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Awakening the unconscious: Mind the attainment gap

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Abstract

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

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why the Difference?

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

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

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

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

1. Lower entry qualifications. Although this varies across programmes, generally the gap narrows as the level of qualifications increases and for very high achievers reverses.

2. Age. Mature minority ethnic students' performance can in some circumstances be worse than younger minority ethnic students and the gap is largest for Bangladeshi students followed by Chinese students.

3. Gender. Black females outperform black males.

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

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

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

Unconscious Bias

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

Numbers and Words

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

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

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

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

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

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

Interventions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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