



# Disparities in Student Attainment (DISA)

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# ***Disparities in Student Attainment (DISA)***

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Project Website: [www.wlv.ac.uk/disa](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/disa)

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**Key Words for report**

*Disparities in student attainment, equity, success, ethnicity.*

## **I. Acknowledgements**

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The core project team consists of:

- Professor Glynis Cousin, University of Wolverhampton – Principal Investigator
- Dr Gurnam Singh, University of Coventry
- Dr Debra Cureton, University of Wolverhampton
- Dr Arinola Adefila, University of Coventry
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- Dr Christine Broughan, University of Coventry
- Mr Pliny Soocoormanee, University of Wolverhampton
- Jill Morgan, University of Wolverhampton - Project Administrator

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## **2. Executive summary**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This report provides an outline of the research and development outcomes of the Disparities in Student Attainment project, which was undertaken by the University of Wolverhampton and University of Coventry between September 2010 and October 2012.

In 2007 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) carried out research pertaining to sector wide disparities between the attainment of students classified as Black Minority Ethnic (BME) and those who are not. This research indicated that an attainment gap is evident and this gap cannot be explained by demographic characteristics and concluded that further university based research was required to more fully understand the attainment gap. This programme of research attempted to explore this area in two city-based, post-1992 Universities.

### **2.2 Project Aims and Objectives**

The project utilised a number of types of research data to explore why disparities in student attainment occur. The data collected included quantitative analysis of institutional data sets, evaluations of the impact of pedagogical developments through action research and interviews with students and lecturers to understand their perception of attainment and disparities in attainment. Through this work the programme has produced enhanced understanding of why the attainment gap arises, positive impacts on the attainment gap, made conceptual and methodological developments in the field and created resources for students, lecturers, the family of students, curriculum designers, educational developers and researchers in the field of student attainment. In short, the project has achieved all of its aims and objectives. The aims achieved are:

- The project has generated fresh understanding of the complex issues pertaining to the attainment gap.
- It has produced research findings, initiatives and briefing papers that are not only useful to teachers, students, educational developers and senior managers at the Universities of Wolverhampton and Coventry, but also may be of use at a sector level.
- The Disparities in Student Attainment work carried out in at the Universities of Wolverhampton and Coventry has provided supportive resources to the sector for policy making and curriculum design, including policy papers, teaching initiatives, conceptual developments, research and ethical frameworks for work with the attainment gap.

The achieved objectives are:

- A quantitative picture of disparities has been developed for each institution.
- An understanding of student and lecturer perception of degree disparities across both Universities has been achieved and is outlined below.
- Areas of learning experience which could lead to the attainment gap have been identified.
- Nine student and lecturer designed initiatives, to alleviate degree disparity in subjects where there are a high number of students categorised as Black, Minority Ethnic (BME), were implemented

- Conceptual issues pertaining to categorisation and the 'Pygmalion Effect' (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) and their relationship to the attainment gap have been explored and developed.
- Internal and external dissemination of the research outcomes and outputs.

### **2.3 Research Outcomes**

This programme of work has utilised institutional data to understand a full picture of the disparities in student attainment in both institutions. The programme has uncovered four interlinking, key areas that contribute to understanding disparities: relationships, socio-psychological impact, pedagogical impacts and social and cultural capital. The project also made conceptual developments pertaining to disparities in student attainment, which include: post-classification, post-race, the role of psychological contract (Rousseau 1996), the impact of the interlocutor on attainment and the Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

### **2.4 Impact, Key Outputs and Outcomes of the Project**

The Disparities in Student Attainment project has impacted at sector, university and school level, both in terms of initiatives to alleviate the attainment gap and further research. Moreover, during the course of this research programme a decrease in the attainment gap has been noted at the University of Wolverhampton.

A number of key outputs have been achieved. These include:

- The development of initiatives to impact on attainment.
- Information for students.
- Information for lecturers.
- Information for parents.
- Policy briefing papers to the sector, focusing on the reduction of the attainment gap.
- Methodological and ethical framework to enhance researching in the area of disparities and to support researchers in this area.
- Further conceptual development pertaining to the attainment gap.
- Methodological development for working with sensitive issues.

### **2.5 Implications for future practice and research**

There are two main implications for future research and practice; these are:

- The psychological contract that students have within their learning relationships, and with the University as whole, requires further research to understand how this operates and affects engagement, retention, progression and attainment. This will provide more in-depth understandings of the impact of relationship, pedagogy, socio-psychological interactions and social and cultural capital and their relationship to student attainment.
- Statistical monitoring of the attainment gap needs further longitudinal cohort research of at least three years in order to identify all related data trends.



### 3. Background

In 2007, the former Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Higher Education Funding Council directed the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to investigate this issue urgently and to provide recommendations based on a commissioned survey into stakeholder perceptions of the problem (Jacobs et al, 2008), a literature review (Richardson 2008) and a web-based documentary analysis of impact assessments and equality policies (Willott and Stevenson, 2008) and confidential case studies. A report bringing this together (*Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment, 2008*) was produced by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) – authored by Cousin, Rawat and Sen. The HEA subsequently launched a programme of projects across the sector with which the lead investigators (Cousin and Singh) were involved.

This present research builds on the above, including a synthesis of the research so far (Singh 2011) and preliminary findings from Dhanda, 2009 and Hockings, 2008, namely :

- a) BME students were twice as likely as their white peers to apply for extensions for coursework submission and these students were less likely to progress to their final year.
- b) Aggregates at the level of Schools, hide disparities at the level of modules. BME students are actually doing better than white students in particular modules and just as well in many others, albeit their performance is much worse than white students in the remaining modules.
- c) As with the national picture, there is variation in achievement within BME populations with 'mixed race' comprising the highest achievement category.
- d) Some BME students report that they do not feel intellectually stretched sufficiently.
- d) Appropriate mentoring appears to make a difference to confidence and attainment.

#### 4. Aims and objectives

As curriculum strategies for closing the attainment gap are likely to support excellent teaching and learning in general, an overarching purpose of this project was to provide resources of benefit to all students.

The purpose of this project was to offer a systematic research response to the following recommendations in the ECU/HEA (2007) report:

- *HEIs need to implement systems that can evaluate, review and design teaching, learning and assessment activities in the light of data on degree attainment variation.*
- *Research must be seen as a generative, developmental part of the change process; to this end researchers need to work with relevant students and staff rather than simply extract findings from them.*

Key research questions were:

- How can naturally arising institutional data be deployed for evidence informed curriculum design at subject and generic levels?
- What curriculum interventions can reduce the attainment gap between BME and white students?

The evidence yielded from our explorations of these questions are contained within the briefing papers.



## 5. Methodology & Implementation

This project was led by Professor Glynis Cousin with the support of Dr Gurnam Singh (Lead at Coventry University), Dr Debra Cureton (Project Manager at University of Wolverhampton) and Dr Arinola Adefila (Project Manager at University of Coventry). Full project team meetings were held every month and four advisory group meetings were held over the course of the project.

Project team meetings focused on developing the framework for the implementation of the research, the discussion of further areas of investigation that were required and the analysis of, and finding from, the data. Each of these will be outlined further in the sections below.

### 5.1 Methodological Frameworks

Three streams of data were investigated as part of this research: quantitative institutional data, qualitative data from staff and students and implementation of learning and teaching initiatives and their evaluation by action research.

**5.1.1 Institutional Data:** Population data analysis was carried out on institutionally collated datasets. These datasets contain data for all students defined by graduating year, final degree classification, ethnicity, gender, school, module grade, progression, retention and transition code and home postcode. From these datasets a picture of the disparities in each institution was developed to facilitate an exploration into areas of concern.

**5.1.2 Staff and Student Experiences and Views:** Data from staff and students was collected in a number of different ways. The initial datasets from both staff and students were collected using Consensus Oriented Research Approach (briefing paper A14), which involves key stakeholders in sharing their views and experiences towards the topic under exploration and then engages them in developing solutions to the issues. Six Consensus Oriented Research Approach Conferences were carried out over the course of the project:

- two were student focused and investigated student perceptions of and ways of addressing the attainment gap,
- two were staff focused and addressed the investigation of staff views about the attainment gap and associated learning and teaching issues,
- one focused on students' approached to preparing work for submission, spelling and grammar
- one focused on students' levels of social and cultural capital

From the conferences, follow up interviews and surveys with staff and students were conducted and action research teams were put together

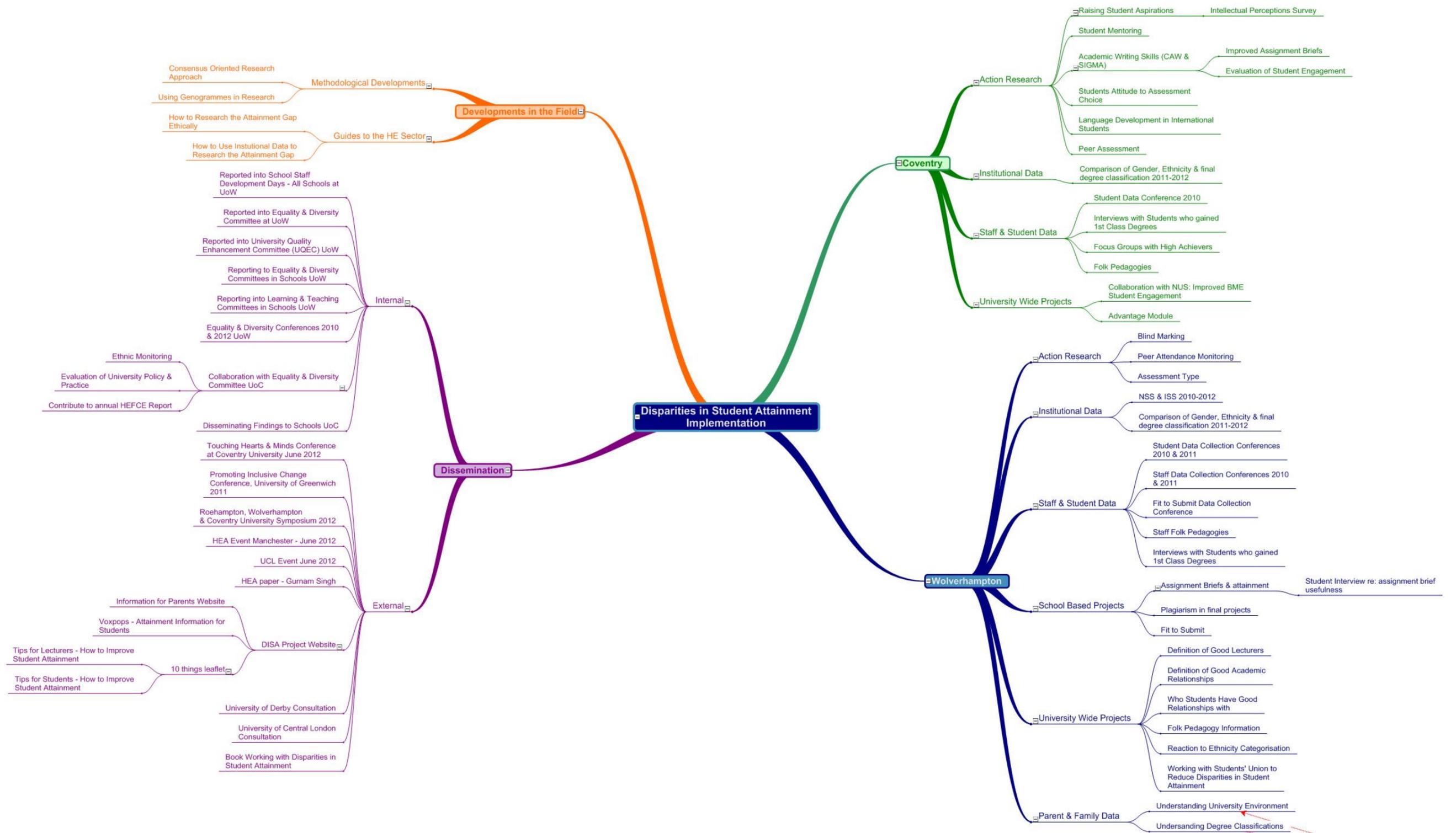
**5.1.3 Action Research:** Nine action research projects were formulated from the conferences and implemented, six in the University of Coventry and three at the University of Wolverhampton:

- Student assessment regimes in mathematics.
- Student assessment choice in criminology.
- Peer monitoring process.
- Raising aspirations and intellectual capability.
- English language development for undergraduate biomedical and bioscience students.
- Challenges in academic writing.
- Peer mentoring.
- Academic literacies for STEM students.
- Blind marking processes for art and design.

An outline of the data collected are outlined in the diagram below.



# Areas of Data Collection: Disparities in Student Attainment



## 6 Outputs and Findings

### 6.1 Outputs

1. A rich quantitative picture of patterns of disparity for each institution.
2. Evidence informed advances in our understanding of degree disparities across two Universities
3. A series of practical outputs for universal application in relation to student attainment, namely:
  - I. Vox pops: Ways to enhance attainment  
<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=27668>
  - II. How to Guide: assignment brief writing  
<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/Default.aspx?page=29901>
  - III. How to Guide: improve student attainment  
<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/Default.aspx?page=30055>
  - IV. Family's Website: Supporting Students  
<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=27800>
  - V. 10 Things to Raise Attainment Leaflets:
    - a. For students  
<http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Ten%20things%20student.pdf>
    - b. For lecturers  
<http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Ten%20things%20lecturer.pdf>
  - VI. Maintaining Virtual Relationships  
<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=25312>
  - VII. Black and Minority Ethnic Students' Participation in Education: Improving Retention and Success  
[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/inclusion/Ethnicity/BME\\_synthesis](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/inclusion/Ethnicity/BME_synthesis)
  - VIII. Ethical Framework for researching into disparities in student attainment
  - IX. Methodological Development: Consensus Orientated Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012)
  - X. Data Capture Developments: Snakes and Ladder Research Game  
[www.wlv.ac.uk/disa](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/disa)
  - XI. Fit to Submit Statement [www.wlv.ac.uk/disa](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/disa)
  - XII. The Advantage Module – for further information contact Ashok Patel at [ashokpatel@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:ashokpatel@coventry.ac.uk)
  - XIII. Mentoring students for success, further information contact [Arinola.Adefila@Coventry.ac.uk](mailto:Arinola.Adefila@Coventry.ac.uk)
  - XIV. Curriculum development in the use of Socratic dialogue to engage students in exploring their potential. For further information see <http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/projects/disa/Stephen%20Cowden%20and%20Gurnan%20Singh%20full.jpg>

### 6.2 Key Findings

- I. Students classified as BME tend to have 'spikey' patterns of achievement in terms of a range of low to high module marks; the causes for this remain unexplained



2. Female students classified as BME tend to achieve higher marks than do BME male
3. Good assignment briefs impacts on attainment
4. Good assignment briefs reduce student anxiety and raise their confidence in the ability to achieve (See briefing paper A10)
5. Some teachers appear to operate with deficit models of explanation for degree attainment gaps
6. Students classified as BME contradicted the view that parents place undue pressure on their choice of subject (briefing paper A11)
7. Students appreciate teachers who manifestly treat them as individuals rather than as anonymous members of a group (briefing paper A3)
8. Many students are unclear about the purpose of ethnic monitoring; some are discomforted by it (briefing paper A3)
9. Students polled at both universities reported that they and their parents were uncertain about the degree classification system
10. Stretching students intellectually influences student aspirations and engagement (see briefing paper A7)
11. Students reported that they were unaware of the importance of grammar and spelling and did not use Word facilities to check this because results were often confusing.
12. High achieving students reported the importance of the existence of at least one motivating teacher who communicates confidence in their ability as well as the importance of a proactive approach to building a relationship with teachers
13. Peer monitoring positively impacts on attendance (see briefing paper A2)
14. There is no association between small class numbers and the erasure of a degree attainment gap
  - a. Lecturers whose modules exhibited no gap named rapport building, repeated reminders of the rules of academic engagement, the communication of high expectations and an invitational approach to question asking as key to equitable outcomes

## 7. Outcomes

This programme of work has utilised institutional data to understand a full picture of the disparities in student attainment in both institutions. The programme also uncovered four interlinking key areas that contribute to the understanding disparities: relationships, pedagogy, psycho-social barriers and social and cultural capital. Additionally, it has explored conceptual developments in this area, which include: post-classification, post-race and the Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

**7.1 Institutional picture of disparities.** The institutional data picture indicates at the beginning of the programme students categorised at BME were more likely to gain a 2:ii degree or below and students who are not categorised at BME are more likely to gain a 2:i or above. Students that are categorised as BME are also less likely to achieve an assignment or module grade within the first class band of marks. This group of students are also more likely to fall on the borders between classifications for their final classification and are more likely to achieve a wider range of module scores. Students categorised as BME are from high Multiple Deprivation Index areas and are more likely to get a 2:ii as a final degree classification. Students who are not classified as BME and from high Multiple Deprivation Index areas do not exist in either of the Higher Education Institutions surveyed.

**7.2 Relationships:** There is an affective aspect to learning that emerged as key to address: Quality learning relationships are central to alleviating the attainment gap. Both lecturers and students identified this is crucial to academic attainment; however both defined learning relationships differently and clearly had differing expectations of the others' responsibilities. Students make the most productive learning relationships with 'good' lecturers; these are lecturers who they perceive as knowledgeable about their subject area, who demonstrate an enthusiasm about teaching them, who communicate clearly, see students as individuals rather than a category, but above all, are willing to answer questions. If students do not have access to good relationships with lecturers, they rely on their peers to provide information about how to attain good assignment grades. However, students adhere to, and circulate amongst each other folklores about how to do well. These folklores vary in their usefulness.

Students stressed that lecturers play a key role in raising students' aspirations, where they act as an interlocutor who introduces the student to the belief that they can achieve higher grades and have the potential to gain a 'good degree'. Lecturers who communicate high ambitions for their students (e.g, 'when you become a solicitor, you will...') create an achieving dynamic.

Students not only have a relationship with their lecturers and peers, they also have a relationship with the university that is akin to psychological contract (Rousseau, 1996). The full nature of this psychological contract is not fully understood but violations of psychological contract can lead to disengagement, dissatisfaction, lack of motivation, lack of productivity and possible withdrawal.

Ensuring that the student and the institution have matching expectations and understanding of the process of higher education will empower the student and provide further opportunities for success.



### **7.3. Pedagogical issues:**

A clear link was found between the quality of assignment briefs, the rates of students who pass the module and the numbers of students attaining A and B grades. Good assignment briefs reduce student anxiety and promote students' confidence in their ability to achieve. This finding is informing current initiatives in Schools and a 'how to write a good assignment brief' guide.

Students revealed that they did not know the extent to which spelling and punctuation errors negatively impacted on the grades that they received. As a result, a school based pilot of new submission documentation was implemented, that requires students to confirm that they have completed spelling and punctuation checks on their work before submission.

Peer attendance monitoring positively impacts on student attendance and subsequently on student attainment. In modules where peer monitoring has been implemented, a reduction in disparities has been found.

Blind marking was found not to impact on the degree disparities, however, strategies for reducing potential bias in marking in Art and Design modules has been successfully trialled as part of this work.

Work around assessment choice has also provided new insights into how providing choice for students impacts on attainment. This found that students perform best when their assessment type was consistent with their prior experience – ie examinations for maths students, written assignments for criminology students. However, this research also proposes that students' agency appears to be expressed extrinsically by a focus on the grade, rather than being intrinsically motivated to develop new skills or improve weaknesses.

There is an important meta-learning dimension to success. Where students were stretched intellectually through Socratic dialogue and where they were asked to reflect on their capabilities as they progressed, they achieved more. Students were also exposed to ideas and literature on intellectual growth and on the threat of internalising stereotypes of themselves. See briefing paper A7 and intellectuality measurement tool.

### **7.4 Psycho-social Impact:**

A research question we have not fully answered is: do we *make* students classified as BME into 2-2 students through a set of expectations about them? Individualisation appears to be important to students categorised as BME. Many reported ambivalence or resistance to monitoring categories (briefing paper A3) expressing the view that they wanted to be treated as individuals.

There is some evidence of 'group think' or folk pedagogies (Bruner, 1996) about particular student groups from teachers, e.g. Far East learners are passive; Muslim women do not like mixed groups. We tested the folk pedagogy that BME students have little sovereignty over subject choice; briefing paper A11) sets out the contrary evidence

### **7.5 Cultural and Social Capital:**

Cohorts of students in both institutions indicated that they knew little of what university would look like before they began their studies. Many of the students interviewed revealed neither they, nor their families, understood the demands of Higher Education or understood the degree classification system, which impeded families from encouraging the further development of students. Additionally, students reported a lack of knowledge of the relationship between good degrees and employability.

Those students who are categorised as BME and achieve good degrees suggested that some of this success was due to the intervention of an interlocutor who helped them negotiate some of the new concepts that they encountered. These findings highlight the need to provide information to student about higher education study before they enter higher education, during their induction and throughout their studies.

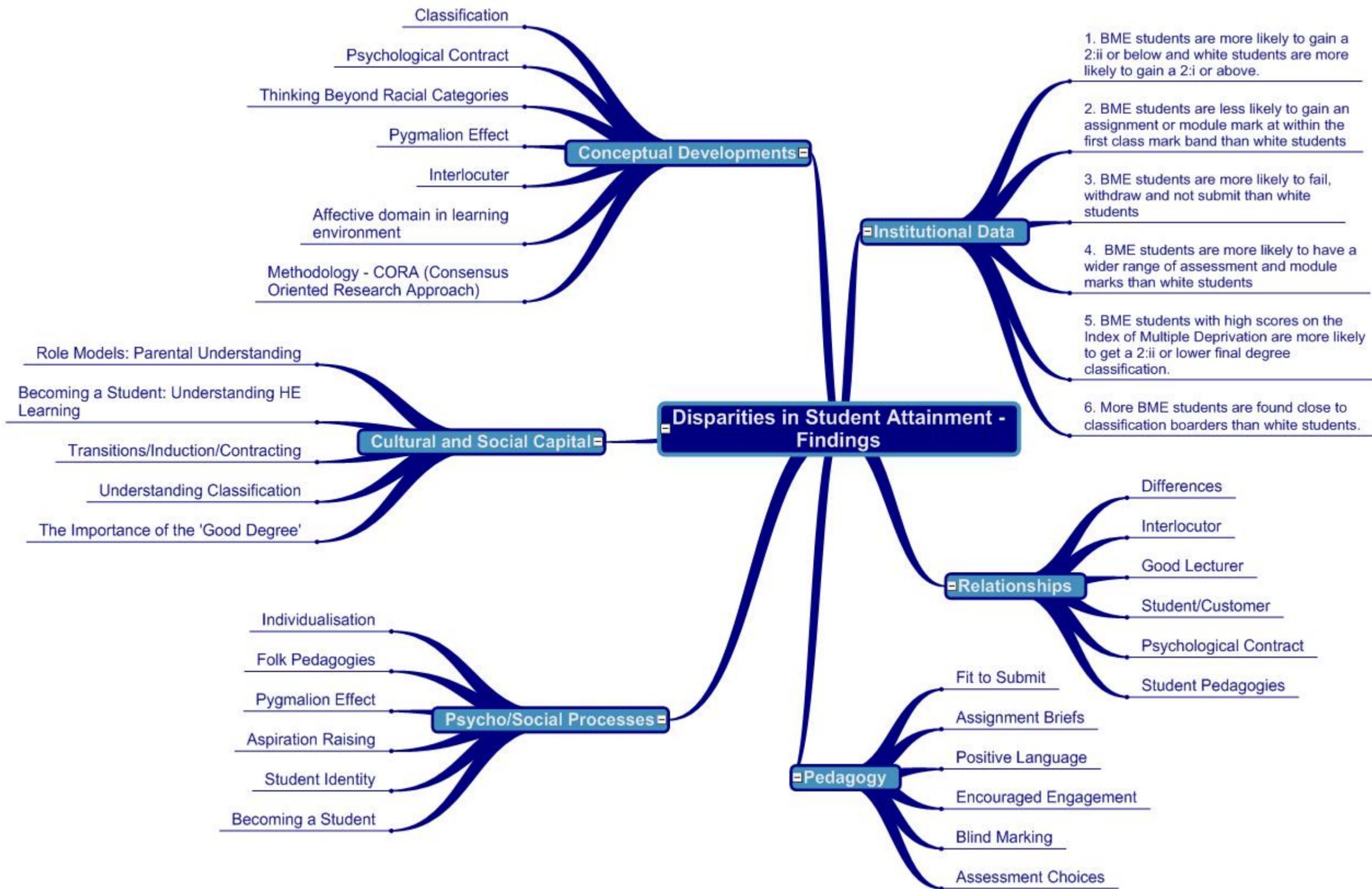
This finding led to the production of student vox pops on how to achieve; guidance to parents and to students on degree classification

**7.6 Conceptual Developments.** This research has generated a number of conceptual developments which are important to the further study of student attainment and disparities in student attainment. These are:

- Post-race and post-categorisation approaches to research are crucial as categorisation is a social construct, is not representative, is inaccessible to many and is most likely to generate an ethnically oriented deficit model of disparities.
- Post-race approaches to pedagogies, that engage debate and enquiry and encourage 'transformative intellectuals' (Giroux, 1993) are essential.
- The impact of the affective domain within learning is intrinsically linked to disparities in student attainment.
- Although psychological contract (Rousseau, 1996) has been discussed in relation to student and higher education (Gregory, 1996, Jarvis, 2006 and Charlton, Barrow and Hornby-Atkinson, 2007), the extent to which it is important to the learning relationship, student identity and its impact on disparities in student attainment have not been previously discussed.
- The concept of the lecturer interlocutor, their importance to student attainment and their potential to reduce the attainment gap has been identified in this research.
- The Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) may be evident in the Higher Education environment as it has been identified in schooling. This effect is produced where there is a dynamic between a teacher's expectations about their learners' capacity and its fulfilment. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy dynamic.
- This research has also made methodological advances, through the development of the Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012 - see briefing paper A14), which safely engages key stakeholders in discussions about sensitive issues and encourages them to provide solutions to the problem.



# Disparities in Student Attainment Research Outcomes and Outputs



## 7.7 Impact

The Disparities in Student Attainment project has had made school, university and sector impacts; these include:

### 7.7.1 Sector Impact

- Advising the University of Derby about working toward reducing the attainment gap.
- Working with St Peter College Gate School in Wolverhampton to increase Higher Education related social and cultural capital of school pupils.
- A team from the Universities of Wolverhampton, Coventry and Derby are responding to the HEA Institutional Funding call to carry out work into student psychological contract.
- Contributed to the HE on disparities in student attainment.

### 7.7.2 University Outputs and Impact

- At the University of Wolverhampton there has been a decrease in the disparity found between the final classification of students classified as BME and those that are not between the graduating years of 2008/2009 and 2011/2012
- All Schools at the University of Wolverhampton have committed to working with the DISA team to develop accessible assignment briefs
- The research outcomes, learning and teaching interventions and other outputs of the project have been fed into the staff development days of all Schools in the University of Wolverhampton.
- The information about how to get a good degree is being used in University of Wolverhampton international induction programmes, within the University and on international satellite campus.
- The Centre for Academic Writing at The University of Coventry has developed an inclusive practice.
- The Centre for Academic Writing has developed an assignment brief tool kit for lecturers to help improve the accessibility of assignment briefs.
- SIGMA at the University of Coventry, a maths and sciences academic support department has developed an inclusive practice guide
- The University of Coventry has worked with the Equality and Diversity Committee to introduce annual monitoring of disparities in student attainment.
- The Faculty of Business and Environmental Sciences at the University of Coventry have redeveloped the infrastructure of student support to include more time with personal tutors, academic mentoring and a course Facebook group.

### 7.7.3 Impact on Schools

- Peer monitoring, to improve attendance and engagement, has been adopted across the School of Sports, Performing Arts and Leisure, at the University of Wolverhampton
- The School of Art and Design at the University of Wolverhampton has made changes to their assessment and moderation practices to include blind marking practices.
- The University of Wolverhampton's School of Technology has implemented a 'fit to submit' cover sheet as part of their assessment submission process.

#### 7.7.3.1 Further research in Schools

- The University of Wolverhampton's School of Sport Performing Arts and Leisure are bidding to develop peer development groups for BME sports students, with the aim to help improve transition from college/6<sup>th</sup> form to University study
- The University of Wolverhampton's School for Education Futures is working with students to understand how they process assignment briefs
- The University of Wolverhampton's School of Art and Design are applying to HEA for funding to develop principles of good assignment briefs in Art and Design.

- Coventry University are further investigating the impact upon attainment of support infrastructure changes.

## 7.8 Outputs

This programme of work has produced a number of outputs that have impacted positively on attainment and disparities in student attainment in both institutions. These are:

- Vox pops: Ways to enhance attainment <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=27668>
- How to Guide: assignment brief writing <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/Default.aspx?page=29901>
- How to Guide: improve student attainment <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/Default.aspx?page=30055>
- Family's Website: Supporting Students <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=27800>
- 10 Things to Raise Attainment Leaflets:
  - For students <http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Ten%20things%20student.pdf>
  - For lecturers <http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Ten%20things%20lecturer.pdf>
- Maintaining Virtual Relationships <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=25312>
- Black and Minority Ethnic Students' Participation in Education: Improving Retention and Success [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/inclusion/Ethnicity/BME\\_synthesis](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/inclusion/Ethnicity/BME_synthesis)
- Ethical Framework for researching into disparities in student attainment
- Methodological Development: Consensus Orientated Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012)
- Data Capture Developments: Snakes and Ladder Research Game [www.wlv.ac.uk/disa](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/disa)
- Fit to Submit Statement [www.wlv.ac.uk/disa](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/disa)
- The Advantage Module – for further information contact Ashok Patel at [ashokpatel@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:ashokpatel@coventry.ac.uk) [www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/projects/disa/Ashok%20Patel%20et%20al%20Poster%20full.jpg](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/projects/disa/Ashok%20Patel%20et%20al%20Poster%20full.jpg)
- Mentoring students for success, further information contact [Arinola.Adefila@Coventry.ac.uk](mailto:Arinola.Adefila@Coventry.ac.uk)
- Curriculum development in the use of Socratic dialogue to engage students in exploring their potential. For further information see <http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/projects/disa/Stephen%20Cowden%20and%20Gurnan%20Singh%20full.jpg>

## 7.9 Dissemination

The project team have disseminated the project at a number of external events, these include:

- Sector wide dissemination event Disparities in Student Attainment: Touching Hearts and Minds <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=26890>
  - Keynote from Professor Paul Gilroy: Talking about race without talking about race [www.wlv.ac.uk/disa](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/disa)
- A joint symposium with Roehampton University <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/Research-Centres/Centre-for-Educational-Research-in-Equalities-Policy-and-Pedagogy/Seminars-and-events/>
- Book Proposal for 'Controversies and Debates: Student Attainment' with Routledge
- University of Coventry Masterclass on Race, February 2011
- Two papers at Promoting Inclusive Change: addressing equity and success for BME students in higher education Conference - Monday 4 July, 2011, University of Greenwich
- Glynis Cousin & Gurnam Singh, HEA Attainment Summit, Manchester, April 2012
- Glynis Cousin & Debra Cureton, A Tale of Two (City) Universities: Disparities in Student Attainment, University of Derby, October 2012

The project team have also engaged in extensive internal dissemination, this includes:

- In-school based discussion within both universities
- Presentations for all schools during Staff Development Days at the University or Wolverhampton
- Annual Diversity Conference at University of Wolverhampton, April 2012
- Feed into the Equality and Diversity Committees in both universities
- Feed into Quality Enhancement Committee at the University of Wolverhampton

2010-2012

- Feed into the Student Experience Committee
- Our fortnightly *Learning and Teaching* update always front page features one of the briefing papers' findings.

## 8. Conclusions

The conclusions from this research are:

- Module level data analysis indicates that students categorised as BME achieve an array of assignment and module grades, sometimes ranging from A to D, whereas their counterparts that are categorised as white have a smaller range of grades. The causes for this remain unexplained although some teachers appear to operate with deficit models of explanation for degree attainment gaps. However, the wider range of grades achieved by those categorised as BME leads to a lower aggregate score when classifications are calculated. Therefore, there is no evidence that students categorised as BME are less able to gain good degrees and the barriers to doing so are, most likely, socially constructed.
- Although both students and lecturers agree on the building blocks to academic success, the groups define these very differently. This suggests that student and lecturer expectations differ which can potentially generate a lack of empathy and understanding of the other group and can generate a barrier to good learning relationships. A further consequence of this is that during times of anxiety, such as assessment points, a 'pedagogic battle field' can arise (Howell-Richardson, 2013).
- Attempts to understand the roots of the attainment gap have led to a complex picture in which there is interplay between four areas: learning relationships, social capital, the psychosocial arena and the pedagogic domain.
- Lecturers whose modules exhibited no gap demonstrate a pedagogic signature that significantly overlaps with the qualities that student appreciate in lecturers and encourage them to define lecturers as good. This stresses that understanding and acting upon student expectations is an important part of creating a 'success culture'.
- Successful students are engaged in a discourse around success which is triggered by external influences (lecturers, aspiration raising activities and so forth). The concept of the lecturer interlocutor and student intellectualisation should be weaved throughout the student journey.
- Students uncertainty about the rules of academic engagement range from a lack of understanding about the importance of grammar and spelling to not understanding degree classification or the importance of gaining a 'good degree'. This lack of social capital makes it impossible for some students to be aspirational about their potential academic success.
- Stereotype threats form a barrier to students building functional learning relationships and negatively impacts on their sense of belonging to the HEI. Stereotype threats can be heightened by students discomfort and lack of clarity pertaining to ethnic monitoring and deficit models operated by some teachers. Education is necessary to counter both these effects.
- Clear, concise, fit for level and student friendly assignment briefs positively impacts on attainment. Good assignment briefs reduce student anxiety and raise their confidence in the ability to achieve. Good assignment briefs also reduce tensions between lecturers and students and thereby encourage productive learning relationships to develop.

## 9. Implications

The key implication of this research is that there is no single, clear cut cause for the disparities in attainment that are found between students categorised as BME and those categorised as white. This research shows that efforts to reduce the attainment gap need to encompass the complex interplay between generating productive learning relationships, removing psychosocial barriers, enhancing student social capital and ensuring inclusive pedagogy. Although this research has demonstrated areas that can enhance student success and support the reduction of the attainment gap, it has also highlighted that there is more work to be done in this area, particularly in relation to understanding the development of learning relationships, differences in lecturer and student expectation and what constitutes a violation in learning relationships. Additional explorations in this area are important in our quest to understand and further enhance students' sense of belonging.

This work has also highlighted that transitions into higher education are important. Enabling students to grasp the rules of higher education is crucial to success. Induction needs to level the playing field so that students understand key building blocks of academic success and how and where to access support. Again, the communication of expectations is crucial to this process; it is not only necessary for educators to make their expectations of students explicit, the comprehension of student expectations of Higher Education is necessary to understand the psychological contract that students hold with the University.

Finally, the importance of raising student confidence in their intellectuality and their success aspirations has been evident throughout this work. Whether undertaken in group or individual settings, this is one of the simplest but most powerful building blocks to student success.

## **10. Recommendations**

A number of recommendations are apparent within our briefing papers (see Section 11). Additionally, there are three main recommendations for future research and practice; these are:

- The psychological contract that students have within their learning relationships, and with the University as a whole, requires further research to understand how this operates and affects engagement, retention, progression and attainment. This will provide more in-depth understandings of the impact of relationship, pedagogy, socio-psychological interactions and social and cultural capital and their relationship to student attainment.
- Statistical monitoring of the attainment gap needs to span at least three years in order to identify all related data trends.
- In order to fully understand the disparities in student attainment, a longitudinal study of at least three years is necessary, in order to determine the effectiveness of the interventions recommended in the report and associated briefing papers.

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## **12. Appendices**

A number of policy briefing papers have been developed to support curriculum design, researchers in the area of disparities in student attainment, lectures and academic developers. These papers are entitled:

### **A1. The Power of the Learning Relationship**

Both students and lecturers identified that good academic relationships are crucial to achievement and disparities in student attainment. However, regardless of agreeing that relationships are important, students and lecturers define learning relationships differently and both have differing perceptions of what constitutes a good learning relationship.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/DiSA\\_Briefing\\_Paper-Learning\\_Relationships.docx](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/DiSA_Briefing_Paper-Learning_Relationships.docx)

### **A2. The Increasing Participation of Male BME Leisure Students through Blogs and Peer/Tutor Collaboration**

The DiSA project used a blog as an intervention to improve the dialogic relationship between learners, peers and teachers. A disparity in attainment had been identified between Black Ethnic Minority (BME) students and their white peers at the University. The intervention improved the attendance and participation of BME males in particular when compared to females, and females generally wanted marks to be added or taken off in group work related to the level of participation. It was not possible to compare performance over different modules as some of the learning was contextual.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Increasing\\_participation-Stokes.doc](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Increasing_participation-Stokes.doc)

### **A3. The Perils of Ethnic Categorisation**

The DiSA project investigated the issue of disparities in student attainment between BME students and White students as an attainment gap has been reported by the HEA. Previous research appear to have used ethnic categorisation as an unproblematic construct and such an attempt was made in this study to investigate students' learning in relation to ethnic categorisation. A survey with open ended questions was conducted with students and the evidence gathered appeared to show that most students found categorisation of ethnicity problematic.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Ethnic\\_Categorisation-Soocoormanee.doc](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Ethnic_Categorisation-Soocoormanee.doc)

### **A.4 English Language Development for Undergraduate Biomedical and Bioscience Students**

Every year, approximately 230 students enrol in BSc Biomedical Science and related degree programmes in the Department of Biomolecular and Sports Science. They are from increasingly varied backgrounds; crucial variables include mother tongue and engagement with traditional literacy in forms such as extended reading. The variety of language backgrounds and lack of engagement with literate activities may affect progression rates in some cohorts of our students. In an attempt to improve the performance of these students, we designed a module called 'Easy ways to improve your scientific English language' which focused on their literacy practices in areas outside of Biology. Delivery started in academic year 2009-10 and students had a free choice to enrol.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/English\\_Language\\_Development-Patel\\_and\\_Adefila.doc](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/English_Language_Development-Patel_and_Adefila.doc)

### **A.5 Challenges in Academic Writing**

This study seeks to explore the perspectives, practices and conceptualisations which lecturers bring to the task of developing and writing assignment briefs and to explore the conceptualisations, academic literacy and wider literacy practices undergraduate students bring to the task of interpreting and acting on the assignment briefs. The project draws also on the perspectives of specialist Academic Writing tutors who provide support and tuition in academic writing to students across Coventry University. The aim of the study is to explore the degree to which there is congruence between the conceptualisation and practices of students and academic staff and to discuss the implications of the findings for pedagogical practice and formative dialogue.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Challenges\\_in\\_Academic\\_Writing-Howell-Richardson.doc](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Challenges_in_Academic_Writing-Howell-Richardson.doc)

### **A.6 The Effect of Assessment Regimes on the Performance of BME Students study Mathematic-based Courses**

This study aimed to assess whether disparity in attainment between white and black and minority ethnicities (BME) students was consistent across different assessment styles, ranging from traditional examination-based assessments to group presentations and essays. In one module, the assessment was changed from a portfolio to a time constrained assessment. The portfolio had been shown to have the largest disparity in attainment; just this change in assessment reduced the disparity in attainment between BME and white students. There was no statistically significant disparity in student attainment after this change in assessment.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/The\\_Effect\\_of\\_Assessment\\_Regimes-Fairclough.doc](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/The_Effect_of_Assessment_Regimes-Fairclough.doc)

### **A.7 Raising Aspiration and Intellectual Capacity**

A subjective sense of intellectuality is crucial to the learning process, particularly at HE level where students are expected to perform as independent learners much more than at primary or tertiary stages. The basic premise of this project was that given that evidence exists suggesting a correlation between self-perception of academic ability and attainment, one way of closing the attainment gap is to raise students' identity as thinkers or intellectually minded and capable people.

The overall aim of this intervention was to improve student attainment levels by raising all students awareness of the importance of developing an academic identity and then to develop this through working at the both the subjective and objective levels. As well as developing a sense of being 'capable' of intellectual work, it involves developing and nurturing behaviours and dispositions associated with academic achievement such as reading, intellectual curiosity, engaging in discussion and debate, experiencing and exposing oneself to 'high culture' and so on. This idea is inspired by Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital', which he has argued is a crucial component of determining educational outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Raising\\_Aspirations-Sing\\_and\\_Cowden.doc](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Raising_Aspirations-Sing_and_Cowden.doc)

### **A.8 The Affective Domain and Attainment**

It is widely accepted that deep and surface learning are aspects of student learning (Marton and Saljo, 1976) that are important to attainment. This paper considers the impact of the affective domain in the adoption of surface and deep learning strategies by students. The data pertaining to this argument has been collected through Consensus Conferencing and through interviews with current students and alumni who have achieved good degrees. Students discussed the importance of good relationships with lectures and feeling respected as individuals as important to their engagement with the topic and how they operate as learners.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/The\\_Affective\\_Domain\\_Cureton\\_and\\_Cousin.docx](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/The_Affective_Domain_Cureton_and_Cousin.docx)

### **A.9 The Student Psychological Contract**

Through data collected via student consensus conference and student interview, the importance of the affective aspects of student psychological contract in learning relationships, arose as a dominant theme pertaining to student attainment. Furthermore, it is evident that students have a differing but equally significant psychological contract with the institution as a whole. This extends the current knowledge in this area, which has previously focused on the psychological contract of the first year student, the cognitive and behavioural elements of student psychological contact and its impact on engagement, satisfaction and retention.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/psychological\\_contract-cureton&Cousin.docx](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/psychological_contract-cureton&Cousin.docx)

### **A.10 Student Voices: Perceptions of Learning, Assignment and Achievement**

The School-based 'Conversations' intervention contributes to the DISA Project Research Stream 2 which draws together qualitative data around what may help or impede student achievement. A representative sample of undergraduate students from the School for Education Futures (University of Wolverhampton) took part in one-to-one conversations with an independent researcher in order to capture authentic student voices sharing their perceptions of factors which impact upon learning and assessed work. These semi-

structured conversations further illuminate DISA's substantive themes of academic processes (pedagogy); cultural and social capital; relationships and psychological processes.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Student\\_Voice-Oldham\\_and\\_Dhillon.doc](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Student_Voice-Oldham_and_Dhillon.doc)

### **A11. Influence on Subject Choice.**

The DiSA project investigated the issue of disparities in student attainment between BME students and White students. An attainment gap has been reported by the HEA and given that a number of folk pedagogies were in circulation among colleagues, it was thought it would be important to investigate if such folk pedagogies rested on any evidence. A survey with open ended questions was conducted with students and the evidence gathered appeared to show that most students (BME and White) themselves decided to attend university and were the main influence in choosing their subject area.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Influence\\_of\\_Choice-Soccoormarnee.doc](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Influence_of_Choice-Soccoormarnee.doc)

### **A.12 Peer Mentoring**

A number of mentoring schemes run at departmental or course level across the University; many of these are unconnected to other University services and are essentially informal. The aim of this study was to explore students' attitudes to formal mentoring schemes coordinated centrally by the University. The Mentors were screened and selected for their strong academic capabilities. Mentors were also paid for a requisite ten hours of contact time with mentees per week.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Student\\_Mentoring\\_Adefila.docx](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Student_Mentoring_Adefila.docx)

### **A13. Making the Grade: Student Attitude to Choice in Assessment**

The aim of this study was to explore students' attitudes to choice in assessment, particularly the extent to which they feel empowered by greater assessment choice. The study formed an evaluative part of the first cycle of an action research project within the Disparities in Student Attainment Project (DiSA) in which a small assessment intervention was implemented to test outcomes on students' performance. Students were on a Level Two Criminology module at Coventry University which was normally assessed by a 3000 word written reflective journal. In the intervention, however, students were offered the choice between submitting their work in the normal written format, or in the form of an audio recording (or podcast). The intention was to allow them to choose how best to present their work in order to maximise their performance and achieve optimum attainment. The evaluation set out to consider the actual choices that students made and the reasons for their choice, as well as their attitudes to the idea of choice in assessment being made available to them.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Making\\_the\\_Grade-Steventon.doc](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Making_the_Grade-Steventon.doc)

## ***Methodological Papers***

### **A.14 Consensus Oriented Research Approaches: Reflexive Co-enquiry with Students.**

Pedagogic research into higher education often draws on a limited repertoire of methods. Characteristically, research projects will rely on semi-structured interviews or focus group either to supplement surveys or as the key method. Even where case study or action research frameworks are proposed, data tends to be gathered primarily through interviews. In defending a more creative and generative method, we will first set out some of the methodological issues that attend interviewing but which are often overlooked; we will then offer a contrasted rationale for and describe how we used a form of co-inquiry with students through a 'consensus conference'. Our argument is that this research perspective provides an ethical third space in which lecturers and students are empowered to generate understandings and insights. We ground our argument in research we have undertaken on degree disparity.

[http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Methodology\\_CORA\\_Cureton\\_and\\_Cousin.doc](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Methodology_CORA_Cureton_and_Cousin.doc)

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