# Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment Project

## FINAL REPORT

Equality Challenge Unit

The Higher Education Academy

# Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This report provides an outline of the research and development outcomes under the Ethnicity and Gender Degree Attainment project, which was undertaken by the Higher Education Academy and Equality Challenge Unit between 2007 and 2008.

This project, which benefited from substantial input and assistance by higher education institutions and sector agencies, engaged in a series of research and development activities to explore possible causes of and practical responses to degree attainment differentials relating to ethnicity and gender.

The project focused on an exploration of:

- understandings and perceptions of degree attainment variation across institutions and among academics and students
- ways in which current Race Equality Policies and Gender Equality Schemes helped higher education institutions in addressing issues of attainment variation
- relevant teaching, learning and assessment activities and issues.

These questions were explored within various strands of activity described below. This report provides no evidence of clear causal factors to explain degree attainment variation by gender or ethnicity. Given the complexity of educational experiences, this is unsurprising. Moreover, the main scope of this project was to gather sector perceptions and examples of equality and diversity systems, activities and practice. While the project identifies some areas for further research, it urges immediate action and shared ownership of this issue by government, institutions and individuals to address differential degree attainment.

## Key outcomes from the project

**Former DfES research** – The project team did not find information to contradict the former DfES research from which this project emerged. This research showed that even after controlling for the majority of contributory factors, being from a minority ethnic group (except the Other Black, Mixed and Other groups) was still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment. The research also showed that females are more likely to obtain higher degree classification than males, except when it comes to attaining a first.

**Causal factors** – The causes of degree attainment variation with respect to gender and ethnicity were found to be unlikely to be reducible to single, knowable factors.

**Data collection and analysis** – While quantitative data collection at institutions was often found to be sophisticated, in some cases the research indicated a gap between the collection of data and subsequent analysis and action.

**Perceptions and understandings** – Institutional perceptions of the reasons for differential attainment according to ethnicity and gender appear more certain on a general level, but there is less clarity about contributory factors at the individual institutional level.

**Learning and teaching development** – Further linkage and co-ordination is needed at governance, strategic and curriculum development levels between principles and practice of equality and diversity, and learning, teaching and assessment functions.

**Assessment and feedback** – More research and development activities are needed to strengthen demonstrably fair, inclusive and helpful assessment and feedback regimes for all students.

**Student support** – While a good level of student support activities are provided by institutions, it is important to resist a tendency to view students as the core problem, instead of other factors.

**Institutional infrastructure and management** – While the general importance of Equality and Diversity committees is well recognised across the sector, these committees are not always sufficiently empowered to support the effective integration of equality and diversity principles across the university. Strategic attention to the role, level of representation and responsibilities of these committees is vital for the generation of an inclusive ethos and supportive policy and practice.

**Policies and practice** – Race Equality Policies and Gender Equality Schemes do not appear to inform HEIs' engagement with attainment issues. A report of the institution's relevant activities, to include indications of progress against actions, should be a prominent feature of a university's profile.

## Key recommendations
Although many of the outcomes outlined in this report are provisional and indicative, they offer a sufficient basis for immediate action within the sector, primarily because the project did not find information to contradict

the former DfES research. It would therefore be useful for higher education institutions to consider the following key recommendations as a means of improving understanding and practice in relation to attainment, ethnicity and gender issues:

• There is a need to ensure that the valuable information gained from data sources, such as management information systems, are used as a means of reflective institutional analysis and action planning, ideally through impact assessment. The loop between data collection, data analysis and action planning must be closed.
• HEIs need to implement systems that can evaluate, review and design teaching, learning and assessment activities in light of data on degree attainment variation.

These key recommendations are supplemented by others to reinforce the benefits of combining and co-ordinating equalities issues with those of attainment (e.g. linking together Learning and Teaching Strategies, Race Equality Policies and Gender Equality Schemes to develop inclusive practices).

# Foreword

I am delighted to introduce the report of the Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment project. Just over a year ago the findings of some research on Ethnicity and Degree Attainment were published by the then Department for Education and Skills. This research showed that even after controlling for the majority of contributory factors, there is a difference in the achievement of students from certain minority ethnic groups with regard to final degree attainment. In addition it showed that women are more likely to obtain higher degree classification than men, except when it comes to attaining a first.

This project picked up from that research and aimed to keep the matter 'live' with higher education institutions (HEIs) by engaging with them to find out their perceptions, as well as finding out about practices in HEIs that may be recommended as possible ways of taking the debate further in individual institutions.

Retention and achievement of our students is important to all institutions. We all want to get the best out of our students. The possibility that our policy infrastructure and some of our approaches to teaching and learning (including assessment) may not be enabling some of our students to achieve their full potential is surely something that HEIs would wish to discuss, notwithstanding our duties under the equalities legislation. The purpose of this report is to help institutions to do just that.

This report does not claim to the have all the answers, nor is it an extensive piece of research into cause and effects. Rather it is a provisional survey of the landscape, which has produced some very practical suggestions for how HEIs might engage with the issues and consider the relevance in their own context. We hope that it will provide a useful stimulus for HEIs, among professional learning and teaching specialists and those with responsibility for equality matters, but also among senior managers within institutions. After all there is a sound business case to be made for maintaining institutional practices which maximise student achievement.

Those involved with the project hope that this report is not an end to the debate, but rather a beginning. In commending this report to the sector, I would like to thank all those involved – to my fellow steering group members and to those staff in HEIs who have given generously of their time as part of the survey work. Finally, this report would not have been completed without the hard work of the project team members, in particular Glynis Cousin, Saheema Rawat and Cristina Sin.

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# 1. Introduction

The ethnicity, gender and degree attainment project arose out of the findings of the DfES  research, *Ethnicity and Degree Attainment* by Stijn Broecke and Tom Nicholls, published in January 2007, which showed that even after controlling for the majority of contributory factors, being from a minority ethnic group (except the Other Black, Mixed and Other groups) was still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment. The research also showed that females are more likely to obtain higher degree classification than males, except when it comes to attaining a first.

The findings from this research prompted DIUS, HEFCE and HEFCW to commission the Higher Education Academy (the Academy) and Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), supported by UUK and GuildHE, to work with English and Welsh higher education institutions to investigate the types of institutional practice that can have a positive and/or negative effect on degree attainment according to ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, gender. The original former DfES research report focused on English-domiciled students in English HEIs. This project extended its scope to consider issues affecting English- and Welsh-domiciled minority ethnic students.

Given their importance to the subject matter of this project, the *Race Relations Act 1976* (as amended by the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000*) and the Gender Equality Duty under the *Equality Act 2006* were used to guide the project.

This report outlines the key outcomes from a series of research and development activities undertaken as part of the project, and provides practical recommendations for action by HEIs and relevant organisations. It is aimed at learning and teaching specialists, equality and diversity practitioners, academic staff, vice-chancellors and senior management in HEIs, and trade and student union members and officers. It is also intended that this report provides useful ways forward for DIUS and sector organisations.

# 2. Aims of the project

The aims of the project related to the following three distinct areas of activity:

(a) Sector-wide investigation of perceptions, understandings, policies and practices concerning attainment. This investigation was conducted through survey research and eight case studies.

(b) Some limited further analysis of the data available to identify any additional factors that may have a bearing on the attainment on minority ethnic groups, and males and females. This involved analysis of relevant quantitative studies and datasets, as well as qualitative evidence.

(c) Development of the recommendations to inform good practice, informed by the investigations in (a) and (b).

# 3. Scope of activities

The project consisted of the following five strands, each of which was conducted by commissioned consultants:

## 3.1 A survey of HEIs to investigate current policies, practices and understandings in the sector

A survey was distributed to contacts in all English HEIs, and 22 follow-up semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted. Completed questionnaires were received from 54 (40%) out of 133 English HEIs. This gathered perceptions, views and reported experiences concerning differential degree attainment by ethnicity and gender.

This survey was supplemented by an internet-based documentary analysis that searched for public and easily available equality policies and schemes across sixty-one English and Welsh institutions (ensuring geographic coverage and a spread of type of higher education institutions). Documents were located through a systematic search of websites and with some follow-up telephone contact with relevant staff.

## 3.2 Case studies

The aim of this strand was to generate case studies of the experiences of HEIs in relation to initiatives focused on or related to ethnicity and degree attainment, and to see how the Gender Equality Duty has enabled institutions to consider issues relating to gender and degree attainment differentials.

Eight universities agreed to collaborate with the project on the basis of a dialogic and confidential approach to include, where possible, conversations with students.

## 3.3 Brief literature review

A brief review of existing published literature addressed understandings of factors and contexts relating to degree attainment among UK-domiciled minority ethnic students, and male and female students. The aim of this review was to identify the potential need for further investigations.

## 3.4 Quantitative data analysis of HESA and NSS data

Further analysis of the dataset considered by the DfES research that triggered this project (the 2004-05 HESA student record data) and relevant data from

the National Student Survey was undertaken. Using a multi-level approach, the analysis of the HESA data aimed to elucidate the role of factors such as institution, subject area and demographic background in relation to minority ethnic and gender-related differences in degree attainment. This was followed by further analysis of the NSS dataset, building on the work of Surridge (2006) and others, again focusing in greater detail on factors that may interact with minority ethnic and gender-related differences in degree attainment. (Note that the National Student Survey (NSS) is targeted at final-year undergraduates in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and participating higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland).

## 3.5 Qualitative data analysis

Recognising the value of institutionally commissioned qualitative research into student experiences with respect to degree attainment variation, this strand established an expert panel of relevant academics and equality officers. The panel generated a set of suggestions for institutions wanting to address the practical, methodological and ethical issues relating to the gathering and analysing of qualitative data to complement statistical evidence on degree attainment variation.

Dialogue groups were also held with British minority ethnic students at some universities in England and Wales. Additionally, views on the project's recommendations were sought from delegates at a recent National Union of Students Black members' conference in October 2007. The data from this strand should be treated as generative of possible understandings and of further discussion. Given the limitation of this dataset, we do not claim that the views gathered are necessarily representative.

## 3.6 Scoping conference

In addition to these five strands of activity, a one-day scoping conference was held in September 2007 to summarise, synthesise and discuss the project's outcomes with policymakers, researchers, equality officers and academics. The event was both consultative, and generative of ideas and recommendations.

This report outlines the main outcomes from the above strands, and presents recommendations that are informed by them.

Full reports from each of the above strands are available from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/ethnicity_degree_attainment_project and www.ecu.ac.uk.

# 4. Context

There are a range of contextual factors relevant to this project's enquiry.

Firstly, it is of paramount importance for HEIs and sector organisations to understand the factors that might influence degree attainment in order to address how to raise it to the highest possible level for all students. This question directly bears upon graduate employability and the sector's concern to compete on a world-class level. Moreover, the premium attached to attainment levels also fundamentally relates to issues of fair participation and social cohesion.

Secondly, the recently produced Burgess report (2007) is of clear concern to this project. The Burgess report addresses issues of how best to assess, calculate, record and present student achievement in the UK. It recommends that the means of representing student achievement should be reformed because the honours classification system (which tends to be reduced to the two categories of first/upper second and 'the rest') is far too blunt a tool to fully capture the qualities and capabilities of the modern student (Burgess 2007, p.43). The report recommends supplementing degree classification with a detailed Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), although it should be noted that the current degree classification system would continue while the HEAR is developed. Further consideration will be given to abandoning or changing the degree classification system after the trialling of the HEAR. As this recommendation is taken forward, it could offer complementary opportunities to address the issues relating to differential achievement across student groups.

Thirdly, with respect to ethnicity it is already known that the initial participation rates for British minority ethnic students is higher than for their white peers – they represent one in eight of UK students (Connor *et al.* 2004); that Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean have lower rates of participation than other minority ethnic groups (Connor *et al.* 2004); and that most minority ethnic students are registered at post-1992 universities (Modood 2006). These broad factors provide an important background to some of the issues addressed in this report.

Fourthly, previous research has made associations between gender, degree attainment and assessment, arguing that: anonymous marking has become common practice in many departments as a result of the claims that this increases fairness for female students (Bradly 1984; Baird 1998); that males are in 'first-rich' science disciplines (Woodfield and Earl-Novell 2006); and that exams favour males and coursework females (Martin 1997; Francis *et*

*al.* 2001; Smithers 2003). This scholarship, and the continuing debates it has prompted, is of clear relevance to the concerns of this project with respect both to gender and to the broader concerns raised in the reports on demonstrably fair assessment regimes for all students.

Finally, these questions of degree attainment variation by gender and ethnicity also sit within a legislative and policy environment.

The *Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000* requires higher education institutions to meet a three-stranded general duty to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination
- promote equality of opportunity
- promote good race relations between persons of different racial groups.

This duty is known as a positive duty, as it requires institutions to pre-empt unlawful discrimination before it occurs and to be proactive in meeting the three strands outlined above. The rationale for this positive requirement is to help institutions ensure that students and staff of all ethnic backgrounds can make the most of their experiences in higher education.

The general duty is accompanied by four specific duties, which can be thought of as the tools by which institutions can meet the general duty. These are:

1. creating and maintaining a Race Equality Policy
2. monitoring the admission and progress of students and staff recruitment and career progression by racial group
3. assessing the impact of all institutional policies for their impact on different racial groups
4. regularly publishing the results of all its work on race equality, in particular the results of work outlined above.

A key feature of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 lies in its proactive and positive nature. Subsequent legislative provisions in other equality areas such as gender and disability have enhanced the concept of a more proactive promotion of equality. For example, while the Gender Equality Duty does not have a requirement to promote good relations, its two-stranded duty provides a gender-specific equivalent to the Race Equality Duty. Crucially, the specific duties under the Duty (which do not apply to HEIs in Wales) clearly show the development of positive equalities legislation, requiring an HEI to:

1. prepare and publish a Gender Equality Scheme, showing how it will meet its general and specific duties and setting out its gender equality objectives
2. consider the need to include objectives to address any gender pay gap

when determining gender equality objectives

3. gather and use information on how its policies and practices affect gender equality

4. consult stakeholders (e.g. employees, students, trade unions) and take account of relevant information in order to determine its gender equality objectives

5. assess the impact of its current and proposed policies and practices on gender equality.

6. implement the actions set out in its scheme within three years, unless it is unreasonable or impracticable to do so

7. report against the scheme every year, and review the scheme at least every three years.

The net effect of these legislative provisions (further information on which can be found at www.ecu.ac.uk) is that there is a legal imperative for institutions to consider key points within the three parts of the student experience: admissions, progression and attainment. The provisions of the legislation can also be considered as a useful focus on the relevant equalities considerations in these areas, and can be brought together with past research that shows recurrent themes.

# 5. Key outcomes

This section provides an outline of the key outcomes from the strands described above, and is organised under the following five thematic headings:

1. Data collection and action
2. Learning, teaching, assessment and student support
3. Perceptions and understandings
4. Institutional governance and management
5. Policies and practice.

A full account of the activities and outcomes from each strand of the project can be found at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/ethnicity_degree_attainment_project and www.ecu.ac.uk.

It is important to reiterate that, although many of the outcomes outlined in this report are provisional and indicative, they offer a sufficient basis for immediate action within the sector, primarily because the project did not find information to contradict the former DfES research. To help support institutions in formulating such action, case studies based on composite examples of practice gathered from institutions have been included.

## 5.1 Data collection and action

As indicated, higher education institutions are legally required to gather data on levels of representation in order to understand potential or actual gaps, and then to take action against any adverse findings (for example, through setting targets and carrying out impact assessments). In relation to this requirement, the survey revealed that 67% of HEIs compiled and classified degree attainment by ethnicity, and 77% of HEIs classified degree attainment by gender.

Good data collection systems were a common feature of the institutions that offered case studies, with one HEI having an excellent management information system which tracked all the relevant stages of the student cycle by ethnicity and gender. A sophisticated approach to data collection and analysis of this kind supported the identification of gaps in representation, attainment differentials and complaints by students.

Follow through from target setting varied across institutions. One university had a very thoughtful approach in which data from attainment results are the basis for setting challenging but achievable targets. However, it appeared that in some institutions targets were not always widely communicated across the institution, thus impacting on ownership.

*"Monitoring and HESA statistics are part of the problem; these just lead to ticking the right boxes and breed spin. Monitoring data becomes the focus – but we should be finding out the story behind the data."*

— **Staff comment**

Management information systems support institutions to organise and evaluate their departments. Making full use of these systems emerged as key, to ensure that they integrate the need to collect equalities data, set targets and plan activities, such as positive action. It is important, however, that management information systems are seen as a means to an outcome-focused end, in that they should provide a catalyst for action in necessary areas (such as target setting); where possible, they should be teamed with qualitative data collection so that institutions can drill down into the experiences of groups of students.

**Case study**

University 1 has outlined in its Race Equality Policy baseline data for students from different ethnic backgrounds and has set challenging but achievable targets with clear roles and responsibilities for implementation. To ensure that it meets the targets, it has developed excellent management information systems to generate statistics on the admissions process, student progression and degree attainment by BME and white students. In an overall sense, it has established a central repository for equality and diversity data.

Having analysed the data from the university's management information system, the university has been able to start an in-depth analysis that would allow for particular variables to be tested.

When looking at the issue of degree class awarded, the university found that students from Black Caribbean and Chinese backgrounds were less likely to gain upper seconds or firsts compared to other ethnic groups. To ascertain potential causal factors for this differential, the university decided to investigate further. In addition to looking at results of the most recent National Students Survey, it decided to conduct qualitative analysis by way of interviews with students. In doing this, it chose students from a variety of different departments, to ensure that the student selection was representative of the overall pattern of students at the university. The university was able to employ a PhD student at the university who specialised in qualitative research to undertake this activity. It was also made clear that the researcher should work closely with the students' union to make sure that students would be encouraged to provide feedback.

While feedback from the students was generally quite positive, there were some issues of concern for the university, such as:

- a growing feeling amongst Asian students of being 'othered' and alienated
- support structures for Black students coming from outside the institution (for example, outside organisations that provided mentoring support), rather than from within
- a general feeling of disengagement between students and teaching staff.

Having considered these points, the university decided that its next steps should be to:

- engage with students through mechanisms such as diversity weeks and facilitating discussion groups
- make links with local Black and minority ethnic community groups to see how the university could contribute to any existing support structures for students
- review current student support activities (e.g. mentoring, study support workshops) to ensure that met requirements of students from diverse backgrounds
- work with the students' union to raise awareness of the student support work and other means of engaging with students
- review feedback from students on an annual basis
- ensure that the above information featured in relevant documents such as the institution's Race Equality Policy, Gender Equality Scheme and attendant action plans.

**Conclusion**

HEIs, in the main, appear to use sophisticated data collection systems. However, in some institutions the collection of data, data analysis and action planning need to be strengthened, with appropriate action undertaken and monitoring of progress.

## 5.2 Learning, teaching, assessment and student support

### 5.2.1 Learning and teaching

More needs to be known about how those directly involved in teaching and learning enhancement (e.g. educational developers, pro-vice-chancellors for teaching and learning) engage specifically with attainment variation. In one collaborating institution the Director of Educational Development worked closely with the university's Equality Officer and sat on the Equality and

*"The first step is to listen carefully to what students in the affected groups have to say…"*

— Staff comment

Diversity Committee, although we do not know whether this is common practice in other institutions.

While most teaching and learning strategies reviewed made reference to inclusion and diversity, particularly with respect to the widening participation agenda, issues of attainment variation appeared to be less specifically addressed.

The project did not locate evidence of institutions that explored subject variation and attainment gaps. Nor did the project find evidence of explorations of attainment gaps within teacher development programmes, although many such programmes clearly include a concern for equality and diversity.

The perceptions relating to the reasons for degree attainment gaps reported in section 5.3 raise important challenges for academics and those responsible for teaching quality development. In particular, if academic teachers offer explanations that rely wholly or in part on a 'deficit model' (a tendency to view students as the core problem instead of other factors), they may be less motivated to review their own teaching practices.

Overall, males were seen by survey respondents as less engaged with academic study: particularly Black Caribbean and white working-class males. Although, the number of students interviewed was too low for any reliable generalisation to be made, some commented that they were concerned about stereotypical views in circulation, and indeed expressed anxiety that teachers might have preconceived ideas about them based on their gender or ethnicity.

### 5.2.2 Assessment

There are clearly challenges for higher education institutions to demonstrate visibly that their assessment policies and practices are fair. The National Student Surveys for 2004–05 and 2005–06 revealed that 74% of white students agreed with the statement 'assessment and marking arrangements have been fair', compared to 66% of Black students, 64% of Asian and 67% of 'others'. This is perceptual data, but what students think is happening can have a bearing on their study behaviour. At the least, these figures suggest that institutions should keep a watch on response variation to this question in their own institution.

Most of the students spoken to raised the need to have conversations with academics to fully grasp what is required for assignments and to establish trust in marking standards. These students appeared to be unaware of the extent and nature of formal information about performance criteria that all academics give to their students, which suggests that formal information needs to be accompanied by ways of securing active engagement.

*"[The assessment process] lacks explanation especially on what would make a difference to improve assignment. "*

— **Student comment**

Concern was also raised by some students about securing further feedback on a low mark.  It was suggested by one respondent that it requires a great

deal of confidence and nerve to follow up a disappointing mark, and that thought needs to go into creating a departmental culture that makes this a comfortable and natural step for students to take.

In one contributing university, academic staff are asked to reduce borderline cases of 49, 59 and 69 in favour of clearer differentiation between degree classifications. In another institution, all assessment is by examination to maximise the anonymity of the student's work. However, since this institution has a very small number of BME students, there was no way of evaluating whether this made a difference to attainment rates. Further, given the research on examinations and gender, it is by no means clear that a single form of assessment will produce fair results for all students.

The expert panel identified some specific challenges associated with researching assessment and feedback regimes. In particular, there are sensitive and ethical issues associated with examining possible bias in marking. However, it was felt that these difficulties should not inhibit departments and universities from exploring this sensitive terrain in order to ensure robust, fair and inclusive methods of assessment, marking and feedback. Such an exploration with respect to ethnicity can draw on the scholarship relating to gender and marking signalled already.

### 5.2.3 Student support

Student support is an area where some creative and innovative initiatives take place. For example, one higher education institution had a proactive support framework model that could be used to predict students at risk of failure or attrition. This is a statistical model in which variables, including age, gender, ethnicity, need for financial support, prior attainment and so forth, are factored into the analysis of where to place support. In using this model, care, of course, needs to be taken to avoid over-determining particular social groups as underachievers.

Most universities surveyed indicated that study skills tutoring, workshops and academic writing support might help particular groups. Mentoring and personal support were provided by some institutions; these were seen to be relevant to minority ethnic students, as well as to young males 'at risk' of disengagement.

There is also growing interest among universities to extend the curriculum to include cross-cultural capabilities, which can help facilitate better understanding between diverse cultural groups. One contributing institution has set targets so that departments can work towards the embedding of these capabilities within an agreed timeframe.

Some institutions, however, did not have available details on take-up of student support activities. More needs to be known about possible

associations between using these services and raising degree attainment, ideally through an evaluative framework. Further, the project was unable to identify whether monitoring data gathered by support services is submitted to teaching and learning committees for discussion – one way of achieving this would be to ensure that a summary of student support activities is captured in the institutional Race Equality Policy, in order to raise awareness of the existence of such activities and to aid monitoring of their effectiveness.

Finally, a few respondents to the survey cautioned against special interventions for BME students, stressing that student support services need to be inclusive and available to all students. There was not a consensus on this issue since other respondents felt that targeted initiatives were important. Finally, a few students who participated in the dialogue groups said that the presence of BME role models would help encourage further affinity with the institutional environment.

**Case study**

One university regularly reviews its statistical evidence of attainment patterns throughout the student cycle so that it can identify any emerging trends in underachievement, which can then be addressed in a timely fashion.

Another institution integrates its concerns for an inclusive ethos for international students with those for a campus that respects learner diversity generally. This university has set targets for all departments to produce ways in which cross-cultural capabilities can be embedded in the curriculum in their subject areas. Workshops are run to support this process and to allow academic staff space to explore which cross-cultural capabilities may be relevant to their disciplinary area.

*"Any actions should be embedded in the main curricula or it will not reach the people it needs to reach."*

*"In general, initiatives that address people as individuals and not members of groups are most effective."*

— Staff comments

**Conclusion**

Two key issues emerged from this project's enquiries into teaching, learning and assessment. The first concerned the extent to which there is cross-fertilisation of the work between those responsible for equality and those for teaching and learning. There is a need to combine consideration of principles and practice of learning, teaching and equality and diversity with key issues in areas such as attainment. The second concerns the importance of exploring assessment and feedback regimes with students to ensure that they fully understand what is required of them and they feel comfortable about raising concerns at any stage of the assessment cycle.

*"Widening Participation is a pathologising model. Students are seen as special cases to be disciplined and whose aspirations to higher education must be raised."*

*"The general problem is that students lack independent study and personal organisational skills… this is the case for many students, including ethnic minorities."*

— Staff comments

The scale of student support activities indicates a growing level of commitment to diversity and equality issues surrounding attainment.

However, more needs to be known about the contribution these support activities are making in relation to degree variation patterns by gender and ethnicity.

## 5.3 Perceptions and understandings on causes for degree attainment variation

Most survey respondents saw the reasons behind degree variation as likely to involve complex determinants, as indicated by the choices they made when given a list of potential factors to select from. An important aspect of this complexity concerns differentiation in relation to intersectionality/multiple discrimination, as the experiences of young Black men may differ from those of older white women, for example.

It is important to stress that the survey asked for perceptions about the potential and actual causes of degree variation. As indicated, such perceptions are of importance because what people think creates a problem will often determine how they address it.

Although there was some use of a 'deficit model' to explain differential attainment (see Tables 1 and 2), particularly men's, many explanations regarding ethnicity mixed deficit-type explanations with those focusing on institutional processes and discrimination.

**Table 1:** Reasons given for differential attainment by ethnicity

|  | In general | At my institution |
|---|---|---|
| Need to work/finance | 83.9% (47) | 64.0% (32) |
| Social class factors | 78.6% (44) | 56.0% (28) |
| Family background of university study | 71.7% (38) | 54.0% (27) |
| Parental involvement | 63.0% (34) | 41.2% (21) |
| Subject areas | 61.0% (33) | 38.8% (19) |
| Marginalisation of minority ethnic people | 56.4% (31) | 16.0% (8) |
| Mode of study (FT/PT) | 34.6% (18) | 20.0% (10) |

There was a relatively high variation (approximately 20%) between affirmative answers to reasons for differential attainment by ethnicity "in general" and affirmative answers concerning respondents' own institutions (see Table 1).

The most significant difference (40.4 %) appears in the case of 'marginalisation of minority ethnic students'. This variation seems to indicate that, whereas a number of factors are 'generally' perceived to impact on attainment, there is less certainty regarding reasons for underattainment in instances when people's own institutions are concerned, and regarding the effectiveness of potential solutions (such as the presence of BME staff as role models). Marginalisation, in particular, seems to be put under serious doubt within the context of people's individual institutions. Perhaps the contentiousness of the matter may account partly for this variation.

**Table 2:** Reasons given for differential attainment by gender

|  | In general | At my institution |
|---|---|---|
| Ways that males and females study/ approach examinations | 79.2%  (42) | 60.0%   (30) |
| Subject differences (sciences, arts) | 71.7%  (38) | 51.0%   (25) |
| Gendered expectations of men | 64.2%  (34) | 46.0%   (23) |
| Childcare responsibilities | 60.8%  (31) | 40.8%   (20) |
| Gendered expectations of women | 57.7%  (30) | 34.7%   (17) |
| Family background of university study | 43.4%  (23) | 30.0%   (15) |
| Social class background | 42.3%  (22) | 31.4%   (16) |
| Need to work/finance | 39.2%  (20) | 26.5%   (13) |

The main factors perceived to account for differential attainment by gender were associated with teaching, learning and curriculum design, followed by expectations placed on men and women (Table 2). It should be noted that taking into account caring responsibilities (which usually fall to females and cut short the amount of time they are able to dedicate to study) and discriminatory attitudes, it might be implied that if females gain better degrees than males, they do so despite the obstacles that have yet to disappear.

Again, the variation on the gender issue in the pattern of affirmative responses between perceptions "in general" and perceptions of what occurs in respondents' individual institutions is similar to the distribution for ethnicity. The lower levels of 'yes' answers where people's own institutions are concerned may also indicate a discomfort about this contentious issue.

*"Peer group pressure for males militates against engagement with study."*

— Staff comment

## Experiences of discrimination and institutional ethos

The general ethos of an institution was perceived as important in fostering inclusivity, with potential impact on degree results. This related to the ethnic profile of students in an institution, but was not viewed as reducible to it.

The vulnerability to racism, both past and present, of British minority ethnic students does not appear directly to be addressed by universities in an academic context. There is therefore a need for higher education institutions to consider and provide for students' needs in the learning environment more, and to refer to these provisions in the institutional Race Equality Policy. Some respondents pointed out that students may arrive at university with the worry that earlier experiences of marginalisation will be repeated at the institution. As the survey report states, "nearly all informants felt that BME students might face discrimination and that, even if unwittingly, it was possible for this situation to be replicated within higher education" (Jacobs *et al.* 2007, p.36).

Student concerns about discrimination, whatever their foundation, are likely to have an impact on the social and intellectual well-being of students – again, as the survey report states:

"Racism and ethnic discrimination in society was seen as an important although 'hard to quantify' factor affecting progression and attainment. Many BME students' experiences of some degree of marginalisation at school and of direct and indirect discrimination were seen to affect their confidence and their perceptions that they could succeed at university. This was perceived as an issue especially (although not exclusively) for Black and African-origin students." (p.27).

While the importance of Race Equality Policies and Gender Equality Schemes should not be underestimated, there is a need to couple the intentions of these documents with practices that enable all to feel part of the institution's community. Survey respondents stressed that an inclusive institutional ethos is not achieved by mission statements and publicity, but by inclusive everyday practices with respect to staffing, effectiveness of harassment procedures and the extent of inter-group interactions.

**Case study**

A lecturer at the School of Applied Sciences at the University 3 established a local student discussion group to look at the experiences of Black students in higher education. He had been looking at the student experience in youth and community courses for a number of years, which had provided good background information. Further, having had many informal discussions with students previously, he decided that he would like to conduct a piece of work looking at the experience of Black students.

He and four other colleagues had established a discussion group to inform their research. He felt that it was appropriate that a small group of students be brought together to consider their experiences in relation to the institutional context.

The lecturer found that the discussion group provided a rich source of information. Participants reported that open dialogue allowed them to get much more from the session they attended. They felt safe enough to discuss sensitive matters and to learn from such discussions. In particular, the following perceptions from students emerged:

- feeling strong pressure to fit in with particular 'cultures' at the university
- the expectation of underachievement by tutors
- the positive presence of some role models in the university;
- negative stereotypes featuring in conversations between staff and students.

Having themed discussions on relevant areas allowed the lecturer and his colleagues to gain a substantial amount of information in a variety of key areas. Anonymised information from the discussion groups was fed into relevant impact assessment processes, enabling Black and minority ethnic students across the university to benefit.

*"The imbalance of males at the top of the staffing structure doesn't present positive role models and raise aspirations for female students…exactly the same applies to ethnic minorities and staffing."*

— **Staff comment**

**Conclusion**

Perceptions of differential attainment according to ethnicity and gender appear more certain on a general level, but there is less clarity about causal factors at individual institutional level.

Achievement, may be adversely affected if a student feels vulnerable to discrimination. Accordingly, equality schemes and policies need to be demonstrably translated into practical activities that demonstrate continuing institutional commitment to an inclusive ethos.

*"It is important that the senior management take a lead in showing staff and students that diversity is an issue for everyone."*

— Staff comment

*"A feedback form on the basis of anonymity should help, or maybe have a suggestion box in the department. Again, students will have to be told to feel free to drop their comments in the suggestion box. But if nothing is done towards these suggestions/ comments then the students will lose interest in giving any feedback."*

— Student comment

## 5.4 Institutional infrastructure and governance

In this section we report on matters concerning institutional infrastructure and governance, and their connections to both equality and teaching and learning agendas.

The very important presence of Equality and Diversity committees, or equivalent, was a common feature of the case study institutions. Typically these committees had a wide range of representation from the institution, including senior management, librarians, officers from the students' union, academic staff and human resources staff. However, evidence suggested that more consideration should be made of the positioning of such committees in relation to an institution's reporting structure. Related to this was the matter of how any referred items are considered at senior level, such as by the governing body (which has ultimate legal responsibility for equalities implementation).

Some of the case study institutions reported the committee's actions to the governing council/body as starred items or 'taken without discussion' items. It was thus not always clear how the work of the committee fitted into the overall strategic direction of the higher education institution.

Other initiatives were disadvantaged by low visibility on the institutional strategic agenda. There may be a risk that initiatives will operate in isolation for the following reasons:

- available resources, with demand exceeding supply
- the absence of relevant activities in key documentation (such as Learning and Teaching Strategies, Race Equality Policies or Gender Equality Schemes), which can cause difficulties when trying to track progress
- inadequate mechanisms for HEIs to check relevant feedback from students with respect to degree attainment variation
- dependence on the goodwill of a few staff to take matters forward
- a lack of systematic monitoring, by ethnicity and gender, of participation in initiatives aimed to improve attainment levels and/or the student experience (e.g. student mentoring schemes, study skills workshops etc.).

Equality issues tend to be addressed by Human Resource departments with little clear connectedness to those responsible for learning and teaching quality and enhancement. This tendency suggests that ownership of the problem of degree attainment variation should be broadened, particularly among those responsible for driving the institution's teaching, learning and assessment activities. This is an area where HEIs' Equality and Diversity committees can be of great value.

**Case study**

The Equality and Diversity Committee of University 2 has been in place since 2003, and benefits from a rich level of representation from different parts of the institution, including representatives from student support services, estates, personnel, management information systems, the students' union and trade unions, as well as the Academic Registrar and the Equality and Diversity Officer. The Committee is also chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, which helps to demonstrate strong leadership and commitment to equality and diversity issues.

The Committee advises on the University's strategy on equality and diversity issues, such as staff progression and attainment. It also has a strong implementation role, as it is tasked with co-ordinating work on monitoring systems and impact assessment. The Committee reports back to the University's Governing Council on an annual basis, as a result of which the Council makes recommendations on equality and diversity priorities for the coming year.

A key achievement of the Committee has been in the area of monitoring, where the Academic Registrar and Head of Personnel emphasised the need for more effective collection and use of monitoring data. The University responded by rewriting the Code of Practice for Students with a stronger data-gathering requirement, with underperformance by students to be looked at in relation to different equality areas, and for general themes to be investigated by the relevant head of department with the assistance of the Equality and Diversity Officer.

**Conclusion**

While the importance of having Equality and Diversity committees is well understood by universities, it is equally important to understand that these committees must be appropriately empowered to translate policy into practice. Attention to how roles, levels of representation and responsibilities can enable this is vital. For instance, the spread of responsibilities would need to include: supporting the production of equality schemes and policies; maintaining action plans; considering attainment issues in relation to equality matters; and helping to link these areas to learning, teaching and assessment.

Consideration also needs to be given as to whether existing means of reporting to senior managers and governing bodies, or equivalent, are sufficiently robust to assist practical action.

## 5.5 Policies and practice

Higher education institutions have a legal requirement to create and maintain a Race Equality Policy and Gender Equality Scheme, which provide an outline of the institution's commitment to race and gender equality. In particular, these documents are required to go beyond statements of commitment to equality issues, to define particular activities that will help the institution in embedding race and gender equality. These documents are therefore intended to be useful tools that can help guide the institution in this process.

It appears that equalities legislation, such as the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000* and the *Equality Act 2006*, has provided a degree of documentary focus and impetus to student issues in relation to ethnicity and gender, which in turn has demonstrated a reasonable level of visible and practical commitment. For example, one university is looking at how it can provide guidance to staff on relevant gender issues in learning and teaching.

Among a representative sample of 61 English and Welsh higher education institutions surveyed, references to attainment rarely appeared to be linked to the assigning of staff with responsibility for action. Even fewer institutions from the sample appeared to have annual reports on progress.

Online accessibility of schemes and policies was not always straightforward: some were distributed over a number of different areas of the institution's website without hyperlinked connectivity between them, and some were hard to find at all.

There was little information about institutional action beyond that of data collection. The reasons for this appeared to vary, but can be linked to the following overall issues of implementation and co-ordination:

- lack of linkage to relevant strategies (e.g. learning and teaching strategy)
- insufficient linkages with equalities impact assessment measures
- lack of confidence regarding the use of qualitative data
- insufficient use of mainstreaming techniques
- lack of confidence regarding action setting on the basis of observations made from quantitative data.

A connected issue lay in the question of senior management commitment, already signalled as of importance for the embedding of positive change. This commitment appeared to vary across the HEIs, with some apparent lack of engagement from managers and in one case, a member of staff was advised to take a 'light touch' approach to equality issues. However, these instances need to be balanced with those where senior management showed high levels of commitment to equality and diversity, actively promoting positive work.

*"I think that [the race equality policy] should be part of the initial induction. It should also be included in the student handbook. It should be outlined in the university's website. Students should be actively assisted to participate in activities that reduce stereotypical views about race and ethnicity (…) to raise awareness of culture and difference in a way that does not undermine other races, but encourages better understanding and appreciation."*

— Student comment

*"Intercultural training for university staff [would be helpful]."*

— Staff comment

From the case study investigations, it seems that the widening participation agenda tended to focus on expanding recruitment and on retention, with much less focus on addressing degree attainment variation. This may be due to the attendant resources attached to the widening participation agenda.

**Case study**

The Race Equality Policy and Gender Equality Scheme of College 4 have demonstrated commitment to relevant areas of the student cycle primarily by aiming to generate relevant monitoring data in the following areas:

- student numbers, transfers and drop-outs;
- different methods of assessing students
- work placements
- take-up of student support services
- bullying, racial and sexual harassment
- job offers arising from work placements
- employment rates on graduation
- levels of disciplinary action
- reported incidents of unlawful discrimination and their outcomes
- alleged perpetrators and victims of unlawful discrimination
- outcomes of work to raise student attainment levels.

It is intended that key trends emerging from the above areas will form the basis of the College's forthcoming impact assessment activity, again outlined and timetabled in the Race Equality Policy and Gender Equality Scheme.

**Conclusion**

Race Equality Policies and Gender Equality Schemes should inform HEIs' work on all aspects of the staff and student experience. Prominence should be given to an institution's work on attainment issues, which should include a report on progress against actions. The levels of senior management commitment to equality issues appear to vary. While the Widening Participation agenda has been helpful in raising awareness of recruitment and retention issues and follow-on action, it is important that a similar focus takes place in relation to degree attainment.

# 6. Conclusion and recommendations

For readers wanting more detailed information and findings from this investigation, we urge them to access the reports available from: www. heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/ethnicity_degree_attainment_project and www.ecu.ac.uk.

The main purpose of this overview report is to highlight key outcomes, examples of existing practice and recommendations aimed at reducing the degree attainment gap by gender and ethnicity. A number of our recommendations will be irrelevant to some institutions or sector bodies, either because they do not fit their role or circumstances or because the recommended action is already occurring. We hope, however, that taken together, the recommendations can be used as an evaluative means by which HEIs and sector bodies can judge which apply to them with regard to ownership, responsibility and future action.

As already stressed, precise reasons for differential attainment are difficult to identify due to the complexity of possible causal factors, and we must therefore resist reductive and simplistic explanations. That said, it needs to be recognised that the former DfES research findings are not contradicted by the outcomes of this project. It is also important to recognise that the perceptions students and staff expressed about the marginality of minority groups and their vulnerability to discrimination need to be addressed. Thus the indicative findings of this project point towards the need both for further research, and for urgent immediate practical action by HEIs and sector organisations. We need to ensure that the sector is demonstrably inclusive and free of discriminatory practices or processes that breach equalities legislation.

The following recommendations are intended to support institutions in reflecting on which areas of action might be of particular relevance to them. For ease of reference, this section outlines key recommendations from the five thematic headings used in the outcomes section above and have been supplemented with relevant considerations/actions to aid implementation. A separate recommendation regarding further research has been included, setting out the considerations to be taken into account by HEIs and sector organisations in pursuing research in this area.

We hope the recommendations will be considered also by sector organisations such as the funding councils (HEFCE and HEFCW), advice and support bodies (ECU and the Academy), representative organisations (UUK and GuildHE) the unions (UCU, UNISON and NUS) and relevant networks and groups. We have indicated where specific action by these organisations would be welcome.

## 6.1 Data collection and action

**Key recommendation for HEIs:**
*There is a need for HEIs to ensure that the valuable information gained from data sources, such as management information systems, is used as a means of reflective institutional analysis and action planning, ideally through impact assessment. The loop between data collection, data analysis and action planning must be closed.*

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.      Institutions could explore ways of bringing complementary data sources together to support their reflections on attainment gaps. Many of these sources will be quantitative, but there are also external examiner reports, student scripts and course evaluative data that can be taken into consideration.

ii.     It might be useful for HEIs to explore records of all allegations of student complaints (including those of plagiarism) by ethnicity and gender, along with the number of complaints upheld and subsequent penalties. At the same time, this could support a review of complaints systems. The recent HEFCE/ECU update on conducting equality impact assessments in higher education can assist in this area (see www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/guidancepublications/200709-conductingequalityImpactassessments.pdf).

**Key recommendation for sector organisations:**
*Sector organisations (funding councils, membership organisations, advice and support organisations, and trade unions) are invited to provide guidance (in the form of publications and/or reflective training interventions) to enable institutions to use monitoring data to undertake action planning.*

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.      Consideration could be given to existing resources (such as the HEFCE/ECU guidance on impact assessment referred to above), and to how other mechanisms (such as workshops or briefing sessions) can be used to enhance understanding in this area.

ii.     Proposals for additional support could be considered in line with existing projects, such as the present equality data analysis project by ECU, HESA and others.

iii.    There is a need to provide updated guidance on effective equality monitoring processes.

## 6.2 Learning, teaching, assessment and student support

### 6.2.1 Learning, teaching and assessment

**Key recommendation for HEIs:**
*HEIs should ensure that their systematic review processes include consideration of equalities issues and a robust evaluation of learning, teaching and assessment practices in light of any discovered attainment variation. The subsequent impact on degree attainment as a result of these reviews should also be evaluated.*

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.      HEIs should consider ways in which to demonstrate visible and strong ownership of these recommendations from those responsible for driving teaching and learning policy and practices in HEIs (i.e. PVCs for teaching and learning or equivalent, directors of educational development, academic staff and trade unions).

ii.     Ways in which to strengthen conversations with students about study expectations, standards, performance criteria, assessment and feedback should be considered and actioned.

iii.    Sustained collaboration is needed between equality officers and educational developers to ensure cross-fertilisation of these two areas.

iv.     Evaluation of the following areas should be undertaken (as suggested by the Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice for the Assurance of Quality and Standards):

   • evaluation of assessment practices with periodic internal institutional review mechanisms. Such mechanisms could include trajectory studies of students' progress according to factors such as ethnicity, gender and other equalities areas and be incorporated as part of impact assessment reviews

   • review whether a disproportionate number of complaints and appeals are emanating from students of particular equalities backgrounds, including ethnicity and gender

   • periodic programme reviews to ensure that programmes remain current and valid, to evaluate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes are being attained by students, and the continuing effectiveness of the curriculum and assessment in relation to the intended learning outcomes.

v.      Specially commissioned qualitative research into the experiences of particular student groups could provide valuable intelligence to

institutions. Where possible, researchers with experiential affinity with such student groups need to be identified in order to create a safe context in which sensitive issues can be explored.

**Key recommendations for sector organisations:**
***Research and development initiatives relating to teacher development and curriculum design should include ways of addressing degree attainment variation.***

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.     Organisations for educational development should work with academic and subject communities to strengthen curriculum designs that engage with degree attainment variation.
ii.    Professional standards for academic teachers should include an active engagement with equality and diversity in matters of degree attainment.

### 6.2.2 Student support

**Key recommendation for HEIs:**
***HEIs should ensure that student support activities are adequately resourced to enable them to support the raising of degree attainment for all students.***

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.     There is a need to ensure that support activities avoid stereotypical 'deficit model' approaches, primarily through engaging with students and students' unions on effective ways forward.
ii.    HEIs should ensure that initiatives are adequately resourced, and that take-up rates according to areas such as ethnicity, gender and disability are monitored on a regular basis.
iii.   HEIs should ensure that student support initiatives feature as part of the strategic approach of their institution, and that there is effective co-ordination between different functions.

**Key recommendation for sector organisations:**
***Examples of institutional work should be disseminated more widely within the sector by advice and support organisations, as this can help facilitate understanding and practice.***

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.     The examples of creative and innovative initiatives should be part of a central repository of practice that can aid HEIs in progressing work.
ii.    The provision of guidance on effective co-ordination of student

support (particularly counselling and guidance, and study skills) and learning and teaching issues would be a positive move.

## 6.3 Perceptions and understandings

**Key recommendation for HEIs:**
*HEIs should promote student feedback about their learning and social experiences in as many ways as they can. Where negative perceptions are found, appropriate and reflective development interventions should be undertaken.*

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.      Assessment and feedback practices need to be actively understood, and trusted by all students.
ii.     Reflective development interventions can help staff in exploring and challenging negative stereotypes.

**Key recommendation for sector organisations:**
*It is important that sector organisations (membership organisations, trade unions and funding councils) ensure that negative perceptions and subsequent stigmatisation on the basis of ethnicity and gender do not impact on enquiries into degree attainment variation.*

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.      There is concern that initiatives and research focusing exclusively on BME and male students run the risk of further stigmatisation. Enquiries into degree attainment variation should avoid a 'deficit model' with regard to causation. Changes and initiatives should be within a model of education for all, but be mindful of particular issues arising in the area of ethnicity.

## 6.4 Institutional infrastructure and governance

**Key recommendation for HEIs:**
*HEIs should review the position, role and authority of their Equality and Diversity committees with a view to strengthening their capacity to support the raising of degree attainment levels for all students.*

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.     Positioning: The equality and diversity function should ideally sit above staff and student services to ensure the needs of both groups are catered for.

ii.    Representation: HEIs should ensure that there is adequate representation of and input from student support services, including students' union representatives, on relevant committees. Similarly, trade union representation for academic and support staff should be included.

iii.   Responsibilities: An Equality and Diversity committee has the potential to outline specific improvements required at corporate, faculty and departmental/school level, to embed these into an action plan that outlines clear responsibilities and mechanisms to check progress, and to recommend that the action plan is supported by sufficient resources to help implementation. Outlined below are some areas that can feature as part of the committee's responsibilities:

   a) helping to ensure that the overall ethos of institutions is based on equality and transparency

   b) including in its consideration all relevant aspects of the student lifecycle, particularly in relation to learning, teaching, assessment and degree attainment

   c) ensuring the appropriate implementation of the institution's equality schemes and policies, including the need to identify and address degree attainment differentials by senior staff at corporate and departmental/school level

   d) supporting senior management to ensure that equality and diversity work is co-ordinated at a corporate level, and that there is an effective interdepartmental/school structure established to implement corporate and local improvements within an agreed timeframe

   e) creating and maintaining mechanisms to deal with explicit racial, ethnic, religious or gender discrimination and abuse that are robust and able to meet legal requirements. Students and staff need to feel that they have the right to study and work in safe environments where they do not feel marginalised

f) encouraging initiatives aimed at supporting and expanding the recruitment of academic staff from BME backgrounds.

**Key recommendation for sector organisations:**
*The strategic importance of equality and diversity principles and practice should be promoted by sector organisations (funding councils, practice organisations, the Higher Education Academy Subject Network, trade unions, and advice and support organisations) in areas of learning, teaching and assessment.*

Relevant actions/considerations:

i. Guidance should be provided on ways in which particular strategies (such as Learning and Teaching Strategies) should consider relevant race, gender and other equalities considerations.
ii. Thought should be given to the sharing of information on institutions that have clearly updated equalities schemes and policies, as this will help disseminate effective practice within the sector.

## 6.5 Policies and practice

**Key recommendation for HEIs:**
*HEIs should consider ways in which well-drafted equality policies and schemes can be implemented, co-ordinated and maintained in relation to degree attainment.*

Relevant actions/considerations:

i. HEIs are advised to ensure that equality schemes/policies and action plans contain guidance on key areas in the student cycle (e.g. work placements, careers advice and complaints), which can help outline rights and responsibilities for students. These documents should include the following information:
   a) how the institution provides safe environments for student feedback (such as a dialogue through the students' union, course representatives or facilitated dialogue groups)
   b) how the institution will consider the whole student cycle in monitoring and impact assessment measures.

ii. These documents should be clearly and publicly available to all prospective and current staff and students (in suitable formats), and should be referred to in student handbooks and at induction sessions.
iii. The action planning requirements of Race Equality Policies, Gender

Equality Schemes and Disability Equality Schemes provide a good opportunity for HEIs to link equalities work with their Learning and Teaching Strategies.

**Key recommendation for sector organisations:**
*There is a need for sector organisations (advice and support organisations and trade unions) to promote engagement of academics with attainment gap issues.*

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.     Commitment to positive outcomes requires a continuous dialogue between different groups about values, beliefs and visions concerning educational processes and learning environments.
ii.    Practical action should include ways of engaging with academics about attainment gap issues. Educational developers and learning and teaching specialists have an important role to play in this relation.
iii.   Thought needs to be given to work that can help HEIs in promoting, supporting and expanding the recruitment of academic staff from BME backgrounds.


## 6.6 Further research

**Key recommendation for sector organisations:**
*Given the complexity of the area of attainment differentials in relation to ethnicity and gender, further research should be undertaken in this area.*

Relevant actions/considerations:

i.     Further research is required in relation to possible associations between attainment and social and economic factors, geographic location, and family history of attendance at university.
ii.    Key areas of focus in relation to the learning and teaching environment should include:
       a) how marking practices, assessment and feedback regimes are experienced by students groups
       b) how student-lecturer and peer interactions are experienced by student groups and any linkages this might have with attainment
       c) possible influencing factors relating to social spaces, informal networking and the informal curriculum on student attainment
       d) the possible influence on assessment of the distribution of students at HEIs
       e) how departmental and subject differences might affect

attainment variation

    f) student experiences of specific support schemes such as buddying, mentoring or small group teaching

    g) an exploration into course designs and pedagogic activities that could maximise student attainment.

iii.    It would be very useful to explore, comparatively, practices in HEIs where differential attainment does not exist, or subject areas where the 'hierarchy' of attainment does not follow the usual pattern.

iv.    Research should not assume that the experience of ethnic minorities is commensurate. Additionally, such research should recognise the salience of wider factors in attainment, but should not lose the specific focus on attainment.

v.    Research must be seen as a generative, developmental part of the change process; to this end researchers need to work with relevant students and staff rather than simply extract findings from them. In this respect, invitations from funding bodies to submit proposals must include a capacity building imperative to support those who may not have prior experience of successfully bidding for research funding.

vi.    It is important that research into current prior attainment issues (e.g. achievement at Key Stage 2 onwards) is conducted. The results from such analysis should be linked to achievement at further and higher education, so that potentially recurrent patterns can be explored. Researchers can learn from and build alliances with the relevant scholarship in the compulsory sector.

vii.    Work on the development of the proposed Higher Education Achievement Report, and the associated work on assessment issues and practices proposed by the Burgess Group, should include principles of equality and diversity, particularly with regards to the need to record skills and learning by students of diverse backgrounds.

viii.    It would be useful for sector organisations to consider research work related to issues of intersectionality/multiple discrimination, for example the experiences and achievements of older BME males in higher education.

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# Appendix: Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **BME** | Black and minority ethnic |
| **DfCSF** | Department for Children, Schools and Families |
| **DfES** | Department for Education and Skills |
| **DIUS** | Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills |
| **ECU** | Equality Challenge Unit |
| **HEFCE** | Higher Education Funding Council for England |
| **HEFCW** | Higher Education Funding Council for Wales |
| **HEI** | higher education institution |
| **HEIPR** | Higher Education Initial Participation Rate |
| **HEPI** | Higher Education Policy Institute |
| **HESA** | Higher Education Statistics Agency |
| **NSS** | National Student Survey |
| **NUS** | National Union of Students |
| **PVC** | pro-vice-chancellor |
| **UCU** | University and College Union |
| **UUK** | Universities UK |

## Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment Project
Final Report

## The Higher Education Academy

Our mission is to help institutions, discipline groups and all staff to provide the best possible learning experience for their students. We provide an authoritative and independent voice on policies that influence student learning experiences, support institutions, lead and support the professional development and recognition of staff in higher education, and lead the development of research and evaluation to improve the quality of the student learning experience.

The Higher Education Academy is an independent organisation funded by grants from the four UK higher education funding bodies, subscriptions from higher education institutions, and grant and contract income for specific initiatives.

## Equality Challenge Unit

Equality Challenge Unit supports the higher education sector in its mission to realise the potential of all staff and students whatever their race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief or age, to the benefit of those individuals, higher education institutions and society.

Equality Challenge Unit was established in 2001 to promote equality for staff employed in the higher education sector. Its role was expanded in 2006 to cover equality and diversity issues for students as well as staff.

The Unit is funded by Universities UK, GuildHE, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland. The Scottish Funding Council also funds the Unit to collaborate with Equality Forward in Scotland.