**Black and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UCL**

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**Glossary**

*ANOVA - analysis of variance*

*BME – black and minority ethnic*

*CALT – Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching*

*FTs – Faculty Tutors*

*HESA - Higher Education Statistics Agency*

*HoDs – Heads of Department*

*IQR – Internal Quality Review*

*OD – Organisational Development*

*WP – widening participation*

**Abstract**

This article is the culmination of a project to investigate and quantify BME student attainment at UCL. The format is non-traditional as the text is based on a committee paper. The UCLU BME Student Officer initiated the project by raising concerns about the higher education attainment gap between White and BME students. A team, funded by the UCL Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT), reviewed literature, and collected data to quantify the gap at UCL. A small gap was identified, leading to recommendations for future monitoring and measures to create a sense of belonging in BME students.

**Keywords**

Assessment, BME student attainment, belonging interventions

**Background**

There is evidence of an attainment gap between BME and White students in HE in the UK. Recent research funded by the Equality Challenge Unit (2013), analysing HESA data, reports that:

“Overall, 71.5% of White UK-domiciled students graduating from their first undergraduate degree received ‘good’ degrees, compared with 53.8% of their BME counterparts, an attainment gap of 17.7 percentage points. “[[1]](#footnote-1)

Recently UCLU appointed the first BME Student Officer, who raised concerns about BME student attainment at UCL. Recognising that the attainment gap is an issue across the sector, staff at the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) devised a project plan to investigate BME student attainment at UCL; the plan involved carrying out data collection of undergraduate BME student attainment, exploring initiatives at UCL aimed at increasing ethnic diversity in staff and students, and making recommendations for future action to Education Committee.

**The Project**

The BME Student Attainment project aimed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to better understand BME student attainment at UCL. Members of the project group are Dr Teresa McConlogue (Senior Teaching Fellow in CALT), Shanell Johnson (Black and Minority Ethnic Students' Officer, UCLU), Dr Julie Evans (Faculty Tutor for Brain Sciences) , Dr Alastair McClelland (Programme Director BSc Psychology), Dr Sylvia Vitello, Matthew Jones and Francina Clayton from the Division of Psychology and Language Sciences.

We began with the hypothesis that there was no gap in attainment between BME and White student attainment at UCL. To investigate this, we undertook a literature review of research on the attainment gap in the UK HE sector and actions had been taken to narrow the gap (see Appendix A for a summary). We also undertook quantitative analysis of UCL undergraduate students’ final degree marks and drop out rates (see Appendix B) and exploratory qualitative research involving focus groups and interviews with UCL BME students .

Quantitative data analysis was carried out based on historic data (2011-2013) of undergraduate student achievement provided by the Head of Student Data Services. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to investigate the effect of ethnicity, Widening Participation (investigated through factors such as students from low participation neighbourhoods), gender and Faculty on the final mean percentage score which forms the basis for degree classification. Student drop out rates as a function of ethnicity were also investigated.

Seven Faculties were included in the analysis. The analysis showed a significant main effect of ethnicity in six of the seven Faculties, with White students on average scoring higher than BME students. The difference in performance varied across Faculties; Arts and Humanities showed no significant effect of ethnicity, and for other Faculties the percentage differences between White and BME students for their final degree grades varied between 1.4 percentage points (Brain Sciences) and 3.6 percentage points (Built Environment). See Appendix B for a detailed summary.

As a result of this project, we made recommendations for immediate action and for further work at UCL. These recommendations were formally approved at UCL’s Education Committee and will be monitored in 2014-15.

**Recommendations, Actions and Monitoring**

These recommendations draw on the literature review and the analysis of data collected in UCL on BME student attainment. Table 1 sets out the various actions that UCL will undertake to enhance BME student attainment. Many of these actions fit with ongoing work at UCL; for example, work on the Connected Curriculum aimed at embedding research-based education, led by the VP Education, will include a review of curricula diversity.

**Table 1 – Recommendations and Reporting**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Themes | Activities | Owner | Reporting/deadline |
| Data Collection and Research | Annual monitoring of BME attainment statistics.  BME student satisfaction departmental focus groups.  Develop resulting action points to include in Equality and Diversity Faculty Action Plans (which are now a compulsory aspect of UCL Equalities Accountability Framework) | Faculty Tutors (FTs) supported by the VP Education office | Yearly report to Education Committee |
| Assessment and  feedback | Review anonymised marking. Where anonymised marking is not taking place, report to Education Committee.  Introduce ‘guided marking’[[2]](#footnote-2) exercises, or similar, at the beginning of every module. | Heads of Departments (HoDs) and FTs | Pilot in 2014-15  Introduce for all courses in 2015-16  Report to Education Committee |
| Curriculum development | Curriculum review of existing and new courses in 2014-17, and action to ensure diversity is represented in curricula. | VP Education (to link with the Connected Curriculum, an institutional-wide strategy for curriculum review) | Ongoing throughout 2014-17.  HoDs report to FTs and FTs to Education Committee |
| Professional Development  and  Pedagogy | Equality and diversity awareness embedded in the UCL Arena scheme for professional development of teachers  Widespread dissemination to teaching staff of films developed by UCL BME students.  Organisational Development’s programme of courses/events to embed awareness of equality and diversity. | CALT Director  Organisational Development (OD) Director  Supported by Head of  Equalities and Diversity | As from September and to incorporate in UCL Arena Equality and Diversity.  Report to Education Committee on progress by June 2015 |
| Belonging Interventions | Create and show videos of BME Alumni and other alumni discussing the challenges they faced at UCL, how they coped and their subsequent careers, to be shown within induction programmes.  Raise awareness of importance of creating diverse groups for student group work assignments.  Mentoring – ensure BME students have access to an appropriate mentor | Head of Careers and HoDs  HoDs and Faculty Tutors | Piloted in 2014-15 and actioned by September 2016 |
| Internal Quality Review (IQR) | Review IQR criteria and ensure that questions relate to examining diversity in curricula where relevant.  Review questions relating to BME student recruitment, attainment and retention. | IQR Panel  Registrar  Head of Academic Services | By end of 2015 |

**Future Work**

This project investigated BME undergraduate student attainment; owing to time constraints we could not investigate postgraduate attainment. The data shows substantial differences in the numbers of BME students in certain Faculties at UCL. Some departments had small numbers of BME students; hence recruitment of BME students at UCL requires further investigation. Further work will also be done to see whether the gap was present when BME students entered UCL and whether UCL has added value i.e. whether, as a result of studying at UCL, the attainment gap has widened or narrowed.

Retention rates and progression of BME students to postgraduate qualifications are key to nurturing involvement in academia and increasing the numbers of BME professors. The UCL President and Provost, Michael Arthur, is chairing a working group to prepare UCL’s application for the Race Equality Charter Mark (<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/our-projects/race-equality-charter-mark>). Many of the actions in Table 1 compliment work required to achieve this award.

The current study was funded by CALT.

**Appendices**

Appendix A

Summary of the literature review

Appendix B

Summary of quantitative data analysis

**Appendix A**

**The Attainment of Black and Minority Ethnic Undergraduates at UK Universities: A Summary of the Evidence**

This short piece summarises the findings of Jones (2014) on the UK’s BME attainment gap: the tendency for Black and Minority Ethnic undergraduates to underperform their White peers. The overall gap is dramatic, but there is significant variation both by particular ethnicity and by educational establishment. The reasons for the gap are complex, but even when controlling for all available variables BME students remain at a disadvantage. This suggests that part of the gap may be mediated by ethnicity *per se*. The gap might be narrowed using strategies like BME role models, expectation-raising for BME students, and bridge programmes to ease the transition to university.

*What is the Gap?*

The gap is usually framed in terms of the proportion of students who receive ‘good’ degrees: first or upper second class. By this metric, BME students are consistently less successful than White students. The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, 2013), analysing Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for the 2011-12 academic year, report that 71.5% of UK-domiciled White students graduating 2011-2012 did so with a good degree, compared to only 53.8% of BME students.

Every BME ethnic category recognised by the HESA underperformed White students. This has been the case since 2003-2004, the earliest year listed in the ECU report. However, the gap is not equal for all ethnicities: in 2011-12 62.7% of students deemed ‘Chinese’ received good degrees, whereas the figure for ‘Black: African’ students was only 42.5% (ECU, 2013). Thus it is crucial to be wary of overgeneralisations about BME students. The category BME covers hugely diverse communities. Though this diversity is masked by the language and the modes of analysis often used for the attainment gap (which tend to treat BME students as a homogeneous group), it is important to remember that the causes of and solutions to the gap may not be the same for all BME groups.

The size of the gap also varies between institutions. Richardson (2013) presents evidence that the gap is smaller at Russell Group institutions than at post-1992 universities, even though the latter take a far higher proportion of BME students.

*Why is there a Gap?*

Ethnicity is confounded with other factors that affect university attainment. Broecke and Nicholls (2007) examined information culled from 2004-5 HESA data on 65,000 UK undergraduates to attempt to determine whether the gap merely reflects confounds that correlate with ethnicity. They built a statistical model that first took into account all other available variables (including deprivation, previous academic attainment, age, gender, subject of study, disability, and subject area), and then asked whether ethnicity remains a predictor of degree class even after these other variables are factored in. They found that though the extra variables explain most of the ethnic variability in degree class, there remains a residual gap: i.e. even controlling for SES, school grades etc., BME students underperform White students.

This finding has been corroborated by the Equality Challenge Unit & Higher Education Academy(2008); by Woolf, McManus, Potts, and Dacre (2011) in a study focusing on UCL medical students (psychological factors and study habits were also taken into account in this paper); and more recently by the Higher Education Funding Council for England(2014). The latter found that among those entering higher education in 2007-8, 72% of White students with BBB A-levels gained a good degree compared to 56% of Asian students and 53% of Black students with the same A-level grades.

Broecke and Nicholls point out that though their finding is consistent with ethnic bias in UK higher education, it does not prove that bias exists. Unavailable variables (e.g. English as a second language) might explain the remaining attainment gap. However, that the gap persists after a range of factors have been taken into account implies is that it is not tenable for universities to blame the gap on bad schooling, student inadequacy, or any other single factor cleanly outside their control.

What then explains the residual gap? We don’t know for certain – rigorous research is scarce (Richardson, 2013). However, there is evidence for several possibilities. Appreciable minorities of the BME student body report that they find their learning environment ‘cliquey’, ‘hostile’, or (less commonly) ‘racist’; or that their courses fail to reflect issues of ‘diversity, equality, and discrimination’ (National Union of Students, 2011). For cultural reasons, BME students may be subject to family or community obligations that their White peers don’t have to contend with (Stevenson, 2012). Additionally, *stereotype threat* - whereby a person’s awareness of an unfair stereotype to which he/she might be subject creates anxiety that can, perversely, impair performance so as to fulfil that stereotype - has been shown to be a factor in African Americans’ disadvantage in academic tests (Steele & Aronson, 1995), and may also have an effect in the UK.

*How Can the Attainment Gap be Closed?*

Interventions tackling both the SES-mediated gap and the ethnicity-mediated gap would be crucial in closing the overall gap. The former has been successfully attacked in the US using strategies that help make up the educational deficit suffered by many low SES students before university (Stevenson & Whelan, 2013). These include partnering with schools, implementing first-year transition programmes, enhancing introductory teaching, establishing early-warning systems to detect struggling students, and providing counselling and tutoring for study skills.

A number of changes have been suggested to help close the ethnicity-specific gap. Berry & Loke (2011) attest the importance of visible BME mentors, and Craig, Hall, & Peat (2010) the importance of fostering high expectations of BME students. Singh (2011) emphasises the need to move away from curricula taught by White people from a White point of view towards a more inclusive syllabus. These reforms might also help dismantle the negative assumptions underlying stereotype threat. Interventions designed to help BME students deal with psychological threat have been shown to be effective in Cohen’s work; in one study negative stereotypes were confronted through a ‘self-affirming’ writing assignment. BME students’ grades significantly improved after the intervention and the attainment gap was reduced by 40% (Cohen et al, 2006), attesting to the power of ‘belonging’ interventions.

**In conclusion**, the attainment gap represents a serious problem for UK higher education. Addressing it is not only a moral imperative, but a chance to make universities more attractive to BME students from the UK and around the world. UCL has the opportunity to determine the extent to which it suffers from a gap, and to then pioneer interventions to close any gap that is found.

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**Appendix B**

**Summary of quantitative data analysis**

Results

The results below are based on a data set of 7149 UCL students from 2011-2013 excluding the faculties of Laws and Medicine. Table 1 below reveals that the largest ethnic group is White across all domicile types, with the second largest ethnic group being Chinese ( the majority being non-EU), and that the third largest ethnic group by quite some margin is South Asian ( the majority being from the UK).

Table 1**:** Total Number of UK, EU and non-EU students from each ethnic group across all three years.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ethnicity | Domicile Type | | | Total |
| UK | EU | Non-EU |
| 1. White | 2979 | 615 | 168 | 3762 |
| 2. African-Caribbean (AC) | 170 | 4 | 35 | 209 |
| 3. South Asian | 741 | 11 | 138 | 890 |
| 4. Chinese (mainly non-EU) | 201 | 9 | 977 | 1187 |
| 5. Other Asian | 222 | 5 | 317 | 544 |
| 6. Mixed: white and A-C | 50 | 2 | 1 | 53 |
| 7. Mixed: white and Asian | 128 | 16 | 24 | 168 |
| 8. Other (mixed, other ethnicity including Arab) | 245 | 16 | 75 | 336 |
| Total | 4736 | 678 | 1735 | 7149 |

Table 2 shows the ethnic breakdown by Faculty.

Table 2: The number of students from each ethnic group as a function of Faculty

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ethnicity | Faculty | | | | | | | Total |
| AH | BE | BS | ES | LS | MAPS | SHS |
| 1. White | 771 | 193 | 305 | 257 | 439 | 591 | 1206 | 3762 |
| 2. African-Caribbean (AC) | 13 | 9 | 20 | 68 | 53 | 22 | 24 | 209 |
| 3. South Asian | 42 | 18 | 60 | 173 | 198 | 178 | 221 | 890 |
| 4. Chinese | 27 | 76 | 91 | 182 | 125 | 394 | 292 | 1187 |
| 5. Other Asian | 17 | 32 | 23 | 127 | 104 | 118 | 123 | 544 |
| 6. Mixed: white and AC | 7 | 3 | 7 | 5 | 8 | 10 | 13 | 53 |
| 7. Mixed: white and Asian | 37 | 6 | 10 | 16 | 13 | 30 | 56 | 168 |
| 8. Other | 48 | 17 | 18 | 76 | 68 | 46 | 63 | 336 |
| Total | 962 | 354 | 534 | 904 | 1008 | 1389 | 1998 | 7149 |

AH - Arts and Humanities LS -Life Sciences

BE- Built Environment SHS- Social and Historical Sciences

BS -Brain Sciences ES Engineering Sciences

A 7 (Faculty) x 2 (Gender) x 8 (Ethnic Group) Analysis Of Variance (ANOVA) was used to investigate the effect of ethnicity, gender and Faculty on the final percentage score which forms the basis for degree classification. The analysis shows a significant main effect of ethnicity, with white students, on average, scoring higher than BME students (66.2% vs. 64.5%), *F*(1, 7121) = 113, *p* < .001, η2p = .016. This can be considered a small effect, and for both cohorts the average student would have been awarded an Upper Second class degree. There was no significant effect of gender, with both females and males score on average 65.4%, *F*(1, 7121) = .007, *p* = .936.

To examine the effect of ethnicity on performance in more detail, a further ANOVA was conducted with ethnic group (8 categories), gender and Faculty as independent variables and mean percentage score as the dependent variable

There was a significant effect of ethnic group, *F*(7, 7037) = 16.2, *p* < .001, η2p = .016, as illustrated below in Table 3.

Table 3**:** Mean percentage score as a function of ethnic group

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| White | African-Caribbean | South Asian | Chinese | Other Asian | Mixed: African-Caribbean | Mixed: Asian | Other |
| 66.2 | 63.0 | 65.1 | 64.6 | 63.7 | 64.7 | 65.1 | 64.6 |

Pair-wise comparisons between the ethnic groups using Bonferroni-corrected *t*-tests revealed that:

White students score significantly higher than, African-Caribbean students (*p* < .001), South Asian students (*p* < .001), Chinese students (*p* < .001), Other Asian students (*p* < .001) and Other Ethnicity students (*p* = .001). African-Caribbean students score significantly lower than South Asian students (*p* = .001), and Chinese students (*p* = .040). South Asian students score significantly higher than Other Asian students (*p* = .004)

There were significant differences between faculties in relation to the mean percentage score, *F*(6, 7121) = 44.2, *p* < .001, η2p = .036, as shown below. As expected, Faculties with the more quantitative subject disciplines have higher average scores (see Table 4 below).

Table 4**:** Mean percentage score as a function of Faculty and Ethnicity

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Arts & Humanities | Built Environment | Brain Sciences | Engineering Sciences | Life Sciences | Mathematics & Physical Sciences | Social & Historical Studies |
| White | 65.1 | 66.0 | 67.0 | 67.6 | 66.2 | 68.7 | 65.2 |
| BME | 64.3 | 62.4 | 65.6 | 64.2 | 63.6 | 66.7 | 62.8 |
| Overall | 64.9 | 64.4 | 66.4 | 65.1 | 65.2 | 67.6 | 64.3 |

There was no interaction between ethnicity and gender,*F*(1, 7121) = .141, *p* = .707. However, there was a significant interaction between ethnicity and Faculty, *F*(6, 7121) = 3.37, *p* = .003, η2p = .003. White students consistently outperform BME students across all Faculties. However the differences are generally small and not statistically significant for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

UK students only data

A 2 (Ethnicity) x 2 (Widening Participation) x 2 (Gender) x7 (Faculty) ANOVA was conducted on the data for UK students (N=4256) to investigate the effect of ethnicity (white vs BME), WP (whether the student came from a below average performing school in terms of A level points or not), gender and Faculty. There was a significant main effect of ethnicity, with white students scoring significantly higher than BME students (66.0% vs. 64.8%) *F*(1, 4200) = 45.0, *p* < .001, η2p = .011. Therewas nosignificant effect of gender or whether the student came from a below average performing school or not(*F*s < 1).There was however a significant effect of Faculty, *F*(6, 4200) = 15.6, p < .001, η2p = .022, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5**:** Mean percentage score as a function of Faculty and Ethnicity (UK students only).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Arts and Humanities | Built Environment | Brain Sciences | Engineering Sciences | Life Sciences | MAPS | Social and Historical |
| White | 65.1 | 66.0 | 67.0 | 67.6 | 66.2 | 68.7 | 65.2 |
| BME | 64.3 | 62.4 | 65.6 | 64.2 | 63.6 | 66.7 | 62.8 |

Withdrawal from Study rate for all students as a function of Ethnicity

Over the period 2008-2013, 6.8% of students who enrolled on undergraduate programmes at UCL failed to complete their studies. Overall, there was no significant difference in the percentage of White (6.9%) and BME (6.7%) students who failed to complete their undergraduate programme, (1, *N* = 12,907) = 0.25, *p* = .619. However, in two faculties there was a significant difference in withdrawal rates. In Life Sciences, 6.7% of BME students compared to 3.8% of white students withdrew from their studies,(1, *N* = 1741) = 7.15, *p* = .007. Conversely in the Faculty of Social and Historical Studies, 5.9% of white students compared to 3.9% of BME students withdrew from their studies, (1, *N* = 3,466) = 5.68, *p* = .017.

**Summary**

This report provides an overview of BME attainment across UCL, and reveals that there is considerable variation across Faculties. For all Faculties, with the exception of Arts and Humanities, there are significant differences in performance as a function of ethnicity – but these differences are generally small – and on the Honours degree scheme, the average BME student would obtain the same degree classification as the average White student.

With respect to students who withdraw from their studies, analyses show no difference in drop-out rate between white and BME students in five of the seven faculties investigated. In Life Sciences BME students were more likely to drop-out than white students and the reverse was true for Social and Historical Studies.

**Summary of findings with respect to Ethnicity:**

* Faculty of Arts and Humanities – no effect of ethnicity (White: 65.1%, BME: 64.3%), *F*(1,958) = 2.56, *p* = .110.
* Faculty of Brain Sciences – significant effect of ethnicity (White: 67.0%, BME: 65.6%), *F*(1,530) = 9.41, *p* = .002, η2p = .017.
* Faculty of the Built Environment – significant effect of ethnicity (White: 66.0%, BME: 62.4%), *F*(1,350) = 32.2, *p* < .001, η2p = .084.
* Faculty of Engineering – significant effect of ethnicity (White: 67.6%, BME: 64.2%), *F*(1,900) = 34.4, *p* < .001, η2p = .037.
* Faculty of Life Sciences (excluding School of Pharmacy) – significant effect of ethnicity (White: 66.2%, BME: 63.6%), *F*(1,826) = 32.7, *p* < .001, η2p = .038.
* Faculty of Mathematics and Physical Sciences – significant effect of ethnicity (White: 68.7%, BME: 66.7%), *F*(1,1385) = 14.5, *p* < .001, η2p = .010.
* Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences – significant effect of ethnicity (White: 65.2%, BME: 62.8%), *F* (1, 1994) = 86.7, *p* < .001, η2p = .042.

1. Quoted from Jones 2014  *The Attainment of Black and Minority Ethnic Students in UK Higher Education – A Review of the Literature.* See Annex A for a summary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Guided marking – students mark a range of previous years’ assignments and discuss their marking judgements with peers and their teacher. This helps students better understand assessment and enables them to benchmark and self-assess. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)