

The Gender and Ethnicity Attainment Gap Project

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**Educational Development,
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Executive Summary, December 2010



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Introduction:

In the context of a government target to achieve 50% participation in higher education in the UK (Labour Party manifesto, 2001), the success rates of different groups of students (particularly those designated as 'non-traditional' students) has come under considerable scrutiny. Of interest is not simply access to higher education, but the varied experience of different student groups, studying different subjects at different institutions. Investigation of 'the student experience' has included retention rates, academic achievement, progression into employment and opportunities for extra-curricular activities amongst different groups. In many areas the differences are stark: Research by Broecke & Nicholls (2008) reveals that students from ethnic minority backgrounds obtain poorer degree results than white students, even when controlling for prior attainment, age, gender and discipline. They also found that women were more likely to achieve better degree classifications than men, except when it came to attaining a first, where there was no statistically significant difference between the two sexes.

A recent report by the Equality and Diversity team at the University of Plymouth indicated that attainment at this institution is following the trends reported nationally: White students are more likely to obtain a good degree (classified here as a first or 2:1) than black and minority ethnic (BME) students (Moon, 2008). In the case of gender, female students at the University of Plymouth are more likely to obtain good degrees when compared to their male counterparts, and this difference persists even in many science subjects where male students are generally more successful. The gender attainment gap at Plymouth was found to be greater than the national average, according to HESA data.

In order to explore some of the possible reasons for these gaps, a small piece of research was undertaken to investigate the similarities and differences in social and academic experiences of different groups of students (white, BME home, BME overseas, male and female), and to elicit the views of selected teaching staff. This summary outlines the key findings from the project. (The full report, with details of the methodological approach is available on request from Dcotton@plymouth.ac.uk)

Key Findings:

a) Motivation:

Although the quantitative findings were inconclusive in this regard, the qualitative data suggest that BME students are more likely to be extrinsically motivated (by course reputation or future career), while white students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated (by interest in the subject, personal development etc.) This may mean that BME students are more likely to adopt surface approaches to learning as suggested by Ridley (2007). BME students also reported being more strongly influenced by family when choosing a degree programme and this might result in their choosing courses in which they have little interest. In male dominated disciplines such as engineering, women were perceived, both by staff and students, as being more determined.

b) Confidence and anticipated attainment:

Whilst confidence is generally viewed as a positive attribute in learning new skills, there is evidence from this research that some groups were over-confident about their abilities and over-estimated their potential degree outcomes. This applied particularly to male students and to BME overseas students, two groups who currently underperform. There were large differences in the proportions of male and BME overseas students who estimated that they would achieve a first or 2.1 and the proportion of those groups who were statistically likely to achieve this. Women were more likely to anticipate a 2:2 degree classification, and were less likely to over-estimate their potential degree outcome. They also reported significantly higher anxiety levels. Female BME students had the lowest level of expectation of achieving a 'good degree'.

c) Study time and attendance

There is no evidence from this research that BME home or overseas students spend less time studying or are more likely to skip lectures than white students. In fact, BME students (both home and overseas) seem to be *less* likely to skip lectures than white students, and many staff viewed BME overseas students as being generally hardworking and motivated compared to home students (the relative paucity of BME home students meant that staff were unlikely to attribute characteristics to this group). However, male students did report lower study hours and were more likely to skip lectures than female students. BME home students were more likely to hold a part time job, and male students were more likely to work long hours in paid employment; however, female students (especially female BME home students) were more likely to have childcare responsibilities. A recurring theme of women having to work harder in order to prove themselves appeared in the female focus groups.

d) Study habits

There is little evidence of differences in flexibility of study habits between white and BME students (in terms of place and way of studying). However, BME overseas students expressed a stronger preference for learning through memorisation than either white or BME home students. BME students in general expressed a stronger preference for using internet resources for studying than white students. However, it is not clear that study-related factors alone are sufficient to explain the attainment gap for these groups. Female students had the most flexible study habits and also reported strong peer support for studying. They were perceived by staff as being organised and conscientious. Male students expressed a stronger preference for using internet resources than female students, indicating perhaps that female students are more information-literate. Male students were more likely to be fixed in their approach to studying, reported being discouraged from studying by their peers and were wary of being associated with a 'geeky' stereotype.

e) Teaching and assessment

There was evidence of some tension between student and staff expectations of teaching and assessment in higher education across all groups. This was particularly true of BME overseas students, who expressed some concern about the perceived lack of contact time and need for independent study. Staff felt that students from BME backgrounds did not always participate well within the classroom environment, and some BME students reported being unwilling to ask questions in class for fear of reinforcing prejudiced expectations about lack of ability. In addition, writing was mentioned by staff as being a key issue

influencing success in higher education, and writing skills were viewed as being more problematic for BME overseas and male students.

f) Support needs

Students across all groups were somewhat unhappy with the extent and amount of academic support offered by staff, whereas staff tended to be concerned about students who did not seek support when it was required. Whilst UK students expressed some concerns about the sufficiency of their prior education in preparing them for university-level study, in the case of BME overseas students, this could be compounded by language issues. There is some evidence that female students were more likely to ask for academic support than male students.

g) Social integration

Male students seemed to place more importance on the social aspects of university life, while women tended to place importance on academic aspects. Students suggested that involvement in sports and the drinking culture might impact on academic work (for male students). BME students tended to be less strongly engaged with the social life of the university in general. The social difficulties encountered by BME Home and BME overseas students were different. BME overseas students reported facing issues of integration and mixing with home students. BME home students were more likely to report issues of isolation and loneliness, possibly owing to the small numbers at Plymouth. Both BME overseas and BME home students reported not feeling comfortable speaking in English with friends at University.

h) Experiences of being a minority

BME students identified some challenges but also some opportunities arising from being part of a minority group at this institution. Social difficulties of integration for overseas students, given language and other barriers were reported; however, the lack of other students from the same ethnic group was seen as providing an incentive for students to mix. Some BME students reported a lack of cultural awareness of home students and, although most were reluctant to consider racism, there are reports of identified discrimination particularly from BME overseas students. However, students also described a range of coping strategies which they drew on, and some felt that the experience of being in a minority enhanced their personal resilience and resourcefulness.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

This research has identified a number of differences between the groups of students which may go some way towards helping to explain the observed differences in degree outcomes. Examples of factors which may contribute to the success of female students in HE include: Good attendance at lectures; spending time studying outside classes; having well developed writing skills; flexibility in study habits; strong support from peers; willingness to ask for advice and support when needed; and realistic expectations about likely degree outcomes. In order to reduce the gender gap, it would therefore be advisable to encourage male students to engage in better study habits and make regular attendance at classes mandatory; to offer writing support for those in need; to provide regular checks on understanding and feedback on progress; to encourage students to seek support from tutors (and ensure that tutors provide this support); and to warn about the risks of over-confidence and too great a focus on social activities. It was notable that when staff were asked to describe the characteristics of a successful student, they attributed many of these qualities to female students.

Interpreting the ethnicity attainment gap is more problematic, particularly because of the small number of BME students involved in the study, and the difficulties in disentangling the issues relating to overseas students or non native English speakers. In addition, a number of the attributes of female students (such as being hard-working and conscientious) were also attributed to BME students. However, some possible explanations for the attainment gap include: differences in intrinsic interest related to motivation for undertaking higher education; over-confidence in degree outcomes, perhaps arising from lack of familiarity with the UK system; difficulties with writing or with English language; and lack of integration into the social life of the university. Although evidence is not conclusive from this study, the impact of prejudice and racism should not be dismissed as a potential contributory factor. Possible actions to reduce the ethnicity attainment gap might include: providing more information and advice at the application stage to ensure that students are clear about expectations (of them and of teaching staff); easier transfer process if students decide to change degree programme; writing and English language support for those in need; more activities aimed at enhancing integration of students from different cultures.

Staff development is also a key factor in tackling the attainment gap, since there are a number of actions which staff could take to mitigate the impacts of ethnicity or gender. It is clear from this study that both staff and students, whilst overtly expressing the view that they did not 'see' gender or ethnicity, were influenced by widespread stereotypes about different types of student. There was only limited engagement with a more critical view of race and gender, and little reflection on the ways in which gender and ethnicity might influence the everyday interactions of staff and students. Ways in which staff might enhance their teaching to the benefit of all students include:

- providing more explicit guidance on autonomous learning (why it is important and how much time commitment might be expected to be successful);
- demonstrating what a 'good assignment' looks like, and explaining what its key features are (including aspects of the writing style, criticality and analytical thinking);
- helping students understand plagiarism, using specific examples and focusing on respect for the author's integrity, rather than exclusively focusing on academic dishonesty;
- being explicit about the need for criticality and analytical thinking, and explain clearly to students what this means in practice;
- changing teaching methods to ensure that all can participate in classes where appropriate (via structured discussion methods or audience response systems etc.);
- allocating students to groups, rather than allowing them to self select on all occasions, in order to provide a more diverse learning context;
- providing learning opportunities which require all students to participate (e.g. group activities where each person has a specific role; structured discussions in which each person has a turn to speak etc.) to reduce the potential for discussion to be dominated by an individual or a specific group of students;
- encouraging students to respond to questions in lectures, or use electronic voting equipment to check students' understanding, as they may be afraid to ask even if unsure;
- using more diverse modes of assessment which draw on other skills aside from the written word (e.g. practicals, presentations, posters);
- building up the level of writing in assignments gradually, in order to 'scaffold' development of writing abilities in the discipline;

- providing feedback on student writing at an early stage of the programme and signposting students to available support for assignment writing and English language (including Learning Development and the English Language Centre);
- enabling students to undertake self assessment of their own skills (through an online resource, or with personal tutors) with links to appropriate support services;
- ensuring that there is a safe environment for students to ask questions – through face to face tutorials or through e-mail or an online discussion space;
- drawing on the experiences and expertise of international students where possible by including course content which refers to contexts outside the UK.

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