

### Editorial

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The black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) attainment gap that exists in universities has been rightly referred to as *“the great unspoken shame of higher education”* (Tatum, 2019). This Special Issue of *Compass* – through its opinion pieces, case studies and articles – adds to the wave of new scholarly publications that are trying to help us understand this inequality better. These papers capture the experiences of staff and students working in different institutional contexts and with a common goal: to throw light on the many practices and structures that have led to some avoidable attainment differences. They help us to understand how we can address attainment inequalities at all levels – institutional, programme and module; they show that we need to take a close, hard look at how the curriculum, in its design, delivery and assessment, excludes many of our students.

There is a strong moral imperative for changing our thinking and practice. In our increasingly competitive world, dominated by high student fees, social mobility is in decline and, with it, our meritocratic traditions. All students should have the opportunity to flourish, but the attainment gap project referred to by Nona McDuff in her preface shows that this is far from happening. We have to recognise that, up to now, we have been largely trying to fix the student, not the institution. This needs to change. It is not the job of any regulator to tell us to care about our students and our local communities – it is a collective responsibility that should be within every institution's DNA.

One well-tried and tested approach to changing attitudes is to promote and amplify the student voice and engage in constructive dialogue with our students. Many institutions have successfully funded student partnership activities and some have focused specifically on developing inclusive practice through curriculum consultancy schemes. Angel Rose and Antonela Chirilov, students at the University of Greenwich, together with Students' Union Representation Coordinator, Esther Olorunsomo have been playing a powerful role in helping to create a level playing field for students. Angel notes that small steps can be effective:

*“As Curriculum Consultants, we aim to view course materials from a student perspective and to offer appropriate recommendations on how to make these more inclusive. The changes we recommend are often small, but these small changes can make all the difference to the students accessing the course.”*

Inclusion needs to be considered in every aspect of the way we design and deliver higher education. This cannot be achieved in a partial way. We need to examine our institutional cultures, processes and attitudes so that inclusivity permeates everything we do. The data provide us with insights to start conversations and create new narratives. However, our

leadership needs to recognise, reward and drive inclusivity. After all, a diverse classroom, in which every student feels that she or he can thrive, is a better classroom.

This issue of *Compass* illustrates a range of responses and ideas from members of academic and professional services staff in institutions involved in the Office for Students (OfS) *Catalyst Student Success* project.

In the preface, Nona McDuff, project lead, discusses how Kingston University reduced the BAME attainment gap through a combination of meaningful metrics to raise awareness, followed up by the use of a framework for developing inclusive curricula. This approach proved to be highly successful in her own institution, in that it positively engaged staff in discussion which, in turn, led to concrete actions. In the articles that follow, readers can see how this approach was applied by other institutions.

Participation in a 2017 project to widen success in higher education led Danielle Tran to reflect on what is needed of academic staff and their institutions to achieve a 'decolonising' of curricula. As students currently campaign to achieve this latter, their teachers, the author says, have to face up to the challenges of discussing potentially difficult matters concerning class, gender and race and of responding sensitively and thoughtfully to the issues that relate to student experience of the classroom and education as a whole. Institutions are certainly under increasing pressure to create a much more inclusive learning experience that caters for the needs and concerns of a diverse student body. This opinion piece emphatically places the responsibility of achieving decolonisation of the curriculum upon the shoulders of individual staff, who must not shy away from perceived barriers if they are to achieve a personal understanding of and empathy with their students' very varied backgrounds and diverse perceptions of the world.

At De Montfort University, the voice of BAME students is being heard and responded to, as the institution sets about countering the attainment gap through its 'Freedom to Achieve' project, with co-creation at its heart. On the basis of qualitative data, Lucy Atkins and Richard Hall evaluate the success of a recent (2018) series of co-creation events in creating institutional understanding of the experiences of BAME students. Against the backdrop of a thorough survey of the literature, the authors explain how students and staff came together to discuss ways of addressing attainment inequalities, with their focus upon the four themes of curriculum, environment, development and community/belonging. We are left with a clear sense of the worth of the project for its encouragement of authentic conversations between the institution and its staff and students, and its strong emphasis on communication and the practical application to teaching and learning of the principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility.

Kingston University's Student Curriculum Consultant Programme (SCCP) is that institution's way of harnessing the lived experiences of its very diverse student body to address the attainment gap; it is an integral part of the University's 'Inclusive Curriculum Framework', outlined for readers here. Authors Annie Hughes, Kamal Mohamad, Nona McDuff and Christina Michener describe the development of the programme from its inception,

explaining how paid 'Student Curriculum Consultants' have worked with staff across the University in co-creation activities, three of which provide case studies within this issue. Careful evaluation of what has obviously been a successful start to the programme should guarantee its continuing development and improvement and help to access the hitherto untapped and very rich resource of student experience, bringing its diversity to bear upon the practice of academic teachers and so significantly enhancing students' learning and life prospects.

Substantial staff experience of teaching Chinese students in two departments of the University of Greenwich Business School and some sensitive, empathetic appraisal of the challenges such learners are likely to face when studying in the UK lend rigour to a case study about strategies for raising their attainment nearer to that of their peers. Liz Warren, Dawn Reilly, Wenxian Sun and Iwona Vellam explain that increasing numbers of Chinese Direct Entry Students (CDEs) – who, under articulation agreements with higher education institutions in China, study at Greenwich – benefit from learning with UK lecturers in China before coming to the UK. They improve their use of English and become acclimatised to more active forms of learning, which may be an unfamiliar approach for those previously educated in more didactic systems. Other things which help to minimise culture – and learning culture – shock are carefully discussed: for example, a semester at Greenwich prior to a return to study later on, amendments to induction, programme content and delivery and one-to-one meetings with staff. Thoughtful evaluation of the work done so far to close the attainment gap for Chinese students and plans for improvements to come leave the reader with a sense of the genuine concern here to help all students succeed according to their potential.

Helen Barefoot and Cage Boons provide a case study which charts the development of the 'Student Advocate Programme', a University of Hertfordshire initiative to reduce the BAME attainment gap. The appointment – to paid part-time advocate roles – of ten students of diverse backgrounds and experiences has, according to this study, already borne fruit. These students have, within their own schools, risen to challenges – both pre-identified and discovered – and addressed matters of inclusivity with staff and curricula, earning the respect of senior university figures and of the staff with whom their roles have led them to work. This paper clearly explains the rationale of the scheme against the background of the literature and includes a detailed account of how the programme unfolded, listing its benefits to both students and staff. The authors are careful to add that some limitations affected the overall success of the advocates' work, but the very fact that this institution has fully funded the programme's continuation, initially for another year, confirms that it has already achieved a great deal. This institution's experience seems to confirm that BAME students themselves are a powerful means of implementing constructive change.

The University of Hertfordshire held inclusive practice workshops with the programme and module leaders of thirty-seven of its programmes. Beginning with provision of relevant data to generate discussion about the sensitive issue of race and leading on to inclusivity and compassionate pedagogy, the facilitators sought to enlighten the curriculum leaders about the lived experience of people of colour and about how they might make their practice and

curricula more inclusive. The workshops were followed by interviews with the leaders who attended, conducted by members of the 'BME Student Success' working group. Helen Barefoot's compelling article conveys the core substance of the personal narratives of the two workshop facilitators and two researchers who conducted leader interviews – these four themselves a diverse group who have all worked in higher education for some time. It's impossible not to be moved by the powerful message of this paper which is bound to create empathy for BAME students and staff and to aid understanding of the impact of experiencing, as a facilitator, very entrenched and challenging opinions.

Rebecca Maccabe, Ricarda Micallef and Mark Carew present a study of the impact of peer-assisted learning (PAL) upon the retention, progression and attainment of Pharmacy students at Kingston University, London, where student mentors, with academics and the Academic Mentoring team, co-design student-centred active learning materials. The mentor role described in this study was trained and paid and involved supporting two Pharmacy modules. On the basis of quantitative and qualitative data, the authors conclude that engagement with PAL, which is voluntary, does produce higher progression, retention and module pass rates than achieved by non-engaged students. The study found that the most positive impact was with BAME and disadvantaged students. This paper provides clear confirmation that students in partnership with mentors to co-create knowledge within an inclusive curriculum has very positive benefits for all those involved; in this case, the participants were unanimous in finding PAL valuable and rewarding.

Two studies – qualitative and quantitative – of student 'belonging' at the University of Wolverhampton provided authors Debra Cureton and Phil Gravestock with a wealth of material confirming strong similarities between the sector-wide evidence of disparity in the degree outcomes of ethnic groups and the measurable differences at Wolverhampton between the sense of belonging of BAME students and that of their white peers. Interestingly, the authors, having first accepted the premise that belonging directly affects retention and degree success, do conclude from the studies that an individual's sense of belonging can fluctuate during her/his time at university. This has obvious implications for whole institutional community awareness of the importance of creating and sustaining a social environment and learning relationship that engenders in all students the sense of feeling welcome, cared about and valued. The fact that BAME students are clearly amongst those groups whose sense of belonging is the most vulnerable, should, the authors say, encourage universities to focus consistently on inclusive strategies from induction right through to graduation.

In a companion piece to the paper above, Phil Gravestock and Debra Cureton explore in a case study the University of Wolverhampton's research into causes of ethnicity-based attainment gaps and this institution's subsequent initiatives to reduce such disparities. The outcomes of two projects suggested that students' lives, wellbeing, sense of belonging and subsequent success depend on resolution of a complex range of factors. The authors focus on three themes – 'belonging', 'assessment activities' and 'expectations' – and explore their implications in influencing students' higher education experiences and final attainment. The study throws up some interesting lessons about how an institution may achieve the goal of

gap reduction/elimination and at the same time perpetuate the means by which such a success is accomplished. The key appears to be in a genuine embedding of principles and practice which will be sustained whether the institution undergoes restructure or academic staff come and go.

A collaborative pilot project (offered by the Faculty of Education and Health and Information and Library Services) at the University of Greenwich has sought to equip students with the skills and strategies they need to meet the challenges of learning on a two-year accelerated degree (BA in Primary Education). An opinion piece by Poppy Gibson, Sharon Perera, Robert Morgan and Bonnie Kerr makes very clear that students who frequently suffer anxiety, stress and self-doubt – and sometimes Imposter Syndrome – are more likely to face these problems during a compressed degree. The authors explain that the pilot embedded academic and information literacy skills into the taught programme to support students “*and also to enhance their abilities and build lasting confidence through employability and citizenship skills*”. If students are to improve their performance, motivation, optimism and empathy, it is incumbent upon higher education institutions and their educators to recognise the need of *all* learners to be engaged in active participation and to make sure that both academic and emotional support mechanisms are in place. Four strategies that might be considered for deployment on other cross-faculty accelerated programmes conclude this interesting paper.

Louise Owusu-Kwarteng, a member of the Applied Sociology Research Group at the University of Greenwich, offers a case study about staff-student research collaborations at this institution, confirming unequivocally the benefits of such partnerships in encouraging a sense of belonging amongst marginalised groups, especially BAME students. Of particular interest in this absorbing study is the way in which the author used Sociology modules as the vehicle for such collaborations, with students' autobiographical and semi-autobiographical narratives springing from local neighbourhood research and personal experiences of shaping personal identity within society. Equally striking in this paper is the account of the two symposia which the author and a colleague collaborated with students to hold, which involved the students in a public opportunity to present autobiographical research papers and in all the shared preliminary preparations for these events. It is refreshing to read of such relevant and productive approaches to student engagement and unsurprising that they were very successful!

University College London (UCL) adopted a multi-level approach in its efforts to close the BAME attainment gap. An informative article by Rosalind Duhs, Julie Evans, Paulette Williams and Parama Chaudhury describes how UCL drew on and adapted the work of other institutions to enhance the learning of its BAME students. The paper outlines research into degree outcomes data which was carried out by the UCL Centre for Teaching and Learning Economics and underpinned the institution's 'Inclusive Curriculum Health Check'; departments' initial responses within one faculty illustrate the value of initiatives recommended by the health check. Staff engagement – in partnership with students – with various appropriate strategies certainly seems to be having a very positive influence on outcomes for the whole student body as well as narrowing the BAME attainment gap. A strong, institution-wide awareness of the gap and interest in reducing it are key to student

empowerment. The article highlights the relevance of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) for remaining in good standing for staff who provide evidence to end disadvantage for black, Asian and minority students.

As you will discover, the articles in this Compass Special Issue show the range of approaches taken by many of the universities involved in the *Catalyst Student Success* project. What they do demonstrate is an institutional commitment to redress the BAME attainment gap.

We hope that you, the reader, will gain further insights into the common issues faced by a range of institutions of different sizes, cultures and missions and benefit from the ideas explored in these articles.

### Reference list

Tatum, J. (2019) *The Great Unspoken Shame of Higher Education: Tackling the BME attainment gap*. Available at: <https://showtime.gre.ac.uk/index.php/medway/festival2018/schedConf/keynotes> (Accessed: 05 April 2019).