

Black and ethnic minority student success: addressing the attainment gap

Gary Loke
Head of Policy
Equality Challenge Unit

Over the past 6 years, the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students¹ in UK higher education has been rising. In the 2008/9 academic year 17.8% of UK-domiciled students were from BME backgrounds. This is an increase from 14.9% in the 2003/4 academic year.

The increasing participation of BME students in higher education should be celebrated because diversity has an inherent educational in encouraging debate and discussion. Universities, whose business is to develop, share and exchange knowledge, can encourage learning through increasing diversity.

However, underneath this headline data, how are BME students actually finding the lived experience of higher education? This paper argues that that while measuring diversity is important, it is sometimes more important to look at qualitative experiences and the outcome of diversity.

In 2007-08, Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) jointly delivered a project on 'Ethnicity, gender and degree attainment' which mapped the 'landscape' of BME attainment in higher education. This arose out of research undertaken *Ethnicity and Degree Attainment* in 2007 by Broecke and Nicholls, which found that even controlling for a wide range of factors thought likely to contribute, coming from a minority ethnic community had a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment (see also Fielding *et al.*, 2008).

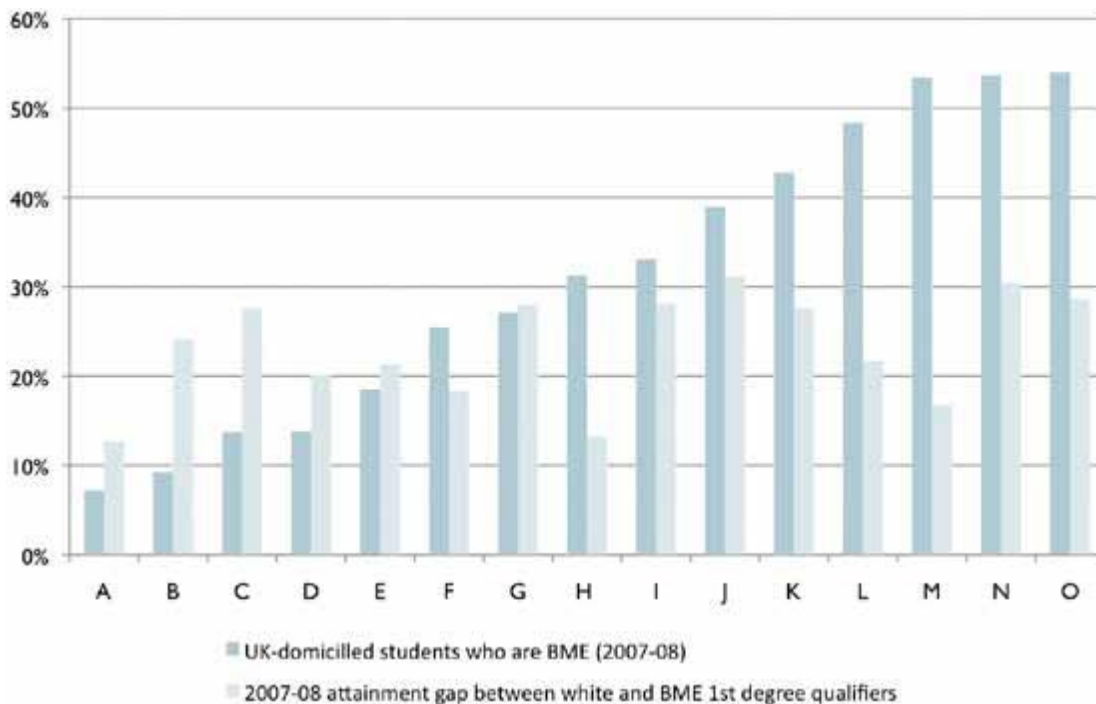
Findings from the ECU/HEA work confirmed previous research and highlighted once again the somewhat confusing and complex picture regarding degree attainment, ethnicity and the mitigating effects of socio-economic, educational and institutional factors for individual attainment. The degree attainment gap between BME and white qualifiers in 2008/9 was 18% (ECU 2010). This gap is the difference between white qualifiers who obtain a first class honours or upper second class honours and that of BME qualifiers.

Research in other European countries appear to echo similar concerns (see for example Wolff and Pásztor, 2010 which showed that while Dutch higher education was increasingly ethnically diverse, ethnic minority students were more likely to not complete their higher education).

Emanating from that research, in 2009, ECU and the HEA embarked on a year-long programme, working with 15 UK higher education institutions to develop and/or pilot initiatives to address the degree attainment gap. One of the aims of the programme was to develop a deeper understanding of the implications of student diversity for degree attainment.

¹ UK-domiciled students

The figure below shows the profiles of institutions that took part in the programme:



Beyond these basic statistics, each participating institution had its own detailed profile in relation to the ethnic make-up of its BME students, their socioeconomic backgrounds and their distribution across areas of study. Research continues to show the complexities of the interplay between such factors in accounting, at least partially, for differential performance both within and between ethnic groups; added to which is the complexity of the part of differential attainment that remains inexplicable in terms that can be readily identified and measured.

This paper will explore the findings from that programme, including the different mechanisms that institutions have trialled to help close the degree attainment gap. The mechanisms are broadly themed into topics:

- Building knowledge: data collection and action
- Building understanding: further research
- Changing practice: learning, teaching, assessment and student support
- Changing institutional culture and individual behaviour
- Embedding the agenda: institutional infrastructure and governance
- Changing cultures: Institutional policy, strategies and procedure

References

Broecke, S. and Nicholls, T. (2007) *Ethnicity and Degree Attainment*, DfES Research Report W92. Available from:

<http://publications.education.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=RW92>

Equality Challenge Unit (2010) *Equality in higher education: statistical report 2010*. London: ECU. Available from: www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-in-he-stats-10/

Fielding, A., Charlton, C., Kounali, D. and Leckie, G. (2008) *Degree attainment, ethnicity and gender: interactions and the modification of effects – a quantitative analysis*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/inclusion/EDA_quantitative_report

Wolff, R. and Pásztor, A. (2010) 'Equal opportunity in a public system: experiences of ethnic minority students in Dutch Higher Education' in Lazin, Evans and Jayaram (eds.) *Higher Education and Equality of Opportunity: Cross-National Perspectives* Lexington Books