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The Learning and
Teaching Institute



Blended Learning
in Practice

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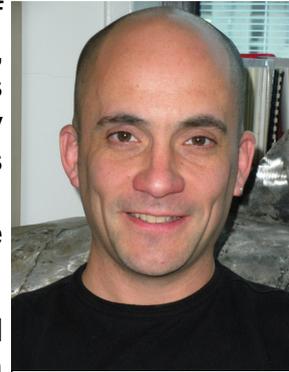
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Welcome to the October 2013 edition of the University of Hertfordshire Learning and Teaching Institute e-journal, *Blended Learning in Practice*. The publication of this edition has been timed to coincide with Black History Month (October 2013) and our papers and articles therefore appropriately focus on the Black, Minority, Ethnic (BME) attainment gap, which is a major issue currently facing the Higher Education sector.



Phil Porter

In our first research paper, Sharon Maxwell-Magnus and Helen Barefoot consider the BME attainment gap with reference to an undergraduate Journalism module. A key factor thought to be at least partially responsible, is the extent of extra curricular and work experience activities. Sharon and Helen then go on to consider the importance of inter-cultural activities within the classroom as an aid to enhancing inclusivity for all.

Helen Barefoot then presents our regular 'how to do it' feature and provides a series of quick and easy 'top tips' to help you enhance classroom inclusivity, with a goal of helping to address the BME attainment gap.

Rita D'alton-Harrison then previews current research into the BME attainment gap and suggests practical institutional strategies that may help address it. Rita highlights the importance of Universities both accepting the extent of any "unconscious bias" and understanding the importance of constructive dialogue with all students in order to intervene successfully in pursuit of closing the attainment gap.

Finally, in our regular 'student voice' section, University of Hertfordshire student Jadaine Wright considers her personal experience as a BME student studying in the UK.

I hope that you enjoy this BME themed edition of *Blended Learning in Practice* which also marks my last contribution as Editor. I am delighted that this innovative journal has been such a success since its inception in 2009 and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people, staff and students, who I have had the pleasure of working with over the past 4 years. I hope that the journal continues to flourish and I wish the new editor the very best for an enjoyable and successful tenure at the helm!

Dr Philip Porter

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Along with being the editor of *Blended Learning in Practice*, Phil Porter is a Senior Lecturer in Physical Geography at the University of Hertfordshire in the School of Life and Medical Sciences and has been active in glaciological research since 1993. After completing a PhD (Leeds) in borehole instrumentation of fast flowing glaciers, Phil took up lectureships at Manchester and Leeds and joined the University of Hertfordshire in 2003. His current research interests concern the response of the cryosphere to environmental change. Phil is also a LTI teacher taking a lead on 'research informed teaching' and is currently working with undergraduate students to film and edit a series of reusable learning objects (RLOs) that will help students and educators in the earth and environmental sciences teach specific field skills. The 'under construction' website that hosts these RLOs can be viewed at: <http://sarahnolan15.wix.com/fieldworkforstudents#!video-menu/cupt>



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Helen Barefoot graduated from the University of Hertfordshire in 1998 and went on to complete a PhD at Cambridge University. She returned to Hertfordshire in 2001 as a lecturer in human physiology, specialising in the teaching of Neuroscience. Helen is currently the Deputy Head of the Learning and Teaching Institute (LTI) and continues to teach Neuroscience within the School of Life and Medical Sciences. Helen leads the continuing professional development (CPD) programme for academic staff and her current research interests focus on learning, teaching and assessment activities which enhance the student learning experience.

Contributor Profiles

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Sharon Maxwell Magnus is a Senior Lecturer in Journalism and Employability Tutor for Humanities at the University of Hertfordshire. She recently won a Dean's Award for Excellence in Learning and Teaching and has an MA in Education from the University of Hertfordshire. Her first degree was from Christ Church, Oxford.

Her professional background is in journalism, particularly within features. She has won several national awards for her articles on women's health and equality issues, particularly in the workplace.

Her first job was on Cosmopolitan magazine, followed by senior roles on several other consumer and customer magazines, with clients including Tesco and Dixons. She has also written for most national newspapers, including The Guardian and The Times. She is a founding member of Women in Journalism .



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Rita D'Alton-Harrison is a Senior Lecturer within the University of Hertfordshire Law School and has worked in this role since 2001. She teaches the laws of tort and evidence to undergraduate students and the practice fields of civil and criminal litigation, personal injury and medical negligence to postgraduate students. Prior to her appointment to the University of Hertfordshire in 2001, Rita worked in private practice as a Solicitor, advising in the field of commercial litigation, personal injury and medical negligence. Rita was seconded to the University of Hertfordshire Learning and Teaching Institute as a Subject Adviser in 2013 and has also worked for the Solicitors' Regulation Authority as an External Examiner since 2009.

Reflections and actions following consideration of the attainment gap between Black and White student performance on a journalism course

Sharon Maxwell-Magnus and Helen Barefoot

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Abstract

Despite the proportion of black and minority ethnic (BME) people entering education being higher than the proportion of BME individuals within the overall UK population, the proportion of BME students achieving first or upper second class degrees is lower than that of white students (attainment gap of 18.6%). The biggest attainment gap is between White and Black students (29.8%). Within a journalism course at the University of Hertfordshire the performance of black and mixed race students was considered in relation to that of white students. An attainment gap was noted, however further investigation of the data indicated that black/mixed race international students out performed black/mixed race home students and also outperformed white students. Consideration of the differences in performance suggested the importance of extra curricula activities and journalism work experience opportunities which were accessed by black international students but not as well accessed by black home students due to time pressures faced by home students including long hours of paid part time work and commuting time. Awareness of the issues stimulated some of the teaching staff to investigate, and promote, paid diversity schemes to enable BME students to gain work experience in journalism enhancing their degree performance in addition to improving their employment prospects. The teaching team also reflected on their curricula and stimulated positive activity within the classroom; the inclusion of assessments and course content directly associated with race has increased student awareness, and the facilitation of discussion of difficult topics within the classroom has reinforced to students

the benefits of learning from people with different ethnicities, cultures and backgrounds from one's own.

Introduction

The proportion of UK domiciled black and minority ethnic (BME) people entering higher education in the UK has steadily increased from 14.9% in 2003/04 to 18.1% in 2009/10 (Blandford *et al.*, 2011). This is greater than the overall UK population for BME individuals, who were identified as comprising 8% of the population in the 2001 census. However, it has been reported for a number of years that the proportion of BME students who achieve a 'good' degree (i.e. first class honours or upper second class honours) is lower than the proportion of white students attaining good degrees (figure 1) (Blandford *et al.*, 2011). In 2010, 67.9% of white students achieved a good degree, yet only 49.3% of BME students achieved a good degree; an attainment gap of 18.6%. As can be seen in figure 1, the attainment gap has been recorded for a number of years with little variation in performance. When considering different ethnic groups, black students underperform compared to all other groups and the largest attainment gap is seen between white and black students (29.8% in 2010) (Blandford *et al.*, 2011). As the gap is largest between white and black students, this study focuses on black (and mixed race) student performance in comparison to white student performance.

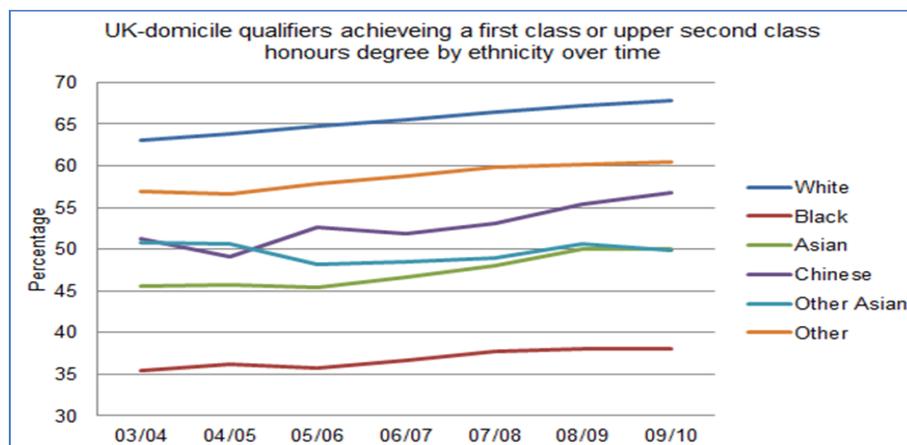


Figure 1. Performance of UK domiciled students according to ethnicity, over time (adapted from Blandford *et al.*, 2011).

Background to the Study

Given the national data associated with degree differentials, it was decided to examine the degree achievements of three cohorts of black and mixed race students (between the academic years of 2007-10) on an undergraduate journalism course within the university to see if the national findings were mirrored within the course and, if so, to look at national literature to examine what factors might be contributory to this situation.

The portfolio module was chosen because it involved individual tutorials with the teaching team, ensuring good rapport with all students, and as the final module of the course, it provided a good indication of summative achievement over the three years. A total of 146 students took this module, 14% of whom were black or mixed race. This represents a higher proportion of the population than the 2% of the UK population who were identified as black or mixed race by the UK census in 2001. In terms of recruitment, black students are well represented on the journalism course.

Over the three year period, 52% of black or mixed race students received grades of 2:1 or above which is better than the national performance of black students. According to the Equality Challenge Unit's annual statistic report (Blandford *et al.*, 2011) an average of 38% of black students achieved a good degree. Over the same period, the average proportion of white students achieving a good degree was 67%.

Year	Black	White
07	36.7	65.5
08	37.7	66.4
09	38.1	67.2
10	38.1	67.9

Table 1. National data showing the proportion of black and white students achieving a first or upper second class degree (Blandford *et al.*, 2011).

However, when the portfolio information was analysed more closely, a paradox emerged. While UK black/mixed race students did slightly worse than white students, (there were no EU black/mixed race students on the course) black/mixed race international students performed much better than any other group, including white home students and students of all other ethnicities. In the years surveyed 71% of black/mixed race international students received a 2:1 or above; higher than the national average for any group. It should be noted that the sample size is very small so it is important to be cautious when considering the data. However, the journalism result is in line with University data which showed that international black students significantly outperformed black home/EU students in terms of good degrees (Haddleton, pers. comm., 2010).

The 2010 National Union of Students report 'Race for Equality', which surveyed over 900 black students Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE), investigated factors which may contribute to the attainment gap. As well as considering topics such as academic support and institutional environments, central to the discussion was the importance of equal treatment from teachers and tutors and the importance of inclusive teaching and learning environments. Although the majority of responders were positive about their teaching and learning environment, a significant minority viewed it negatively and indicated that the environments were cliquey, isolating or hostile and reported feelings of being left out of discussions or debates within the classroom (National Union of Students, 2010). Even more concerning was that 7% of responders described their teaching and learning environment as 'racist' (National Union of Students, 2010). Even concerning was that 7% of responders described their teaching and learning environment as 'racist' (National Union of Students, 2010).

The lack of evidence of a widespread pattern of under-achievement amongst black students (i.e. the very good performance of international black students) on the journalism course at the University was somewhat reassuring, as on the basis of this finding, it would be reasonable to assume an absence of explicit racism.

However, there is a body of academic thought which suggests that everyone is to some extent racist as a result of both experience and personal bias. This theory is

put forward, for instance, by authors such as Crenshaw *et al.*, (1995) in their book 'Critical Race Theory: The key writings that formed a movement'. The small evaluation carried out within the journalism course suggests that any unconscious biases of staff members did not have an obvious impact on black student performance as evidenced by the very good performance of international black students. However, it is pertinent to investigate what might account for the achievement gap between black home and black international students as well as the gap between white and black students.

Examining possible contributory factors to the achievement gap

One theory of black under-achievement at university is that black students traditionally enter with a poorer level of educational qualification and academic history behind them. This is supported by the data from the Higher Education Funding Council for England report (Gittoes, 2010):

"Of students with known entry qualifications, a lower proportion of black students entered [university] with A-levels compared to entrants from other ethnic groups: 81 per cent for young students and 10 per cent for mature students."

The educational disadvantages endured by black students before they arrive at university are also given as a reason for under-achievement at University by Connor *et al.*, (2003) in their report for the Department of Education and Skills.

"The key entry factors affecting degree outcomes in general are entry qualifications and prior education and, as these vary considerably between ethnic groups, they help explain much of the observable differences in degree outcomes."

If home black students are often entering university with poorer prior educational achievement than international black students and white home students, it is likely that there will be some residual disadvantage.

In his book, 'Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy?' David Gillborn (2008) argues that the education system is essentially racist in focus as well as in terms of inherent assumptions by white teachers about black students. If this is so, it would account for why some black home students enter UK universities with

lower qualifications and would also explain why international students who come from predominantly black countries are not impeded by past experience and education in the same way.

However, Broecke and Nicholls' (2007) report demonstrated that even after controlling for the main factors one might expect to impact attainment, such as prior entry qualifications, type of prior institution, parental attributes and language, there still remains a statistically significant gap in attainment between white and black students. Prior higher educational achievement may be a contributing factor as to why black International students do better than both white and black home students; however, there may be other factors which contribute to the difference.

Campus advantage?

Black international students cannot live at home since, as in most cases, they have come from overseas. Conversations with black international students on the journalism course revealed that most took advantage of the offer to live in University residential halls during their first year of study and then subsequently chose to live close to the university in private accommodation. This may explain why, in general, they tended to participate to a greater extent in extra-curricular activities related to journalism than home black students did. For example, attendance by international black students at a symposium with journalism students from the United States of America, and at a talk by former University of Hertfordshire graduates, was better than the attendance of black home students. (30% of attendees were black international students, whereas only 10% of attendees were black home students).

When considering black home students, research shows that black home students are less likely to live on campus than white students. The Higher Education Funding Council for England on Student Ethnicity, found that 61% of white home first year students lived in halls of residence as opposed to only 41% of black home students. (Gittoes, 2010).

Living at home, *per se*, may not affect university performance, but if one student is commuting an hour each way every day and the other is able to spend those two

hours either studying or attending an extra-curricular activity he/she is likely to benefit from that time. When discussing travel with students, all those who commuted indicated difficulties such as buses and trains being delayed or cancelled. Challenges in terms of travel may result in students living at home being less willing to attend after hours activities, whatever their ethnicity.

The work gap

Another potential factor in the disparity between the achievement of black home students and black international students may be the impact of high levels of part time work carried out by black home students. Black students spend longer in paid jobs than white students, or indeed any other ethnic minority (Connor *et al.*, 2003).

Andrews and Wilding (2004) argue that financial concerns have a greater impact on academic performance than other events (e.g. relationship breakdowns). EU legislation stipulates that students from outside the EU can only work up to a maximum of ten hours a week in term time (Kelly, 2010) yet there is no legislative maximum for home students, so the impact of long working hours on student performance is likely to be greater for home students. Connor *et al.*, (2003) suggest that black full-time home students have the longest working week on average (over 45 hours), and spend the most time in paid work (13 hours) compared with students from other ethnicities. Some home black students may therefore be spending almost 30% of their working week in paid employment which may impact upon academic performance.

The Survey of Higher Education Students' Attitude to Debt and Term-Time Working and Their Impact on Attainment (2005) found that 40% of students with term time jobs had missed lectures because of their jobs, with over a third missing them occasionally and 29% missing seminars occasionally. Overall the report noted that not working in term time produced a positive outcome, particularly in the third year, while working was associated with lower attainment.

Evidence from the University of Hertfordshire journalism course supports the findings from Connor *et al.*, (2003), with most black home students needing to work in term-time for financial reasons. A consequence of the long working hours is the

lack of time to undertake relevant journalistic work experience/campus journalism. It was evident on the journalism course that the uptake of journalistic work experience was much lower for black/mixed race home students than it was for white and international students. 71% of black international students reported having journalistic/campus journalism experience either here, or in their home country, yet only 31% of black home students self-reported this. However, the black home students who did have relevant work experience in journalism scored an upper second class mark or above. It therefore seems that relevant work experience improves degree attainment irrespective of ethnicity or fee status (i.e. home or international).

This may be particularly relevant to the University of Hertfordshire journalism course since the syllabus is based on acquiring vocationally relevant skills, and assignments are therefore strongly orientated towards producing professional quality articles for a variety of media. Those students who undertake journalism work experience generally gain the opportunity to produce work similar to assignments with the added benefit of a professional evaluation and possible publication.

In order to tackle this discrepancy and lack of opportunity for black home students, one could consider redesigning journalism assessments to make them less practical and more theoretical. This could have the required effect of ensuring more parity between those who undertake relevant work experience and campus journalism and those who don't. However, if this approach was adopted, it's likely that all students would be less employable within the field of journalism due to the lack of practical experience of writing for a variety of markets. They would not have a portfolio of journalism articles and hence would not have relevant pieces to send and sell to employers. This would, in turn be likely to make those students who hadn't done any work experience even less employable. Milburn's recent report (2012) again stressed the importance of journalism work experience in gaining jobs within the profession.

Rather than changing a curriculum to arguably make it worse, another option is to continue to stress the importance of work experience and to facilitate work experience opportunities within the journalism course particularly for those students who

have to undertake paid part time work in order to support their studies. It is hoped that introducing such work would benefit black home students who are more likely to work part time as previous evidence has shown. This has just been undertaken with the introduction in 2012 of a level six module featuring work experience for journalism students in an environment such as a newspaper or magazine, where they can utilise their journalism skills.

In order to specifically support black home students, paid work experience opportunities have been promoted. Diversity schemes which offer paid work experience, specifically for black candidates in journalism, such as the Pearson's diversity summer internship scheme, The George Viner Fund Journalism Bursaries and Channel 4's diversity fund enable black home/EU students to work less hours in part time jobs as they are paid for their journalism. Such diversity schemes are an example of positive action (Equality Act, 2010) in that they are open to students on the basis of particular ethnicities and disabilities. This could be seen either as "social justice or unfair preference" (Mosley and Capaldi, 2006) in that selecting someone on the basis of that they are black could be viewed either as an attempt to reverse centuries of discrimination or as merely substituting discrimination against one skin colour by discrimination against another. However, given that there are only between 10-20 black journalists on UK national newspapers out of a workforce of 3,000; only 15 out of 7,000 on regional newspapers (Ainley, 1998) and that all national newspaper editors are white as are all the national newspaper political editors (Gribbin, 2012), black journalists are severely under-represented in the media. Giving paid bursaries to students who might otherwise not be able to afford to do work experience could be a step to helping better representation of individuals from ethnic minorities in the media, and therefore a justified positive action.

Course content

In addition to promoting diversity work experience schemes, the teaching materials within the journalism module have also been critically reviewed to improve the representation of articles by black authors and the increased consideration of topics related to race (Bok, 2010). The number of positive interviews and features

about black people has been increased and the Voice newspaper is studied as an example of a successful media product. (The Voice newspaper, which was founded in 1982, aims to serve Britain's black community and focuses on news of specific interest to this community).

Managing the classroom to facilitate multicultural learning has also been a key development within the module. Gurin *et al.*, (2002) argue that students who had a more diverse university experience did better in terms of maturity of thinking in the senior year of study. It was noted within the portfolio module, and other modules, that students generally chose to sit next to people they already knew. Allocating students to mixed groups for particular projects had previously shown limited success, with many students opting to go back to their friendship groups as soon as the formal exercise was complete.

In order to facilitate more inclusive group work and enable students to learn from students of other ethnicities and cultures, a tutorial session was held where the findings of Gurin *et al.*, (2002) were discussed. Students were asked to consider the conclusions of the paper (i.e. that students who worked in diverse environments tended to do better academically than those who worked in mono-cultural ones) and were asked to reflect on why they thought this was. Taking time to share the findings of the paper enabled discussion of the benefits of managing group allocation including a greater opportunity to experience diversity which in turn improved academic ability. Students were asked to reflect upon why sitting next to people who were different from themselves should enhance academic performance and to share their opinions with the group. Most students agreed that hearing different perspectives encouraged a more open-minded approach that would increase their critical thinking. Indeed, the fact that diversity could be of benefit to the individual student, rather than a chore imposed by the tutor, facilitated inclusive and more productive group work. This was evidenced by the enhanced level of critical discussion within groups and the engagement and involvement of students within the discussions.

Developing interview skills is of crucial importance for practical journalism and most modules feature at least one assignment based on an interview or material

sourced through interviewing. Introducing challenging topics for first and second year journalism students as part of their interview practice has also enabled improved understanding of other peoples' cultures and backgrounds. In previous years, students were able to choose a current affair topic with subjects such as money, drugs and alcohol being chosen. Now topics are more restricted within the interview component, and students are encouraged to explore one of the following areas: race and racism, religion, attitudes to homosexuality, attitudes to women and attitudes to disability. This allows for student and tutor discussion of these sensitive topics and the exploration of student attitudes towards them.

In particular, the opportunity for students to discuss race enabled not only the consideration of crude and obvious acts of racism, but consideration of the more subtle operations of power and behaviours which may disadvantage one or more ethnic minorities (Gilborn, 2008).

The National Union of Students' survey (2010) of black home and international students stated that 33.4% of black students felt unable to bring their perspective as a black student to lectures and tutor group meetings. One black student stated: "I tend not to share my views because I feel it is the voice of the minority and no-one will want to hear it." It is hoped that by providing black students on the University of Hertfordshire journalism course with the opportunity to discuss areas such as race and discrimination within seminars and through interview practice, we may enable a more open culture and feeling of empowerment in seminars. Discussing these issues more overtly in class should encourage free and open debate, particularly in relation to how journalists treat such issues and how difficult interviews can be handled.

Conclusions

In summary, considering the performance of students on a journalism course at the University of Hertfordshire has stimulated positive activity both within the classroom and beyond. The promotion of diversity schemes for paid internships will provide an opportunity for black home students to take up journalism work experience opportunities, with the potential to enhance both their academic

performance and employment prospects. Anecdotal evidence suggests that facilitating the discussion of difficult topics within the classroom has increased student awareness of race and the benefits of learning from people with different ethnicities, cultures and backgrounds from one's own.

It is too early to know if these subtle changes will result in greater academic achievement for black students but it is hoped that having an awareness that these issues do exist, and a willingness to tackle them, will create a learning environment that will enable all students to achieve their full potential

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Top 10 Tips to support BME student success

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Learn student names

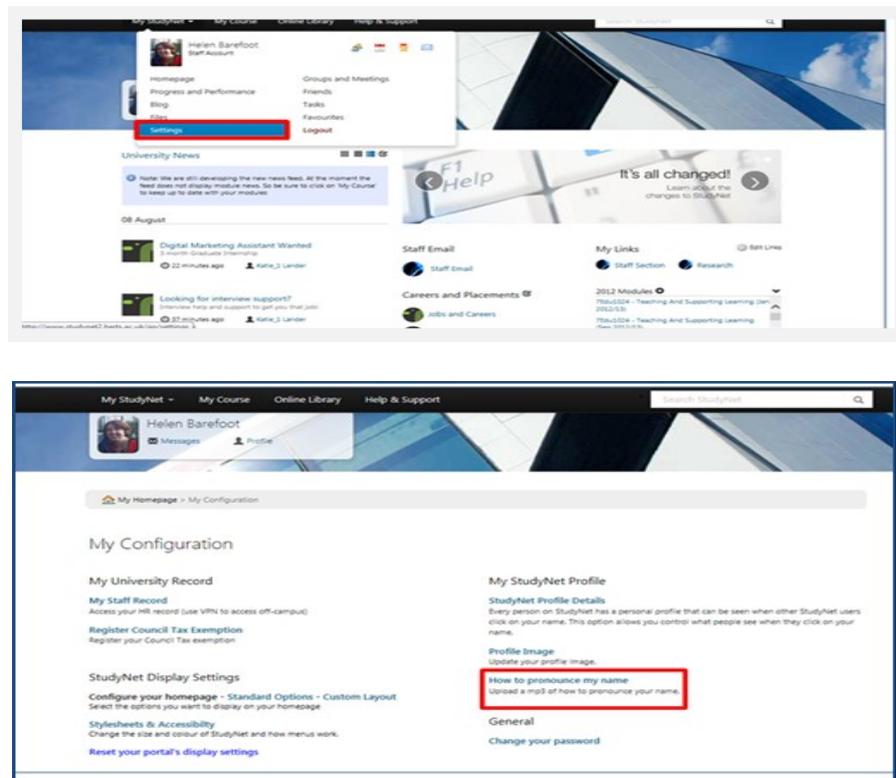
If we take the time to learn student names it can make a huge difference to how students feel during their University experience. Calling students by their names demonstrates that they are known as individuals and that they are being supported through their studies. Being confident with students' names is particularly beneficial in class, as staff members can call on individuals in an inclusive way to answer a question or to thank an individual for their contribution. Asking students to fold an A4 piece of paper into three and writing their name on so that it can be seen by the member of staff is an incredibly simple way to help us learn, and use, names in each session.

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Remembering names

- USE CUES
- Repeat, Repeat, Repeat
- Association
- **Pictures**
- Mnemonic
- Sketch the room

Depending on our background and culture, some names will be more difficult to pronounce and remember than others. Making efforts to learn how to pronounce names is important and having student photos and names visible by your desk will provide a regular reminder of who students are. Virtual learning environments may also have the option to enable staff and students to upload a podcast or videoclip to introduce themselves. Encouraging students to do this will benefit you and fellow students as everyone will be able to listen to the podcast or videoclip to hear how to pronounce the name and learn a little bit about the individual.



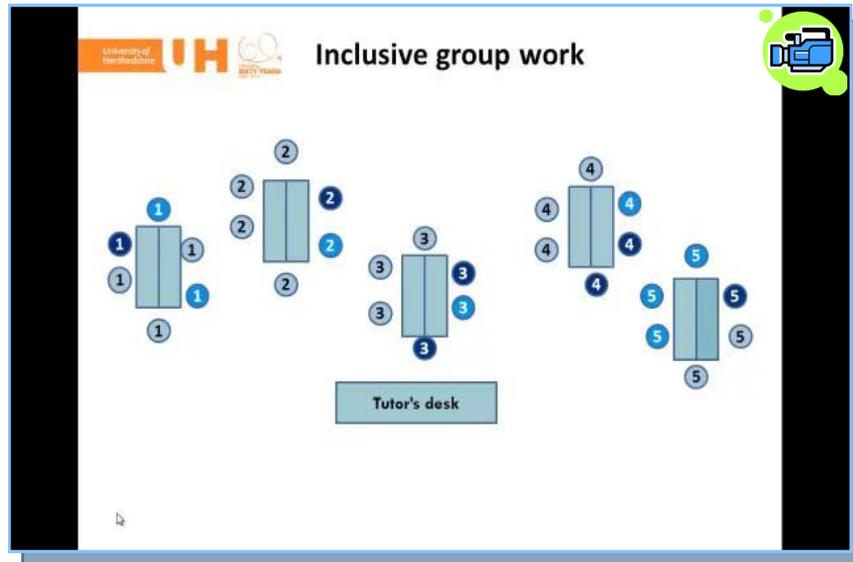
2. Invite participation from all students verbally and through body language

Being clear at the beginning of classes that you expect contributions from everyone is important. Setting 'ground rules' or defining high expectations ensures that everyone understands how the class will run. However, some students will feel less comfortable contributing than others so encouraging individuals by using their names and through regular eye contact will help them feel supported. Being aware of having open body language and moving around the class will also encourage contributions.

3. Manage student groups

Managing group work will help students to recognise the benefits of learning from students from different backgrounds, cultures and experiences. Using techniques to put students into groups for class activities or group assessments can be time consuming and may require the movement of furniture, but the benefits far outweigh the inconvenience. Plan initial short exercises to enable students to get to know the other members of the group (e.g. an initial activity in a pair, followed by a very short activity for three people on the table and then an activity for the whole group) and discuss the challenges of group work and how to manage difficulties. For example

it is useful to share Tuckman's model (1965) of group dynamics and discuss with students how the group is going to manage if individuals don't contribute or certain members are over dominant.



4. Facilitate discussion with students regarding how working with people of diverse backgrounds enriches their own learning

It is important to share with students why you are asking them to work beyond friendship groups and to share the benefits they will gain from working with people with difference backgrounds and experiences. If students always work together within friendship groups, there is a risk that cliques will form and some students will become isolated. Working with the same individuals will also limit creativity and inhibit the development of different ideas and perspectives.

Gurin *et al.*, (2002) argue that students who had a more diverse university experience did better in terms of maturity of thinking in their senior year of study. Sharing the findings of research which demonstrates the academic benefits of cross cultural learning and making links to graduate attributes such as respect others, empathy, self awareness and cultural awareness will help students to recognise the long term benefit of working with, and learning from others.



5. Assess your own racial or cultural biases

We all have unconscious biases/preferences for certain individuals or groups. These are innate and hardwired preferences resulting from processes of socialisation and social categorisation. We can identify three types of bias:

Affinity (like me) bias; favours people like us

Confirmatory bias; searching for information that confirm our existing perceptions

Social comparison bias; developing a sense of individual and group identity – a need to see ourselves as better than other groups (Robertson, 2013).

Understanding how our experiences, values, beliefs and stereotypes inform the way we interact with individuals whose racial background differs from our own will help us to be more inclusive in teaching. We can test our own biases through Implicit Association Tasks which help us to surface unconscious biases and thus can inform how we interact with individuals; <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

6. Review and develop our teaching materials

How representative are our teaching materials? How do all our students experience the syllabus? Our courses may have a Western/Euro centric focus yet including references from scholars of Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) backgrounds and using BME case studies will ensure more inclusive curricula and will enable students to explore different racial and cultural perspectives.

7. Consider opportunities for students to be inspired by BME role models

Inviting guest lecturers and/or alumni from BME backgrounds who have been successful in their chosen career can be very inspiring for all students and particularly for those students who identify with the individuals and may have a shared background or similar experience. Alternatively, or in addition to inviting guests, you could consider using relevant video clips or podcast interviews of inspiring individuals.



Figure 1. Ramachandran (2007) discussing the Brain within a TED talk

8. Model appropriate language and behaviour

Understanding our own unconscious biases will hopefully ensure that our behaviours are inclusive and that our language is non-discriminatory. As well as modelling appropriate behaviours it is essential that we gain confidence in addressing any racist or discriminatory behaviour that we witness. Don't let potentially harmful behaviour go unaddressed. If we do, our students may take our silence as an unofficial endorsement. Guidance on managing challenging situations in racially diverse classrooms is available from the [Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University](#).

9. Whenever possible, use anonymous marking

Anonymous marking ensures that any unconscious biases we may have do not impact on the marks of an individual. If we don't know whose work it is, we can't make any assumptions about the individual or the work. Marking anonymously also eliminates any perceptions of unfair marking and reassures students regarding the fairness of the marking process.

However, there are limitations to anonymous marking including the lack of opportunity to provide personalised feedback and the reduction in support and development that staff members may provide through the assessment process. Staff may therefore like to consider options such as non-anonymous formative work but anonymous summative submission, or marking the work anonymously and releasing the score and then writing personalised feedback once the work has been non-anonymised.



Figure 2. The National Union of Students' campaign for anonymous marking



10. Use informal and formal mechanisms to capture feedback from all students

In order to meet the needs of our students we must understand the demographics of our student body and make efforts to gain feedback from all students and not just those from certain backgrounds. How representative are our students reps? Do we encourage students from different backgrounds to become student reps and do we help student reps to develop mechanisms to gain feedback from all students on the course? As well as formal feedback mechanisms such as module questionnaires and National student surveys, we need to create opportunities for all students to provide informal feedback. Getting to know our students and creating supportive and inclusive learning environments will enable students to feel comfortable to speak to us and let us know when something is going well or if something needs to change.

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Awakening the unconscious: Mind the attainment gap

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Abstract

This discussion paper summarises recent UK research into the attainment gap between UK domiciled white students and those from other ethnicities who are also domiciled in the UK. The paper discusses how universities might adopt a student-centred approach to their intervention strategies to close the attainment gap. Domicile is defined as the student's permanent or home address prior to entering higher education. 'Attainment' refers to the student's level of success in assessments leading to the award of a degree. The 'attainment gap' is the difference between the numbers of white UK students achieving a first-class or upper second class degree as measured against UK students from other ethnicities. This paper argues that in order to assist in addressing the attainment gap, universities must first acknowledge the existence of so-called 'unconscious bias', a preference or affinity towards certain types of people or groups and then put in place appropriate attitude-changing interventions. Secondly, it is suggested that the implementation of an ongoing, open dialogue between students and staff may offer a powerful means of understanding the student perception of issues that may be affecting their educational attainment and in doing so, allow the institution to formulate and implement effective intervention strategies.

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it." (Harper Lee, 1960/2010)

Introduction

Education is a partnership between students and educators and therefore poor student performance is of importance to all higher education institutions and more so when statistics suggest that a particular group or groups are consistently under-performing.

In the UK, the Report of the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, 2012) reveals that there is a gap in the academic achievement of UK domiciled white undergraduate students as compared to those undergraduate students from other ethnic backgrounds who are also domiciled in the UK.

For the purposes of this paper, the widely adopted terms Black Minority Ethnic (BME), Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) or Minority Ethnic (ME) are used. All terms are based on the 2001 census classification system for white, black, Asian, Chinese, mixed and other ethnic groups. The term 'minority ethnic' is also used, with the caveat that it is recognised that each of the three widely used terms have limitations, as they assume that students from an ethnic background are a homogenous rather than a heterogeneous group. It should also be noted that the 2011 census classifications have introduced new minority groups of 'gypsy/Irish Traveller' and 'Arab'.

The attainment gap is particularly noticeable when comparing the percentage of first class or upper second class degrees awarded to white and minority ethnic students. For example, if we consider the black student population only, then relative to white students in the academic year 2003/04 the attainment gap was 27.6% based on 63.1% of white students achieving a first or upper second degree as compared to 35.5% black students achieving at the same level. This gap widened to 29% in 2005/06 and by 2009/10 was 29.8%. If we then consider other ethnicities there was a 17.9% gap between White and Asian students in 2009/10 and an 11.1% gap between white and Chinese students in the same year (ECU, 2011). By the academic year 2010/11 the attainment gap had reduced slightly for all the main ethnic groups. The attainment gap between white and black students had decreased slightly from 29.8% to 28.8%, the difference in (achievement between

white and Asian students was down from 17.9% to 17.4% and between white and Chinese students the reduction was from 11.1% to 10.8% (ECU, 2012). The attainment gap remains the widest between white and black students which is why the focus remains on black students, as demonstrated by the use of the terms Black Minority Ethnic (BME) and Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME). The national statistics also show that the number of minority ethnic students in higher education increased from 14.9% in 2003/04 (when statistics were first compiled) to 18.4% by 2010/11 with the greatest increase being amongst black students. However, it was also demonstrated that black students were the most likely to leave their studies before completion (Connor *et al.*, 2003). Prior entry qualifications are stated as being the factor for non-continuation. Earlier research of black leavers suggested that financial difficulties, dissatisfaction with staff support and difficulties forming relationships with others were the main factors for early leaving (Yorke, 1999).

It could be argued that that the difference in attainment might be explained by the fact that the proportion of the non-white UK population is relatively small (7.5% of Asian origin and 3.3% of black origin and 0.7% of Chinese origin, ONS, 2011). However, the ECU national equality data focuses on the number of students from the population going into higher education and makes adjustments for the differences in those numbers between ethnicities before arriving at percentages.

Similar trends have been found outside the UK. For example, Wolff and Pasztor (2010) and Zorlu (2013) looked at the Higher Education system in the Netherlands and concluded that there was low performance in ethnic minority students (largely students of Mediterranean and Caribbean origin) and Strayhorn (2010) writing from an American higher education perspective, argued that minority ethnic groups were less likely to have the necessary relationships or networks that would produce successful outcomes for them (known as 'social capital').

Why the Difference?

There is no simple explanation for the attainment gap. As noted by the UK National Union of Students' Black Students' Campaign and their Race for Equality

report (NUS, 2011), the issues are complex with a range of possible external factors. This is borne out by Broecke and Nicholls in their study for the DfES Skills Research Report RW92 'Ethnicity and Degree Attainment.' They found that even allowing for factors impacting on attainment (such as prior attainment, gender, age, subject of study, deprivation and type of higher education institution) minority ethnic students were still statistically less likely to perform as well as their white counterparts. This excluded 'black other', 'mixed' and 'other groups' in the analysis due to the small numbers involved (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007). They were unable to find conclusive reasons for the difference in attainment, but did find that prior attainment at level 3 (secondary school) had a significant impact on degree attainment.

This is not to say that prior attainment is the main factor operating on the attainment gap between all the minority ethnic groups. A survey of British minority ethnic students in England and Wales (Cousins et al, 2008) found that their perception of the reasons behind degree variation differed from previous research with the need to work being the common factor cited (83.9%) with mode of study receiving the lowest score at (34.6%). Prior attainment was not given as a reason, but students felt that marginalisation of minority ethnic people generally also explained the variation (56.4%).

Fielding *et al.*, (2008) considered the Broecke and Nicholls data and, using statistical modelling, found that there were external factors that impacted on lower degree achievement in minority ethnic groups as compared to white groups such as:

1. Lower entry qualifications. Although this varies across programmes, generally the gap narrows as the level of qualifications increases and for very high achievers reverses.
2. Age. Mature minority ethnic students' performance can in some circumstances be worse than younger minority ethnic students and the gap is largest for Bangladeshi students followed by Chinese students.
3. Gender. Black females outperform black males.

4. Number of minority ethnic students at an institution. Minority ethnic students perform better at institutions with low minority ethnic student numbers.

5. Living at home. Asian students had a greater statistical advantage by living at home than any of the other minority ethnic groups.

Interestingly the analysis by Fielding *et al.* found that socio-economic background only had a small (but statistically significant) impact and could sometimes produce a reverse effect, leading to high achievement in the main minority ethnic groups (except for the Bangladeshi and Chinese groups). Again no explanations were given for these differences.

Unconscious Bias

Attempts to find factors that would wholly account for low performance in a single group and then applying those factors to every member of that group is an example of what has been termed unconscious bias. This is part of what social psychologists call 'social categorisation' (Tajfel, 1974). By analysing particular groups, humans have a tendency to make assumptions about the behaviour of that group. An affinity towards certain people rather than others can lead to the dismissal or rejection of other groups or individuals. This bias does not have to be as obvious as skin colour and can include assigning negative characteristics to a particular group. Social psychologists further argue that humans consider their own behaviour in light of the circumstances and situations they face at the time, but when they observe the behaviour of others they make judgements that do not stem from the same degree of knowledge. This actor/observer bias (Jones and Nisbett, 1971) can lead to the behaviour observed being viewed in a negative light. In order to address the attainment gap. Whilst it is important for academics to understand possible causative factors that might explain the attainment gap, it is important not to blindly apply these causative factors to every individual minority ethnic student or group.

Numbers and Words

The collection of statistics is an important starting point for institutions in revealing

whether there is low performance in a particular group. However, it could also be argued that institutions can become preoccupied with the data to the point where they fail to move towards action planning. The ECU and HEA final report (Cousins *et al.*, 2008) recommended that enquiries into degree attainment should avoid negative perceptions and stigmatisation and avoid the 'deficit model' with regard to causation and close the loop between data collection, data analysis and action planning. Action planning might include, for example, attitude change for both staff and students, extra-curricular activities and peer mentoring aimed at supporting minority ethnic students and increasing confidence and self-belief to enable them to achieve.

Interventions to address the attainment gap may differ from programme to programme, module to module and from institution to institution because of the different make-up of the students undertaking a particular course. For example, the 2011/12 HESA statistics show that the percentage of ethnic minority students is highest in the non – SET (science education and technology) subjects of Law, Medicine and Dentistry followed by Computer Science and Business and Administrative Studies. By 2010/11 the attainment gap was more noticeable between UK white students studying non-SET subjects (70.4%) and UK black students studying those subjects (50.4%). Whereas in terms of geographical differences the ECU 2012 report reveals that the largest proportion of minority ethnic students are within Higher Education Institutions based in London (ECU, 2012) and that the number of minority ethnic students vary across the UK with 20.6% in England and only 2.1% in Northern Ireland (ECU, 2012).

Statistics can highlight the attainment gap but the students' narrative of their experiences can offer fresh insights to assist institutions in taking a proactive approach in tackling potential discrimination. By understanding the experiences of their students through talking to them and reflecting on what they reveal, institutions can then take action to put in place the right intervention. The conversation is likely to be best handled by talking to all students and including a good proportion of minority ethnic students and staff in the discussion. The conversation must be handled in a way that avoids labelling students as this could have the potential to

produce negative reactions from students who do not want to be associated with a group that has a negative statistical status. For example, it has been found that black African students do worse than other black students, Asian students do better than black students and Chinese students do best out of the three groups (Connor *et al.*, 2003). This appears to be borne out to some degree by the ECU's 2012 statistics and Fielding's statistical modelling. Yet not all students from these groups would agree that this represents their academic experiences but a student in one of these groups may feel the statistics are already stacked against them even before they begin their course because the statistics suggest, for example, that if you are a black African student you are likely to underperform as compared to white, Asian or Chinese students.

This can lead to a phenomenon that has become known as the "stereotype threat", a term first coined by Steele (Steele, 1997 and 2010) to signify stress induced by a sense of belonging to a group that is negatively stereotyped, which then produces characteristics and behaviour conforming to the stereotype (Aronson, 2002).

Interventions

Students must of course take responsibility for their own learning including their own achievement and it would be wrong to expect it to be a one-sided partnership but perhaps the partnership responsibility should rest more with the institution particularly if unconscious bias might exist. Indeed considering the analogous legal position in employment law, there is no requirement for the person subject to unconscious bias to prove it. All that is required is that they show a difference in treatment and a difference in race between themselves and those subjecting them to a particular treatment. It is then for the employer to explain why that different treatment was not a result of race as seen in cases such as *Francis v London Probation Trust* [2013] EqLR 299. In this case it was accepted that statistics supported the existence of a "glass ceiling" for minority ethnic staff in the probation service in that they had limited prospects for promotion. In the context of higher education, institutions should be in a position to show that their practices and

treatment of students are not the result of unconscious bias. Indeed the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 places a 'positive duty' on institutions to be proactive in tackling potential discrimination before it arises and promote good relations between persons of different racial groups and this is reinforced in the Equality Act 2010.

Action should focus on intervention at the earliest signs of difficulty by students and this should be for all students, regardless of ethnicity. However, induction processes could be tailored towards culturally sensitive and value affirming activities to help student transition into higher education. This is particularly pertinent because of the high numbers of minority ethnic students leaving university before completion of their course with black students being amongst statistically amongst those most likely to leave before completion (Connor *et al.*, 2003, ECU, 2012).

Singh, 2011 demonstrated that learning, teaching and assessment practices may contribute to the attainment gap. Introducing intervention and retention practises in conjunction with conversations with students may offer an opportunity to support minority ethnic students in a way that helps them to achieve their academic goals. For example, if conversations with students reveal that mature minority ethnic students are performing worst of all in a particular programme, because they say they have been out of education for some time, then there is a need to reflect and consider whether this can be addressed through academic skills support and pastoral care through, for example, a personal tutor system. If part-time minority ethnic students say they are not engaging with the programme then interventions might include a more blended learning approach or a flexible approach to learning. This is particularly important because the ECU report found that the highest proportion of part-time students studying at undergraduate or part-time level was amongst the black student population (ECU, 2012). If minority ethnic students are underperforming because they reveal through conversations with staff that they have a crisis of identity, consideration might be given to self-affirmation tasks in induction and repeated at key stress points such as prior to assessments or the end of the semester break and supporting this with regular personal tutor contact and mentoring Research has previously confirmed the importance of 'academic

behavioural confidence' with the introduction of the Academic Behavioural Confidence (ABC) scale, which is based on the ability of a student to perform specific skills in a classroom (Sander and Sanders, 2009). In addition student engagement and sense of belonging to an institution is seen as important in helping student progression (Read *et al.*; 2003, Reay *et al.*, 2010, Stuart, 2009).

Cohen and David (2013), conducted a longitudinal study of a mixed ethnicity middle school in the US, where value affirmation activities took place at the beginning of the school year, before tests and towards the end of the academic year. These had a significant impact on the achievement of Latino students who were previously underachieving. Small interventions can therefore make a significant impact. For example, a previous study (Cohen and Garcia, 2006) found that by asking African-American students in a middle-school to write end of term assignments explaining the values they cherished and why, this led to an improvement in their end of term grades by three tenths of a grade point closing the attainment gap by 40%.

Stevenson (2012) explored the extent to which minority ethnic student views about what they could be (career wise) influences and informs their academic help seeking strategies. She found that minority ethnic students' limited views of themselves (in terms of future success) might be restricting their academic ability to achieve. This is of particular interest, as it is clear that not all minority ethnic students are low performing students. Discussions around what strategies are adopted by high achieving minority ethnic students to help them reach their academic goals is also needed as much as understanding what prevents low achieving minority ethnic students asking for or getting support. Tailoring activities to a cultural group is important because different cultural groups respond differently to different activities. For example, Bhattacharyya *et al.*, (2003) found that study support worked more effectively with students from Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds. In Cohen and Sherman's study, the value affirming tasks had very little impact on white students but a big impact on Latino students. It also has to be appreciated that some minority ethnic students may be less willing to seek help, particularly if this is viewed as a sign of weakness or conforming to a tutor's expectations of

them linked to their social background. Intervention requires a careful balance of cultural awareness and student input. It is important that students are involved in the discussions about the intervention model that would best suit them.

Another key recommendation of the ECU and HEA final report (Cousins, 2008) was that institutions should “work with academic and subject communities to strengthen curriculum designs that engage with degree variation”. The University of Wolverhampton carried out internal qualitative research into the attainment gap and recommended initiatives such as staff using blogs to detail the measures taken to improve achievement within their subject that specifically mentioned what had worked well and what had not. They also recommended that course teams collaborate to produce a leaflet for students on what is expected of them and how they can achieve it and that course teams use team meetings to discuss differentials in grades between white and minority ethnic students (Dhanda, 2009).

The University of Hertfordshire’s Learning and Teaching Institute (LTI) has been working with academic teams to raise awareness of the national attainment gap.

The University’s Learning and Teaching Institute has developed ‘top ten tips’ for staff to support minority ethnic students and this includes the use of anonymous marking where possible, the use of minority ethnic role models through guest lecturers and alumni profiles and using positive minority ethnic references in case studies and teaching materials.

In response to the issue of retention of students, particularly ethnic minority students, various schools at the University have previously developed retention strategies which include, for example, student communication using Face book and Twitter to aid online mentoring and advice. Co-ordination by student support tutors to identify students who might need additional academic and writing skills takes place in some schools. Use of a traffic light system or behaviour measures by student support tutors and progression and achievement officers to identify students at risk of failing the module has also been trialled. The University is also working on ‘Dashboard’, a system that can record and release student grades as

assessments occur which will enable tutors to map and track student progression more effectively and enable students to be more aware of their own assessment performance. The University has set itself a target to reduce the attainment gap by 10% by the academic year 2013/14. In addition the Head of the university's Equality Unit has set up a 'task and finish' group to provide guidance and support to academic staff on retention and attainment.

Jacqueline Stevenson in her 2012 qualitative research conducted for the Higher Education Academy involved interviewed staff and students from 11 UK higher education institutions to look at the attainment gap. Stevenson recommended that attainment of minority ethnic students should be central to universities' core purpose of bringing about social change in communities and that this should be supported by written policies of each higher education institution (Stevenson, 2012). To understand the possible reasons why minority ethnic students may not be achieving to the same extent as their white counterparts, each higher education should consider conducting and publishing its own qualitative research on the attainment gap and identifying action planning following discussions with students. This would provide valuable information on what factors students themselves perceive as contributing to the attainment gap within their institution.

Conclusion

The partnership between students and educators lasts for a number of years and educators therefore have the opportunity to make a difference and perhaps undo some of the external factors that may account for the attainment gaps. A potentially effective tool to assist institutions here is to engage in a continuing conversation with students as part of the reflective practice of ensuring equality in education for all students. This continuing conversation may be difficult initially for students and the institution, but is essential. Whilst many educators may feel that they have gone to great lengths to provide an equitable education experience for all students, ensuring that this commitment remains as an ongoing process by putting in place appropriate attitude changing and affirmation interventions will ensure that the equality duty in legislation is met. Educational attainment is likely to be

influenced by a complex set of inter-related factors and linking attainment to one single factor such as socio-economic background, age or gender and attributing it to particular groups is unlikely to offer a holistic explanation of the attainment gap. What is needed is an institution specific approach based on the needs of its student population and that these needs are identified from open discourse with students.

If you would like to test your own unconscious bias try an Implicit Association Test (IAT) such as the Implicit Project test by Harvard University <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

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Student Voice

In our regular Student Voice section we hear from recently graduated student Jadaine Wright, about her experiences of studying in the UK as a BME student.

I am a bachelor of Human Biology with Spanish student who has recently graduated from the University of Hertfordshire with 1st class honours. Living abroad in Spain whilst working in a research laboratory between 2011 and 2012 gave me the opportunity to acquire native friends as well as learn more about the general culture and history of the country- greatly re-establishing my love for travel. Aside from travel I also enjoy reading novels from an array of authors as well as spending quality time with my large family. At the moment, although I hold a degree, I am still exploring job options which may lead me to pursue a definite career. As I have always been a focused and hardworking young lady, I have no doubts that the future holds a lot in store for me.



Jadaine Wright



What has been good about your experience as a student at the University of Hertfordshire?



As a BME student, did you experience any difficult or unpleasant experience ?



What do you think the University can do to enhance the degree performance of BME students ?



Having been sponsored to go on a leadership course by the University, what did you gain from the course and how do you think the course will help you in your future career?

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