to the one used by Derby might be useful for students and could perhaps be incorporated into the Student Skills and Development Centre at TUoS’s 301. Publicising this service more widely and/or targeting BME students in particular may also help to ensure that this is a service that gets used by those who need it. Monitoring the use of these services, including analysing the ethnicity and/or socio-economic class of students using it will also help to make sure it is being appropriately marketed.

The Projects and Development team at TUoS have produced guidelines for staff on internationalising the curriculum, and it may be possible to produce something similar – or to expand this publication - with regards to equality and diversity in the curriculum. A copy can be found here: https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/0B6bljbZhBJHpWkhBODcwVVZSMDg

There is also an Inclusive Learning and Teaching handbook published by a range of staff from across TUoS in 2010, which targets staff with learning, teaching and assessment responsibilities. It might be useful to update and/or redistribute this to staff with renewed emphasis on differential attainment, and to ensure it is used in the training of PhD students considering a career in academia.

7 Areas of potential further interest

Key findings:

- Four areas of related research interest are identified; these are 1) Admissions, 2) Progression to postgraduate study, 3) progression to employment and 4) BME academic staff and the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

- Three resources for future work are also identified. These are 1) funding, 2) collaborative partners, and 3) accreditation
This section gives a brief overview of some other areas of research relating to BME students, which were outside the scope of this paper.

7.1 Related areas of research

BME students are affected by issues other than the attainment gap, and the relationship between each of these issues and the attainment gap is not always clear. Below are some suggestions for areas of potential further research. Each of these is an issue affecting BME students in its own right and worth exploring on those terms, but could also have an impact on attainment or vice versa.

7.1.1 Admissions

While the proportion of BME students across the HE sector is 19.6%, the figure for TUs is 12.7%. While this discrepancy may be partly down to students choosing other types of institution, or other geographical locations, there is also research to suggest that there may be inequality in admissions processes for Russell Group universities and this may warrant further investigation.

[See also sections 3.2.3 Institution choice and 3.2.4 Subject choice.]

Further reading


This paper analyses more than 151,000 applications to Russell Group universities between 2010/11 and 2012/13. It presents two key findings. Firstly, that ethnic minority applicants remain less likely to receive offers from Russell Group universities than comparably qualified white applicants, even after the numerical competitiveness of courses has been taken into account. Secondly, that for Russell Group institutions, where the percentage of ethnic minority applicants is higher (e.g. subjects such as medicine and dentistry), the ethnic inequalities in the chance of receiving an offer are also higher.

Both findings are presented with some caveats, including the limits of the data set analysed, and suggestions for further research in order to better understand the findings, with a view to addressing these differences in offer-making.

and


News articles highlighting the prime minister’s plans for UCAS to make its applications ‘name-blind’ in order to avoid the danger of unconscious bias affecting applicants’ chances of securing a place at university.

“And the prime minister [David Cameron] continues: “Some research has shown that top universities make offers to 55% of white applicants, but only to 23% of black ones. The reasons are complex, but unconscious bias is clearly a risk. So we have agreed with UCAS that it will make its applications name-blind, too, from 2017” (Times Higher Education, 2015)

3. UCAS (2015). *Offer rates to different ethnic groups close to expected values.*

UCAS have analysed their own data and drawn slightly different conclusions. While the offer rate from higher tariff universities is lower for Asian, Black, Mixed and Other ethnic groups, some of this is due to other factors, such as the institution and subject applied to, and a student’s predicted A-Level grades. This study controls for these other factors and shows that the ‘expected offer rates’ for White and BME students are much closer together; ranging from two percentage points lower than expected to two percentage points higher than expected.

4. SPA (Supporting Professionalism in Admissions), 2016. *The existing evidence base and considerations for ‘name-blind’ applications to higher education.*

SPA has provided a report on the current evidence base for the anonymization of HE applications in response to the demand from HE providers, UCAS, and other organisations. The report aims to prompt discussions within HEIs about the feasibility and desirability of removing names from applications, and to support admissions professionals in reviewing their strategies for minimising the risk of unconscious bias and illegal discrimination.
5. Chris Hall, Head of External Relations, ECU. (2016). *BME students need more than a place at Oxford.*

Chris Hall responds to the Prime Minister's announcement about racism in admissions, highlighting the importance of looking at the whole student journey and not just one particular issue.

http://wonkhe.com/blogs/bme-admissions-oxford/

### 7.1.2 Progression to postgraduate study

Across the sector, the percentage of BME students studying for their first undergraduate degree is 22.2%. However, this drops at postgraduate level, with 19.5% of taught postgraduate students being BME and only 16.8% of research postgraduates (ECU, 2014). While most of the literature on the attainment gap focuses on the progression and retention of students during the course of their undergraduate degree, the drop off in numbers of BME students at postgraduate level is worth further research, as is the progression of these students into academia and permanent and senior academic staff posts, since this will have a knock-on effect on the number of BME staff.

The attainment gap is likely to have an effect on the number of BME students progressing to postgraduate education as typical entrance requirements are a 1st or 2:1 at undergraduate level, and these qualifications are also more likely to attract funding than a 2:2 below, which is crucial for students who could not afford to study otherwise.

### Further reading


This report looks at the progression from first undergraduate degrees to postgraduate study. Some key findings include:

- Students from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds (who are already less likely to do an undergraduate degree) were less likely to progress to taught masters and PG research courses.

- Students who were mature during their undergraduate studies were less likely to transition to all types of postgraduate study, and more likely to stay at the same institution.

- BME students were more likely to go on to taught masters courses than white students, but less likely to go on to other postgraduate or postgraduate research...
courses. This, however, greatly varied by ethnic group. For example, Chinese students had the highest transition to taught masters, and Black Caribbean students had the lowest. Transition to postgraduate research courses was less consistent over time, but in 2010/11, Chinese students had the highest transition and Bangladeshi students the lowest. Transition to other types of postgraduate study was highest for Pakistani students and lowest for Chinese.

7.1.3 Progression to employment

Likewise, the attainment gap is likely to have an effect on the number of BME students progressing to employment after their undergraduate degree as employers increasingly require a 2:1 or above as a way of filtering out candidates in a highly competitive job market. Universities also use this as a measure of success and a tool for recruiting new students, so anything that affects progression to employment should be addressed.

Further reading

1. Connor, H., La Valle, I., Tackey, N.D and Perryman, S (1996). Ethnic Minority Graduates: Differences by Degrees. An exploratory study to compare the employment experiences of graduates from different ethnic groups. Key findings include:

White graduates are more likely to be employed and less likely to be unemployed in the two and a half years after graduation than BME graduates.

BME graduates experienced more periods of unemployment than White graduates and their longest unemployed period was greater in duration on average. It took BME graduates longer to secure their first job after graduation. However, when class of degree was controlled for, this difference reduced.

2. Tackey, N. D., Casebourne, J., Aston, J., Ritchie, H., Sinclair, A., Tyers, C., Hurstfield, J., Willison, R., and Page, R. (2006). Barriers to Employment for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in Britain. This report presents the findings from research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions on the barriers to employment for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in Britain. The report consists of five sections; a literature review; interviews with experts; an analysis of the labour markets of five selected locations in Britain; a survey of 1,000 employers; and interviews with Pakistani and Bangladeshi jobseekers and non-jobseekers.
7.1.4 BME academic staff and the Research Excellence Framework (REF)

According to one study, academics from Black and Asian backgrounds were less likely to be selected for inclusion in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) than their White colleagues, even when other factors were controlled for. This highlights another element of the experiences of BME staff that TUoS may wish to gather institutional data on, and to address if necessary.

Further Reading


This study investigates how disability, age, sex, ethnicity, nationality and early career researcher status are related to the selection of staff for inclusion in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework. The selection rates were similar for all ethnicity groups, with the exception of Black and Asian UK and non-EU nationals who had statistically significant lower selection rates, even with modelling for other factors taken into account.

7.2 Potential resources for future work on differential attainment

This section looks at possible collaborators, sources of funding and other resources that we might draw upon to help with work on differential attainment.

7.2.1 Funding

A number of the projects at other HEIs received external funding, and this is certainly worth further research to understand what external funding opportunities may exist that we could take advantage of in order to progress with work on the attainment gap at TUoS. Some examples of funding sources included a HE provider’s own Alumni Giving Fund, national schemes such as the National Teaching Fellowship, and local sources such as the Coventry and Warwickshire Life Long Learning Network.

7.2.2 Collaborative work

Below are some potential collaborative partner organisations that may be useful when undertaking future work to address differential attainment.

7.2.2.a Higher Education Race Action Group (HERAG)

Terms of reference:
HERAG is made up of equality and diversity professionals, academics, students and other individuals interested in advancing race equality in HE. It is chaired by Nona McDuff, Head of Equality at the University of Kingston. Nona is supported by two Vice-Chairs, Jean Mutton (Student Experience Project Manager, University of Derby), and Min Rodriguez (Head of Equality, University of Hertfordshire). HERAG has organised two “think tank” events, one in 2014 titled Studentship to Professorship: mapping the gaps and making changes for BME staff and students and one in 2015 titled Journey to close the BME attainment gap.

7.2.2.b Centre for Research in Race and Education (CRRE)

http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/education/crre/index.aspx

The Centre for Research in Race and Education (CRRE) is based in the School of Education within the University of Birmingham. It is an academic centre dedicated to the study of race inequality and racism in education.

7.2.2.c Runnymede Trust – Intelligence for a multi-ethnic Britain

http://www.runnymedetrust.org/

Runnymede is an independent race equality think tank for the UK. It offers some online resources relating to education, such as a section on Teaching Resources and an Academic Forum, which brings together over 70 leading scholars working on race to inform better policy making for race equality.

7.2.2.d Students’ union and student representatives

Sheffield Students’ Union has a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Students’ Committee – this Committee represents all BME students, both home and international. The Committee usually takes the lead on events such as Black History Month and Anti-Racism Week, and campaigns throughout the year on issues which affect BME students. The Committee works with one of the SU Officers each year.
This is usually the women’s officer, who works with all liberation groups on campus, but the committee are also offered the chance to work with any officers who also define as BME in years where BME officers are in post. There is also a BME Councillor who sits on SU Council and the officer, Committee and Councillor. Positions on the Committee and Council are open to all students who self-define as BME.

In addition to the representative committee and councillor, there are also a number of national, cultural and faith societies, some of which may be particularly relevant to BME students. Contact details for each society can be found through the Sheffield Students’ Union Societies webpage [http://su.sheffield.ac.uk/groups](http://su.sheffield.ac.uk/groups) or by contacting [activities@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:activities@sheffield.ac.uk).

TUoS BME Students’ Committee has, over the last few years, campaigned to get a representative officer for BME students in the Students’ Union. The NUS produced a briefing report to support black students campaigning for their own officer. The briefing can be found here: [https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bljbZhBJHp2ZHd05idndUTUE](https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bljbZhBJHp2ZHd05idndUTUE)

More about the history of TUoS student-led campaign can be read here:

[http://sheffieldsocialistparty.co.uk/blog/2014/03/09/sheffield-socialist-students-our-union-has-the-money-for-a-representative-officer-team](http://sheffieldsocialistparty.co.uk/blog/2014/03/09/sheffield-socialist-students-our-union-has-the-money-for-a-representative-officer-team)


Sheffield Students’ Union has also recently created a two-year fixed term position for an Equality and Liberation co-ordinator, within the Specialist Development Team. This role is intended to support students and officers wishing to campaign on equality and liberation related issues. The Specialist Development Team can be contacted via Lauren Simpson, Specialist Development Team Manager – [l.simpson@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:l.simpson@sheffield.ac.uk)

The National Union of Students (NUS) also has a Black Students’ Campaign and Black Students’ Officer, whose details can be found online here: [http://www.nus.org.uk/en/who-we-are/how-we-work/black-students/](http://www.nus.org.uk/en/who-we-are/how-we-work/black-students/)

### 7.2.3 Accreditation

The Equality Challenge Unit has developed a Race Equality Charter Mark, similar to the Athena SWAN award. The project was piloted in 2014-15, with 8 out of 21 institutions who took part receiving a Bronze award in recognition of the work they do towards race equality in HE. These institutions include De Montfort University, Kingston University, and the University of Hertfordshire (ECU, 2015). This scheme will be available to all institutions in 2016.

Clearly we need to do more, but the Race Equality Charter mark is a move in the right direction. It is, however, far too early to tell if it will
make a difference to the inclusion of BME staff and students in higher education. Put bluntly, if it is tied to funding (as the Athena SWAN charter is) then many universities will surely sign up to it – and it has taken 10 years to see the impact of Athena SWAN Charter. But if universities are serious in addressing race inequality, signing up to the Race Equality Charter will demonstrate this, and it will be a springboard to enable more BME staff to be promoted to senior decision-making roles, such as professors, pro vice-chancellors and chancellors. By having BME representation at senior levels, it is only then that we can move towards an agenda that prioritises social justice and inclusion in higher education.

(Bhopal, 2016)

Information about the RECM: http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter


The Stephen Lawrence Educational Standard for schools is also being reviewed this year and their future direction could also include HE institutions. A report is due in 2016. http://www.stephenlawrence.org.uk
8 Resources
8.1 Resources

Copies of most of the literature that has been substantially referenced in this paper are contained within a Google Drive folder. This can be accessed using the following link (requires a University of Sheffield login).

https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6bljbZhBJHpfmk4MHludzlIUUtCckY3cG11dV9GdEQyZiVZZER6X19qU2p0RjN3Yk9tdjA
8.3 Bibliography


HEFCE (2010). Student Ethnicity: Profile and progression of entrants to full-time, first degree study. London: HEFCE

HEFCE (2014). *Differences in degree outcomes: Key findings*. London: HEFCE


Stevenson, J. (2012). Black and Minority Ethnic Student Degree Retention and Attainment. York, HEA.


