



## Improving the degree attainment of Black and minority ethnic students

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Jane Berry, Higher Education Academy

Gary Loke, Equality Challenge Unit

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## Foreword

In 2008–09, a team from the University of Greenwich took part in the Higher Education Academy and Equality Challenge Unit’s summit programme to address issues of ethnicity and degree attainment differentials.

Participating in this programme helped us focus on performance outcomes, and their importance for our Black and minority ethnic (BME) students. It is important to make sure our students maximise their potential and this is especially true as we enter into a new era of changes in funding with all the implications for institutions of a more discerning student population.

This publication is therefore timely. It describes the various initiatives that summit teams worked on, and offers ideas to other institutions on how to develop and implement their own initiatives to support students, especially BME students, to achieve their potential. It is hoped that this important agenda will be progressed.

At Greenwich we have tried to disseminate knowledge about the issue, creating cross-institutional dialogue and exploring BME student learning experiences. Whether you are just thinking about new ways to ensure more equitable outcomes for your BME students or already have some initiatives in place and want to further your thinking, this publication should help you. I hope reading it will be a rewarding and worthwhile experience.

Baroness Blackstone  
Vice-Chancellor  
University of Greenwich

## I. Introduction

This is a joint publication from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). It has been produced as a ‘think piece’ to support higher education institutions (HEIs) with ideas and examples of initiatives on how to support Black and minority ethnic students to achieve and better their degree attainment. It draws together strategies and experiences of HEIs who participated in a national change programme to address the degree attainment gap between BME and white students, which other institutions can draw upon in planning their own activity to address what is widely acknowledged to be a challenging agenda.

### I.1 Background

In 2007-08, the HEA and ECU jointly delivered a project on ‘Ethnicity, gender and degree attainment’ (EGDA), which mapped the ‘landscape’ of BME attainment in HE. This arose out of research undertaken for the then DfES on *Ethnicity and Degree Attainment* in 2007 by Broecke and Nicholls, which found that even controlling for a wide range of factors thought likely to contribute, coming from a minority ethnic community had a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment (see also Fielding *et al.*, 2008). Findings from the EGDA project did not contradict the DfES research and highlighted once again the somewhat confusing and complex picture regarding degree attainment, ethnicity and the mitigating effects of socio-economic, educational and institutional factors for individual attainment. This went some way to explaining the mixed picture across the sector regarding the extent and manner in which degree attainment differentials were being addressed. The project made recommendations for the sector and sector organisations in order to address the attainment gap. However, while the report examined degree attainment differentials due to ethnicity or gender, this publication focuses solely on work that institutions have been doing in the context of ethnicity.

One of the recommendations from the EGDA report for sector organisations was to support the dissemination of creative and innovative practice that can aid HEIs in progressing their own work. In order to help develop such practice, and to facilitate its dissemination, the HEA and ECU decided to run a summit programme to bring together 15 HEIs to focus on the issue of degree attainment and ethnicity.

## 1.2 Summit programme

The summit programme involved the HEA and ECU working with 15 HEIs over 12 months to plan, develop and/or pilot initiatives to address the attainment gap. The aims of the summit programme were to:

- develop a deeper understanding of the implications of student diversity for degree attainment;
- review current institutional strategies, policies and practices that seek to address student success;
- reflect on the relevance and implications of the equality legislation for the further development of these strategies, policies and practices;
- share practice designed to address differential degree attainment from across the sector;
- focus on, and progress institutional work to address, an issue(s) relating to the success of BME students;
- integrate evaluation of effectiveness into work to effect change in this area;
- engage others in the institution in the process of change;
- reflect on progress and outcomes and plan for future activity.

A sector-wide call for expressions of interest led to the selection of 15 HEIs to take part in the programme. Teams were required to demonstrate senior management commitment to the improvement of BME student attainment in order to qualify for a place. Furthermore, the criteria for joining the programme meant there were some commonalities of approach and direction. For example, the teams had all had to demonstrate commitment to:

- being evidence informed;
- embedding change across their institutions;
- building evaluation into their policy and practice initiatives.

On agreeing to be involved, each team agreed to a set of underpinning principles:

- commitment to relevant change;
- involvement of institutional teams to facilitate a cross-institutional approach to change;
- sharing of institutional practice and experience, both internally and externally;

- promotion of the development of evidence-informed practice;
- commitment to evaluation to assess the effectiveness of policies, practices or interventions being progressed through participation in the programme;
- sharing of learning with the sector.

The programme was structured around institution-based activities and attendance at three events over a 12-month period, commencing in March 2009. It sought to support institutions on multiple levels, recognising the different ways to approach BME attainment, an issue where causality is contested and likely to be both multi-faceted and specific to local institutional context. Each team was at a different starting point on entering the programme: some had only recently begun examining their data and acknowledged that they had a gap in degree attainment; others had already commenced initiatives to try and close the attainment gap. Therefore, while there have been various outputs to date, as the programme was time-limited many of the initiatives are still ongoing and/or in the early stages of evaluation. The participating institutions continue to learn from their initiatives, and to refine and embed their approaches to improve attainment rates.

### 1.3 Profile of participating institutions

Prior to participating, each of the 15 institutions had already identified that they had a statistically significant attainment gap. The institutions represented a wide range of scenarios in relation to the number of BME students enrolled as a percentage of all their UK home-domiciled students as shown in Table 1 below. However, qualification for the programme was not contingent on the scale of the disparity, but a commitment to change.

Table 1: Participation in the programme by size of BME population

% BME (as % of UK home-domiciled)	Number of participating HEIs
< 10%	2
10 – 19.9%	3
20 – 39.9%	5
40 – 59.9%	5



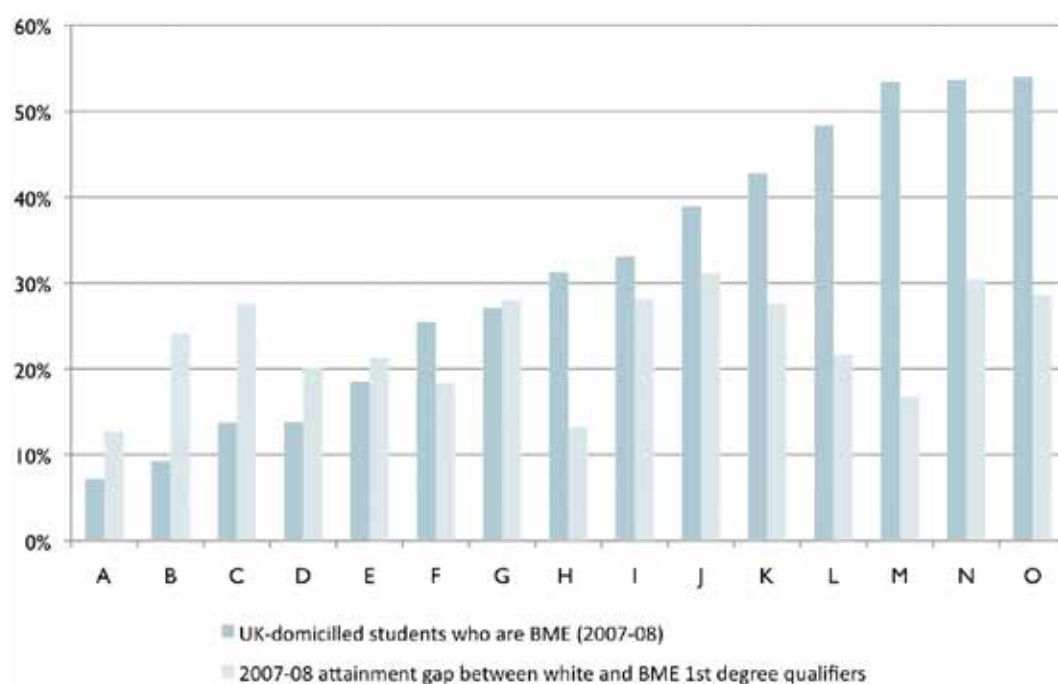
Looking at data for 2007–08 (ECU, 2009), the national attainment gap between BME students and white students was 18.3%. The attainment gap is defined as the difference between the proportion of white qualifiers who obtained a first class honours or upper second class honours and the proportion of BME qualifiers who achieved at the same level. This gap has since decreased slightly to 18% in 2008–09 (ECU, 2010). All but three participating institutions had an attainment gap higher than the national average. Interestingly, however, these three included the institutions within the sample with the lowest (7.0%) and one of the highest (53.5%) percentages of BME students, serving to demonstrate both the breadth and complexity of the issue.

The anonymised chart below (Figure 1) shows the relationship between the scale of each participating institution's attainment gap in 2007–08 and the size of their 2007–08 BME student population, as a percentage of their total UK-domiciled student numbers (source: heidi data management tool<sup>1</sup>). This illustrates the wide range of scenarios represented by the participating HEIs and evidences the fact that HEIs are working to address differential degree attainment irrespective of the size of their BME student population. Beyond these basic statistics, each participating institution had its own detailed profile in relation to the ethnic make-up of its BME students, their socio-economic backgrounds and their distribution across areas of study. Research continues to show the complexities of the interplay between such factors in accounting, at least partially, for differential performance both within and between ethnic groups; added to which is the 'x-factor', i.e. that part of differential attainment that remains inexplicable in terms that can be readily identified and measured. This serves to explain the wide, and often cautious, range of approaches being adopted across the sector as highlighted later in the commentary.

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<sup>1</sup> A briefing introducing how to use heidi equality is available from ECU at: [www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/files/introducing-heidi-equality-briefing.doc/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/files/introducing-heidi-equality-briefing.doc/)

Figure I: Participating institutions and their attainment gap



#### 1.4 Programme outcomes and sector context

Each HEI team<sup>2</sup> produced a reflective paper at the end of the programme documenting their experiences across the course of taking part in the programme. This publication draws upon these reflective papers and pulls together the thinking, ideas and activities that the teams have put in place to address differential degree attainment. The aim is not to provide definitive solutions to the issue, but to showcase the breadth of approaches being used by HEIs in order to help others to develop their own work in this area. Many of their chosen approaches address specific recommendations in the EGDA report.

Singh (forthcoming), in a review of the research literature around BME retention and success, identifies “a shift away from a defensive posture associated with fulfilling legislative and regulatory requirements, to more proactive responses

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<sup>2</sup> One institutional team was unable to complete the programme due to institutional factors beyond their control. Fourteen reflective papers are available to download from the Higher Education Academy website: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/inclusion/EthnicitySummit](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/inclusion/EthnicitySummit)

aimed at developing pedagogical strategies for addressing BME attainment”. However, in this context, and given the number of BME students entering HE from groups being targeted by WP policy, it is appropriate to look at the recent *Review of Widening Participation Strategic Assessments 2009*. Undertaken by Action on Access for HEFCE and the Office for Fair Access, it offers an analysis of the 129 submissions received from HEIs in England (which included some postgraduate-only institutions) and provides another ‘window’ on activities being undertaken to widen participation and address equality. It is, therefore, relevant to any review of the extent and nature of the progress being made to address the underperformance of BME students. While it does not evaluate or compare approaches being used, it does look at the type of activities being undertaken to address the retention, achievement and progression of specific groups such as BME students.

In looking at institutional activity to address BME student success it shows that:

- although 84% of HEIs identified BME students as a target group for access to HE, “only about half of these institutions (57, 44%) are sensitive to the retention, achievement and progression of these groups”;
- “differences between BME students and white students appear to relate to both rate of retention/withdrawal and achievement”;
- much of the institutional work to address differential retention and achievement “is at an early stage”;
- “the most popular type of intervention beyond data collection and analysis seems to be mentoring and the creation of role models”.

These findings provide a sector-wide, albeit partial, context for the work of the summit teams in this area, but seem to indicate that progress towards attention to differential attainment still remains measured, as originally reported in the EGDA project report. However, they also lend weight to the relevance of strategies that seek to address the retention and ongoing performance of BME students as well as their attainment, and point to the fundamental interconnectedness of thinking needed to address BME attainment.

## 2. Institutional drivers for action to improve degree attainment

*This section looks at the reasons why institutions are taking action to address differentials in the attainment of their undergraduates.*

Each institution had its own, context-specific, reasons to participate in the summit programme. The evidence from the EGDA report has encouraged many institutions to begin, or indeed to further examine, the issue of differential degree attainment. Participants therefore entered the programme at different points on this journey.

Alongside the evidence from the EGDA report and other research, numerous internal and external drivers can be identified from the programme as reasons for HEIs to address differential attainment. These are not mutually exclusive and are always particular to the institution, but serve to provide insights into how the agenda may be foregrounded in institutional priorities. They include:

### 2.1 Legislation

The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2001 introduced a positive duty on HEIs to advance equality of opportunity for people of different racial groups. This duty continues in the Equality Act 2010, with specific duties to meet this that are likely to be brought into force in April 2011. The continuing attainment gap suggests that systemic barriers to equality of outcome still exist and some institutions have taken the opportunity to include a specific action(s) to reduce the attainment gap in their race equality policy action plans.

### 2.2 Business case

An increasingly competitive higher education market has meant that all institutions are concerned with their external image and reputation, especially as reflected in league tables. This is likely to be exacerbated with the changes in funding streams announced as an outcome of the Browne and Public Spending Reviews of Autumn 2010 and to be addressed in the forthcoming White Paper on higher education. Indicators of student satisfaction – as reflected in the National Student Survey (NSS) – and graduate outcomes and destinations are recognised as critical to student recruitment, not least for the recruitment of international students. In this context, the NSS shows that BME students, on average, are less satisfied with their student experience than their white peers (SurrIDGE, 2008) – although the author notes that patterns of difference between

student groups across areas of satisfaction measured by the NSS are particularly complex when examined by ethnicity. The research evidence also demonstrates that ethnic minority graduates do comparatively worse in the labour market than white graduates in securing full-time employment, particularly on graduation (Machin *et al.*, 2009). Degree attainment is of direct relevance here. Institutional reputation is likely to be of particular concern where an institution has a significant number of BME students and/or has an institutional focus on disciplines that attract a higher than average number of BME students. The fact that young Black, Chinese, Pakistani and Bangladeshi entrants to HE are more likely to come from low-participation areas (when compared to white entrants and those from other minority ethnic groups (HEFCE, 2010)) and therefore attract additional funding further underlines the potential importance of institutional reputation for the recruitment (and retention) of BME students.

### 2.3 Institutional identity

For some institutions the demographic make-up of their student body means that the attainment gap is potentially especially relevant, namely where they have large numbers of BME students. This may be consequent upon a bias towards certain disciplines and/or courses or because they are situated in areas where there is a large BME population from which they attract a significant proportion of their students, such as in London and Bradford. In four of the HEIs taking part in the programme BME students represented over 45% of their UK-domiciled students.

### 2.4 Institutional vision

Institution mission statements often embody core values that prove to be powerful drivers for addressing degree attainment. For example, many contain a reference to the promotion of equality and equal opportunities. The team from the University of Bradford recognised the relevance of the institution's aim of becoming an inclusive campus to addressing the degree attainment issue, an aim founded in the core principles of social justice and confronting inequality, as well as an institutional commitment to working with diverse student groups and the local community.

### 2.5 Opportunity drivers

The issue of differential attainment is one that many institutions have recognised as a problem, but which they have failed to address or prioritise, as was identified in the EGDA project. The reasons for this have been found to be complex and varied. However, the teams demonstrated how institutional change may be 'kick started' or

leveraged by the simple identification of opportunities to raise the profile of an agenda. Thus the call to participate in the HEA/ECU summit programme was in itself a driver for some institutions where they had been thinking about, or were already undertaking, often uncoordinated initiatives to address the attainment gap. For example, the University of Greenwich team used participation in the summit programme to shift the emphasis from inclusion as a pre-entry/access issue to being an issue for teaching and learning and student performance.

In the same way other institutions had used their internal and/or sector research as a driver for action on degree attainment. London Metropolitan Business School framed the redevelopment of their Business and Marketing course provision and pedagogy on the EGDA recommendation that curriculum needs to be reviewed to ensure its continuing effectiveness and that study expectations, performance criteria, assessment and feedback practices need to be actively understood and trusted by all students.

Finally, extraneous circumstances may provide an opportunity to drive more fundamental change, as in the case of the University of Bradford's work to embed more inclusive teaching practices as a strategy for improving the learning of all their students, including their BME students. Their need to address the Disability Rights Commission's (DRC) recommendations with respect to a formal complaint from a disabled student proved a powerful opportunity for developing a strategy of potential benefit to all students.

### 3. Considerations and challenges in addressing degree attainment

*This section looks at particular considerations that might be taken into account by institutions when developing their plans to address degree attainment differentials.*

The institutions taking part in the summit programme varied in their reasons for wanting to address degree attainment differentials based on ethnicity at the present time. Usually there was more than one driver and there was significant commonality across the teams given the national landscape of equality legislation and economic challenges. All shared a commitment to taking action to enable transformative change.

Irrespective of shared drivers for change, each team was also operating in its own internal 'landscape' and they identified a range of significant challenges that go some way to explaining the slow progress seen to have been made by the sector historically. These challenges also highlight practical considerations that should be taken into account when developing a strategy and action plan to improve BME attainment.

The considerations are:

- structural;
- organisational;
- cultural;
- financial;
- contextual.

#### 3.1 Structural

The autonomous nature of higher education means that every institution has unique internal structures. Some structural features of the institutional landscape had to be accommodated by the teams as they could not be changed, at least in the short-term or by those tasked to address BME attainment:

- collegiate structure – making cross-institutional working more challenging strategically and practically;
- distributed campuses – making strategies/interventions based on working with particular cohorts of students particularly difficult in the context of today's modularisation of degrees;
- high percentage of associate or part-time staff – making staff engagement with desired changes more problematic;

- low percentage of BME staff – limiting the capacity to deliver certain types of intervention (e.g. acting as mentors and role models) and/or create an environment that facilitates change. For example, the team from the University of Greenwich regretted perceptions among some BME staff that there were insufficient BME staff to create a ‘safe space’ for the discussion of race and pedagogy. There were also fears over BME staff being overburdened by institutional attempts to improve BME student attainment in a situation where their peers might see the agenda as being the responsibility of BME staff;
- lack of BME staff in leadership roles to champion change. This is highlighted in an ECU literature review, *The experience of BME staff working in higher education* (ECU, 2009).

### 3.2 Organisational

The precise distribution of job roles and responsibilities clearly also varies between institutions. However, within participating institutions enabling the changes deemed likely to improve student success invariably involved cross-institutional working. In this context, the teams identified a number of organisational issues that had proved challenging but significant for the successful development of their work, to include:

- identifying the locus of change or ‘ownership’ of the agenda, i.e. where should responsibility lie for taking the work forward? This might involve extending the responsibility for addressing BME degree attainment from being an equality and diversity function to a teaching and learning function. The University of Northampton team recognised the need for academic leadership and their work has been led by their Learning & Teaching Committee and Pro-Vice-Chancellor. At the University of Greenwich the approach was to link their work to improve BME attainment to the development of the University’s single equality scheme and relevant impact assessments of academic procedures;
- identifying where project leadership should be located in order to attain staff buy-in, maximise/optimize change and drive the project forward. Having a senior member of staff to lead a project was found to facilitate this, but their commitment needed to be more than tokenistic to be effective.

### 3.3 Cultural

Reflections from the teams illustrated the fact that differing perceptions among staff about whose responsibility it was to address BME attainment, the nature of the changes



required and their wider consequences could constitute a significant barrier to effecting change. Some teams focused their work under the programme on finding ways to address such barriers, examples of which included:

- resistance to institution-wide culture change and the actions necessary to enable it, for example as involved in the introduction of more inclusive curricula;
- resistance to individual change in pedagogic practice and/or the raising of standards of teaching in the context of continued institutional emphasis on research;
- fears of ‘dumbing down’ as a consequence of curriculum change;
- rejection of personal responsibility for improving degree attainment (“it’s not our problem”, “there’s nothing we can do”) and/or the possibility of progress;
- differing constructions of the ‘BME student’ (e.g. ones based on deficit thinking).

The University of Greenwich team developed tools to challenge unhelpful constructions of ‘the BME student’ to support staff in understanding the agenda to improve BME student attainment.

### 3.4 Financial

Competing priorities, especially in the context of the current economic climate, were frequently mentioned as a constraint on progress. As with any developmental work resources needed to be identified to buy out staff time and/or buy in expertise, fund research and other costs and pilot initiatives. Particular challenges cited included:

- identification of funding to ‘kick start’ the process and pilot interventions;
- making the case for justifying/covering the costs of engaging staff to do additional analytical work;
- avoiding perceived ‘tokenism’ through failure to commit appropriate levels of resource, risking staff disengagement with the agenda and/or management failure to prioritise it;
- finding mechanisms to enable sustained action into the medium-/long-term.

### 3.5 Contextual

The nature of the agenda itself means that there are intrinsic challenges for institutions that are complex and multi-faceted. For the teams these included:

#### 3.5.1 Prioritisation – getting the agenda ‘on the map’:

- recruitment of BME students was an issue for some HEIs and differential attainment was an issue for all teams, but its importance was not necessarily being widely recognised across their institutions. This was blamed by some participants on widespread perceptions within their institutions of its low prioritisation by Government, assumed in turn to be due to BME over-representation in HE nationally; this was in a situation where there is often an institutional focus on issues of student access and retention rather than their success;
- tensions were reported to exist both at institutional and individual levels based on the notion of targeting particular groups of disadvantaged students for support as targeting could be seen to be ‘problematizing’ them. However, questions were also being raised around why there should be a particular focus on targeted interventions for BME students as opposed to ‘colour blind’ interventions for all ‘WP students’ to raise attainment. This can be a particular issue in HEIs with a large number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Conversely, it can also be an issue for institutions with small numbers of BME students whom, as a result, might not be seen as a priority.

#### 3.5.2 Understanding – interpreting complex research data:

- the term ‘BME’ is a broad, all-encompassing term. However, given the context of the ‘super diversity’ (Vertovec, 2006) of many student bodies, BME students do not represent a homogenous group and so more sophisticated analysis of data will invariably disclose differences in the attainment gap between different BME groups. Closer analysis of the attainment of students of the same ethnicity may also reveal new and complex dimensions of difference as at the University of Bradford where the major influence of prior attainment on the success of BME students appears to be mediated positively, for example, if a student lives locally;

- while there may be data available, they may not always be presented in ways that best support attention to differential attainment;
- there may also be contested understandings within institutions of what constitutes a 'BME student' as already indicated. Definitions drive data collection and analysis, which lie at the heart of identifying and addressing student attainment differentials. One common source of confusion lies in a failure to distinguish between international and UK-domiciled BME students;
- finally, Singh and Cousin (2009) point to the dangers of missing the obvious flaws in pedagogical practice and institutional structures arising from an overemphasis on mining and segmenting the data. They caution that 'categories' don't tell us anything about the experience of 'individuals' and that it is understanding the latter that is significant for improving performance. They term this 'distraction by data'.

### 3.5.3 Sensitivity – communication to internal and external audiences:

- the ethical dilemma: there is an inherent ethical dilemma in addressing the issue of BME student attainment – for example, if research is being conducted with BME students to try and understand their underachievement, the question remains 'what should we tell the students?'. This was a challenge identified by The Open University in conducting their extensive research, recognising that individual BME students might internalise the risk of failure causing a pattern of self-replicating behaviour. At Aston University there was concern about how to involve students in the development of their toolkit for staff without sending a discouraging or misleading message about the achievements of BME students or their potential for achievement.
- avoiding the 'blame culture': raising the issue of BME underachievement with academic and other staff runs the risk of implying 'poor' teaching practice and/or institutional racism, potentially fostering a counter-productive culture of 'blame'. This is also true of communicating with BME students themselves, there being the potential to be seen to be blaming the student (deficit model) and to be thereby generating negative expectations;
- managing the institutional reputation: as noted earlier, there is a business driver for

raising degree attainment. Linked to that driver is that of reputation. Hence there is a tension in acknowledging degree differentials, especially where the HEI has a large BME student population and/or close links with a local BME community. However, by addressing the issue the institution may be seen to be proactive in supporting its BME students to improve their results and this may help ameliorate this tension.

To overcome the dilemma of what to tell students, institutions may wish to use the language of, and focus on, success and achievement. The University of Greenwich has found that it appears to be useful to inform all BME students about differential degree attainment early on, while raising their expectations of success and offering support to improve their skills.

#### 3.5.4 Complexity – designing initiatives:

- as previously mentioned, BME students are not a homogenous group and within institutions average attainment gaps mask differences by ethnic group and by subject. It can therefore be a challenge to design initiatives that accommodate such difference. Where there is uneven representation across departments some initiatives to address attainment issues may be better suited to be run at a departmental level;
- the lack of research evidence identifying the reasons for differentials in degree lends a particular complexity to designing initiatives to improve the attainment of BME students. Some teams were aware of the potential dangers of taking an overly reductionist approach.

Research at The Open University has identified both a strong link between degree attainment and academic language development and a relatively high number of students from ethnic minorities in need of improvements in their English language skills development. As a result their institutional strategy on English language provision is seen as a key element of their action plan to improve the attainment of their BME students.

## 4. Planning a way forward

*This section looks at the way the teams approached planning their work and highlights their key learning in this area. It also considers the many ways by which work to improve degree attainment can be facilitated or 'enabled'.*

Each team shared a recognition that:

- the goal of improving BME attainment is a long-term one;
- it can be difficult to ascribe cause and effect to any improvements in differentials due to the fact that institutions are simultaneously engaging in many activities to enhance the retention and success of their students. These activities may well also impact on degree attainment;
- the task of identifying initiatives likely to impact on BME attainment is challenging due to the intrinsic nature of the agenda itself.

It was against this backdrop that institutions were working to initiate new activity or to build upon existing work that had already recognised the particular needs of one or more ethnic group, needs considered detrimental to their learning experience and potential to succeed.

The language of action planning can be problematic and the programme did not seek to be prescriptive in the use of particular planning frameworks. However, as the aim of every institution was, ultimately, to improve the performance of its BME students, they were encouraged to identify and systematically plan how they would seek to achieve this. This included consideration of how they would evaluate the outcomes of their work.

### 4.1 Building a team

The composition of the teams taking part reflected their entry point into the programme and the key stakeholders involved in their proposed work. However, many were representative of, and reported back to, wider working groups looking at BME attainment. Teams also 'evolved' as the work undertaken within the time frame of the summit programme progressed. This variously reflected:

- the iterative approach used by many teams to take forward their plans;

- the nature of their proposed activities/interventions;
- the ongoing identification of policy and management teams considered to be important stakeholders for the future of their initiatives.

Institutional functions represented on the teams and/or working groups variously included:

- planning and statistics/data management;
- staff and educational development (including relevant Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning – CETLs);
- teaching and learning;
- equality and diversity;
- widening participation;
- student support;
- student retention;
- research;
- Students' Union;
- library and information services;
- alumni office.

Ownership and leadership was a key issue as already indicated. It often depended on the history of the particular institution's response to the agenda, reflecting, for example:

- the historic interests and concerns of a particular individual, for example someone working in a department where an attainment 'problem' had been identified;
- a wider institutional focus on a related agenda (e.g. student retention and success), which was driving attention to BME student attainment in particular;
- responsibility for particular activities that had formed the starting point for the new work on degree attainment, as at The Open University where various research projects had identified a correlation between attainment and language comprehension/usage in a situation where it was also known that a relatively high number of BME students needed language development support;
- self-selecting interest groups, as at the University of Greenwich where three schools opted to become involved.

Cross-institutional working was typically found to be challenging but rewarding, bringing incremental rewards for some team members in their developing a better understanding of different roles, fostering partnership working in other contexts, and creating a sense of enhanced connectedness with the institution. Team members at the University of Greenwich undertook training with their Office of Student Affairs as part of their work programme, which served to highlight the extent to which student services had historically focused on student failure and retention, as opposed to promoting their attainment and success. This proved to be valuable learning on both sides. At a project level, cross-institution working was intrinsic to the work of those teams taking a whole system approach to effecting change to improve degree attainment, as at the University of Bradford whose work involved managers, educational developers, teaching and academic support staff.

#### 4.2 Start up and initial audit

At the start of the summit programme, and irrespective of the status and progress of their work to date, participating institutions had typically reported institutional environments with:

- known pockets of activity, for example in certain schools, departments or subjects where an attainment gap had been identified;
- limited and/or inconsistent integration of equality and diversity ‘principles’ across the institution;
- patchy awareness among staff of the existence or extent of any BME attainment gap (not helped where there was a lack of supporting data);
- contested views about how to address the gap where there was awareness;
- uncertainty about the way forward given lack of evidence on causality and the extreme sensitivity of the agenda.

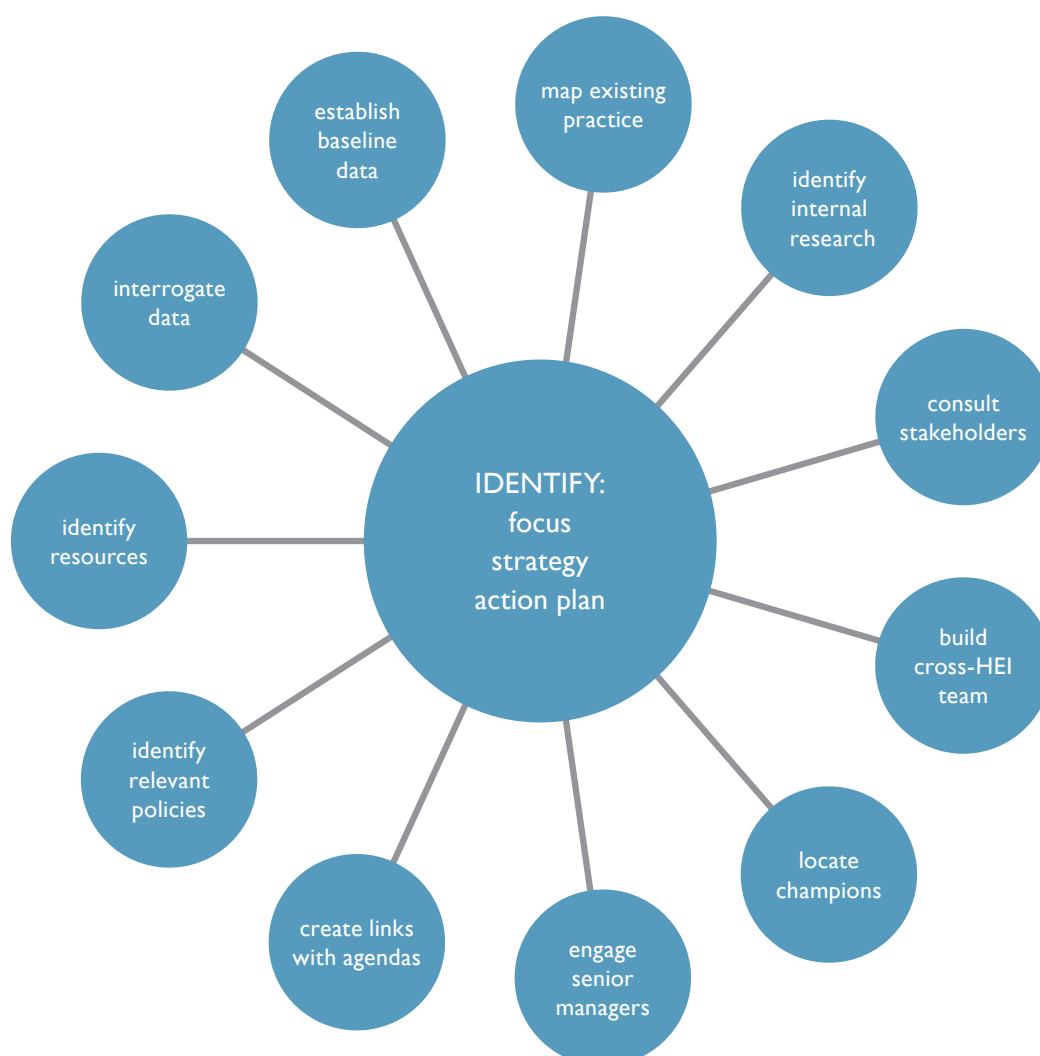
This points to the need to make connections across the institutional landscape in order to plan a way forward to effect change. Appendix I illustrates a range of questions that institutions – particularly those who were in the early stages of addressing the degree differential issue in their institution – were encouraged to consider in relation to planning the scope, scale and focus of their future work. It also helped to refine thinking in relation to existing work. The questions address the key issues of:

- defining the target audience for the work;
- locating the problem of differential degree attainment within the institution;

- understanding the institutional context;
- identifying and engaging key stakeholders.

Figure 2 below identifies some common steps undertaken in the development of institutions' thinking about, and plans for, improving BME attainment. It reflects a significant convergence of views on *necessary steps* for the identification of a way forward and an action plan for its implementation. Some of these steps represent the identification of 'enabling factors' – things that can potentially represent levers for change and/or offer 'quick wins' when planning and initiating a programme of activity.

Figure 2: Steps towards developing a strategy and action plan





### 4.3. Identifying levers for change

Across the course of the programme the teams were able to identify a range of features of their institutions that they considered to have already acted as ‘enabling factors’ in taking their work forward or that they felt represented potential future levers for action in their institutions towards improving the performance of their BME students.

These might be regarded as a ‘checklist’ to be taken into account in the planning of a strategy. They are all things that may help to address the challenges identified in the earlier section and:

- win the argument for action at institutional level;
- gain buy-in from individuals at faculty, departmental or unit level within the institution;
- identify key change agents (e.g. those to be included on any planning team);
- provide ‘building blocks’ for change;
- support the design of particular proposed interventions;
- facilitate their implementation and success.

#### 4.3.1 Institutional mission and values

Given the strong social justice arguments for addressing the underachievement of particular groups of students, the value placed in identifying relevant institutional values is not surprising. Positioning their initiatives within the institutional vision had already helped some teams to create buy-in to their particular plans at an early stage.

The University of Bedfordshire’s corporate plan, *New Futures*, includes a commitment to “enhance the opportunities to access HE for all those able to benefit”, and also to widen participation and enable all its students to maximise their potential.

Some interesting and proven examples of the way in which *existing* institutional commitments can be used as arguments for change internally included ones that cited the importance of:

- creating educational change through partnership with students and alumni;
- building relationships with the local community;
- being open and transparent externally about agendas that are challenging.

The University's commitment to partnership working with students and alumni on the co-creation of curriculum change at the University of the Arts London provided the context for four projects which involved working with students to better understand how to address the performance of their BME students through curriculum developments.

The University of Bradford's pledge to confront inequality through celebrating diversity and building relationships locally was seen as a powerful reason to confront the issue of differential attainment given the large numbers of BME students drawn from their local community.

The Open University has made an explicit and public commitment to the BME attainment agenda as part of their ethos of transparency by publishing attainment data, objectives and key performance indicators. This has the effect of reinforcing the internal message to staff, students and other stakeholders.

#### 4.3.2 Institutional policies and strategies

Certain key national and sector policy agendas were seen by the teams to align closely with the BME attainment agenda and to provide opportunities to add value to their own, possibly more targeted, work and/or to build support for it through cross-institutional working with relevant staff. Crucially, it was recognised that policy commitments influence the allocation of resources. Examples of the ways in which the teams variously used this opportunity can be found in Section 6, but agendas seen to be highly relevant to the planning of work to improve degree attainment included:

- Student retention: this is a key agenda for the sector especially for those HEIs with significant numbers of students from disadvantaged or non-traditional backgrounds and with lower levels of prior attainment – as demonstrated in the

*Review of Widening Participation Strategic Assessments 2009*. Interventions designed to support 'at risk' students, for example in the first year of study, were seen to have the potential to impact on the future attainment of students. Such activity may be initiated in response to targets for retention built into business or other planning instruments, for example at course level.

- Widening participation: another key agenda in HE, policy commitments and associated activities to support 'WP' students were widely seen to support BME student success (although it is important to remember that not all BME students are 'WP' students).
- Equality and diversity: the development of single equality schemes and other responses to the new Equality Act 2010 have provided a renewed opportunity to revisit and use a key policy area to address goals for student achievement and progression. Likewise diversity strategies can be a key tool for addressing BME student success where they represent an institutional commitment to a co-ordinated approach to equality and diversity across the institution, for example through the inclusion of targets for attainment by different groups of students.
- Learning and teaching: a range of existing strategies to enhance the student learning experience were seen as key enablers of improving the attainment of BME students – variously termed strategies for academic practice, learning and teaching, student learning or the student experience. These frequently reference engaging and supporting students from diverse backgrounds.
- Student support: learner support strategies and commitments provide one of the most obvious opportunities to leverage change to better support BME students, for example in the area of language provision and literacy skills development.
- Internationalisation: while some HEIs fail to differentiate between home-domiciled and international students from ethnic minority groups when thinking of the experience of their 'BME students', thus conflating potentially different reasons for any underperformance, it is recognised that there may be some underlying shared reasons for the success or otherwise of students who share a particular ethnic background, irrespective of their domiciliary status – including discrimination, Eurocentric curricula etc. An awareness of the nature of the synergies between the two agendas and of existing institutional commitments/initiatives to 'internationalise' the student experience (e.g. in the area of curriculum) was recommended. This has been recognised in the recently revised *Race Equality Toolkit* published by Universities Scotland, which focuses on learning and teaching issues for racially diverse institutions.

### 4.3.3 Existing infrastructure

The existence of an established committee structure with responsibility for issues associated with the student learning experience can facilitate ‘quick wins’. This would include learning and teaching and equality and diversity committees, and relevant action groups – as at the University of Northampton whose Equality & Diversity Action Committee is chaired by the PVC Academic and includes senior managers and Deans of School. BME representation at the highest levels, as on the Board of Governors at the University of the Arts London, can also prove a significant enabler of change early in the process.

### 4.3.4 Curriculum frameworks

Specific institutional milestones can provide the opportunity to leverage interest in attainment issues, for example the revision of curriculum frameworks. Likewise these frameworks can provide a rationale for changes to improve the BME learning experience where they are based on relevant commitments or premises, as at the University of Bedfordshire where personalised learning lies at the core of their framework.

### 4.3.5 Pre-existing learning, good practice or interventions relevant to the BME agenda

The ‘student experience’ has become a focus of attention in UK higher education and within it the ‘BME student experience’. Activities to enhance the former can be a source of staff expertise, evidence, benchmarking opportunities and/or a starting point for building wider strategies for improving BME attainment more specifically. The teams cited a wide range of examples of *existing* activities that had proved at least helpful, and at best critical, to the development of their thinking and work to improve BME attainment. This work was not always directly related to BME students or to attainment specifically, but to wider issues of enhancing students’ ability to succeed at every stage of the student life cycle. Examples of such activities included:

- institutional initiatives to raise the aspirations of BME students, for example Black History events;
- projects and activities involving BME students but not necessarily just about the BME experience, for example University of the Arts London’s workshops for WP students;
- membership of national initiatives, for example the National Mentoring Consortium (NMC), which was set up to promote equality and diversity in graduate recruitment and to enhance the employability of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students and those with a disability or dyslexia;
- mechanisms, practices and support activities to support vulnerable students – as at

- The Open University whose learning support framework includes a sophisticated computer model that includes a significant weighting for ethnicity and is used to identify and proactively target vulnerable students for additional contact;
- guidance and resources on addressing equality and diversity issues, for example in course design or review.

Prior to joining the summit programme, the University of Greenwich had recognised that their proportion of 'good' undergraduate degrees was poor compared to national averages. A University-wide project had been set up to identify good practice in tutor feedback as a way of addressing this. They had also been targeting certain areas of student support like counselling and guidance and employability initiatives to support their BME students.

#### 4.3.6 Staff capacity to promote and/or implement change

HEIs typically have a wide range of specialist groups and individuals with a particular interest in agendas highly relevant to improving BME student success. The teams emphasised the importance of finding 'safe' environments for issues of race, diversity and inclusive practice to be discussed, a necessary precursor to the effecting of change in practice. However, they had also drawn significant support for their work from such groups and individuals, to include:

- diversity champions;
- staff development units (especially where they already offered support to staff in related areas such as diversity, as at the University of the Arts London);
- special interest groups, for example race fora for staff and students – as organised at Leeds Metropolitan University through its Inter-Faith Forum, Race Forum and WP Practitioners Forum;
- teaching fellows – as at University of the Arts London where some BME fellows are ex-students;
- senior managers with an interest in, or responsibility for, relevant agendas, such as inclusion or diversity, as at the University of Bradford whose team highly valued the support of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for the inclusion agenda. Leeds Metropolitan University's Equality & Diversity Group is chaired by their Professor for HE Diversity in Teaching and Learning.

#### 4.3.7 Student bodies/alumni networks

Student engagement in the process of addressing BME attainment is seen as fundamental. Their early involvement at the planning stage was enabled where there were established:

- interest or support groups for student minorities or groups with a focus on diversity issues as at the University of Northampton whose Diversity Champions Group is open to staff and students, and the University of the Arts London's student assemblies for BME students;
- student officer roles designed to address cultural difference or student diversity;
- alumni networks, especially ones where BME alumni could be identified. For example, the University of the Arts London have used their alumni network to develop a database of diverse students who can act as buddies and demonstrate career progression;
- postgraduate researchers with an interest in the BME student experience as at the University of Roehampton.

#### 4.3.8 Financial resource

Resourcing is a key issue for institutions wishing to develop interventions, undertake research or buy out staff time for any new programme of work. Successful strategies used by the teams included the identification of:

- small-scale project funding within the institution;
- dedicated teaching and learning funding, for example through a:
  - CETL;
  - staff development unit;
  - institutional award scheme;
- external funding, for example through a:
  - Lifelong Learning Network;
  - HEA subject centre.

Coventry University set up four action research mini-projects in different departments as part of a BME Student Initiative Mini-project Scheme. These were co-funded by the Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Network (CWLLN) and the University as part of a shared commitment to finding ways to address issues of progression, retention and performance identified among some BME student groups. As well as helping them to explore 'what works' to raise the retention and attainment of BME students, the projects have formed a key part of the HEI's commitment to helping all staff to develop strategies for combating racial discrimination.

#### 4.3.9 Evidence base

An existing evidence base, frequently dispersed across institutions, can provide the motivation and momentum for change to address BME degree attainment, including the initiation of more systematic investigation of data at institutional level and the better engagement of staff and senior managers. Most summit teams cited examples of small-scale research into aspects of the BME student experience that had sparked interest in, or provided the evidence for, the need to look at BME attainment on a wider, institutional level. The University of Northampton team had identified a number of small-scale projects to include ones on differential performance by assessment type and support needs of their BME students.

The team from Leeds Metropolitan University was able to draw upon the findings from a wide number of research projects designed to enhance equality and minimise discrimination undertaken through three research centres and cross-University collaborative research networks, including their Race Research Network. Recent research has looked at how students with low social capital see others, for example those in the professions, and the impact of this on their perceptions of their own 'possible selves' and future aspirations.

#### 4.4 Lessons learnt

Some key, and sometimes hard-learned, lessons emerged here from the teams' experiences of developing their plans, including the need to:

- be realistic: building in too many levels of activity and complexity can easily stall a project. The Teesside University team, for example, considered that their original plan had involved “too many levels” of activity;
- avoid exploiting the commitment of particular individuals to the agenda: the underachievement of students, particularly by those from disadvantaged or minority groups, is both a sensitive and highly politicised issue often attracting a high degree of commitment from interested individuals. However, in seeking to tap into their interest and expertise it is all too easy to assume an unrealistic level of commitment from them. Similarly it is important to avoid an over-reliance on one or two team members, however committed;
- acknowledge the need for strong and visible leadership;
- identify, if at all possible, funding for project management support and/or funding to buy out staff time to support the process;
- maximise the impact of the work by taking a pan-university approach wherever possible, even at the planning stage;
- seek to set up an appropriate reporting process for the purpose of monitoring progress from the start of the project;
- having identified appropriate partners, create the conditions for staff to become, in the words of the team from The Open University, “activity owners” in the action plan so as to distribute responsibility for outcomes;
- be clear about goals and deliverables, especially where projects are cross-institutional and involve multiple strands of activity. The team at the University of Greenwich found a clear set of shared goals across the multiple partners involved in their work was particularly enabling;
- identify some ‘quick wins’ for the team, small-scale and actionable projects to encourage and sustain momentum;
- find ways to ensure that the team is seen as more than a pressure group.



## 5. Institutional approaches to improving the degree attainment of BME students

*This section looks at some broad themes in the approaches to the work being undertaken by institutions to address the degree attainment of BME students.*

### 5.1 Scope and scale of plans

The scope and scale of the teams' plans reflected a wide range of factors including:

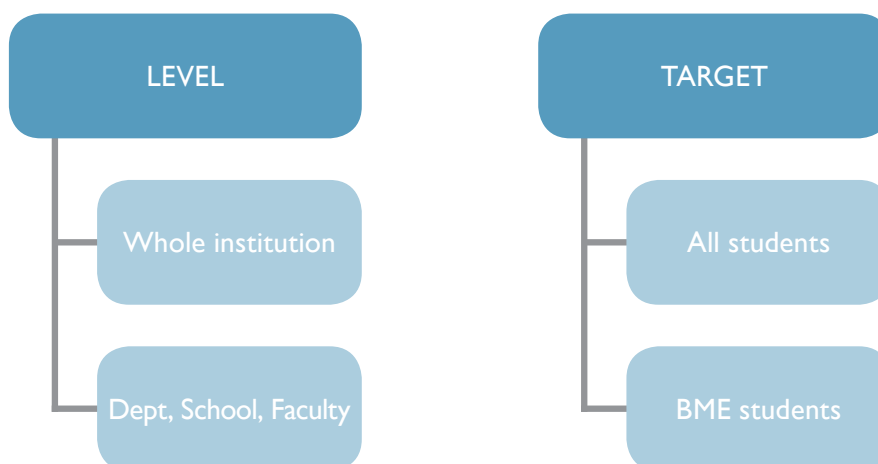
- the particular institutional drivers for their work;
- current management priorities;
- resource issues, i.e. considerations of funding and staffing;
- the distribution of BME students within the institution, their numbers and associated patterns of attainment differential;
- the extent and nature of existing initiatives and/or institutional commitments to address the agenda.

One resulting difference was in the extent to which institutions decided to initiate or further develop existing work being undertaken *in particular departments* to improve BME attainment (with a view to evaluating and disseminating the learning and rolling it out at a later date) or to work at an *institutional level*, building on existing learning where it existed but seeking to achieve pan-university change in policy and/or specific areas of practice. Decisions taken in relation to complex agendas may be necessarily pragmatic, particularly given the current climate in HE. Thus while long-term culture change might be the objective, some teams were not in a position to initiate plans at this level at this point in time. Conversely some teams were able to work at multiple levels and all recognised the need to make an institutional commitment to the embedding of the agenda in relevant policies and practices.

### 5.2 Dimensions of change

Looking at the wide range of activities and initiatives undertaken by the summit teams, it is useful to characterise them in relation to their *level of delivery* and *degree of targeting*. This reflects two key issues in the design of strategies to improve the attainment of BME students, namely the extent to which the reduction in degree differentials between ethnic groups is seen to require a whole-institution approach and the extent to which the 'solutions' are seen to lie in initiatives directed at all students or better targeted at BME students more specifically.

Figure 3: Dimensions of change



Decisions in both respects are likely to be informed by the total number of BME students in the institution; the extent of their clustering in certain subject areas/ departments; and patterns of differential attainment in any particular institution; also by the institutional discourse around both the ethics and practicalities of targeting. This latter challenge was mitigated where teams chose to initiate activity in departments with a high percentage of BME students.

The debate around whole-institution change was one raised across the various strands of research undertaken under the EGDA project and reflected in its recommendation that, in their attempt to improve the attainment of their BME students, HEIs take actions at strategic/policy level to facilitate more inclusive practice. May and Bridger (2010) have explained such an inclusive approach as necessitating “a shift away from supporting specific student groups through a discrete set of policies or time-bound interventions, towards equity considerations being embedded within all functions of the institution and treated as an ongoing process of quality enhancement. Making a shift of such magnitude requires cultural and systemic change at both the policy and practice levels.”

The scale of the changes implied in this proposition may provide a partial explanation, however, for the range of piecemeal approaches that have been adopted historically across the sector.

### 5.3 Routes to change

Irrespective of how broadly they planned to implement their changes initially, a range of different overarching strategies were articulated across the teams, which were the basis for programmes of activity designed to make a demonstrable difference to BME student attainment in years to come. More details of the types of associated activity can be found in Section 6. The strategies were certainly not mutually exclusive, but included:

#### *Improving the BME student learning experience*

A number of teams are specifically undertaking work focused on making the learning experience of students more inclusive, for example through commitments to:

- *Inclusive learning and teaching*  
The tension that can be seen to exist in the extent to which institutions address the BME agenda as separate from, or as an integral part of, addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse student body is being addressed by some HEIs (including the University of Bradford and the University of the Arts London) through the development of cross-institution, inclusive teaching and learning policies and practices designed to help all their students to achieve, irrespective of background or ethnicity.
- *Internationalisation of the curriculum*  
There is a recognition of the overlap between the desired outcomes of institutional strategies for internationalisation and learning and teaching in some HEIs and the potential to positively improve not only the experience of BME students but all students. Both the University of Greenwich and Leeds Metropolitan University are seeking to give students the skills to operate in international and cross-cultural contexts. For the team from Greenwich this means embedding BME cultural experiences into the curriculum and pedagogical practice to the benefit of all.
- *Raising BME student aspirations*  
The potential impact of raising students' self-belief and aspirations on their degree performance was the basis for another approach taken by some teams through initiatives designed to build the confidence of BME students.
- *Addressing discrimination and disadvantage through structural change*  
This strategy focuses on the identification of institutional processes and practices that are thought to lead – or have been identified as leading – to

underachievement and then seeks ways to bring about relevant change to address the consequences of structural failure. The University of Greenwich's equality audit of review and validation procedures led to the development of enhanced guidelines for staff, better training for programme planning and the refinement of their audit tool.

- *Supporting BME students to succeed*  
Using internal or sector research as their evidence basis, another common approach was to focus on developing student support initiatives. For example, one key focus of the team from The Open University was on language skills development following research with a cross-section of their students that demonstrated a strong correlation between students' language skills and their degree attainment. When combined with the findings of other research on the failure of many BME students to access relevant support services in this area, their strategy for addressing BME underperformance recognises the importance of support in the area of English for academic purposes.

#### 5.4 Making change effective

Identifying ways to maximise their institutions' capacity to effect change – in this case changes that would ultimately contribute to the improvement in the performance of their BME students – was a key focus of interest for all the teams. Much has been written about the process of managing change in higher education, both in the context of particular initiatives and more generally in relation to conceptual frameworks of change and change management in a collaborative environment. For example, May and Bridger (2010), reporting on an earlier developmental summit programme run by the HEA, identified two broad categories of organisational change required to bring about more inclusive policy and practice:

- institutional-level change: targeting institutional policy, strategy, systems, processes and/or environmental factors, whether centrally or within departments/faculties;
- individual-level change: targeting the attitudes, awareness, knowledge, understanding, perceptions and assumptions of individuals as well as their practice.

One participant in this earlier programme on 'Developing and embedding inclusive policy and practice' is quoted as saying:

*It is very difficult to make a change if all the attitudes, behaviours and systems are against you, so I think it is very difficult to do one without the other.*

The distinction between organisational and individual-level change highlighted by May and Bridger is also reflected in the findings of the EGDA project, which made its recommendations under six thematic headings. These same themes provide a useful framework (see Table 2 below) for examining the details of the types of activity proposed, planned and/or implemented by the summit teams to create desired outcomes at both individual and institutional levels. Just as the authors of the EGDA project’s final report stated that their conclusions and recommendations were intended “to support institutions in reflecting on which areas of action might be of particular relevance to them”, so this programme recognised that improving the performance of BME students in individual HEIs would require context-specific action based on a sound evidence base to be effective.

Table 2: Framework for analysis of institutional activity

Theme	Aims/Outcomes	Activities/Outputs
Data collection and action	Build knowledge	Collect/interrogate data and disseminate findings
Research	Build understanding and evidence base; also research capability	Undertake institutional, pedagogical, experiential research
Learning, teaching, assessment and student support	Change practice	Pilot, implement and/or evaluate interventions
Perceptions and understandings	Change institutional culture and individual behaviours	Engage and develop staff, managers and students
Institutional infrastructure and governance	Embed degree attainment in reporting/delivery structures to monitor and sustain progress	Change reporting/delivery structures
Institutional policy	Embed degree attainment in policy to change institutional culture	Change policy(ies)

## 6. Mechanisms to improve degree attainment

*This section demonstrates the wide range of activities and approaches being adopted by institutions to meet the objective of improving BME student attainment, including the ways in which they are addressing some of the issues and challenges identified in earlier sections of this commentary. It builds on, and could usefully be read in conjunction with, the following resources:*

- *Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment Project – final and individual reports;*
- *Summit programme<sup>3</sup> – reflective papers submitted by participating institutions – these explain the aims, objectives, challenges and progress being made by the teams in addressing identified degree attainment differentials.*

The work of the teams could be characterised as being:

- highly developmental and iterative;
- multi-faceted – most teams planned to do a combination of things, often working both ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ and through addressing both policy and practice to achieve their defined objectives;
- instrumentalist, i.e. much of their work was designed to facilitate change through the agency of staff and students and their better engagement with the agenda of improving BME students’ attainment.

The activity-focused approach in this section reflects the aims of this publication – to provide ideas, lessons and reflections on the nature of changes and initiatives that others in the sector are undertaking as they seek to improve the attainment of their BME students. There is no attempt to draw conclusions from the prevalence of particular types of activity across the teams’ work as they were not selected to be representative of the wider sector. Rather, it is hoped that by giving named examples throughout, the reader will also want to access the reflective papers produced by the teams themselves, which

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<sup>3</sup> Details of the participants’ projects and reflective papers are available from: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/inclusion/ethnicitysummit](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/inclusion/ethnicitysummit)

contextualise the activities being highlighted in the sections below. In this way it is possible to see how the agenda is being conceptualised and addressed in a strategic sense by a range of different institutions. Activities already underway within participating institutions prior to their joining the programme have also been included here for interest where relevant.

#### 6.1 Building knowledge: data collection and action

In order to understand the context of differential degree attainment, there is a clear need for both robust quantitative and qualitative data to baseline the current situation and map progress. However, the EGDA final report focused on the importance not only of data collection and analysis, but on the establishment of mechanisms by which such data are used to inform and initiate actions to effect an improvement in the performance of BME students. To build knowledge in this area any institution will require:

- data collection systems that are fit for purpose;
- availability of baseline and regular data on participation, performance and differential attainment by ethnicity for purposes of monitoring progress and reporting – at both institutional and departmental level;
- evaluative data on interventions, initiatives and activities introduced to address performance.

The collection of baseline data is now a common practice and allows an overall understanding of the extent and nature of the differential attainment within an institution to be developed, to include differences by faculty/school or department and by ethnic group. It can also identify gaps in institutional data and enable the institution to track progress towards defined objectives.

The University of Northampton interrogated its data and found that part-time BME students do significantly less well than part-time white students, and that they are also less likely to get a good degree as compared to full-time BME students.

Data analysis at Coventry University found significant clustering of BME students by discipline; also differences by ethnic group in tariff points on entry. However, this was insufficient to explain all the differences in progression rates between BME and white students.

Some teams had already undertaken complex analyses prior to their joining the programme in order to try and identify patterns in their institutional data (HESA and NSS) to explain degree differentials. This included using the findings of both internal and sector research identifying factors thought likely to be impacting on progression and attainment rates by ethnic group to interrogate their institutional data. Others had identified existing departmental data looking at aspects of the BME experience thought to be possibly contributing to poor performance. This provided useful learning to inform their wider plans for initiatives to address BME attainment.

The University of Northampton had interrogated existing data on performance by type of assessment and ethnicity in their Law department and used it to inform their work to develop hypotheses for ways of improving BME attainment across the University.

At The Open University all faculties held discussions as part of an annual equality and diversity planning event, about how they were responding to attainment gaps identified across ethnic groups. Several committed to re-examining their data and/or undertaking research to identify factors that seemed to lead to success in particular subject areas.



At the University of Bedfordshire four areas for action on BME performance had been identified based on their having significant numbers of ethnic minority students – in Health, Business, Social Studies and Computing. This followed earlier actions to address the underperformance of Chinese students, especially those on 2+1 programmes.

The particular data-related activities undertaken as part of the summit teams' action plans fulfilled a range of context-specific objectives reflecting: the nature of the differentials they had already identified (for example, not all mirrored national patterns exactly when further analysed by ethnic group and discipline); the extent to which those differentials were already being addressed; and the sophistication of existing systems of data collection and management. Crucially, however, they exemplified activity to effect change. Initiatives included those designed to:

- enhance understanding of data, for example by moving to the use of nationally agreed classifications;
- improve the robustness of data by building better systems for data collection;
- identify possible reasons for BME attainment differentials by further interrogating institutional data, for example by examining:
  - the profile and attainment of BME students at institutional and faculty/departmental level;
  - findings from course surveys by the ethnicity of groups of students known to be underachieving;
  - results of the NSS by ethnicity;
- build the use of institutional surveys (e.g. the NSS) into plans for evaluating new initiatives to improve degree attainment;
- use the data on degree attainment to inform the design of new single equality schemes and action plans.

At The Open University work is underway to address the level of missing student ethnicity information by making ethnicity a compulsory field during telephone registration. It is already compulsory through online registration. Paper registration continues to present problems in obtaining complete datasets, and mailings to students after registration are being improved to request ethnicity and other missing data at appropriate intervals.

A number of specific challenges were highlighted by the teams relating to the effective use of available data on degree attainment, including:

- moving from data collection and analysis (centralised function) to action on the findings (distributed function), in particular to encourage ‘ownership’ of the data beyond the equality office. This had been recognised and effectively addressed at the University of the Arts London;

The University of the Arts London’s Academic Board reviewed its institutional data, leading to a recommendation that five institutional committees consider the analysis in detail and the implications for their respected areas of oversight. These committees have responsibility for overall national performance, academic standards, student life, teaching and learning and widening participation. This decision recognised that the causes of degree differentials are complex and distributed, and that responsibility should not rest solely with equality and diversity committees.

- engaging faculty, school and/or departmental staff in the use of the data to inform programme and course design. This requires senior manager commitment;

At the University of Hertfordshire Business School, raising awareness of BME students' results with the relevant staff groups was seen to be an important first step towards building support for new programme structures. The school's Director of Learning and Teaching worked with the faculty learning and teaching group members and the programme tutors to draw out and disseminate performance data, both quantitative and qualitative, from the individual programme level annual monitoring and evaluation reports.

- interpreting and using institutional data on performance where very small numbers of BME students were involved at departmental level. One solution was to undertake qualitative research, for example surveys and focus groups, to build understanding of the data, as undertaken at Teesside University.

## 6.2 Building understanding: research

Given the lack of definitive evidence in the research literature as to the causality of the underperformance of students from ethnic minority groups, it is not surprising that many institutions are undertaking research to further their understanding of the experience of their own BME students and factors that might be impacting on their academic performance. This was a key recommendation from the EGDA report, which also emphasised the importance of ensuring that, as with data collection and analysis, research is acted upon. Research that identifies experiences of students or perceptions of staff that are detrimental to the learning or social environment, and appear to be impacting negatively on performance, can be used to inform initiatives to negate such impacts. Leeds Metropolitan University have followed up their research into how BME students experience the institution with focus groups with staff to discuss the implications of findings and measures needed to address the attainment gap, including ways to promote the better integration of BME students and provide support for employability.

Much of the research highlighted below is ongoing. However, some pre-dated, prompted and/or informed participation in the summit programme and the process of planning or implementing subsequent interventions undertaken by the teams, as at the University of the Arts London and The Open University:

The University of the Arts London ‘Tell Us About It’ project involved whole-course evaluation by high-achieving diverse student groups (14 were BME students). Their art work and their learning narratives were used as a trigger for discussions with staff about changing teaching and have provided new students with an insight into the factors that helped previous students to succeed.

The Open University’s internal data showed that around 10% of its students were BME students and that an estimated 15,000 of its UK students did not consider English as their first language. It therefore did further research into the relationship between academic language and attainment. The results indicated a high correlation between language use and attainment, a relatively high number of students from ethnic minorities in need of English language development and a low level of language-based support in OU course materials and tutor feedback on assignments. This informed their strategy to improve BME student attainment.

### 6.2.1 Research methodologies

Research may be based on a representative sample of all students, as in the University of the Arts London project cited above, or simply on BME students themselves, depending on its specific objectives. A wide range of research methodologies have been used or are being considered by the teams, including mixed-method approaches where appropriate, to include:

- literature review;
- documentary analysis;
- mapping of existing research evidence within the institution;
- student and staff surveys;
- qualitative focus groups;
- one-to-one interviews;
- action research;
- Appreciative Inquiry (AI).

Interestingly, a noticeable number of teams were anxious to avoid focusing on the ‘negatives’ of degree attainment, i.e. what prevented BME students from gaining a ‘good’ degree, and chose research methods designed to investigate the ‘positives’ i.e. what factors enable some students (whether BME or not) to succeed. The hope was that a focus on success might help combat the ‘deficit model’ of the BME student, provide role models and inspiration for all students and also encourage students and/or staff to engage with the research process itself. This approach usefully involved alumni students as well as undergraduates in some cases.

A different approach, as adopted by the Business School at the University of Hertfordshire, was to undertake research with students from both low- and high-performing ethnic groups and to compare and contrast the findings.

Roehampton University engaged a postgraduate student from an ethnic minority background to manage their research project, which used an Appreciative Inquiry approach to “identify aspects of teaching, learning and assessment which have contributed to improving the attainment of students from across four discipline areas”. The researcher reported that this approach had “enabled students to share more personal experiences with their peers about events which had impacted on their experience of university” and to conceptualise their “perfect university”.

The University of Bedfordshire’s research project ‘Eyes on the prize’ has focused on accentuating the positives and the success stories rather than focusing upon low attainment. It aimed to work with BME alumni who were seen to have ‘succeeded’ to determine more about their journeys, including what had helped them to attain good degrees and who had influenced their progression.

### 6.2.2 Research aims and objectives

Research can play a part at every stage of the process whereby an institution seeks to address student performance, and specifically degree attainment, from use as a tool in

action planning right through to evaluation of new initiatives. For example, existing and new research with staff and students was used by the teams to:

- develop understanding of the BME agenda at institutional level – as at Leeds Metropolitan University where, for example, image analysis has been used to identify whether and how BME students are identified as a group and the implications for perceptions of BME students and the institution’s commitment to addressing degree attainment differentials;
- build understanding of the BME student experience so as to inform the development of policy and practices thought likely to improve their learning and performance;
- enhance institutional data to better understand the BME student learning experience – as at Teesside University where qualitative research has been used to inform the analysis of NSS findings that show greater dissatisfaction with their learning and teaching experience among some BME student groups when compared to their white peers;
- build a shared frame of reference for teams working on the agenda – as at the University of Greenwich where they are developing interventions in three schools based on raising student expectations and innovations in curriculum design and delivery;
- review specific learning, teaching, assessment and support practices in order to improve the experience of BME students in ways that might support their better performance;
- identify possible factors in the attainment of BME students – as at the University of Greenwich where they have conducted interviews with high achievers; and Coventry University’s Economics, Finance and Accounting action research project which has looked at differences in student motivation and time available to study by ethnic group;
- develop, design and implement new initiatives to improve progression and attainment – as at Coventry University where mini-projects based on action research have been used to develop ideas to improve transition, retention and attainment rates of BME students; and at the University of the Arts London where localised research projects have been used to involve students and alumni in the process of co-creation of curriculum change;
- generate resources – as at The Open University where they have developed case studies from research undertaken in the Faculty of Education and Language Studies and the Faculty of Health and Social Care on factors leading to student

- success, especially among those with low prior qualifications;
- evaluate existing initiatives – as at the University of Northampton whose new PADARE initiative to support Black African students in social work will be evaluated across three years to establish whether it has impacted on attainment;
- add value to annual student satisfaction surveys by integrating learning from research into factors affecting the quality of the BME student experience – as at Aston University where a measure of integration and engagement is to be added to future internal surveys.

The details of these and many other research projects can be found in the reflective papers written by the teams, accessible from the HEA website. The multiplicity of their findings demonstrates both the known complexity of the issues likely to be involved in explaining differential attainment across ethnic groups and the value in the sharing of such research conclusions across the sector. In this context, a forthcoming synthesis of research on the subject of the retention and success of BME students is to be published by the HEA in 2011 (Singh, forthcoming).

An image analysis of the website, leaflets and information guides, including prospectuses, was conducted at Leeds Metropolitan University. The results showed that BME students are over-represented, giving rise to fears that the predominance of images of BME students as academically successful might serve to mask the reality of degree attainment inequalities and consequently prevent strategies being put into place by the University to address them.

Coventry University's Biomolecular and Sports Science department is running a project with a particular interest in exploring students' perceptions of their academic motivation. They are engaged in a large-scale survey of Level 1 students and aim to expand on these data by exploring the findings via focus groups with Level 2 students.

A mixed-methods qualitative research project at Leeds Metropolitan University among white and BME students has found that despite the institution's strongly stated values of equality and diversity, policy does not always translate into practice, for example in relation to student support. However, the BME students were more willing to maintain that "there was no problem", to lack the confidence to speak to their tutors about it and/or to feel it would be "pointless" to do so. The perceived lack of support from staff was compounded for some of them by a lack of parental or peer group support, leading, for example to feelings of isolation in class.

### 6.3 Changing practice: learning, teaching, assessment and student support

A key recommendation from the EGDA report was to evaluate and then change learning, teaching, assessment and student support practices in light of attainment differentials. It is interesting to note that, in this relation, the authors concluded that more needed to be known about the involvement of key stakeholders in the agenda (to include educational developers and senior managers) and the prevalence among staff of deficit models of BME students as the explanation for underperformance. They also felt unable to offer evidence of the widespread exploration of the subject dimension in differential degree attainment by HEIs or of exploration of the wider issues as part of teacher (i.e. staff) development programmes.

Much of the work of the teams in the area of learning, teaching, assessment and student support illustrates how institutions are in fact involving different groups of staff and using institutional data and research findings to inform their initiatives at disciplinary level. Section 6.4.1 looks at staff engagement in particular, including the ways in which staff attitudes and behaviours in relation to BME students are being actively addressed. This is in recognition that all students have different learning requirements and that where interventions are about difference, for example, they should avoid 'deficit models' of particular groups of students.

It has already been explained how the wide range of practice-related activities and initiatives initiated by the summit teams can usefully be characterised in relation to their *level of delivery* and *degree of targeting*. This is particularly relevant when looking at the work undertaken to change learning, teaching and assessment practice and student support in more detail.



### 6.3.1 Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

This area of activity was seen to require significant institutional commitment in relation to staff time and input, but activities to change the learning experience of BME students were a feature of many of the teams' plans. There was a range of individual initiatives, most of them designed to change practice at departmental or school level.

A number of teams focused on giving skills to academic staff to change their own practice (see Section 6.4.1), a feature in particular of strategies based around the development of more inclusive curricula at whatever level of change. In this context, pre-existing initiatives to support staff in the embedding of diversity issues into the curriculum – as at the University of the Arts London – were reported to be already supporting better LTA practice, and were seen to offer the potential to impact positively on the achievement of BME students.

All such initiatives sought, ultimately, to improve BME attainment through embedding equality principles into both the design and evaluation of programmes, courses and modules. Such changes in practice were driven (where appropriate) by policy change and supported by relevant procedural change. Effective action in the areas of institutional policy and procedure is discussed in Sections 6.5 and 6.6.

### 6.3.1.1 The curriculum design process

Whether teams were addressing curriculum design issues at institutional or faculty/school/departmental level, the *process* of curriculum design variously involved the following types of activity:

- research – for example, to identify issues of particular concern to BME students themselves to inform curriculum change;

The University of the Arts London provided project funding for four small initiatives to be undertaken by course teams to promote curriculum developments. One project used an open space format to bring together staff and students to discuss how the attainment of BME students might be improved. It aimed to inform an action plan for curriculum improvements.

At London Metropolitan Business School research had indicated a difference in staff and students' expectations of the demands in the first-year Business and Management curriculum and the importance of feedback. A review of learning and teaching expectations plus an exercise to map academic skills against the curriculum helped them to design a new curriculum and assessment strategy and a set of learning and teaching principles.

The Leeds Metropolitan University mixed-methods research project, which sought to better understand their BME students' experience of living and learning at the University, was specifically designed to inform a review of their learning, teaching, assessment and student support practices and to develop a plan of action to improve BME student performance.

- curriculum review – for example, to examine particular areas of concern relating to the BME learning experience;

At the University of Hertfordshire they decided to have a periodic review of the entire Business School undergraduate curriculum to address two major issues: the need for strong and sustained academic skills development through the programme of study, which is taught within a disciplinary context and uses very clear language on expectations, and the need for students to experience group work with a more diverse profile than students of their own ethnicity.

At the University of Greenwich, the BSc Pharmaceutical Science programme is largely made up of BME students. The curriculum was reviewed to ensure that opportunities to discuss ethnicity and cultural difference were available, particularly in tutorials.

- development and delivery of support for staff involved in curriculum design and course validation and review – for example, through provision of good practice examples, toolkits, guidelines and dedicated training. It was recognised that there could be resistance to the redesign of curricula and that a rationale should be provided, backed wherever possible by research evidence, for change demonstrating the anticipated benefits. Adopting a course team approach could be productive; also linking changes to relevant institutional commitments, for example to personalised learning as at the University of Bedfordshire.

At the University of Bradford they are mapping current good practice in order to develop a curriculum analysis and development tool to help staff in the design of more inclusive curricula.

The University of Portsmouth decided that course approval, monitoring and review processes should contain consideration of data (where available) regarding ethnicity and progression and achievement. Course approval documentation will be revised to include this requirement.

The involvement of students in the process of curriculum improvement was a particular feature of the work undertaken by the team at the University of the Arts London, an approach recommended strongly in the EGDA project report.

A project at the University of the Arts London used a questionnaire and focus groups with BME students to gather suggestions for curriculum interventions to improve attainment. Alumni students are to be involved in the planning of future interventions to be informed by the research.

#### 6.3.1.2 Curriculum content and learning outcomes

Two specific institutional approaches to curriculum content being adopted by some teams to address the underperformance of their BME students and seen to be of potential benefit to all students, have already been identified: inclusive learning and teaching and internationalisation of the curriculum. Both of these approaches seek to avoid the marginalisation of particular groups of students, “making higher education accessible, relevant and engaging to all students” (Thomas and May, 2010). Staff development was at the heart of the work of the teams taking this approach. The principles of inclusive curriculum design are discussed in a review of the research literature undertaken by Professor Christine Hockings and published by the HEA in 2010.

Aston University has a very significant percentage of BME students and a long history of researching what would improve the learning experience of these students. They have found that some BME students struggle to engage with a curriculum seen to be mono-cultural.

The University Bradford has adopted an approach to teaching and learning that is centred around co-operative, collaborative and active learning. It seeks to build upon the cultural and social capital of their students, foster supportive networks, and increase staff–student dialogue. This will be supported by the development of more inclusive curricula that are culturally appropriate, sensitive and relevant to their students.

Other initiatives addressed particular curriculum issues, as identified, for example, through periodic review of courses or programmes. In particular, there was a wide range of curriculum initiatives designed to develop both core academic and social competencies, which, on the basis of (indirect) research evidence, were thought likely to enhance learning outcomes, and thereby the success, of BME students (while being of benefit to all students). They were often piloted in departments or on courses with a significant number of BME students and included curriculum innovations to enhance students’

- academic skills;
- employability skills;
- cross-cultural capabilities;
- motivation;
- confidence and expectations of success;
- sense of belonging.

These initiatives included both innovative practices embedded into existing curricula and new core courses and modules for skills development.

Motivational talks given by individuals from industry were embedded into taught courses on the University of Greenwich's Pharmaceutical Science programme. On the Sociology programme, study skills and employability provision were embedded in courses and the curriculum is also to focus more on issues of ethnicity and global politics with the use of more texts by BME academics.

The Open University has developed a new course on English for Academic Purposes designed for students new to university writing and/or with English as an additional language. Additionally modules equivalent to the first year of undergraduate study are to include literacy development as part of the core curriculum.

At the University of the Arts London they have funded a project using BME student ambassadors to work alongside staff to develop the research, presentation and critiquing skills of current students. It is hoped this will enhance their confidence and the integration of different cultural groups.

#### 6.3.1.3 Curriculum delivery

A range of issues identified in Hockings' (2010) synthesis of the research literature on inclusive learning and teaching were mentioned by teams as areas of interest in relation to their current or planned work to improve the performance of their BME students. These had sometimes been picked up in internal research looking at the learning experiences of their BME students and included the possible value of:

- student-centred, collaborative teaching;
- recognising the prior knowledge and experiences of BME students (and the

- avoidance of preconceived notions about them);
- paying attention to classroom dynamics – allowing BME students a voice (especially when in a minority);
- avoiding technology that disadvantages students from certain backgrounds (e.g. by class or ethnicity);
- using learning spaces known to be favoured/appropriate to BME students;
- skills development for teaching staff – including development of “emotional capital” (Cousin, 2006).

However, interviews with students investigating possible reasons for the underperformance of some BME students did not always identify pedagogical issues.

Research with students at the University of Hertfordshire found that they were more likely to attribute the underperformance of their peers to individual characteristics than to pedagogical discrimination.

The range of pedagogical interventions actually planned or implemented by the teams was, however, fairly limited beyond those being planned as part of institution-wide commitments to inclusive teaching (as at the University of Bradford). They included initiatives to:

- encourage more mixed group working within courses;
- ensure practice put in place to support BME students on campus is replicated for students on placement;
- move away from traditional formats of delivery (i.e. lectures/seminars) towards more interactive teaching methods (e.g. workshops);
- encourage the more active participation of BME students, for example in in-class debates;
- facilitate student engagement in lectures through the use of personal response systems to encourage students to reflect on their learning.

The University of Hertfordshire Business School encourages students to work with those outside their own ethnic group in group work modules and module leaders assign students to groups to encourage this. However, many of the modules associated with core skills are taught across degree programmes providing a wide working cohort. As a result there have been challenges as some students – usually of the same ethnicity – want to commute together and have similar timetables. Online work is being explored to overcome this.

The University of Greenwich Pharmaceutical Science programme has introduced personal response systems in lectures. These enable students to assess their own understanding as they go along and help them to identify areas where they require further knowledge or support.

### 6.3.2 Student support – changing practice

The EGDA report recommended ensuring that student support mechanisms are adequately resourced and monitored for take-up by BME students. This includes support for academic attainment, as well as to ensure student well-being and satisfaction.

While stressing the importance of ensuring that student support activities are provided to enable the success of all students, many of the teams also recognised that, given the degree attainment disparity, targeted support services could be appropriate for specific groups of BME students. Having robust data and understanding the experience of their BME students helped determine what these services might be and at whom they should be targeted.

The institutions taking part in the summit programme highlighted a range of initiatives to include both those pre-dating and those devised during the summit programme. Some initiatives were aimed at all students and others specifically at BME students. The work of some teams, however, focused on the exploration and identification of the types of support needed by their BME students, but the issue of targeting, and the potential for the stigmatisation of students known to be accessing targeted provision, was seen to be hard to resolve.



At the University of the Arts London they initiated a project to identify the support needs of new BME students through undertaking research with applicants using a resource that includes existing BME students discussing their experience of the course to prompt discussion about their expectations and concerns.

The types of activities undertaken by institutions can be broken down into some key areas:

#### 6.3.2.1 Awareness of student support services

Many participating institutions already deliver a range of student support services considered relevant to enhancing the BME learning experience but recognise that BME students may not be accessing them as much as their white peers. They therefore plan to put in place mechanisms to raise awareness of the support available.

The University of Portsmouth recognised the importance of improving communication to specific groups of students, to include those from BME backgrounds, to raise awareness of support services. Student-facing services have reflected on the first impressions and image they convey so as to provide a welcoming, inclusive and non-judgemental service.

#### 6.3.2.2 Delivery of services to support academic achievement

Whether their initiatives pre-dated or were developed as part of the summit programme, they sought to achieve a wide range of outcomes, to include:

- better information for students, including making students more aware of course requirements;

Previous research at The Open University had indicated that a relatively high number of BME students required some support in English language development. To better prepare prospective students, the University's website and print prospectuses now make more explicit the standard of academic English that is required for study. Additionally the University plans to collect information online on students' language competency to help target offers of support.

- academic skills development, such as in essay writing, revision, study and library skills;

The library service at Coventry University trained four students to work in the library to assist other students. These Roving Study Support Assistants (RSSAs) provided a visible presence and friendly point of contact for other students. They dealt with quick queries and developed knowledge of when and how to refer students to other resources and services. The RSSAs reported that they had gained experience and acquired new skills and knowledge themselves through supporting others.

Using staff from the student support team with academics from specific programmes, the University of Greenwich has trialled a voluntary 'acceleration programme' targeted particularly at BME students and based on skills workshops and the use of skills audit tools for self-completion. Historically support had been provided through the welfare and student support section of the Office of Student Affairs working with students in crisis on a one-to-one basis. A key lesson from the trial was the need to involve academics in developing learning interventions, which also needed to be context-specific to be valuable.

- development of personal and academic skills and networks through peer support and mentoring;

The University of Northampton started a support group call 'PADARE'. This scheme aims to pair African students on the Social Work programme with suitable social worker mentors. In some cases these mentors also happened to be past students of the programme. Baseline data for Black African Social Work students for 2009 was collected and over the next three years this information will be monitored to ascertain if the support group has an effect on raising attainment.

- creation of more conducive environments to succeed, through consideration of the physical environment and students' use of particular spaces.

Teesside University, among other HEIs, found that some BME students were using campus learning spaces, especially the library, both for learning and social interaction more actively than their white peers. This caused tension as some students and staff felt that such spaces should be used as quiet spaces for learning, rather than social interaction. To resolve this, library space has been reorganised to more effectively separate quiet areas from social learning spaces, and social learning spaces have been increased. Some staff training has also taken place to address any remaining tensions over use of space.

### 6.3.2.3 Delivering initiatives related to student motivation and well-being

Some institutions had already been targeting certain areas of student support, such as counselling and guidance services, as a way of helping individual BME students to perform better, as at the University of Greenwich. Research by Stuart *et al.* (2009) shows that student experiences differ across ethnic groups, and that a sense of belonging can

account for variances in both academic confidence and well-being. Some teams delivered activities aimed at improving the whole student experience, to include looking at life beyond university, in recognition that this may help students to reach their potential. Such activities included those that aimed to:

- support successful induction;

Coventry University's Biomolecular and Sports Science department recruited ten Level 2 and 3 mentors to assist staff during induction week to act as a first point of contact for new students. The mentors received a day's training on mentoring skills in September. Early reports found that new students were reluctant to contact the mentors but that a more structured approach around mentors putting on specific help sessions might engage more students.

- build a sense of belonging;

London Metropolitan University's Business School recognised the importance of developing a sense of belonging and integration for students to succeed and the potential benefits of participation in extra-curricular activities in this respect. First-year students were introduced to a range of extra-curricular activities and their benefits, and this encouraged greater participation. They were awarded with a certificate for taking part at an event to celebrate student participation and achievement.

At Aston University the team used a student representative training session to collect examples of what had made the students, both BME and white, feel included and excluded.

As BME students are less likely to engage with extra-curricular activities, Coventry University plans to run a new project to encourage more female Asian students to take part in sports activities.

— raise aspirations and motivation to succeed.

London Metropolitan University Business School delivered a series of activities using alumni through Entrepreneurs in Action, an organisation working with young people to teach them about the mindset needed for entrepreneurial success. The feedback from students was that alumni had acted as role models and had helped to raise their confidence and aspirations.

Roehampton University brought staff and students together to discuss the 'perfect university'. Through two-way dialogue and pictorial activity, staff and students came to a better understanding of their mutual aspirations and the challenges of university life.

An existing initiative at the University of Northampton was a mentoring scheme for BME students run in conjunction with the National Mentoring Consortium. While this scheme focuses on issues of employability and skills development for employment, there has been some anecdotal evidence that the scheme can also improve the overall attainment of some participating students.

## 6.4 Changing institutional culture and individual behaviour

Many teams faced preconceived perceptions of BME students among colleagues and failure to understand or recognise that BME students might have different experiences or might learn in different ways to their white peers. In addition, notions of the identity of 'the BME student' could be confused. However, it was recognised that false or negative perceptions about BME students, irrespective of intentionality, could lead to institutional bias and marginalisation of BME students. All teams therefore found it important to engage with both staff and students to enable change in individual behaviours and institutional cultures.

Engagement was seen as necessary on multiple levels, however, not simply for the creation of a positive institutional environment through addressing attitudes, but also to enable staff and students to both inform the design and delivery of specific initiatives and engage with proposed changes in policy and practice to improve the attainment of BME students.

The University of Portsmouth, through projects, workshops and other activities to raise staff awareness, has sought to clarify the term 'BME' and distinguish problems faced by BME students from those faced by international students. Although some of the issues may be similar, this has helped staff to focus on particular matters independent of English language ability.

### 6.4.1 Engaging staff

Many of the institutions taking part in the programme extended pre-existing work to engage staff in this agenda within their institution, as well as introducing new initiatives.

Teams often found it easiest to engage those staff with an existing interest or involvement with equality issues. Various general approaches were adopted, therefore, to promote wider staff interest in the degree attainment agenda, particularly among those in academic and support roles. They included:

- *incentivisation* – through building objectives relating to raising degree attainment into promotion and performance management systems;
- *education* – through development of tools and resources, and provision of routes for staff to access general and role-specific information relevant to the agenda;

- *customisation of activity* – through engaging staff on their own terms, for example in the case of academic staff:
  - being evidence-based at all times, taking care to disseminate research evidence widely;
  - developing arguments based on scholarship;
  - acknowledging disciplinary differences in the way new practice evolves/ is adopted;
- *building credibility* – by providing expert input to events of all kinds;
- *finding safe environments* – for the discussion of issues of race, diversity and inclusive pedagogy;
- *consultation* – through providing opportunities for dialogue and involvement, especially early on in the process of the development of strategies, policies and practices to address improvements in degree attainment.

In developing an action plan to improve degree attainment, The Open University embarked on an internal programme of research dissemination and consulted with a large number academics, academic-related staff and senior managers to get buy-in to the plan. This substantially raised the profile of the problem and supported the distribution of ownership for implementing the plan.

The University of Greenwich team developed a University-wide critical framework for dialogue focusing on learning and teaching as a way of raising staff awareness of their work and the issue of degree attainment differentials.

The University of Bradford team consulted widely with their faith advisers, Students' Union representatives, equal opportunities officers and many other groups of staff about how to develop their plans to address BME underachievement. They have also built arguments for a more inclusive curriculum on notions of inclusive teaching being a worthwhile and scholarly pursuit.

#### 6.4.1.1 Building staff awareness and understanding across the institution

Given the sensitivity of the agenda, the promotion of open discussion to build staff awareness and understanding of the issues thought to be associated with the underperformance of many BME groups is key to enabling change in both individual behaviours and institutional cultures. This was achieved by identifying opportunities to highlight, raise the profile of and promote the discussion of the issue of degree attainment differentials, backed by the research evidence, for example through:

- internal events such as institutional teaching and learning conferences;
- staff workshops on student attainment;
- publicity via internal networks;
- presentations to training and other events organised at faculty, departmental and course levels;
- dedicated staff newsletters on the issue;
- building the issue into induction activity;
- provision of materials and advice on institutional websites.

At the University of Hertfordshire engagement with staff led to questions about the range of factors that might contribute to poor academic performance. It allowed some staff to acknowledge openly that language could be a barrier to learning and that their own classroom practice might favour students who have English as their first language. Staff also reflected on the appropriateness of Eurocentric learning materials for a diverse student population and whether or not students required more personalised feedback for the written work.

An unexpected benefit of inviting applications for small-scale project funding to identify curriculum developments to help BME students at the University of the Arts London to do better was an improvement in staff awareness of degree differentials.



#### 6.4.1.2 Involving staff in initiatives to address degree attainment

As well as those staff involved directly in the delivery of initiatives, the teams sought to involve many others in their development and implementation, for example through:

- involvement in research projects, as at Leeds Metropolitan University where focus groups were conducted with staff to discuss BME attainment;
- development of resources, as at Aston University where the team sought the help of certain groups of teaching and learning staff (learning champions, teaching award holders and CLIPP staff) in the development and later evaluation (using an online evaluation tool) of a toolkit on inclusive practice. The generation of case studies proved particularly challenging, however, and engaging the help of relevant committees to canvass staff support for any such future project work in schools will be considered in future;
- consultation to identify ‘what works’ in relation to practice initiatives being developed by colleagues working on related but relevant agendas. At The Open University the team wanted to consider how institutional work on retention – often linked to low attainment – could be focused to support improvements in degree attainment;
- involvement as critical friends to the work being implemented.

#### 6.4.1.3 Developing staff capacity to address degree attainment

Many of the teams made formal staff development activity a fundamental part of their work, giving staff the tools to support the type of changes in their practice identified as being likely to impact on the degree attainment of BME students. Some of these activities pre-dated the summit programme.

As with changing practice around teaching, learning, assessment and student support (see Section 6.3), while some activities focused solely on BME students, others were wider, developing staff to support the attainment of all students. Such activities included:

- embedding consideration of degree attainment into existing modules within programmes for the development of new and/or existing staff, or developing new modules to address practice designed to support the success of students;

The University of Bradford has redesigned their Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice (PGCHEP) to include a module on how to design inclusive curricula, and also made the PGCHEP compulsory for all new academic staff.

As part of the University of Hertfordshire's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, the issue of degree attainment is discussed within the compulsory module on enhancing the student learning experience. This includes a case study activity for participants asking them to consider the steps that programmes, schools/faculties and the University should take on identifying differing attainment levels in different ethnic groups.

- providing resources including online training modules, best practice case studies, guidance for tutors and toolkits;

Aston University is developing a dedicated website toolkit of resources and ideas to help staff to support students. This has been created through an iterative process of collecting best practice case studies of inclusive practice from staff and examples of student experiences through the Students' Union.

Teesside University is developing a website to support diversity training and this will include materials on degree attainment differentials.

- running dedicated seminar and workshop programmes, for example on inclusive pedagogy or addressing barriers to achievement;

The University of Bradford has used a seminar series on inclusive pedagogy and the potential impact of diversity on learning and teaching to support their strategy to develop an inclusive campus and learning experience for all its students. Over 50% of their academic staff had attended a seminar at the time of reporting. Inclusion and diversity is a key strand in the work of their new Academic Development Unit, which includes educational developers, academics and support staff.

- developing networks of ‘champions’ at departmental or faculty level to provide leadership and encourage the development of strategies for addressing BME attainment;

At Coventry University they have established a network of ‘Diversity Champions’ who raise awareness of issues of BME attainment within departments and services and are tasked to review, evaluate and disseminate practice interventions designed to improve students’ performance.

- rewarding and/or promoting the development of relevant practice through, for example, the award of teaching fellowships and facilitation of the uptake of external travel grants;
- promoting staff involvement in specific BME projects.

#### 6.4.1.4 Engaging senior managers

Moving their work from being a series of time-limited initiatives to being part of a strategic commitment to action to improve the attainment of BME students was a priority for all teams, although time frames necessarily varied. However, engaging senior managers was recognised as essential for the embedding of change at whatever level, and for sustaining the momentum and sustainability of their work. Demonstrating high level academic support for the agenda also gave it credibility and visibility across the institution, promoted staff interest and buy-in to the changes being effected and thereby contributed to cultural change.

Effective approaches included:

- seeking high level academic leadership for work being undertaken. Teams variously obtained the active involvement and/or support of Deans of School and appropriate DVCs and Directors (for example, those with responsibility for inclusion, diversity, student success or learning and teaching);
- obtaining representation on, or permission to make representations to, Boards of Governors;
- inviting faculty heads to sit on the team's working group;
- distributing plans to relevant senior managers.

The Open University team distributed their action plan to Deans and Directors of all their academic and supporting units so as to engage their interest and build support for their work to improve degree attainment. High level recognition of the role of language in attainment helped them to gain staff endorsement for a strategy to improve BME attainment through language skills development.

#### 6.4.2. Engaging students

All of the summit teams prioritised the engagement of students in their work to address differential degree attainment at some level, seeking to involve them in activities and initiatives designed to promote changes in both the institutional environment and teaching practice. In a practical sense this variously meant involving them in the action planning process and/or the implementation of particular activities and initiatives, thereby enabling them to become active participants or 'agents' in the change process. Running as a thread through much of their work was the involvement of BME (and other) students and alumni in research and other activities to build understanding of the institutional environment and the nature of the BME student experience so as to identify ways to challenge negative behaviours and perceptions – for example, deficit models of the BME student – and thereby inform future policy and practice, particularly in the area of learning and teaching.

'Student engagement' is an increasingly high profile agenda for institutions although it is also a contested term. Within the literature Trowler and Trowler (2010) have identified three dimensions of engagement, that is 'engagement' as related to:

- individual student learning – to include students’ involvement with their own learning and with the design, delivery and assessment of their learning;
- involvement in structure and process – to include representation and students’ role in governance and feedback processes at multiple levels;
- student identity – to include “engagement for social justice/redress, identity enhancement and social integration”.

The implications of these differing interpretations are discussed in a series of publications and resources<sup>4</sup>, which include *A Framework for Action*, a briefing for institutional decision-makers regarding the complexities, benefits and practicalities of improving student engagement. The work of the summit teams exemplified all these differing notions or aspects of engagement, although the focus was more particularly on the first, i.e. the engagement of students in individual learning, to include its design and delivery.

Irrespective of the focus of teams’ work in this area, however, giving BME students a ‘voice’ was widely seen as valuable on multiple levels, for example as a way of: building personal motivation and self-confidence; promoting social integration; and providing an evidence base for the design of new interventions to promote their success.

Within the University of Greenwich School of Education and Training, a series of workshops were targeted at BME students focusing on identity, being heard and developing the BME student voice. This provided a forum to identify pedagogical issues, discuss attainment and engage with critical race theory.

#### 6.4.2.1 Engaging students with their own learning

It has already been seen in Section 6.3.2 on changing practice in student support how institutions are finding ways to improve the performance of BME students through

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4 Publications and resources are available from [www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/studentengagement/research\\_and\\_evidence\\_base\\_for\\_student\\_engagement](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/studentengagement/research_and_evidence_base_for_student_engagement)

helping them to engage better with their own learning – both through the formal and informal curriculum. A wide range of activities and interventions have been initiated, many of them seeking to encourage engagement through interaction with peers, mentors and/or other role models (e.g. staff and alumni). Approaches included:

- events where BME alumni came back to speak to students;
- creation of student–alumni networks to offer buddying support;
- using BME student ambassadors to develop the skills of existing students.

The University of the Arts London are evaluating a project using existing BME student ambassadors to develop the research, presentation and critiquing skills of current students on the BA Textiles course. They hope to improve students' confidence and the integration of different cultural groups.

Roehampton University employed a successful BME alumnus as a project officer to manage their research project and to engage with their current BME students. Student feedback was that not only were students able to relate to the project's aims because they could relate to her, but participation in the project had also encouraged participants to take more control of their learning.

#### 6.4.2.2 Engaging students in the design and delivery of their learning

In seeking to improve BME attainment, students were involved in the design and delivery of their learning on various levels. This included:

- participating in research projects designed to inform curriculum and pedagogical developments;
- staff–student activities designed to create the space for dialogue on curriculum issues, for example workshop sessions and internet fora;
- involving students in the design of resources.

Pre-dating the summit programme, the University of the Arts London ran a project involving high-achieving student groups. This included a number of BME students. Their art work and learning narratives were used as a trigger for discussions with staff about changing teaching and have provided new students with an insight into the factors that helped previous students to succeed. The approach was designed to involve students as part of the solution and act as role models of success ([www.arts.ac.uk/docs/HandBook\\_No3LR.pdf](http://www.arts.ac.uk/docs/HandBook_No3LR.pdf)).

Coventry University developed an interactive pre-course website for students prior to their arrival in a department with a relatively high number of BME students. This provides information to assist in their transition from school or college and offers networking opportunities with their cohort, existing students and staff.

The University of Northampton is inviting schools to consider 'positive action measures' that could be run by or for their BME students so as to give them a voice in the process of raising degree attainment.

#### 6.4.2.3 Involving students in institutional structures and processes

Having BME student representation on committees that focus on diversity issues is a recognised way of giving them the opportunity to contribute to institutional discourses on equal opportunities. However, in the context of the programme there were few examples of new initiatives being undertaken in this area, although Students' Unions and their associated societies and clubs for minority groups provided a useful way for the teams to contact and engage interested students in their activities, for example when recruiting respondents to take part in research projects.

## 6.5 Embedding the agenda: institutional infrastructure and governance

Most of the summit teams explored ways of developing and sustaining their work to improve BME students' performance through use of their institution's infrastructure and governance processes at some level. The EGDA report made recommendations about the need to strengthen the capacity of equality and diversity committees specifically to support the attainment agenda and some teams explored this further. Others, however, chose to advance their agenda through finding mechanisms to distribute responsibility more widely. In some cases this was coupled with identifying a senior manager to be responsible for the agenda across the whole institution, although again not necessarily as part of an equality and diversity brief. This ensured both accountability and momentum for the work.

Their particular objectives at the current point in time depended on the level of change being sought as reflected in the scope, scale and time frame of their work under the programme. As noted in Section 5.2/Figure 3, some were addressing BME attainment through whole institution change, seeking to embed particular initiatives across all faculties; others through change at faculty/departmental level initially, whether targeted specifically at BME students or not. Considerations in relation to embedding change variously included how to:

- encourage engagement of senior managers with the agenda at a strategic level in order to facilitate its prioritisation;
- reposition the agenda within the institutional reporting and monitoring framework to ensure continuity of work being planned and/or initiated;
- facilitate cross-institution and/or cross-function working on the agenda;
- promote ownership and responsibility for improving BME performance at appropriate levels;
- access advice and guidance.

### 6.5.1 Positioning of the agenda

The issue of positioning was a significant one for some teams, i.e. the extent to which responsibility for the agenda at an institutional level should lie within the remit of equality and diversity and/or learning and teaching (or other) functions. Representation on relevant committees, such as those related to learning and teaching, and ensuring that BME attainment was featured on their standing agendas, were considered key to the future sustainability of their work, especially where activity at the present time is diffuse or not based on strategic change at whole-



institution level. Reporting might be through more than one committee. In the case of committees other than those for equality and diversity, there were differences in whether they were tasked to look at a wide range of equality and diversity issues of which BME attainment was one, or tasked solely to examine the BME student attainment issue.

At the University of Bedfordshire the team's work is reported by the Director of Teaching and Learning to the University's Equality and Diversity Committee.

The Coventry University team recognised that they needed to develop effective monitoring of BME student progression and achievement and ensure that the information is reported through various committees.

At the University of Portsmouth to further mainstream discussion and encourage ownership of the issue, the Equality and Diversity Advisor was made an ex-officio member of the University's Learning and Teaching Committee to which reports on the progress of work on degree attainment were made.

### 6.5.2 Ownership and responsibility

Given the focused nature of the agenda, a number of the teams emphasised the importance of finding ways to maintain its profile and sustain their activity to improve the degree attainment of BME students into the future. This might include exploring the inter-relationship of existing committees and groups, and the identification of how they might better operate in relation to institutional infrastructure and governance, as was the case at Leeds Metropolitan University. It usually involved the setting up of specialist groups and sub-committees, some of which included senior members of staff to ensure high level buy-in to the agenda. These could operate at:

- institutional level (e.g. to monitor, co-ordinate);
- faculty/service level (e.g. to plan, implement, support).

The University of Portsmouth set up a task group on degree attainment to include representatives from all five faculties of the University, as well as the Students' Union. The Group was chaired by a Head of Department, with three other Heads as members as well.

At Leeds Metropolitan University there has been a review of how the work of the equality and diversity group and the staff–students fora that operate across the University can be integrated more formally into the governance structures of the University. Each faculty and service area will in future have an equality and diversity advisory group to ensure that findings from their research projects, including those on BME students, are taken forward.

The specific responsibilities of these, mostly newly constituted, groups varied by institution but reflected a considered need to:

- monitor data and plan institutional responses;

In response to the work on the summit programme, the University of the Arts London has decided to form a BME student advisory sub-committee, which will have a primary remit to oversee the monitoring and analysis of institutional data and the commissioning of further institutional research on degree attainment. The group will also co-ordinate initiatives to address degree attainment differential across the institution.

- monitor and/or co-ordinate ongoing activities to improve BME student performance.

At the University of Hertfordshire the Student Performance Monitoring Group (SPMG) commissions, considers and reports data with recommendations for its use for quality assurance and promotion of equality. Through SPMG the University identified patterns of differential attainment across ethnic groups. This evidence was instrumental in the University's decision to participate in the summit programme and the initiation of work to address those differentials.

At the University of Northampton a recommendation has been made to their Learning & Teaching Committee that an ongoing working group be established to monitor work and initiatives on raising BME attainment over the next five years.

#### 6.6 Changing cultures: institutional policy, strategies and procedure

One means of addressing differentials in BME degree attainment is to ensure that it is built into key institutional policies, strategies and procedures. Teams found that this enabled the shaping of plans of academic and other functions to ensure future change. It was also recognised that changing institutional cultures and attitudes involved not only embedding equality and diversity as core values in all key policies and procedures, but also consideration of which of them might impact upon student attainment – taking into account the whole student life cycle. Some of the policies and procedures summit teams typically reviewed included:

- overarching institutional strategies, to include mission statements, values and key strategic priorities;
- learning, teaching and assessment, to include curriculum review and course/programme validation and review;
- student support;
- widening participation;
- equality policies and schemes;
- staff development/human resource policies and procedures, to include recruitment, induction, performance management and continuing professional development.

Actions implemented as a result of such reviews illustrate a range of approaches and perspectives on effecting change to improve the performance of BME students through the use of policy commitments and procedural change.

The Open University built a strategic priority on ethnicity and attainment into the University's highest level strategy. As a result, new targets have been set on this agenda within the institution's widening participation strategy. Additionally, the ethnicity attainment gap was highlighted in its equality scheme as one of four key student equality challenges to be prioritised over the three-year lifetime of the scheme.

The University of Bradford has ensured that inclusion and diversity is a key theme in their new learning and teaching strategy, while Coventry University included an objective to improve progression and attainment when analysed by ethnicity in their new equality and diversity strategy.

At the University of Northampton they have decided to include a key performance indicator on raising BME attainment within the University's Academic Strategy.

In support of the review of policies and strategies, some of the summit teams also reviewed the procedures and processes that help their institutions to meet these strategies. Some of the procedures that were reviewed, and revised where appropriate, included:

- induction procedures, to ensure that staff and students are aware of the issue of differential degree attainment from the outset;

As a result of the summit programme, the University of Greenwich is engaging in discussions with its personnel department about equality training being an essential part of induction for all staff. It is also considering how to ensure induction for students and staff provides an introduction to the issue of differential attainment between ethnic groups.

- staff development procedures, for example building the issue of differential degree attainment into training and development and/or making it an issue in relation to promotions and core objectives;

Recognising the role and importance of teaching staff in addressing issues of degree attainment, the University of Bradford decided to seek to raise the profile and status of teaching as an academic career and promote teaching as a legitimate scholarly pursuit. To support this culture change, their promotions procedure is being redesigned to incorporate a commitment to excellence in teaching.

- curriculum development processes, including course/programme approval, monitoring and review, to ensure that the issue of degree attainment is embedded;

The University of Portsmouth decided that course approval, monitoring and review processes should require consideration of data (where available) regarding ethnicity and progression and achievement. Course approval documentation will be revised to include this requirement.

At Aston University, as a result of the summit programme, a formal proposal will be made to the Learning and Teaching Committee that formal closer monitoring of BME attainment should be adopted through the annual monitoring process for degree programmes.

- equality impact assessment, to ensure that procedures for undertaking such assessments and for collecting equality data – as required in order to be able to measure impact and illustrate progress towards fulfilment of their legislative duty to eliminate discrimination and promote equal opportunities – are fit for purpose.

At the University of Greenwich their work to address BME attainment issues has also been a catalyst for progress in the equality impact assessment of various procedures that have the potential to support the BME agenda, including assessment and marking.

## 7. Lessons for sustainable change

*This section looks at the challenge of how to sustain momentum and create lasting change through establishing conditions for success in improving the degree attainment of BME students.*

Given the nature of this agenda and the current climate in the sector, there are particular challenges facing institutions in the process of embedding and sustaining activity to address differential degree attainment:

- scope and scale: degree attainment differentials are often observable across several, if not all, departments/schools. This makes it both a cross-institutional and cross-functional issue, and potentially broader than anticipated;
- time frame: the programme highlights that there are unlikely to be readily identifiable, ‘quick-fix’ solutions. Sustained change takes time, given the need to identify, develop, implement and evaluate interventions;
- business case: arguably there may be less of an economic driver for improving degree attainment than, for example, improving recruitment of particular under-represented groups of students (however, a focus on reducing the differentials will have beneficial impact on the student experience and institutional performance and reputation);
- responsibility: it may not be immediately apparent where leadership and/or the management of necessary change should best lie due to institutional structures and functions;
- engagement: action is often initiated by engaging stakeholders and appointing interested individuals who ‘champion the cause’, making succession planning problematic.

‘Sustainability’ relates to mainstreaming and maintaining progress in the short-, medium- and long-term. This is evidenced when an institution has:

- moved from making the case for change, to achieving substantive changes, for example in institutional policies and strategies;
- embedded changes in practice in order to realise policy commitments to improve BME attainment;
- sustained change at both organisational and individual levels so as to maintain improvements achieved.

Summit teams identified a range of specific actions and strategies they had undertaken and considered important for maximising the chances of their work being sustained into the medium- and long-term. These were context specific, but can be seen as ways of establishing the *conditions for success* in embedding institution-wide change to improve differentials in degree attainment. Their recommendations included:

### 7.1 Embedding change

- embed key performance indicators on improving progression and degree attainment into all relevant institutional strategies (not just that for equality and diversity. See Section 6.6 above);
- build degree attainment into quality assurance and enhancement processes;
- use equality impact assessment to examine policies and practices impacting on student attainment (e.g. assessment policy);
- use promotion criteria and performance management frameworks as a means of driving changes in practice identified as being critical to raising the attainment of BME students.

### 7.2 Monitoring and reporting

- set up robust reporting structures for the purpose of monitoring progress in projects or programmes of work to improve BME performance and their outcomes.

At The Open University, the equality and diversity officer collates six-monthly reports from activity leads, which are presented to the Widening Participation Management Group. This group in turn reports annual progress to the Vice-Chancellor's Executive Group.

### 7.3 Leadership and responsibility

- assign a lead to each activity and distribute responsibility for implementation of plans as widely as possible;
- avoid over-reliance on particular individuals and use succession planning to



- mitigate the loss of key individuals;
- consider using and/or support the development of champions;
- identify or establish an appropriate committee or group to oversee work being undertaken to address degree attainment differentials;
- distribute responsibility for addressing the agenda across committee structures;
- engage active senior management support at institutional, faculty and service level.

#### 7.4 Relationship building

- build a 'critical mass' of support across the institution;
- involve the Students' Union to engage and empower students in the change process;
- foster a partnership approach towards working for change, building cross-institution and cross-function relationships.

Coventry University built a network of diversity champions to act as change agents to addressing BME student attainment. One or two committed champions were identified within each department/service and training was provided through a two-day course, learning resources and a cross-University support group. There were also follow-up activities, such as providing a day for champions to review/evaluate their interventions and share best practice.

#### 7.5 Developing expertise and sharing practice

- disseminate learning and share the expertise of champions and those involved in start-up work to devolve responsibility for future work;
- use continuing professional development and other training opportunities to raise staff awareness of the agenda across functions and to build understanding and motivation to effect changes in practice and procedures;
- disseminate work within the HE and other education sectors to promote dialogue and initiatives to address the agenda.

The Leeds Metropolitan University team presented the findings of their research to the Regional University Network, which includes 23 regional FE colleges.

## 7.6 Evaluation

- analyse BME data on an ongoing basis to inform and evidence change;
- ring-fence funding to sustain and evaluate planned activities;
- plan to evaluate interventions (including new tools and resources) and measure their impact on an ongoing basis to provide evidence of progress and/or need for adjustments;
- build measures of desired outcomes (e.g. better student engagement and integration) into student surveys.

Two members of the team at the University of Greenwich won 'innovative teaching awards' to trial pedagogical approaches that acknowledge and engage with student diversity.

## 7.7 In summary

Although the developmental programme finished after 12 months, the participating institutions are seeking to continue to build and mainstream their activities to address differential degree attainment to ensure effective and sustained change. In this context, and speaking of the vision for their work in this area, one participant spoke of the power of “developing a sense of urgency” and “creating a guiding coalition” in order to maintain the momentum of their work. Many colleagues would be happy to endorse these sentiments.

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## Appendix I: Reflective Questions for Action Planning

### 1. Defining the audience

Is there a clear definition/understanding of the BME student population in our institution?

To think about:

- Which ethnic groups are included?
- Do we include international students?
- Does everyone understand/talk about 'BME students' in the same way?

### 2. Locating the 'problem' of degree attainment differentials

Do we really know for which student groups there is a differential and/or what factors might be affecting this? How valid/accurate is our information?

To think about:

- Do we have the level of information we need to understand where our institution needs and/or wants to take action (e.g. by subject/department, school, programme)?
- Have we sought to understand the emerging patterns through further examination of the data? Or through other types of research?
- Which parts of the 'problem' do we want to address at this time? Do we know yet? How are we going to decide where to focus our efforts?
- What further data and/or analyses do we need to collect/undertake to take forward our proposed work?
- Do we anticipate problems in obtaining this data/information – how might we be able to overcome this?

### 3. Understanding the institutional context

Do we really know what's happening across the institution to address degree differentials where they have already been identified? And are there specific challenges preventing the issue from being addressed – if so, in which parts of the institution?

To think about:

- Have we captured all the different activities/policies that are happening or have happened across our institution (e.g. in different departments/faculties)?
- Are we capturing and disseminating existing good practice?
- Do we understand why more is not happening?
- What could we do to develop that understanding?

### 4. Stakeholder engagement:

Do we have a clear understanding of who needs to be involved (at whatever level) in our work over the duration of the programme?

To think about:

- Who are the key stakeholders in the process?
- Who do we need to engage in order to progress our work?
- How will we engage them?
- Who will our work impact upon and to what extent?
- Do we anticipate any challenges arising from the above?



## Equality Challenge Unit

[www.ecu.ac.uk](http://www.ecu.ac.uk)  
[info@ecu.ac.uk](mailto:info@ecu.ac.uk)

Equality Challenge Unit  
7th floor  
Queens House  
55/56 Lincoln's Inn Fields  
London WC2A 3LJ

020 7438 1010

## The Higher Education Academy

[www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)  
[enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk)

The Higher Education Academy  
Innovation Way  
York Science Park  
Heslington  
York YO10 5BR

01904 717500

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