



Exploring the retention and attainment of black and minority ethnic (BME) students on Social Policy pathways in higher education

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Introduction

Despite the widely acknowledged problems relating to BME student retention and attainment in higher education, information remains relatively sparse. This is particularly true in relation to data associated with the retention of BME students. As Singh (2011, p. 26) points out, this could be obtained under equality legislation 'theoretically', but remains stubbornly missing from the public domain. The attainment gap of black and minority ethnic (BME) students in higher education has been recognised as a significant concern for over a decade. Even when the majority of contributory factors are controlled for, being from a minority ethnic group exerts a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007). The persistence of this problem illustrates continuing inequality on the basis of student ethnicity.

This review was commissioned to explore the problem of retention and attainment of BME students on Social Policy programmes in the UK. The most pertinent fact to arise from this review is the paucity of evidence that exists relating directly to Social Policy programmes. While some evidence has been included from Social Work programmes, evidence from Social Policy departments has not been forthcoming. This is a concern as 12.6% of black students and 8.9% of Asian students choose to enrol onto social studies courses compared to 8.4% of white students (ECU, 2011). Given that the subject area attracts more BME students than white students and, in the face of the evidence that suggests an ongoing attainment gap exists between them, the issue of retention and attainment for this cohort needs to be addressed within the subject area.

This report is divided into two main sections. The first is a review of the literature available looking at the attainment of BME students. This is categorised into four themes as identified through the literature and including a Social Policy discipline perspective. The second section is a compilation of four case studies outlining approaches to BME retention on Social Policy programmes. The report concludes with areas for development arising from the review.

BME students and attainment – what is the problem?

The attainment gap of BME students has been reflected in higher education (HE) statistics since the late 1990s. This is not confined to the UK. Studies have found attainment differences between BME and white students in both the Netherlands (Severiens and Wolff, 2008, in Richardson, 2012a) and the US (Horn *et al.*, 2002, in Richardson, 2012a). However, it was in 2003 that commentary began to appear from academics quantifying the differences in 'good' degree attainment between BME and white students (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2003; Connor *et al.*, 2003). Richardson (2012a) describes a degree awarded at either first-class or upper second-class Honours as a 'good' degree (p. 18). Both Bhattacharyya *et al.* (2003) and Connor *et al.* (2003) agree that data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 1998-99 revealed a disparity in attainment to the extent that 53% of white graduates obtained a 'good' degree compared to less than 30% of black and 36% of Asian graduates. Connor *et al.* (2004) confirmed the ongoing trend in an analysis of 2001-02 HESA data, revealing that students from all minority ethnic groups (with the exception of small 'mixed' and 'other') were less than half as likely to obtain a good degree as their white counterparts. Broecke and Nicholls (2007) replicated this finding in an analysis of the 2004-05 HESA data and confirmed the attainment gap to be an ongoing disparity in higher education statistics. Work by Richardson (2008b) reviewed the reliability of these previous results and confirmed their veracity. Connor *et al.* (2004), however, report that the attainment gap does narrow when only first-class degrees are examined. While 11% of white students achieve a first-class degree, so did 9% of Chinese and 'mixed ethnic' groups. This finding, however, is refuted by Broecke and Nicholls (2007), who assert that the persistent underachieving of BME students is evident at all levels of attainment.

The latest available figures confirm once again that the attainment gap persists. A report by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, 2011) states that for the academic year 2009-10 66.5% of white students who were studying for a first degree were awarded a first or 2:1, compared to 49.2% of BME students. The figure for black students specifically was significantly dissimilar at 38.1%. The report goes on to state that the attainment

gap increased from 17.2% in 2003-04 to 18.8% in 2005-06 and currently sits at 18.6% for the academic year 2009-10 (p. 50). The highest attainment gap was noted between white and black students where it stands at 29.8% for 2009-10 (ECU, 2011). Although these figures show that attainment in HE generally has improved for all groups, the difference between black and white students obtaining a good degree has remained relatively unchanged in recent years.

Furthermore, the response to the problem has been largely incoherent and unco-ordinated within and across higher education institutions (HEIs). Willott and Stevenson (2007), in a survey of HEIs policies and schemes to address degree attainment, found that only a small number of schemes referred directly to ethnicity in relation to attainment. Furthermore, few had provided named staff with responsibility for the issue, developed specific objectives to improve the situation or been involved in projects that focused on degree attainment disparities of BME students. This is despite evidence from Berry and Loke (2011) that suggested that staff concerns regarding BME attainment in HE education could be allayed through provision of a named lead to take responsibility for the issue. Singh (2011) also reviews the evidence collected on responses to the attainment gap but finds a slightly more optimistic amount of activity, concluding that initiatives to address equality generally were evident in most HEIs. However, projects associated with tackling the BME attainment gap specifically were, by and large, lacking (see Willott and Stevenson, 2007). Singh (2011) illustrates the general lack of awareness of and scepticism towards equal opportunity policies per se. This is despite the fact that recommendations of action to address the BME attainment gap have been repeated across many studies (Willott and Stevenson, 2007; HEA/ECU, 2008).

However, Singh and Cousin (2009) warn that the picture is not as simplistic as the statistics and commentary make it appear. They imply that the largely reductionist approach to the problem is distorting the issue and is counterproductive for meaningful solutions. Specifically, they believe the categorisation of students' masks individual experiences and the focus on achievement distracts attention away from "institutional structures and pedagogical practices". This problem of categorisation is apparent also in the term 'BME' as an all-encompassing expression. As work by Dhanda (2010) demonstrates, within the BME category itself, differences between minority ethnic groups occur and without taking into account these differences, finding a solution will be haphazard at best and ineffective at worst. As Dhanda (2010) continues, work by Bhattacharyya *et al.* (2003) highlights the difference between effective solutions to poor attainment in black Caribbean and Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls. The former group responded encouragingly to mentor support, while the latter were positively impacted by structured study support. Similarly, Connor *et al.* (2004) found distinct differences within minority ethnic groups as to what affected their academic attainment. Among their findings they reported that while Indian students were less likely to be affected by part-time working they did experience difficulties with the academic level required in higher education. Meanwhile, Chinese and Asian students reported a lack of academic support as being a more significant problem, while Pakistani and Bangladeshi students felt, more than any other group, that they did not receive the encouragement they needed from lecturers. Overall, black Africans were more likely to have experienced problems than any of the other ethnic groups. Jacobs *et al.* (2007) uncovered differences also in learning styles between BME students and indicated that on all levels BME status did not indicate a homogenous group. These examples demonstrate the potential for difference within ethnic categories. If universities are not sympathetic to these differences any impact will be disproportionate.

By quantifying BME attainment in this way, Singh and Cousin (2009) state that the context of historically bound progress in equality is lost in the attempt to find an 'absolute' truth that is applicable across broad definitions of ethnic minority. Work by Tyson *et al.* (2005) supports this, criticising studies that failed to acknowledge the practices inherent in higher education that disadvantage BME students. Berry and Loke (2011) recommend that, particularly where there is an uneven distribution of BME students, "attainment initiatives may be better suited to be run at a departmental level" (p. 17). Dhanda (2010) surpasses this Recommendation, however, by presenting evidence that, in some modules, BME students perform better than white students, indicating a tighter target for recognising effective practice. However, following through on this evidence is difficult given that universities rarely report attainment by module, instead reporting overall

figures for the year. As attainment is not broken down to this level of minutiae, differences in module delivery, which may contribute towards the higher attainment of BME students is lost within the bigger picture.

What factors are believed to contribute to the attainment gap?

Connor *et al.* (2004) state that much of the gap in attainment of minority ethnic students come from indirect causes and, specifically, personal characteristics such as age, gender, subject and institution (p. 77). However, when taken in relation to ethnicity, they also cited entry qualifications as being of particular significance, which is a finding echoed in other research (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007; NUS, 2011; Singh, 2011). Fielding *et al.* (2008) analysed the prior attainment of HE students and found that, when ranking according to prior attainment, both white and black African students returned the highest scores. Indian and Pakistani students had high scores also with most other ethnic groups ranked as average. The exception was Bangladeshi, Chinese and other black background students who ranked lowest. By this analysis it could be assumed that those ethnic groups with higher attainment, for example white and black African, should achieve better degree classifications, whereas those with poorer attainment, for example Chinese students, would not do as well. However, both Fielding *et al.*'s (2008) analysis of degree attainment and the ECU (2011) study revealed that although white students did achieve higher degree classifications, as would be expected, Chinese students outperformed black students in attaining first and 2:1 degrees. Furthermore, the percentage of Chinese students receiving third-class degrees was lower than their black peer group. Additionally, Hussein *et al.*'s (2008) study of the progression of Social Work students revealed also that students with previously lower levels of educational attainment did not experience poorer progression rates. This was attributable to the structure of the Social Work course and a finding to which other higher education departments were encouraged to pay attention. Richardson (2008a) maintains also, that previous attainment accounts actually for only about half of the disparity in attainment between BME and white students. Connor *et al.* (2004) concede that after controlling for indirect causes BME students still significantly underperform; this they put down to other, undisclosed attributes specific to BME students and the institutions within which they study. Other research (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2003; Purcell *et al.*, 2005) maintains that, even when these other factors are taken into account, the attainment gap between BME and white students remains at a significant rate. Richardson (2012a), however, emphasises that ethnicity per se is not the effective variable influencing attainment. Overall, as findings from NUS (2011) demonstrate, there is no simple explanation of disparity in BME student attainment, instead it is a complex issue with a range of causal factors (p. 3).

Singh (2011) summarises some of these reoccurring causal factors that encompass the possible explanations for the attainment gap. Some themes, such as lack of family support, time in paid employment (Connor *et al.*, 2004) and financial hardship (Dhanda, 2009 and 2010), may be applicable to students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds generally rather than students from minority ethnic backgrounds specifically; although Connor *et al.* (2004) and Cotton *et al.*'s (2010) survey indicated that BME home students were more likely than white students to hold down a part-time job alongside their studies. Black students in particular reported that this factor had affected their ability to concentrate on their studies (Connor *et al.*, 2004). In contrast to lack of family support, the influence of family is a theme explored by Cotton *et al.* (2010) who suggest that strong family influence when choosing a degree may result in students being on courses with in which they have little interest, ultimately limiting the extent to which they engage with the content, tutors and other students. Jacobs *et al.* (2007) reported that parents of BME students exerted pressure on their children to undertake degrees such as Law, Accounting or Medicine rather than 'non-vocational' choices such as subjects in the humanities. A further recurrent issue that has been suggested as both contributing to the problem of and the solution to BME retention is BME staff representation. Singh highlights work by Dhanda (2009 and 2010) that cites possible causes of poor attainment by minority ethnic students as being related directly to a lack of role models. Dhanda (2010) reported that students saw the presence of BME staff as being important to improving their academic performance. Work by Clegg and Stevenson (2009) on projections of future selves of BME students identified students who exhibited an underdeveloped view of themselves as the future employed. For students such as these the presence of BME staff would provide impetus for them to be able to envisage what the culmination of their studies may mean. Runnymede (2010)

argued that the induction of BME staff into HEIs was of paramount importance in attracting students to university and enabling them to remain and succeed once they were there. However, as a caveat the report advocates that parallel to this goal there needed to be a concerted strategy to tackle racism and negative experiences among BME staff in HEIs, otherwise the initiative may prove counterproductive and reinforce negative self-conceptions of BME students.

Low tutor expectations have been cited as significant in several studies (see Tikly *et al.*, 2006; Tolley and Rundle, 2006; Dhanda, 2009 and 2010). Dhanda (2009 and 2010) reports also the possibility that tutors develop prejudicial attitudes in response to students' lack of linguistic competence. The findings of these studies are reflected in early work by Leman (1999) that suggests staff expectations of students may arise from their ethnic identity and that tutors would need to be particularly skilled in order to avoid communicating those expectations through their teaching sessions. This perspective is reiterated through the study Cotton *et al.* (2010) conducted, where BME students reported a reluctance to ask questions in the classroom for fear of "reinforcing prejudiced expectations about lack of ability" (p. 3). BME students in the NUS survey (NUS, 2011) reported also that staff generally had low expectations of them, with one respondent reporting as being made to feel as if "failure was already pre-determined" (p. 6). Dhanda (2010) also suggests that staff do not have the same expectations of BME students as of white ones. This, the author maintains, contributes to the culture of failing to challenge BME students, thus denying them the opportunity to raise their expectations of their own abilities. However, work by Richardson (2012b) that looked at the results of Open University students, refutes the significance of interactions with staff. As Open University degrees are administered via distance learning with limited tutor and student interaction, Richardson concluded that the gap in attainment does not arise necessarily from the nature of the interactions with teachers, or indeed, with other students (p. 395).

Osler (1999, in Richardson 2012b) suggested that both staff and students might subject BME students to covert "discriminatory teaching and assessment exercises". An interesting proposition by Singh (2011) suggests that racism may be a factor that has hitherto remained relatively unexplored. Citing Back (2004) he explains there is the possibility that white academics only ascribe attributes of tolerance and reason to themselves, and the university environment. They see these as inconsistent with the perceived attributes of racism, namely hate and irrationality. This, Back maintains, leads to the belief that racism cannot exist within the atmosphere of higher education and that the problem must lay elsewhere. Connor *et al.* (2004) suggest also that there may be a possibility that systematic discrimination is an additional factor in disparities of attainment. The student voice, as recorded in work by NUS (2011) confirms that this is a feeling that persists among students themselves. This National Union of Students (NUS) report records persistent examples of both institutional and personal racism levelled at BME students. The failure to acknowledge this, they maintain means that the experiences of BME students will not be fully understood. Singh (2011) refers to work by Osler (1999) that suggests, "in part, BME students are subject to some form of discriminatory practice in relation to teaching, student support and assessment".

However, this perspective is contested. Leslie (2005) is emphatic in presenting a "non-sinister" explanation for lower attainment by BME students. He suggests, simply, that the gap in attainment can be explained by the aforementioned lower level of qualification on entry of BME students than those from non-minority ethnic backgrounds. He maintains also that the prevalence of BME students taking subjects where it is harder to achieve a good degree compounds the problem. Richardson (2012a) presents evidence from a study also that explored the premise that online tuition rendered the ethnicity of the participant invisible and therefore courses utilising online tuition should enable BME students to get better results. In reality, however, the use of online tuition neither increased nor decreased the attainment gap between BME and white students indicating that systematic discrimination was not a factor in that case. However, despite these energetic defences of a 'colour-blind' institutional tradition, Leslie (2005) concedes that after accounting for prior qualification and subject choice, BME students are still behind in class of degree awarded compared to their white peers. Runnymede (2010) exposes the degree of scepticism exhibited by the public in response to such attempts to divert attention away from claims of institutional racism. In response to the ECU (2009) statistical report they relay the public's belief that "no amount of explaining away the figures can get away from ... challenging

institutional racism in academia”. This feeling is echoed in work by the HEA/ECU (2008) where it was stated that universities failed to address their own vulnerabilities to racism and were in danger of replicating discriminatory practices in relation to BME students.

Richardson (2008a), in light of the evidence that contradicted claims of institutional disadvantage (Connor *et al.*, 2004), suggested that explanations for the continuing attainment gap needed to be sought in the quality of student learning itself and specifically, the conceptions of learning and approaches to studying of BME students as compared to their white peers. Work by Cotton *et al.* (2010) supported the opinion that student approach to learning may contribute towards differential attainment. The study results indicated that due to the extrinsic motivation of BME students they may be more likely to adopt a surface learning approach, which impacts on the quality and depth of their academic output. Richardson (2012b) reiterated his initial beliefs in later work, implying that his earlier observations on this point had yet to be explored. However, it is possible that providing strong academic support may counteract this predisposition to surface learning approaches by BME students. Strong academic support was cited more frequently in a recent NUS survey (NUS, 2011) than any other factor contributing to BME attainment. This was cited, not only in relation to contributing towards the solution, but also extended beyond improving academic performance to raising overall self-esteem beyond the confines of the classroom.

Segregation and poor social cohesion have been recognised also as possible contributory factors (see Tikly *et al.*, 2006; Tolley and Rundle, 2006). Stevenson (2012) presents interviews with BME students that offer insights into the manner that inter-ethnic relationship as represented in HEI literature do not materialise in actual course situations. Ogbu (2003, in Richardson, 2012b) theorises a “cultural inversion” whereby black students reject behaviour that may indicate they are acting as their white peers. This may extend to not actively mixing with students of different ethnic backgrounds in an attempt to distance themselves from any suggestion of assumed ‘whiteness’. This same “cultural inversion” Ogbu (2003) suggests may contribute also towards the attainment gap, in that black students fail to perform well academically as this is contrary to the characteristics of their race. However, as Richardson (2012b) reveals, other authors (Comeaux and Jayakumar, 2007) refuted these claims criticising Ogbu’s failure to acknowledge structural factors, such as ‘institutional racism’, in the poor attainment of BME students.

What suggestions exist for addressing this problem?

As with the evidence presented to explain why the attainment gap occurs, solutions to remedy it remain unco-ordinated and diverse. This was a public criticism, highlighted by Runnymede (2010), which stated that sophisticated solutions may be known but “there is not the political or institutional will, nor the courage to realise them” (p. 31). However, some action has been taken towards addressing the issue. The report by the ECU/HEA (2008) was the culmination of a summit programme that presented the approaches to addressing the attainment gap taken by 15 UK HEIs. This has provided a solid bank of knowledge that can be a point of reference for other institutions to begin to understand the issue. The suggestions here serve to highlight the complexity within broad approaches to improving BME attainment. These examples represent three of the fundamental starting points from which more specialised strategies can evolve.

Inclusion or exclusion?

There are contesting views as to the approach to be taken in addressing the needs of BME students. As demonstrated here there is a body of evidence that clearly demonstrates that the attainment of BME students is adversely affected by the virtue of their ethnicity. Although the factors that contribute to this disparity are not yet clear they inarguably exist. However, some literature, as Singh (2011) observes, discourage institutions from targeting interventions directly at BME students in order to prevent the reinforcement of negative ‘racial and cultural stereotypes’ (see Law *et al.*, 2004; Jacobs *et al.*, 2007). He goes on to balance the arguments of these two approaches by comparing the results of studies into BME attainment in compulsory education. Here, Singh (2011) asserts, the evidence advocates clearly a strong student support framework complemented

with an unequivocal strategy to tackling racism maintains high expectations of BME students, while acknowledging their cultural experiences (p. 40). However, Hockings *et al.* (2008), when addressing the problem of equality in teaching and learning strategies urges professionals to avoid isolating BME students by not treating them as 'non-traditional'. In doing so they can circumvent the potential for stereotypical bias to affect the way in which they regard BME students' academic potential. Singh (2011, p. 46), in summarising, agrees with this and urges caution in implementing strategies targeted at BME students. Institutions should where possible embed "assertive support activities for the benefit of all students rather than explicitly and openly targeting BME students as a 'special needs' category".

Inclusive teaching and learning

The HEA/ECU (2008) report made a key recommendation in relation to teaching and learning, which was that the principles and practice of equality and diversity needed to be interconnected and harmonised with the functions of teaching and assessments (p. 3). Evidence for this approach is abundant as recorded by Singh (2011). Hockings (2010) advocates a student-led perspective to curriculum design claiming that this facilitates an inclusive curriculum for all students. This perspective provides further support for the argument that strategies should not be developed for the benefit of BME students alone, but as part of an inclusive curriculum for all. Chang *et al.* (2006) is cited in Singh (2011) and quotes good inter-racial interaction as being a significant factor in the tolerance of ethnic diversity, as well as positive development and attainment.

Singh (2011) makes several recommendations also regarding teaching and learning strategies that could enhance BME experience in HEIs. In relation to curriculum he advocates the integration of components on social justice and global citizenship into all courses. However, this, he asserts, must be implemented in such a way so that a focus on social problems or victimisation does not dominate and perpetuate negative stereotypes. This perspective featured prominently in the case studies included in this report. Tutors were anxious about how teaching modules on race and ethnicity could be taught effectively so as to transcend an academic purpose and encourage an inclusive relationship between students and staff. Nixon and McDermott (2010) in advising on teaching race in Social Work maintain that dialogues that challenge students on both a personal and academic level can contribute to their understanding of a critical theory of race. It also opens up an understanding of organisations and agencies that are, potentially, part of the problem

Moving from a deficit model

The available research does indicate a move away from a deficit model of conceptualising the issue of the BME attainment gap. Jacobs *et al.* (2007) found that overall people were less likely to refer to a deficit model to explain disparity in BME attainment rather than to use it to explain attainment disparity based on gender. However, work by NUS (2011) demonstrates still instances of educational success being attributed to inherent characteristics of individuals or groups of people. These characteristics are often based upon negative, stereotypical assumptions that may not be a true reflection (p. 56). Instead what is proposed is an interrogation of the institutional factors that contribute towards the attainment gap. This, according to Jacobs *et al.* (2007), needs to be framed in the context of institutional processes with the aim to initiate proposals that facilitate the construction of a model of education for all.

Social Policy perspective

As previously recorded there is very little research that reflects the retention and attainment of BME students in Social Policy specifically. In some ways this is not surprising. An in-depth analysis by Fielding *et al.* (2008) reveals that although there are variations by subject none of the effects are statistically significant. However, although this may be an accurate reflection of the extent of the problem, the same is not evident of solutions to it. Connor *et al.* (2004) report that on the issue of student work and its impact on attainment there is a substantial difference between disciplines. This finding is important if departments are going to be able to implement effective strategies to tackle attainment disparity. In relation to Social Policy in particular, given

figures (ECU, 2011) demonstrate the attraction of BME students to social studies programmes. It would be naive to ignore the possible impact of ongoing attainment disparities on departments administering social studies courses, particularly in the wake of increased university fees, that may lead students to examine the outcome of their choice of course more carefully. Therefore, finding out the extent of the problem and being informed about what works in relation to Social Policy is a worthwhile endeavour. Statistics aside, given that Social Policy programmes inevitably encompass issues of race, ethnicity and equality, as well as attracting academics who can offer expertise in these and related fields, such departments have a rich source of material to explore the factors contributing and offering solutions to the problem, more than many other subject areas. This is enhanced by the fact that Social Policy departments are often encompassed within the broader discipline of the social sciences, which brings with it further relevant perspectives from both staff and students.

In contrast, the discipline of Social Work has been addressing discrimination within its teaching programmes since the early 1980s, despite the fact that significant amounts of research has not produced. The way in which 'theoretical commitments' to counter discrimination actually materialise and impact on the demographic of students completing Social Work programmes has been examined (Hussein *et al.*, 2008). This scrutiny has facilitated the discipline to examine the part it plays in maintaining a diverse workforce, as well as identifying specifics of Social Work education that contribute to the success of its students. Social Policy departments would be well advised to consider this approach given that the catalyst for it was the substantial amount of black students who were enrolling on Social Work courses. Considering the figures stated previously that demonstrate the popularity of the social sciences among BME students and given the continuing attainment gap of such students, the indications are that Social Policy departments would benefit from both researching within its own discipline as well as examining the broader knowledge from others.

Research from the United States (Syed *et al.*, 2011) utilises this broader knowledge in an interdisciplinary study that links the importance of identity, a theme they assert runs through social sciences disciplines, and its influence on academic retention and success. This sense of identity, the authors claim, is constructed not just in an individual context but also through "inter-personal relationships in the context of institutional structures" (p. 443). Leman (1999) also assert that these interactions encountered in higher education not only create the identity of a student, but can reinforce potentially negative stereotypical ones. This can encourage students to display academic behaviour that that will allow them to 'fit in' rather than fulfil academic potential. These constructions can encompass both a sense of collective belonging and individual place in a wider existence, both factors that can be impacted on by their lived experiences and academic study in higher education generally and in the social sciences particularly. This work is supported in UK-based research from Clegg and Stevenson (2009), who postulate that students with low social capital struggle to visualise their possible selves and actualise that through present actions. They single out social sciences students in particular as struggling to adjust themselves and their actions towards the future (p. 2). When this is combined with evidence that ethnic variances affect the ability to conceptualise a future identity, the notion of both ethnic and discipline-specific research and action is supported.

Leman (1999) writes also about the extent to which choice of discipline affects the identity of higher education students. He maintains that subject choice is as powerful at demarcating an individual as gender, ethnicity and school background. The conception of a subject identity brings with it both "specific and powerful social stereotypes which entail attitudes regarding the 'sort of person' an individual is expected to be" (p. 250). Therefore, the identity the discipline projects may be of greater importance than previously anticipated and, indeed, can be informed by what the public perceives a 'social political' professional to be.

As with the broader perspective on BME attainment, what works on improving it is not always clear from the evidence available. Once again, in relation to discipline-specific measures, it is a Social Work study that offers evidence in a discipline context. In the face of a lack of evidence from UK-based studies, Hussein *et al.* (2008) address the evidence from US-based studies (Aranda, 2001; Bowie *et al.*, 2005), which, in agreement with more general evidence, advocate institutional support, relevant curriculum and staff members who are themselves from minority ethnic backgrounds (p. 1,591).

BME student retention: Social Policy case studies

This section presents four case studies that outline approaches to student retention on Social Policy degrees. Universities offering single Honour degrees in Social Policy were invited to share an aspect of their current practice that they believe contribute towards BME student retention.

As Singh (2011) reports, there is very little raw data on BME retention available in the public domain (p. 26). This report confirms that this is still the case. Connor *et al.* (2003) summarised evidence that demonstrated that black students have higher leaving rates than Asian students. Both these ethnic groups, however, have higher non-continuation rates than white students. The same piece of research goes on to assert that once figures are adjusted to take into account variations between BME groups the difference is insignificant. Research by HEFCE (2010) looked at the continuation rates of students in the academic year 2002-03. These confirmed the findings by Connor *et al.* (2003). Specifically the HEFCE study found that continuation was highest for Chinese students (88%) followed by white students (86%). Indian and other Asian, and mixed and other students both recorded continuation of 84%, while black students returned a rate of (83%). The lowest continuation rate was among Pakistani and Bangladeshi students, where only 79% of the cohort continued into their second year. HEFCE (2010) presented also a year-on-year comparison for the decade ending 2005-06 showing that, apart from minor fluctuations, continuation rates for young UK entrants to HE have stayed broadly the same for white, black and Chinese students (87%, 82% and 89% respectively) and have risen slightly for mixed and other students (85% up from 84%), Indian and other Asian (85% up from 82%) and Pakistani and Bangladeshi (82% up from 78%). The figures for mature students showed lower completion rates than for young students in all ethnic categories. Rates of continuation for mature students were highest for white students (80%) followed by mixed and other (73%). Indian and other Asian students recorded continuation of 71%, black students returned a rate of 69% and Chinese 68%. The lowest continuation rate was among Pakistani and Bangladeshi students where only 66% of the mature cohort continued into their second year. Longitudinally, rates remained fairly consistent across the decade to 2005-06, except for the Chinese cohort that experienced a decrease of 5% and the mixed cohort with an increase of 4%. These figures demonstrate that continuation rates are affected more by age than by ethnicity, a factor that is significant both within and across ethnic categories.

As with work on attainment, the factors for poor BME retention have not been categorically defined. Instead the terms 'retention' and 'attainment' have become synonymous, and factors and strategies that are applied to one are broadly applied to the other. Connor *et al.* (2003) record that work on retention has also been neglected in favour of research and analysis into HE entry and participation, a fact with which other research agrees (Jacobs *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, evidence focused specifically on BME students was reported as being even rarer. Factors that have been identified are similar to those cited as affecting attainment. Work by Connor *et al.* (2004) found that universities with the highest non-continuation rates tend to be those with lower entry qualifications, implying that prior qualifications may be a contributory factor. However, they assert also that differences outside of prior academic attainment are significant in student retention generally. Specifically, they state that family support and expectations affect retention positively, while academic difficulties, financial pressures or disappointment with the course or institution affect students' retention negatively. Of these, the most influential, according to Connor *et al.* (2004) are "unmet expectations of the HE experience; making the 'wrong' choice of course; and a lack of commitment to the subject chosen" (p. 60). However, these are retention factors relating to all students and the authors admit that how these factors relate specifically to the experience of BME students is not clear. However, work by Jacobs *et al.* (2007) that did examine the experiences of BME students mentions specifically parental pressure in relation to retention of students, so claiming that parental direction is unhelpful because students were less enthused with subjects with which they did not engage. Later work by Cotton *et al.* (2010) discusses also the influence of family on course choice of BME students, highlighting the possible importance of this aspect of BME students.

The following case studies encompass a diverse selection of institutions with different approaches to improving BME retention and experience. All of the departments offer a single Honours Social Policy degree, although the size of cohort and size of BME contingent varies greatly between them. However, in common to all was a desire to share practice and open a conversation about how to address the continuing disparity in continuation of BME students.

University A

University A profile

A red-brick university located in the West Midlands near a major city with a student population of over 27,000. Of those with a known ethnicity, 30% are minority ethnic and 70% are white or from white backgrounds, contrasting positively with HESA statistics for BME participation (2010-11).

In relation to student retention at the University overall, of those undergraduates who started in 2010-11, over 95% continued into their second year. Once again this compares favourably with the national statistics on student retention that report continuation into year two as being 89%. In relation to retention there was no difference recorded according to ethnic background, with 95% of both white students and BME students continuing to year two.

Social Policy at University A

The course is oversubscribed having 241 applications in 2011 for 40 places. It offers Social Policy pathways in Housing, Health and Social Care, and Policing and Community Justice. It also offers Social Policy as a joint Honours degree with Planning, Political Science or Sociology.

Social Policy BA

First-year core modules:

- Social Issues;
- Finding out about Social Policy: introduction to social research;
- Introduction to Social Policy.

Optional modules include (but are not limited to):

- Psychology;
- Social History;
- Education;
- Urban Space and Society;
- Sociology;
- Politics;
- International Studies;
- African Studies.

Second-year core modules:

- Research Methods;
- Social Theory.

Optional modules include (but are not limited to):

- New Migration and Super-diversity;
- Social Inclusion;
- Managing Health and Social Care;

- From Beveridge to the Cameron/Clegg Coalition;
- Social Policy into Practice.

Third-year core modules:

- Research-based Dissertation;
- Prospects for Social Policy.

Optional modules include (but are not limited to):

- Crime and Justice: Communities and Diversity;
- Comparative Social Policy;
- Your Money and Your Life;
- Poverty and Social Security;
- Agency and Morality;
- New Migration and Super-diversity.

Opening dialogues and continuing conversations

The Social Policy programme at the University boasts a diverse mix of students drawn significantly from local schools and colleges arriving through traditional A-level routes, BTECs and Access programmes. Over the last five years the year-on-year figures have reported between 40-50% of the students as having identified themselves as being from a black or minority ethnic (BME) background. The Programme Director maintains that the work of the admissions tutor in building relationships with local schools and colleges is vital in helping to form effective strategies to retain the diverse cohort of students it attracts: “Because we’ve got a diverse population locally, as soon as we recruit locally we reflect that diversity. That is certainly one of our strengths and as a whole it’s an important part of what Social Policy here tries to do.” Diversity, in relation to people’s backgrounds, identities and values adds a great deal to an understanding of Social Policy.

Monitoring of students performance, in relation to retention, progression and attainment is undertaken on an annual basis as part of an annual programme review. This includes examining data for a number of categories, including those students who identify themselves as belonging to a BME group. The size of the cohort, and the interplay of different factors, reduces the confidence by which conclusions can be drawn with regard to BME groups specifically. For example, a number of BME groups are also home students, who also tend to come from low-income and/or low-participation areas. This creates difficulties for the programme team when examining the performance of students and the interplay of these factors. Therefore, rather than rely on these data for developing policy and practice, strong account is also taken of tutors’ and students’ experiences and feedback, through processes such as the staff-student liaison meetings. This form of information has proved far more useful for better understanding the complexity of the student experience and identifying issues regarding ethnicity. The programme team recently explored this assertion through a study, funded by the University’s Centre for Learning and Academic Development, of its students who received 50%, or below, as a mean mark in their first year, including those who had to resubmit. This sample included BME and non-BME students, but one of the issues to come out strongly from the study for a number of these students was that, it took them a while to feel like they ‘belonged’. This was not expressed as a deficit per se, but the relative value of the student’s personal, material and social resources within the University setting. The red-brick status is important to some, but to others at the University it is less appealing. It is a palpable phenomenon described in relation to struggling to accept the nature of the setting, the tone of conversations in the refectory or feeling uncomfortable waiting outside a classroom. However, as the Programme Director observes, the outcome for the student can be vastly different. Some students expressed a sense of resilience, and an ‘I’ll show them’ attitude. In others, however, it may lead to a feeling that they don’t really belong, or that they may lose too much by ‘fitting in’. Subsequently, it is argued that the institution faces the challenge of reducing those feelings of not belonging, while also attempting to better understand and support the way that students respond to such experiences, where more work needs to be done.

To this end, the importance of starting and maintaining a conversation with all students is seen as vital: a conversation that does not just seek to get the student perspective, but where necessary leads to changes in the way the institution operates. Within this framework for dialogue, the importance of making opportunities for both tutors and students to get to know each other as individuals is seen as a priority, which is something that challenges the conventional notion of academic relationships: “When I first came to the department,” the Programmed Director recollects, “I remember seeing two students in a corridor leaving a tutor’s room and one was looking aghast. Her friend asked her if there was a problem. She replied that her tutor had said if she had any problems to come and speak to them but as she put it, ‘why would I want to do that when I’ve got friends to talk to?’” This incident, he recalls, emphasised and epitomises the perception by some students that tutors are there if you’ve got a problem, not as part of a conversation. To divert this attitude from the outset the University delivers layers of support that fit together and contributes towards opening a dialogue from pre-induction onwards.

An example of pre-induction activity is the formative piece of work given to students when they first arrive in the department. This has taken the form of a short self-referential piece of about 500 words on ‘what is a good essay?’ and is now part of the University’s ‘Great Read’ initiative. The point being is not to start a triage or identify students who may exhibit a lack of understanding, but to open an ongoing conversation. It is a way to formalise the first contact, get an initial comment but then leave the space open for the dialogue to continue by asking the student: what do you want from university, where are your strengths and where do you need to work on as areas of improvement? This initial contact is then developed in a number of formal and informal settings with a small band of tutors who are dedicated to the year one transition. An agenda of meetings is scheduled between tutors and students that facilitate contact and communication between the learners and offers an opportunity to discuss a range of issues including writing and research skills. Inductions are also held at the beginning of every term and as part of these meetings, performance and retention data is shared with students. This is seen as an opportunity to continue the dialogue and offer them the opportunity to share their experiences, achievement and difficulties with tutors. The emphasis on small group discussions and group work is also reflected in all of the first-year Social Policy modules.

The importance of opening and maintaining a dialogue is not only seen as vital in monitoring student progress and identifying those at risk of non-continuation, but also in promoting understanding between students so as to encourage group cohesion and inclusion. In this respect Social Policy can be seen to lend itself particularly well to raising awareness of issues of discrimination. The first-year module Social Issues further develops students’ knowledge of the social construction of a range of social issues. This provides an excellent platform for then examining the views and reaction of students to a range of more specific issues. For example, using the expertise of colleagues, a session examined Islamophobia and used photo elicitation as a means to provoke responses from the students. As the Programme Director recalls, what was palpable in the session was the sense of relief exhibited by some of the students: “There was an overwhelming feeling of ‘we can talk about this’ as though we’d given them a licence to articulate a difficult topic.” The response to the session was so great that the members of the programme department are looking at the use of photo elicitation within the academic tutoring process and then linking that back to the mainstream curriculum currently in place.

The rejection of a deficit model of teaching and the type of interaction and relations associated with more student-centred forms of pedagogy are seen as essential to contributing towards improving the experiences, progression and attainment of BME students and the cohort as a whole. However, although Social Policy may be seen as an ideal subject within which to exercise this approach, there is also the challenge of operating within a predominantly bureaucratic and increasingly managerialist model of performance management. There is potential for a clash between the desire to be dynamic and the need to respond to central intelligence and wider incentive structures. The rewards and incentives to initiate and maintain a dialogue with students are relatively limited. The type of work described above is labour and time intensive and is not always amenable to the form of measurements favoured by managerialist approaches. Therefore it can be tempting to restrict efforts to the analysis of end-of-module evaluations and the performance data, and respond in a way that fulfils the basic criteria. The role of being a student facilitator is far more labour intensive and takes the tutor beyond being just instrumental. In many ways it carries its own merits and brings great job satisfaction.

However, at present the incentives to do it are lacking and tutors who do so may bear a personal cost and, as the Programme Director reiterates, “you just hope that in many ways it gets reflected in the data so that they can get credit for it”. Attending to performance data is important, but such data cannot be relied on. Rather, this form of data and review process needs to be embedded within and inform a wider discussion of equality and diversity. Practically, this translates to looking at the data regarding ethnicity and exclusion, but also looking at the systems by which those measures and categories have been developed.

Once again this is an example where the students’ own experiences can be used to inform an understanding of Social Policy and vice versa. Questions regarding the role of categories (whether as part of the management of the programme or in society as a whole) can be contextualised by ensuring that the students’ values and views regarding their own position and identity are included in discussions of such topics. Initially the emphasis may be placed on students discussing case studies or their own experiences, but then related to relevant examples of similar positions in the academic and policy literature. This can be very powerful for the students’ personal and academic understanding, as connections and precedents are found between their own strategies and forms of sense making and wider political and policy discourses. This also lends itself to questions concerning the wider politics of representation that then applies to the realm of Social Policy. The challenge, maintains the Programme Director, is in bringing together the more traditional social administrative aspects of Social Policy with the insights provided by critical theory and post-structural approaches. If this can be applied successfully then its relevance is applicable across all aspects of the curriculum.

However, the approach is not without its difficulties. There have been some instances where in the course of student discussions students have made complaints about the nature and tone of other students’ comments. Tutors need to be experienced and prepared to address such concerns, particularly given the recent changes in higher education. Some students are not used to having, or prepared to have, their views challenged, and this is not helped the recent packaging of higher education. As the Programme Director explains: “What seems to be happening is you’re getting a more pressured environment particularly at the moment when students are being told this is a huge investment, this is critical, and that’s creating a pressure where any kind of perceived difference is creating real friction.” Therefore the challenge is ensuring that there is no behaviour that pollutes the working and learning environment, while also dealing with the tensions that can develop across the student cohort within an increasingly pressurised environment.

This also points to a distinction that can be drawn by what is meant by a ‘learner-centred approach’. Some may consider ‘learner-centeredness’ to refer to making available a range of quality products, identifying learners’ preferences and ensuring efficient delivery to a ‘consumer’. This leaves little room for challenging students or an expectancy that students will be challenged. Instead the emphasis is placed on creating a range of products for particular (and arguably homogenous) groups of students. In contrast, the Programme Director argues that a move towards a learner-centred approach should refer to efforts to identify and start from the actual practices and meanings that students have when they enter university and to harness these meaning-making practices as part of the students’ development to enquiry-based learning. Put another way, do we attempt to identify and plug the gaps in students’ skill sets, or seek to enhance, elaborate and extend that range of repertoires students have for making sense of and engaging in the world. This presents a real challenge for the institution. In order to continue to respond to the dynamic of different student cohorts, the structure of regular contact and opportunities for dialogue has to be in place so that members of the programme team can react to them quickly. Social Policy at the institution reflects this in its emphasis on student contact from the beginning of the relationship.

Despite the difficulties, this approach has made an impressive impact on retention rates on the programme. Last year (2010-11) the overall non-continuation rates for first-year students on the programme were under 10%, down from a high of 19% in 2007-08. This compares favourably to the college rate of 9.24%. In relation to comparison of BME retention, the progress made has been equally striking. In 2005-06 only 78% of students who described themselves as BME made it into their second year compared with 93% of white students. The figures for 2010-11 show an improvement in retention for both BME and white students,

recording that 96% of students in both groups continued into the second year of their degree. This success reflects the priority given to student retention and progression in recent years and ensures the department performs better than the college and University as a whole.

A lot of the strategies used may seem very general and not directly aimed towards the BME population of students, but that is exactly the way the Programme Director sees it working best. The student-centred approach, which asks students to make sense of things in their own way, applies to every student and the Programme Director is emphatic about the importance of this: “It’s not about supporting BME students in isolation. We also get the white, male, independently educated student to look at their own notion of identity and their construction of it and it is within that the most heat and challenge often arises. This is because there is no history of this type of student being required to do it, whereas other students may be very well rehearsed in it and be expected to do it because they do it on a day-to-day basis.” This approach certainly contributes to what is endorsed as the importance of starting from where the student is at, at that moment. It is no surprise that his personal reference is to the work of Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and to consider, in the words of Rancière, “equality as a starting point not a destination”.

University B

University B profile

A post-1992 university located in the East Midlands against a predominantly rural backdrop with a student population of over 9,500. Of those with a known ethnicity, 8% are minority ethnic and 92% are white or from white backgrounds. This compares negatively with HESA statistics that report BME participation rates of over 19% for all first-degree undergraduate students.

In relation to overall student retention of the undergraduates who started in 2010-11, 88% continued into their second year. This is slightly lower than the national statistics on student retention that report continuation into year two as being 89%. However, the University consistently performs better than its benchmark. The retention rate of BME students was 80% for 2010-11.

Social Policy at University B

The cohort for the single Honours degree is small, with 16 students in the 2010-11 intake. Social Policy is offered also as a joint Honours degree with Criminology, International Relations, Politics and Management.

Social Policy BA

First-year core modules:

- Social Issues and Social Justice;
- Identity and Citizenship;
- Applying Research.

Optional modules include:

- Images of Crime and Social Control;
- Who Runs Britain? Power, Politics and Beyond.

Second-year core modules:

- Challenge and Change in Social Policy I and II;
- Ideology into Practice;
- Diversity, Difference and Exclusion;
- Researching in Social Policy;
- Comparative Politics and Policy.

Optional modules include:

- Law, Order and Politics;
- Model United Nations;
- Criminal Justice.

Third-year core modules:

- Understanding the Policy Process;
- Analysing the Policy Process;
- Community and Conflict I and II.

Optional modules include:

- Harm, Agency and Regulation;
- Human Rights;
- Anti Politics;
- Globalisation and Developing Societies;
- Body Politics;
- War Crimes and Genocide.

Support and choice within a limited curriculum

“Having small numbers does not exclude you from paying attention to issues such as inclusion and isolation” asserts the module co-ordinator and Professor of Public Policy at the University. Because of the small numbers, he suggests, retention across the whole school and whole student cohort has always been seen as a priority. Although smaller numbers of students do present some problems in other areas working within a smaller department, it can also yield positive results.

In relation to diversity, the Social Policy cohort has changed considerably over the years and this has affected how much planning has had to go into devising retention strategies, for example formulating effective student support. At its height the single Honours degree could attract up to 54 students of which up to 15% would be from BME backgrounds. That, mixed with a high intake of mature students, made inclusion and integration much easier. Even though present levels of BME students are over 12%, this equates to an actual figure of just two. As the module co-ordinator points out, when you have a big intake in some sense there is less to do than when you have a small one. In contrast, the Masters programme this year attracted around 40% BME students. This is put down to a conservative choice from undergraduates that dissipates with academic progress. The ethnic diversity of the staff reflects also that of the undergraduate students with only one BME staff member teaching on the programme. However, because of the multidisciplinary nature of the School, the broad research interests of the team do reflect international issues.

The main mechanism for improving student retention on the Social Policy degree has been the ability to support students through academic tutor groups (ATGs). These are used to teach the first-year Applying Research module and serve effectively as the seminar groups as well. The University breaks away from the usual system of organising seminar groups across subjects and instead, for ATGs, these are normally formed by all the Social Policy students (single and joint Honours) being placed in the same groups. Even by their own standards these groups are small, with only four to six students in each one. This size of group, however, means they get to know each other and the tutor very well and, crucially, they see each other on a regular basis. In relation to working with a student cohort with little ethnic diversity, this is seen as crucial in being able to facilitate an environment where students form strong peer relationships

Alongside the use of small academic tutorial provision, the department uses flexibility within its assessments to enable students to extend the scope of the curriculum into areas of personal interest. Within what is predominantly a traditional curriculum, based on a politics and policy perspective, it is recognised that there is

not currently as much choice of modules as tutors would ideally like. As it is explained: “Our restricted curriculum does leave us at a disadvantage in terms of attracting a diverse set of students through the curriculum provision, but we are proud to have adapted our assessments and that may help to retain people with particular interests.” The students have the flexibility to choose an area of interest within some module assessments. For example, one assessment is an evaluation of a piece of policy or legislation. Students can choose which policy they wish to evaluate. Not surprisingly BME students often opt for policies such as race relations. With three additional Social Policy staff in post from the 2012-13 academic year it is likely that greater choice of modules will be provided.

The issue of small numbers of BME students is problematic in relation to statistical returns. For example, in last year’s cohort, of the two BME students who started the course one did subsequently leave at the end of the year. This is reflected, of course, as a retention rate for BME students of only 50%. However, the reasons behind the withdrawal were not influenced by ethnic origin and were insurmountable regardless of any input from the School. In this case it was a change in the personal circumstances of the student that meant she was no longer able to live within commuting distance of the University. The benefit of small student numbers is that it is easy to get to know the students personally and so tutors are more aware of the circumstances that may well lead to student withdrawal or the experiences of particular groups of students. BME students in the School do not comment on or display feelings of ethnic isolation despite studying on a predominantly white campus. Integration of the students in relation to the common subject matter that they study has resulted in a cohesive network of mutual support groups.

Although, as demonstrated, small departments do offer some advantages for retention of students the biggest threat is complacency: “There’s always a danger of complacency, whether that’s because you are small or you have mechanisms in place.” However, undoubtedly small numbers do make it easier for tutors to know when their students are missing regularly or performing poorly. In the module co-ordinator’s opinion the key to retention is finding out about problems before it is too late and giving the student as much information as possible so that they know and understand the implications of the choices they are making and what help is available to them. However, he acknowledges that not all students will want to take advantage of such support and that leaves tutors with limited chances of positive intervention.

University C

University C profile

A red-brick university located in the East Midlands near a major city with an undergraduate student population of over 21,000. Of those with a known ethnicity, 24% are minority ethnic and 69% are white or from white backgrounds. This compares positively with HESA statistics that report BME participation rates of 19.6% for all first-degree undergraduate students.

In relation to student retention at the University overall, of those undergraduates who started in 2010-11, over 95% continued into their second year. This is higher than the national statistics on student retention that report continuation into year two as being 89.3%. The retention rate of BME students at the University was nearly 97% for 2010-11.

Social Policy at University C

Social Policy is offered as a BA and also as a joint Honours degree with Sociology and Social Work. Figures for current participation not available.

Social Policy BA

Typical first-year modules:

- Investigating Social Worlds;
- Social Worlds and the Sociological Imagination;
- Understanding Contemporary Society;
- Social Problems and Policy Responses;
- Culture in Contemporary Society.

Typical second-year modules:

- Theories of Welfare;
- Knowing the Social World: Paradigms and Practices;
- Research Design and Practice;
- Health Theory, Policy and Practice.

Typical third-year modules:

- Dissertation in Social Policy.

Typical optional modules:

- History of British Social Policy;
- Housing and Society;
- 1940-1950 The War and The Peace;
- Analysing Public Policy;
- International Social Policy;
- Tourism, Identity and Risk;
- Applied Ethics and Society.

Playing to strengths and laying foundations

The Director of the single Honours Social Policy degree at the University is somewhat self-deprecating when first contemplating retention strategies on the programme. As he explains: “It is possible that this degree attracts people who have thought about it to a greater extent than most, in that they have had to deliberate their future a bit more than others.” It is this deliberate contemplation of the importance and relevance of the degree to individual students that makes them highly motivated. Additionally, life experiences allow them to connect with the subject of their studies in a way that is often hard to achieve through academic study alone. He is keen to acknowledge the advantage that this gives the teaching team. He asserts: “the emotional investment of these students in their programme of study does make it easier to engage with them and bring out their potential and strengths”. These observations have informed the team also of the importance of effective recruitment as part of a wider strategy to improve the retention of, not just BME students, but also all students on the programme. As he explains, “it has been important, when recruiting, to ensure that students show an interest in the degree beyond just a continuation of their previous studies”. Building retention into pre-course provision is therefore regarded as essential.

Student motivations are not the only strength that is acknowledged as contributing to retention strategies. “Having relatively small numbers of students is, ultimately, a bonus but can also be a double-edged sword,” he explains, “on the one hand it is a strength in that students can get to know each other better, but on the other it also leaves you, as a department, vulnerable in the statistics if you lose even one student.” This observation emphasises exactly why retention of all students, not just those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, is given serious consideration at the University. In relation to the diversity of the student cohort on the programme of those who disclosed their ethnicity, 44% described themselves as white compared to 36% who described themselves as being from a black or minority ethnic background. With these similarities in the balance of ethnic backgrounds the inclusive approach to retention is logical. In relation to continuation the University places great emphasis on supporting students, even if this is onto courses other than those on which they had originally registered. The Social Policy programme of 2010-11 had a 50% continuation of its

BME students onto year two of the degree. However, in an overall context, a further 37.5% of its BME students were supported in continuing onto an alternative HE programme.

The support necessary to be successful in completing first-year studies or to have the confidence to seek advice and guidance for alternative courses of study is nurtured through a comprehensive academic and pastoral support network. It is the emphasis on forming a strong and cohesive bond between the student cohort and school staff that is placed squarely at the centre of an extensive specialised tutoring system. In the first year students are given the expertise of a tutor with extensive experience of introducing students to university life and contextualising the experience in a personal way. Students are supported also in developing basic academic skills so as to equip them with the tools for success. Second-year students are placed with a tutor group with whom they will stay ideally for the remainder of their studies. Contact is frequent in year two, with, typically, 13 scheduled meetings either as a one-to-one session or in their tutor group. This decreases slightly in their third year, but the aim throughout is to provide for both the emotional and academic needs of the student.

As well as this an open-door policy exists giving students access to expert help and advice whenever they need it. To a certain extent students are encouraged to identify any problems or issues they are experiencing and consequently the approach for help is made on their terms, rather than being forced upon them. It is impossible to generalise which type of student is likely to need support, as the Programme Director recounts, “it varies from student to student. Some want to be left alone, others want regular reassurance, but there’s no obvious distinction between students on the basis of gender, age or ethnicity.” It is because of the small numbers of students in the tutor groups that these observations are easier to make and targeted support is easier to administer. This, he maintains, is an important factor: “Without question our ability to provide this type of focused and intensive support is achievable because of the size of our cohort. Our approach fosters a greater sense of knowledge, familiarity and friendship between students and tutors that you don’t get on the bigger programmes. No-one is at risk of getting lost in the crowd”.

The department has taken also advantage of learning lessons from the international experience of the university. There are strong links with other countries and this has given departments the opportunity to observe what works with students who may be prone to isolation within their degree programmes. One strategy that has been employed with great success in the department has been to ensure that students have the opportunity to be in touch with people to whom they may find it easier to relate. International students were introduced to a tutor with a similar background, which was very successful. The importance of contact with an individual to whom students may relate is acknowledged and put in place whenever possible if it is felt it would be of benefit. To this end the department boasts a diverse and cosmopolitan mix in their academic and research staff and PhD students. The same is true of the department’s research interests. However, as the Programme Director is at pains to point out although this is a strength, it is not an outcome of a specific policy or monitored intuitive.

University D

University D profile

Located in the Yorkshire and Humber region, the University currently has nearly 33,000 students from 145 countries, of which nearly 25,000 are undergraduates. Of those with a known ethnicity, 10% are minority ethnic and 70% are white or from white backgrounds. 17% are non UK-domicile students. This contrasts markedly against the 2010-11 statistics (HESA) for BME participation in the UK where of the overall higher education population 18% described themselves as being from a black or minority ethnic background.

In relation to student retention at the University overall, undergraduates who started in 2009-10, 93.7% continued into their second year. This compares favourably with the national statistics on student retention that reports continuation into year two as being 89.3%.

Social Policy at University D

The University offers programmes in Social Policy and Sociology and Social Policy and Crime. Additionally it offers a joint Honours degree with Politics. Figures for current participation not available.

Social Policy BA

First-year core modules:

- Sociological Analysis of Contemporary Society;
- Identity, Difference and Inequalities;
- Central Debates in Welfare;
- Social Welfare and Social Change;
- Study Skills for Social Science.

Second-year core modules:

- Sociology and Social Policy Research Methods.

Optional modules include (two from the following):

- Drugs: Society, Politics and Policy;
- Disability Studies: An Introduction;
- Welfare and Crime: Continuity, Conflict and Change;
- Urban Disorders, Social Divisions and Social Control;
- Crime, Law and Regulation;
- Race and Hollywood Cinema;
- Racism and Ethnicity Studies: A Global Approach;
- Gender, Race and Culture;
- Tourism and Culture;
- Emotions, Power and Contemporary Society.

Third-year core modules:

- Social Policy Dissertation.

Optional modules include (two from the following):

- Approaches to Social Exclusion in Later Life;
- Governing Cultures, Identities and Emotions;
- Organised Crime, Violence and the State;
- Urban Regulation, Power and Difference;
- Approaches to Social Exclusion in Later Life;
- Disability Rights and the International Policy Context;
- Education, Culture and Society;
- Discipline and Punish.

Delivering a cathartic curriculum – acknowledging issues and constructing solutions

As the module examples demonstrate, issues of race form a substantial part of the Social Policy curriculum at the University. The department is acutely aware of the difficulties in teaching this content to a diverse student cohort. To address this the University is working with specialist multidisciplinary university departments that have an established reputation for theoretically informed, policy-relevant research on racism and ethnicity with core staff based in Sociology and Social Policy. The department has initiated a working group to address

the difficulties of implementing and administering an inclusive and emancipatory curriculum to aid both the education and empowerment of all students.

The working group agenda centres on three themes: firstly, sharing experience of teaching race and ethnicity and discussing any classroom issues; secondly, reviewing the provision of modules addressing issues of race and ethnicity; and thirdly, constructing a framework of action to take ideas that arise forward. The atmosphere is one of support, guidance and engenders a resolve to improve the teaching experience both for tutors and students. The scope of the working group is broad with participants being drawn from module conveners, tutors and PhD students who teach on the programme. The areas covered in the workshop are driven by the participants but facilitated through a member of the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies (CERS), who then co-ordinates actions to construct a framework within which change can occur in response to the issues explored.

One such identifiable issue has been the way in which tutors go about creating a safe environment for teaching issues of race and ethnicity. Primary advice from one participant was emphatic in asserting, “We [tutors] set the ground rules from the word go.” The consensus for the basis of these ground rules was respect for others, confidentiality and facilitating the questioning of the statements being made and not the individuals making them. Although topics were acknowledged to be potentially controversial it was felt important to encourage an honest dialogue. This could only be achieved by providing a platform where people could talk openly, were aware of and respected the mark that could not be overstepped.

Part of this discussion also explored how lectures and seminars could be facilitated effectively so that all students felt included and were not exposed to harm as result of the dissection of potentially explosive or emotional content. From the perspective of non-BME students in the class, it was felt important to manage the potential for white students to feel marginalised by BME students who may be perceived as ‘experts’; leaving white students feeling as though they were not able to contribute or had difficulty contributing without putting the BME students down. This discussion made tutors aware of the need to encourage constructive inclusive discourse and to manage accusations from BME students that white students cannot understand the issues due to their position of ‘whiteness’. In relation to tutors who are themselves BME, it was additionally advised that they resist calls to ‘side’ with students on the grounds of their shared experience. Tutors reported the aspiration was to remain an equal voice within these debates.

Conversely, it was felt there was a risk of exposing BME students to harm, if they were called upon to be ‘experts’ and reveal personal information about themselves and their experiences. An interesting proposition the group needed to consider was the notion of a risk assessment when teaching race and ethnicity. The inherent risks when minorities are also minorities in the classroom were seen as being both credible and substantive. One participant in the workshop likened the laying bare of the statistics or examples of racial inequalities as being akin to “flashing up circumstances of torture”. However, the role of emotions was seen as being vital in an understanding of the issues. The reaction of both tutors and students was described as “substantively relevant and massively important to engage with”. However, the question of how tutors protect both themselves and their students who may be suffering was not easy to formulate.

A further key challenge confronting those teaching race and ethnicity was how to encourage students to engage critically with their own ideas. Tutors reported the necessity to challenge students with the extent to which they think they know about an issue by putting it in a context other than their own. This was felt to create the conditions whereby all students could give an opinion that could be considered as valid. However, the fallout from this approach was seen to be in relation to dealing with people who feel as though they are part of the problem. It was at this juncture that critical engagement was fundamental to a good outcome for all participants. Sometimes, it was reported, in order to achieve this it was necessary to engage on a personal level yourself. One tutor recalled a white student who could not relate to, or articulate the notion of having a British identity. The tutor illustrated the notion of being British by sharing an example from their personal family history. The outcome was an emotional experience, experienced by the tutor, but one that got the point across. Although experiential learning was not seen to be something that is key to provision, in relation

to learning, it was thought to be a very powerful tool. It was generally felt that if tutors concentrated too much on the side of theory that students felt lost, and so much of the teaching in this area hinged on making immediate decisions based on the extent and nature of student experience.

Another issue that was identified within the group was the nature and success of assessment methods. Many tutors had noted reluctance from students to answer questions related to race and ethnicity in exam questions. It was thought that whereas students felt they were 'given permission' to discuss issues of race and ethnicity within the seminar environment this confidence did not extend to questions and essays. Exams reflected that students were able to talk about gender, sexuality and disability, but were unable to construct a critical argument about race. Where students had answered questions regarding issues of ethnicity the theory often got left out of the answers and came down to anecdotal and sometimes racist responses to the questions. This left tutors and particularly teaching assistants confused as to the extent to which they had the authority to mark down on the grounds of racist commentary. One tutor recounted an experience where she was advised to ignore the racism and mark down on grounds of content and critical engagement. It was felt, however, that in reality there were strong moral grounds for marking down for the racist content and not simply using another reason as a pretence. Although it was noted that there wasn't any specific guidance or policy that covered how to address racist content in student work, it was noted that the universities policy on dignity and mutual respect embodied a measured approach to situations such as these as well as providing information on the steps to initiate an official complaints procedure. A further point was raised by a member of staff who felt that they were made to feel insecure in their position as a black tutor to mainly white students. They felt the necessity to justify the marks they awarded students due to repeated challenges to their marking.

There was discussion also about how teaching race and ethnicity was something 'different' from teaching on Social Policy modules in general. As one teaching assistant remarked: "I really had no training on how to teach race and ethnicity and I really think that it should be something on top of just how to teach." Another tutor observed that teaching programmes taught the ethics of teaching in a procedural manner with no understanding of the tutor's power and position, particularly in relation to their own and students' background. Teaching assistants working on modules based around issues of race and ethnicity felt particularly vulnerable and unprepared. As one teaching assistant remarked: "As a lecturer you're just standing saying your bit, but it's the teaching assistants that are on the frontline dealing with the fallout in the seminars and they aren't as equipped as they may be." There appeared to be an assumption that teaching assistants have come through a university environment that has equipped them with a consciousness of diversity strategies. However, the experiences of the teaching assistants in the working group refuted this, as one individual recalled. "I would have had no capacity or understanding of these issues and unless you are someone with a professional working history you may not have developed a consciousness of the issues through study alone". The group consensus was that module leaders and lecturers were not involved enough in supporting teaching assistants. It was confirmed that although the University provided a teaching programme this was necessarily broadly aimed to encompass teaching across all faculties¹. It was suggested that the person in charge of managing teaching assistants needed to be in a position to guide them in learning ways to challenge issues in a positive and practical way. Furthermore it was felt that the lecturers on the course should take at least one of the seminars to get a feel for what was happening when the students got into the classroom.

These sessions are more than just an opportunity for lecturers, tutors and teaching assistants to share experiences. From this discussion a clear and realistic strategy for progression was devised. Three key actions were identified:

- the production of a 'good guide' resource for teaching race and ethnicity;
- a meeting to discuss the content of learning and teaching programmes for teaching assistants to take into account the needs of those who teach race and ethnicity (see footnote 1);

¹ Since this case study was compiled the School of Sociology and Social Policy now runs a compulsory, paid, school-specific training programme for its teaching assistants.

- to further clarify and disseminate the strategy for identifying marking criteria in assessments that may elicit opinions of race promoting the use of the University's policy on dignity and mutual respect.

What was most keenly supported, however, was the need for these meetings to continue regularly. The overwhelming atmosphere transcended a mere concern for individuals as teachers, but also concern for the students. There was a belief that getting this aspect of teaching and learning right would encourage students to engage with their degree programme and promote greater understanding between, and stronger friendships with, their peer group: elements that would ultimately contribute to the successful completion of their degree.

Areas for development

There is a temptation to urge academics, in the face of such sparse evidence, to increase the quantity of research into BME retention and attainment. However, given the complexity and contradictions of the existing research it would be prudent to instead encourage a route forward based on clarification and clarity.

As this report was commissioned to examine BME retention and attainment in Social Policy, and as this has been difficult due to a lack of research and action directly attributable to Social Policy departments, then it is appropriate that the contribution that individual departments can make to the issue is examined. As the review reveals there is evidence to support the case of departments taking a lead in BME retention and attainment in relation to their own courses. The ECU (2011) statistics that reveal the popularity of Social Studies among BME students is one factor, as is the work of Dhanda (2010) that shows differences in attainment can occur on a module-by-module basis, let alone across departments and indeed universities. Furthermore, as the case studies demonstrate, departments are aware of their performance in relation to student retention and success, and programme leaders can if desired further break figures down to reveal differences by ethnicity. It is, however, how these figures are collated with other Social Policy departments and, most importantly acted upon, where difficulties may occur. It is apparent through the case studies that good practice is occurring, but these initiatives remain largely within departments, if not institutions. Also complicating the issue is the extent to which Social Policy stands outside of Sociology specifically and social studies more generally. The initial discussion, therefore, needs to be one of what value and feasibility there may be in a Social Policy approach to BME retention and success, and if it will be possible to collate the information from and co-ordinate action with Social Policy departments as a whole so as to support the significance of outcomes from interventions. If this is deemed undesirable or impractical the question then remains of what Social Policy can offer to an interdisciplinary discussion of BME retention and attainment?

As the majority of this review was undertaken from a general perspective given the scarcity of Social Policy driven evidence, then unavoidably some points for further consideration are in themselves not specifically orientated towards Social Policy. They do, however, warrant being highlighted as important. One such finding is the paradox between entry levels as reported by Fielding *et al.* (2008) and the degree attainment statistics published by ECU (2011). As reported, prior attainment has been touted as a significant factor in poor attainment, particularly in relation to BME students. Ergo the implication is that the lower degree attainment of BME students should be related to their attainment prior to entering HE. However, what the statistics by Fielding *et al.* (2008) show is that while the assumption holds true for white students, it fails to reflect accurately in other ethnic groups, in particular black African and Chinese students. The analysis is complicated as the ethnic groupings are different, with sub-categorisation ethnic students occurring in one but not the other. The exploration of this paradox is important. If the statistics are shown to be true then upon starting HE something is happening to specific students to reverse their prior progress both negatively and positively. It could be speculated that this could be attributed to a sense of complacency on behalf of some and motivation for others. However, such explanations would not explain why white students remain unaffected. Therefore, it may be an indication of hidden institutional racism (see Back, 2004; Connor *et al.*, 2004; Singh, 2011) or confirmation of low tutor expectations (see Tikly *et al.*, 2006; Tolley and Rundle, 2006; Dhanda,

2009 and 2010). The confirmation of this paradox would open up an opportunity to strengthen the argument for discarding the deficit model and facilitate the exploration of the institutional factors that may contribute towards poor BME student retention and attainment. This exploration can be informed by the themes in this review such as BME learning styles, inclusive teaching and learning methods and inter-ethnicity student relationships.

A further aspect that would benefit from clarification is how to reconcile an approach that clearly demonstrates a commitment to improving BME retention and attainment within an inclusive framework. Much of the literature advocates not developing schemes of support that specifically target BME students (Law *et al.*, 2004; Jacobs *et al.*, 2007; Hockings *et al.*, 2008), but evidence from compulsory education (Singh, 2011) suggests that a more transparent approach contributes towards tackling racism while raising the expectations of BME students; two points that have been covered in the literature concerning reasons for the disparity in BME retention and attainment. Furthermore, commentary from students about institutional literature (Stevenson, 2012) describes how representations of BME students cultivate unrealistic expectations that are unfulfilled in actuality. By embedding BME student support into a broader discourse of, for example, widening participation, expectations of potential equality may be encouraged even though the statistics demonstrate the attainment gap of BME students has changed little over the past decade. Therefore, visualising what an inclusive structure for BME support within a wider student support framework would look like would be beneficial.

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