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Minding the Gap - From Disparity to Beyond Dr Debra Cureton (presenting) & Professor Glynis Cousin, University of Wolverhampton (0078)

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Abstract:
The sector wide differences in the attainment of students categorised as Black Minority Ethnic (BME) and as white increases, despite the good degrees gained by students categorised as BME rising year on year (ECU, 2012). In this research staff and student perceptions of the attainment gap are explored and initiatives to reduce the gap are implemented. The research identified four areas that are crucial to student success and contribute to gap:
  ✦ the quality of learning relationships
  ✦ pedagogic factors: *i.e.* the clarity of assignment briefs
  ✦ psychosocial barriers: *i.e.* student expectation, belongingness, aspiration raising and fear of stereotype threats
  ✦ social capital: *i.e.* understanding the HE rules of engagement and degree classifications

On conclusion of the programme the University saw a 2% decrease in its attainment gap. This work continues through the What Works Change Programme and considers how assessment practices can impact of student retention, progression, success and sense of belongingness.
(146 words)

Outline
Despite a higher percentage of people categorised as Black Minority Ethnic (BME) per head of the population entering into higher education (HE) than their counter parts categorised as white, there is an evident difference in the success patterns of these two groups. Firstly, more students per percentage of the population who categorised as white complete their degrees than students categorised as BME. Secondly, there are disparities in attainment between these two groups, where by students categorized as BME are less likely to than their white counterparts to gain a good (1st or 2:i) degree (Stevenson, 2012). In 2012 the national attainment gap showed a 19% difference in the percentage of good degrees gained between the two student groups. Notwithstanding a year-on-year increase in the percentage of student from minority background gaining good degrees, the degree attainment gap continues to increase (ECU, 2012).

The body of evidence that considers the factors that contribute to the attainment gap indicates that after controlling for gender, prior attainment (tariff score and type of level 3 qualifications), disability, deprivation, subject of study, type of HEI, term-time accommodation and age an unexplained gap in attainment is still evident (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007). The Equality Challenge Unit and Higher Education Academy (2008) reported two key recommendations for further work in this area: One of these recommendations calls for systematic institutional research to inform curriculum design and the other calls for this design to involve students and teachers. The University of Wolverhampton responded to this call in a HEA funded, collaborative project with Coventry University that investigates staff and student perceptions of the attainment gap and developed initiatives to reduce this. The

research identified four areas that are crucial to student success and contribute to the gap, which are supported by Stevenson (2012):

1. The quality of learning relationship
2. Pedagogical factors
3. Psychosocial barriers
4. Social capital

The Quality of Learning Relationship

Quality learning relationships between staff and students is of utmost importance. Students perceive their performance is better when there is a good learning relationship. Lecturers also recognise this, but lecturers and students define 'good relationships' very differently and have differing expectations of each other that can lead to misunderstanding the role each plays. In particular, students define a good relationship with lecturers as two-way; students engage with lecturers through attending lecturers, engaging with content and asking questions and perceive the lecturers' role as engaging with students providing a quality learning experience, encouraging student engagement and communicating with students when it is required. Lecturers, however, see learning relationships as one-way and express this as providing a safe, inclusive and interactive learning experience.

Students also appreciate lecturers who are organised, enthusiastic about their subject, demonstrate that they enjoy educating students are good at communicating assignment expectations and who are happy to answer questions. In addition to relationships with peers and lecturing staff, students also report that they have a relationship with the University and have expectations relating to this. This includes access to resources required to complete their degree and important relationships with other university staff.

Work with successful alumni identifies that lectures can act as an interlocutor to success by introducing students to a discourse about their potential for achievement. Thus the interlocutor raises students' aspirations, their self-belief and self-confidence.

Pedagogical Factors

The clarity and quality of an assignment brief and student attainment are linked. Higher attainment is associated with assignment briefs that are:

- clear
- succinct
- structured
- use student focused language
- fit for level

Contain information on:

- product
- process
- useful examples
- marking criteria
- what marks will be awarded for

Appreciative enquiry was applied in modules where no disparity is evident. This highlights that the lecturers' pedagogic approaches encourage inclusivity, respect student prior experience, recognize

individuality and that lecturers were invitational. It is interesting to note that these are factors that students appreciated in lecturers and linked to facilitative learning relationships (as outlined above).

Psychosocial Barriers

Though-out the study it became increasing apparent that students held expectations of their HE experience, inter alia students' expectation of their relationships with lecturers and with the university, which are akin to a psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995). Psychological contract is the unspoken contract that an individual holds with an organisation to which they are linked; violations of which negatively impact engagement, productivity, satisfaction and can ultimately lead to withdrawal. The importance of student expectation is highlighted by the phase one findings of the What Works programme (HEA, 2012). Further work at the University is on-going.

A motivating factor within this research has been the Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jackson, 1992) and Folk Pedagogies (Brunner, 2006), although these factors are difficult to quantify in practice, the research findings concluded that the mere hint of stereotype threat negatively impacts on learning relationships.

Additionally, students benefited from interventions that encouraged the development of an intellectual and academic identity and through this their aspirations were raised along with their attainment.

Social Capital

Two key findings arose in this area: firstly, students and their families did not understand the degree classification system, knew what a good degree was or its importance to the students' future employability. Secondly, some students appeared not to know the rules of HE engagement and how this differs from their previous educational experiences. Consequently, there is a need to level the playing field and ensure that all students can participate in what is required of them; that they understand an assignment brief, so that they can successfully complete assessments, know who they can ask questions of, when and through what form of communication, but more importantly that they are expected to ask questions and asking questions is not a sign of failure or stupidity, but a sign of engagement.

On completion of the project the attainment gap at the University of Wolverhampton had reduced by 2%. This work now continues through the next phase of the What Works: Retention and Success programme, with a focus on how systematic approaches to assessment impacts on student belongingness, reducing withdrawal and increasing attainment.
(995 words)

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