# Understanding Disparities in Student Attainment:

## Black and Minority Ethnic Students' Experience

*Final Report*

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# Acknowledgements

# Executive Summary

*Introduction*

A gap in the attainment of Black and Minority Ethnic students has been noted nationally for some time and this finding is the main trigger for the research project undertaken here. Other researchers have found that fewer Minority Ethnic students gain first and upper second class degrees than White students and the gap does not disappear when controlled for entry qualification and previous schooling. Differences between the experiences of different BME groups have also been noted by other researchers. It has been speculated that taking account of factors such as term-time working, parental income and education, among other unexplored factors, might explain the attainment gap, thus lessening the likelihood that there may be some form of ethnic bias within the HE system.

The research project undertaken here aims to draw out the salient features of the learning experience of BME students with a view to determine what might improve their attainment.

The University of Wolverhampton has a significantly higher proportion of BME students compared with other UK HEIs, with an uneven spread across the different Schools of the University. The overall constitution of the student population is likely to move further towards a higher BME intake given the predicted rise in international students from non-EU countries. Further if we note that students from low income backgrounds are concentrated in higher numbers in the West Midland than present nationally, we have an overlap of low attainment populations to cater for.

The study consists partly of quantitative analysis of module level data of BME students' performance, but mainly of a qualitative analysis of interviews with 34 BME students most conducted from March – June 2009, preceded by two pilot interviews in November 2008.

It was our guiding belief that it is more important to say what a quantitative picture hides, than what it shows. What any such quantitative picture hides is the variation in BME student performance within courses.

For the quantitative picture we selected five Schools with different concentrations of BME populations (high, med and low) and then chose modules that all BME students on the highest subscribed courses in these Schools are likely to take. A total of 48 modules from 13 Subjects were selected for the comparison of results.

The interview questions to the students were divided into five groups:

- Biographical, including education attainment of parents and financial situation.
- Reasons, feelings, relationships and communication, including why they chose the university, how did they feel when they came etc.
- Curriculum, teaching methods, assessments, achievement including what they do well in, and what in their view may be done to improve the achievement of BME students.
- High points/low points including if they'd ever considered discontinuing and what made them stay.
- Possible discrimination, including their experience in the city outside the university.

## *Key outcomes from the project*

- Quantitatively we found that the aggregate picture at the level of the University shows a striking attainment gap, not dissimilar to the one noted in national studies.

- There is a *recurrent pattern* of significantly smaller percentages of BME students attaining good degrees in comparison with their White peers from 2002-3.

- BME students have mixed feelings about the quality and uniformity of support they get from their tutors and they link the quality of their performance with the perceived ability of the tutor to make a module interesting.

- A significant majority of students believe that more contact with subject staff outside formal lectures or classes would improve their performance.

- There is some perception of unfairness connected with lack of knowledge or mistrust in the moderation regimes.

- Not having English as a first language makes International BME students vulnerable to miscommunication of tutor expectations and the change in educational practices in the new cultural setting is an added issue.

- Increasing the number of BME staff in one amongst the many suggestions that BME students make for improving their performance.

- A hidden factor that the qualitative analysis has revealed, is that we do not expect enough or do not challenge BME students as much as we should, and that low expectation may contribute towards lowering achievement.

## Key recommendations

- *Data gathering and monitoring* must be disaggregated at module level and progression data compiled by ethnicity, gender and age of entry to give a more accurate picture of the most vulnerable group.
- *Improvement in the experience* of BME students may be accomplished by:
    - o Mentoring of new entrants
    - o Trans-cultural activities
    - o Increasing face-to-face contact
    - o Year level tutors
- *Improving the achievement* of BME students may be accomplished by:
    - o Monitoring moderation processes
    - o Integrating study-skills within modules
    - o Raising staff expectations of BME students' academic attainment
    - o Creating a repository of measures that work to improve achievement
- *Staffing issues* arising from implementing the above recommendations must be addressed to make them work.

# 1. Introduction

In his foreword to the HEFCE strategic plan 2006-11 (updated May 2008), Tim Melville-Ross, CBE, Chair, said that 'Higher education in this country continues to be recognised throughout the world for the quality of its teaching and research. Its rich diversity is a significant strength in responding to new and varied challenges…..We are committed to working with universities and colleges in tackling the highly entrenched inequalities in access to higher education'. (Melville-Ross 2008) That is a noble goal, but I think entrenched inequalities work beyond simply restricting access; they persist in tainting the achievements of those who succeed in entering the HE system. They must therefore be kept in sight if we want to seriously improve the performance of the HE system.

There is an acknowledged attainment gap between students from BME backgrounds and their White peers. Broecke and Nicholls (2007) conclude in their report on 'Ethnicity and Degree Attainment' that even though much of this attainment gap can be explained by factors other than ethnicity (e.g. gender, prior attainment, disability, deprivation, subject, type of Higher Education Institution, term-time accommodation, and age), however, 'even after controlling for these other factors, coming from a minority ethnic community was still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment'. They speculate that taking account of factors such as term-time working, parental income and education, among other unexplored factors, might explain the result obtained, thus lessening the likelihood that there may be some form of ethnic bias within the HE system.

The gap in attainment has been noted for some time and has triggered research to find reasons for it. Researchers note differences of attainment profiles within BME students. Whilst all minority groups are less successful than White students in obtaining a first or upper second class degree, class of degree varies significantly between minority ethnic groups. In their report, Bhattacharyya et al (2003) note that in 1998/99, 'there was little difference in the attainment profile within the Black group, though Black Africans appear to do the worst. Within

the Asian group, all do better than Black students, and Chinese do the best. This difference in class of degree is only partially explained by prior attainment, subject and institutional choice'.

# 2. Locating the local in the national context

The University of Wolverhampton has a significantly higher proportion of BME students compared with other UK HEIs. In 2005-6, UW had 30.9% new entrants from the BME ethnic groups (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1: New Entrants 2005-06 by Ethnic Group and School**

**Data Source: HESA July returns (Excludes Dormants, Includes Direct Entry)**

| School | Total | Black, Asian and Others | % | White | % | Not Known | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAD | 748 | 166 | 22.2 | 458 | 61.2 | 124 | 16.6 |
| HLSS | 1383 | 422 | 30.5 | 821 | 59.4 | 140 | 10.1 |
| UWBS | 1259 | 602 | 47.8 | 557 | 44.2 | 100 | 7.9 |
| SLS | 710 | 423 | 59.6 | 228 | 32.1 | 59 | 8.3 |
| SAS | 805 | 287 | 35.7 | 455 | 56.5 | 63 | 7.8 |
| SCIT | 587 | 329 | 56.0 | 226 | 38.5 | 32 | 5.5 |
| SEBE | 713 | 282 | 39.6 | 366 | 51.3 | 65 | 9.1 |
| SED | 2314 | 309 | 13.4 | 1947 | 84.1 | 58 | 2.5 |
| SSPAL | 647 | 160 | 24.7 | 456 | 70.5 | 31 | 4.8 |
| SoH | 1803 | 411 | 22.8 | 1343 | 74.5 | 49 | 2.7 |
| University | 10969 | 3391 | 30.9 | 6857 | 62.5 | 721 | 6.6 |

The spread of BME students across the University of Wolverhampton is uneven, quite like the unevenness according to subject found nationally. In 2005-6, new entrants from BME backgrounds in SLS constituted 59.6% and in SCIT 56% of the

total, while White new entrants predominated in SED (84.1%), SoH (74.5%) and SSPAL (70.5%). HLSS was representative of the university as a whole with 30.5% BME new entrants.

In previous research commissioned by the Equality and Diversity Unit, it was argued that the experience of BME students has to be understood in the wider climate of perceived 'shift of power from the lecturers to the students; increasing difficulties with student behaviour; and a growing number of students with higher levels of need.' Lecturers seem to be following good practice within their subject enclaves, but 'there seems to be an untapped resource for lecturers to share good practice with colleagues across schools'. (Pinnock 2008)

*The overall constitution of the student population is likely to move further towards a higher BME intake given the predicted rise in international students from non-EU countries.*

At the national level, in 2006-7 the non-EU students component rose by 7%, led by the Indian students' increase by 24% and 'among other non-European Union countries with significant increases are Nigeria, up 16 per cent from 9,605 students to 11,135, and Pakistan, up 17 per cent to 9,305'. (Gill 2008) This trend is likely to continue. As Chief Executive HEFCE, David Eastwood has said 'population changes could mean fewer school leavers as undergraduates in the next decade, making both older and overseas students more important to the continued health of the sector'. (Eastwood 2008)

Further if we note that students from low income backgrounds are concentrated in higher numbers in the West Midland than present nationally, we have an overlap of low attainment populations to cater for. (See Table 2 below for relevant figures).

*Class background is a predictor of high attainment*; a HESA study reportedly found that '40 per cent of degrees for students from the top social classes were graded 2:1 or first class. These classes represent 33 per cent of the population but account for 66 per cent of students gaining a 2:1 or first'. (Bloxham 2008) The researchers in this study also found that 59 per cent of 2:1s and firsts went to women. The percentage of students from National Statistics Socio-economic classes 4, 5, 6 and 7 in the University of Wolverhampton in 2005-6 was 50%, well above the national average of 29.8% and above the benchmark of 38.1. Likewise students from low participation neighbourhoods

in UW made up 25.9% compared to the national average of 14%. (HESA)

**Table 2: Percentage of young full-time first degree entrants from under-represented groups by Government Office region of domicile 2006/07**

| Region of domicile | From low participation neighbourhoods (POLAR2) | From NS-SEC classes 4, 5, 6 and 7 | From state schools or colleges | Total young entrants |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Total UK\*** | *9.0* | *29.8* | *87.8* | **250820** |
| North East | *19.3* | *34.3* | *90.9* | **9155** |
| North West | *13.7* | *31.8* | *89.4* | **28125** |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | *15.2* | *31.7* | *91.1* | **18455** |
| East Midlands | *10.8* | *31.6* | *89.4* | **16435** |
| West Midlands | *12.0* | *33.8* | *89.8* | **21645** |
| East | *10.1* | *26.3* | *86.9* | **21365** |
| London | *3.0* | *30.8* | *83.4* | **38865** |
| South East | *6.7* | *22.9* | *82.8* | **34725** |
| South West | *8.6* | *27.6* | *85.6* | **18495** |
| Wales | *10.3* | *33.3* | *95.2* | **12460** |
| Scotland | *2.8* | *27.1* | *87.6* | **20040** |
| Northern Ireland | *6.0* | *38.1* | *99.7* | **10330** |

In this table 0, 1, 2 are rounded to 0. All other numbers are rounded up or down to the nearest multiple of 5.
Percentages are not subject to rounding, but have been suppressed where based on populations of less than 20.
\* Total UK includes
England region unknown.

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A previous study in the University on Curriculum concluded that 'Given the changing context and challenges brought about by the widening participation agenda, there is a need to ensure that the voices of students are heard'. (Pinnock 2008)

Our project is a step in that direction.

In this context a brief overview of the latest NSS surveys may be instructive. In her recent report to HEFCE, Paula Surridge (2008) has written about 'Ethnicity effects' in student responses. In summarising her findings on ethnicity effects she notes differences between the experiences of different BME groups:

> *The most consistent of these differences is within the Black ethnic group: in most cases students from Black: Caribbean groups were more positive than students from Black: African groups. There is greater consistency of effects among the Asian groups: on the Teaching and Learning, Academic Support and Learning Resources scales and for Overall Satisfaction all of the Asian groups were less positive than White students.*

> *Considering these differences within the broad ethnic groups, and across the different aspects of higher education experiences measured by the NSS, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the effects of ethnicity, as well as offering additional insights into possibilities for specific interventions with groups with less positive experiences.*(Surridge 2008: 71)

Preceding this project, in a small study we conducted in a School in the University of Wolverhampton we looked at the profiles of students who seek extensions and found that: *BME students were twice as likely as their White peers to apply for extensions for coursework submission.* Further, we found that these students were less likely to progress to their final year than those who did not seek extensions. (Brooks 2008) In effect we found that to enable better attainment we must focus attention on the early signs of difficulties faced by students, evident in their use of the coursework deadline extension

procedure. However, as Surridge (2008) points out a 'more nuanced' understanding of the effects of ethnicity is needed.

What works for different groups of BME students may vary. According to one study Black Caribbean learners' attainment is found to have improved with focus on pupil attendance and mentoring support, whereas, the impact of study support is most pronounced in the attainment of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls. (Bhattacharyya et al 2003).

Our qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews is meant to explore these differences in what students report is their experience.

In making recommendations we also have to bear in mind how future developments are likely to affect the University of Wolverhampton student profile. Closer attention to the particular patterns of student intake than paid hitherto shows one noticeable fact: the gender composition in our non-EU overseas intake is the *reverse* of the usual pattern. There are almost twice as many male non-EU postgraduates than female (710:360), whereas the U.K. contingent of the postgraduate student body has almost twice as many female as male students (2140:1100). The support we offer to the non-EU international students, many of whom are BME students, must be informed by this observation of student composition.

In research commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills on the influences on participation in Higher education of minority ethnic students, and their achievement and transitions to the labour market, Helen Connor, Claire Tyers, Tariq Madood and Jim Hillage presented the following findings relevant for our purposes:

- Minority Ethnic people are more likely to take HE qualifications than White people
- There is no uniformity in the ME participation, which varies over institutions, regions, subjects, courses.
- Aspirations and expectations of value are a more significant 'driver; for ME than for White Students. 'This combines with greater parental and family influence' to encourage participation and influence choices of what and where to study.

- On average all ME groups do not do as well in degree performance as White Students, Fewer ME students gain first and upper second class degrees than White students. Gap does not disappear when controlled for entry qualification and previous schooling.
- ME students are more likely to leave degree courses early than White students, And Black more likely than Asians. Issues of more concern to 'some' ME students compared to White students were staff support, feelings of isolation, and cultural diversity.
- Few race relations issues were reported at institutions.
- ME graduates are more likely than White graduates to move to further study as their success in the labour market is less than expected. (Connor et al 2004)

# 3. The Study

This study is commissioned by the Equality and Diversity Unit of the University of Wolverhampton; the unit is headed by Berry Dicker who has consistently worked over the years to support a culture in the university, of genuinely incorporating the values of equality and diversity at all levels in the functioning of the University.

In this study, which follows previous ones on the curriculum, we wanted to have a part quantitative and part qualitative analysis of Student Attainment. So we began by asking: to what extent the picture in Wolverhampton in quantitative terms reflects the findings of studies reported nationally? Do BME students in Wolverhampton have lower attainment in terms of degree classification? What might be the reasons for it?

It was our guiding belief that it is more important to say what a quantitative picture hides, than what it shows. What any such quantitative picture hides is the variation in BME student performance within courses (not so much between courses). It was our assumption that aggregates at the level of Schools might hide the disparities in student attainment at the level of modules.

More importantly, what gets hidden in the aggregation is that 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. Whatever is being done right is hidden in the overall picture.

Thus we felt the need for a closer look at BME student experience and a qualitative analysis of it. We decided to ask the students themselves what makes them achieve better results.

## 3.1 Hypotheses

- The quantitative picture in likely to be the same in aggregate as at the national level.
- There are likely to be variations in student attainment at the level of modules.
- Many of the UW BME students come from backgrounds where they are the first generation of university goers. (They suffer from lack of cultural capital, hence are over-dependent upon tutors).
- Many of them have to work to fund their education and financial constraints adversely affect their performance.
- In general tutors are dedicated to improve the learning experience of all students and that is what BME students think too.
- Student experience might have been worse than it was if no support had been offered.
- The more contact students have with staff the better is their performance.
- BME students prefer to relate with BME staff.
- BME students expect the curriculum to be relevant to their lives.
- Being bi-lingual makes a difference to students' perceptions of what is expected of them.
- We do not know what might improve the performance of BME students; they might give good suggestions if asked. There's no theory we can test here.

We grouped these hypotheses into different sets; the first were 'tested' in by looking at the quantitative data and the remaining through qualitative analysis of interview data.

## 3.2 Scope of activities

### 3.21 Quantitative analysis

We began by selecting five Schools with different concentrations of BME populations (high, med and low). We looked at Level One results from 2005-6 for modules owned by these Schools. In an ideal world, the students beginning in 2005-6 should have graduated by 2007-8, and we would in February 2009, when the data was collected be in a position to form a picture of their attainment.

In the initial collection of data, done by Rachel Brooks, we chose modules with the highest population of students, and for subjects with Joint and Specialist routes, modules that were **core for both** routes were chosen. Our attempt was to be able to compare the results from modules that all BME students on the course of which the modules form a part are highly likely to be enrolled on.

A total of 48 modules from 13 Subjects were selected for the comparison of results. To avoid a direct identification of the module, and thereby of tutors leading them, we have code-named them alpha-numerically as A1, A2, A3, …to M1, M2 etc. where the alphabet signifies a subject and the numeral a module; thus A1 is Module 1 from Subject A and G4 is Module 4 from Subject G and so on.

In the second run of data gathering in March 2009, updated in October 2009, we compared the results of these 48 modules over a three-year period (2005-6, 2006-7 and 2007-8). Our attempt was to determine if the differential performance of BME students in a particular module is a recurrent feature of the module or not.

### 3.22 Qualitative analysis

We decided to use semi-structured open-ended interviews (20mins-1hr). Guided by the belief that affinity with the interviewees might generate more open responses, we used student interviewers, all recent graduates of the University: One

Kurdish, One Bulgarian and One Black British, (one male, two female). I conducted pilot interviews with two of these students to 'train' them in conducting interviews. They conducted interviews from March- June 2009, with 34 BME students (ages 21- 50+), including undergraduates and postgraduates. The interviewees included students from several ethnic groups: Bangladeshi, Black- African, Black- Caribbean, Black-British, Indian, Iraqi, Kurdish, Pakistani and Other White. Their gender divide was Male=17, F=17. Atlas-ti was used as an aid in the analysis of the transcripts.

The interview questions to the students were divided into five groups:

- Biographical, including education attainment of parents and financial situation.
- Reasons, feelings, relationships and communication, including why they chose the university, how did they feel when they came etc.
- Curriculum, teaching methods, assessments, achievement including what they do well in, and what in their view may be done to improve the achievement of BME students.
- High points/low points including if they'd ever considered discontinuing and what made them stay.
- Possible discrimination, including their experience in the city outside the university.

# 4. Key Findings

## 4.1 What the quantitative data shows/hides

### 4.11 Attainment gap

The aggregate picture at the level of the University shows a striking attainment gap, not dissimilar to the one noted in national studies. Table 2 shows that in 2007-8, of all the White students who graduated, 55% got a 1st or 2.1 ('good degrees'). In comparison, of all the Black, Asian or Others who graduated in 2007-8 only 30% got a good degree. There is a *recurrent*

*pattern* of significantly smaller percentages of BME students attaining good degrees in comparison with their White peers from 2002-3. The highest proportion of BME good degrees was 40% in 2002-3 and 2003-4.

**Table 2: "Good Degree" Comparison with School Total by Ethnicity Data Source Planning Unit UoW**

| School | Year | White | | Black, Asian or Others | | School |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | % | % point | % | % point | % |
| School of Art & Design | 2002-03 | 61 | 5 | 36 | -20 | 56 |
| | 2003-04 | 60 | 3 | 47 | -10 | 57 |
| | 2004-05 | 50 | 3 | 35 | -12 | 47 |
| | 2005-06 | 52 | 6 | 35 | -11 | 46 |
| | 2006-07 | 55 | 7 | 37 | -11 | 48 |
| | 2007-08 | 55 | 8 | 28 | -19 | 47 |
| Humanities, Languages & Social Sciences | 2002-03 | 59 | 5 | 36 | -18 | 54 |
| | 2003-04 | 57 | 6 | 28 | -23 | 51 |
| | 2004-05 | 59 | 9 | 35 | -15 | 50 |
| | 2005-06 | 50 | 6 | 34 | -10 | 44 |
| | 2006-07 | 52 | 8 | 29 | -15 | 44 |
| | 2007/08 | 50 | 10 | 26 | -14 | 40 |
| University of Wolverhampton Business School | 2002-03 | 50 | 4 | 39 | -7 | 46 |
| | 2003-04 | 58 | 9 | 42 | -7 | 49 |
| | 2004-05 | 50 | 13 | 25 | -12 | 37 |
| | 2005-06 | 44 | 15 | 18 | -11 | 29 |
| | 2006-07 | 41 | 10 | 25 | -6 | 31 |
| | 2007-08 | 56 | 19 | 29 | -8 | 37 |
| School of Legal Studies | 2002-03 | 63 | 22 | 28 | -13 | 41 |
| | 2003-04 | 58 | 20 | 34 | -4 | 38 |
| | 2004-05 | 39 | 14 | 24 | -1 | 25 |
| | 2005-06 | 44 | 19 | 22 | -3 | 25 |
| | 2006-07 | 44 | 21 | 24 | 1 | 23 |
| | 2007-08 | 57 | 21 | 33 | -3 | 36 |
| School of Applied Sciences | 2002-03 | 64 | 8 | 39 | -17 | 56 |
| | 2003-04 | 55 | 5 | 42 | -8 | 50 |
| | 2004-05 | 51 | 9 | 22 | -20 | 42 |
| | 2005-06 | 52 | 4 | 39 | -9 | 48 |
| | 2006-07 | 54 | 8 | 32 | -14 | 46 |
| | 2007-08 | 54 | 7 | 35 | -12 | 47 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **School of Computing & Information Technology** | 2002-03 | **70** | 13 | **49** | **-8** | **57** |
| | 2003-04 | **67** | 18 | **43** | **-6** | **49** |
| | 2004-05 | **69** | 18 | **43** | **-8** | **51** |
| | 2005-06 | **69** | 22 | **37** | **-10** | **47** |
| | 2006-07 | **62** | 17 | **36** | **-9** | **45** |
| | 2007-08 | **64** | 25 | **25** | **-14** | **39** |
| **School of Engineering & Built Environment** | 2002-03 | **74** | 10 | **53** | **-11** | **64** |
| | 2003-04 | **65** | 10 | **48** | **-7** | **55** |
| | 2004-05 | **64** | 14 | **39** | **-11** | **50** |
| | 2005-06 | **49** | 7 | **34** | **-8** | **42** |
| | 2006-07 | **58** | 14 | **34** | **-10** | **44** |
| | 2007-08 | **59** | 14 | **38** | **-7** | **45** |
| **School of Education** | 2002-03 | **55** | 2 | **24** | **-29** | **53** |
| | 2003-04 | **65** | 1 | **48** | **-16** | **64** |
| | 2004-05 | **58** | 4 | **26** | **-28** | **54** |
| | 2005-06 | **58** | 2 | **42** | **-14** | **56** |
| | 2006-07 | **55** | 4 | **37** | **-14** | **51** |
| | 2007-08 | **65** | 4 | **33** | **-28** | **61** |
| **School of Sports, Performing Arts & Leisure** | 2002-03 | **42** | 3 | **21** | **-18** | **39** |
| | 2003-04 | **39** | 2 | **24** | **-13** | **37** |
| | 2004-05 | **33** | 3 | **13** | **-17** | **30** |
| | 2005-06 | **40** | 4 | **16** | **-20** | **36** |
| | 2006-07 | **42** | 4 | **25** | **-13** | **38** |
| | 2007-08 | **43** | 4 | **27** | **-12** | **39** |
| **School of Health** | 2002-03 | **68** | 11 | **31** | **-26** | **57** |
| | 2003-04 | **60** | 3 | **41** | **-16** | **57** |
| | 2004-05 | **53** | 6 | **21** | **-26** | **47** |
| | 2005-06 | **54** | 9 | **18** | **-27** | **45** |
| | 2006-07 | **51** | 5 | **42** | **-4** | **46** |
| | 2007-08 | **55** | 8 | **24** | **-23** | **47** |
| **Total by Ethnicity** | 2002-03 | **59** | 6 | **40** | **-13** | **53** |
| | 2003-04 | **58** | 8 | **40** | **-10** | **50** |
| | 2004-05 | **52** | 9 | **31** | **-12** | **43** |
| | 2005-06 | **51** | 10 | **29** | **-12** | **41** |
| | 2006-07 | **52** | 11 | **31** | **-10** | **41** |
| | 2007-08 | **55** | 12 | **30** | **-13** | **43** |

The picture when disaggregated to a School level shows that the percentages of good degrees vary from 23% (SLS in 2006-7) to 64% (SED in 2003-4). Not unrelated is the fact that SLS had a high proportion of BME students and in 2006-7 only 24% of Black, Asian and Other students attained a good degree, in comparison with 44% of White students who attained good degrees in that School in that year. In considering SED, in 2003-4, when the School as a whole achieved the highest percentage of good degrees anywhere in the University, 65% of White students with good degrees contributed to this overall best, and only 48% of Black, Asian and Others had good degrees. Since then, the attainment of BME students has worsened in SED and improved in SLS.

The highest percentage of good degrees achieved by White students was 74% (SEBE in 2002-3) and the lowest percentage of good degrees was 33% (SPPAL in 2004-5). Interestingly the highest percentage of good degrees attained by Black, Asian and Other groups was 53% (SEBE in 2002-3) and lowest percentage was 13% (SPPAL in 2004-5). A direct comparison shows that the attainment gap between White and BME students is evidently there regardless of whether the attainment of BME students is at a high or the lowest ever.

## 4.12 Variation in modules results

Just as the disaggregated picture from University to School level shows a remarkable variation, a similar variation is evident when results at the level of modules are compared. We present just some findings as indicative of the variation that needs further investigation.

The Tables 3b and 4b show the results of two comparable modules from the same subject. In 2005-6, BME and Other students made up 64.20 % of the students in module I2 (Table 3a) and had a pass rate 4.4 points lower than that of White students (Table 3b). With the same number of BME students making up 64.6% of the students in module I5, BME students had a pass rate 5.3 points higher than that of White students.

In absolute terms, the failure rate of BME students in I5 is half that of I2. Whilst 77 BME students failed in I2, only 38 BME students failed in I5 out of the total of 228 BME students in each module (I2 and I5) in the year 2005-6.

In the second run of data when we looked at the results from all 48 modules over a three year period, we found the results from I2 and I5 showed a similar pattern over three years. (See tables 3b and 4b).

## Table 3a: Module I2 Ethnic Grouping 2005-6

| Ethnic group | 2005/6 | % |
|---|---|---|
| BME | 235 | 64.2 % |
| White | 109 | 29.8 % |
| Not Known | 22 | 6.0 % |
| Sum: | 366 | 100 % |

## Table 3b: Module I2 Results by Ethnic grouping over 3 years

**2005/6**

| Ethnic group | Pass | % | Fail | | Sum: | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BME | 158 | 67.2 % | 77 | 32.8 % | 235 | 100% |
| White | 78 | 71.6 % | 31 | 28.4 % | 109 | 100% |
| Not Known | 11 | 50.0 % | 11 | 50.0 % | 22 | 100% |
| Sum: | 247 | 67.5 % | 119 | 32.5 % | 366 | 100% |

**2006/7**

| Ethnic group | Pass | % | Defer | % | Fail | % | Sum: | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BME | 142 | 73.6 % | | | 51 | 26.4 % | 193 | 100% |
| White | 64 | 75.3 % | | | 21 | 24.7 % | 85 | 100% |
| Not Known | 9 | 56.3 % | 2 | 12.5 % | 5 | 31.3 % | 16 | 100% |
| Sum: | 215 | 73.1 % | 2 | 0.7 % | 77 | 26.2 % | 294 | 100% |

**2007/8**

| Ethnic group | Pass | % | Defer | % | Fail | % | Sum: | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BME | 123 | 68.7 % | 4 | 2.2 % | 52 | 29.1 % | 179 | 100% |
| White | 51 | 73.9 % | 3 | 4.3 % | 15 | 21.7 % | 69 | 100% |
| Not Known | 12 | 57.1 % | | | 9 | 42.9 % | 21 | 100% |
| Sum: | 186 | 69.1 % | 7 | 2.6 % | 76 | 28.3 % | 269 | 100% |

**Table 4a: Module I5 Ethnic Grouping 2005-6**

| Ethnic group | 2005/6 | % |
|---|---|---|
| BME | 235 | 64.6 % |
| White | 107 | 29.4 % |
| Not Known | 22 | 6.0 % |
| **Sum:** | **364** | 100 % |

**Table 4b: Module I5 Results by Ethnic Grouping over 3 years**

**2005/6**

| Ethnic group | Pass | % | Fail | % | Sum: | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BME | 197 | **83.8 %** | 38 | **16.2 %** | 235 | **100%** |
| White | 84 | **78.5 %** | 23 | **21.5 %** | 107 | **100%** |
| Not Known | 15 | **68.2 %** | 7 | **31.8 %** | 22 | **100%** |
| **Sum:** | **296** | **81.3 %** | **68** | **18.7 %** | **364** | **100%** |

**2006/7**

| Ethnic group | Pass | % | Defer | % | Fail | % | Sum: | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BME | 157 | **84.4 %** | 1 | **0.5 %** | 28 | **15.1 %** | 186 | **100%** |
| White | 69 | **84.1 %** | | | 13 | **15.9 %** | 82 | **100%** |
| Not Known | 11 | **73.3 %** | 1 | **6.7 %** | 3 | **20.0 %** | 15 | **100%** |
| Sum: | 237 | **83.7 %** | 2 | **0.7 %** | 44 | **15.5 %** | 283 | **100%** |

**2007/8**

| Ethnic group | Pass | % | Defer | % | Fail | % | Sum: | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BME | 153 | **84.5 %** | 2 | **1.1 %** | 26 | **14.4 %** | 181 | **100%** |
| White | 60 | **87.0 %** | | | 9 | **13.0 %** | 69 | **100%** |
| Not Known | 14 | **63.6 %** | | | 8 | **36.4 %** | 22 | **100%** |
| Sum: | 227 | **83.5 %** | 2 | **0.7 %** | 43 | **15.8 %** | 272 | **100%** |

## *4.13 Variation in progression*

We also looked at progression of the 2005-6 cohorts on Specialist courses from the selected 13 Subjects.

- We found, for example, in Subject H (see Table 5) in which BME students made 58.14% of the total, out of 43 Specialists, Full-time students, overall only 14 graduated in 2007-8. When considering the Ethnicity, age of entry and gender of those who graduated, degree results of Subject H show that of the 10 BME 0-20, Female students in this cohort, only 2 (20%) graduated, albeit with 'good degrees', but the remaining 8 (80%) did not graduate. BME Male students in the same age group did considerably better with 6 (46.15%) graduating.

## Table 5: Subject H Degree results in 2007-8.

By Ethnic Grouping

| ethnic grouping | 1 | 2.1 | 2.2 | Not graduated | total grad | Total | % 1 | % 2.1 | % 2.2 | % Not grad | % total grad | % Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BME | 1 | 4 | 3 | 17 | 8 | 25 | 4.00 | 16.00 | 12.00 | 68.00 | 32.00 | 100 |
| WHITE | | 5 | 1 | 12 | 6 | 18 | 0.00 | 27.78 | 5.56 | 66.67 | 33.33 | 100 |
| Total | 1 | 9 | 4 | 29 | 14 | 43 | 2.33 | 20.93 | 9.30 | 67.44 | 32.56 | 100 |

By Age on Entry

| aoe grouping | 1 | 2.1 | 2.2 | Not graduated | total grad | Total | % 1 | % 2.1 | % 2.2 | % Not grad | % total grad | % Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0-20 | 1 | 9 | 4 | 25 | 14 | 39 | 2.56 | 23.08 | 10.26 | 64.10 | 35.90 | 100 |
| 21-25 | | | | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 100.00 | 0.00 | 100 |
| 26-100 | | | | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 100.00 | 0.00 | 100 |
| Total | 1 | 9 | 4 | 29 | 14 | 43 | 3.45 | 31.03 | 13.79 | 100.00 | 32.56 | 100 |

By Gender

| Stu Gend | 1 | 2.1 | 2.2 | Not graduated | total grad | Total | % 1 | % 2.1 | % 2.2 | % Not grad | % total grad | % Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| F | 1 | 5 | 1 | 15 | 7 | 22 | 4.55 | 22.73 | 4.55 | 68.18 | 31.82 | 100 |
| M | | 4 | 3 | 14 | 7 | 21 | 0.00 | 19.05 | 14.29 | 66.67 | 33.33 | 100 |
| Total | 1 | 9 | 4 | 29 | 14 | 43 | 2.33 | 20.93 | 9.30 | 67.44 | 32.56 | 100 |

By Ethic Grouping, Age of Entry and Gender

| eth, aoe, gen | 1 | 2.1 | 2.2 | not grad | grad | Total | % 1 | % 2.1 | % 2.2 | % not grad | % grad | % Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BME, 0-20, F | 1 | 1 | | 8 | 2 | 10 | 10.00 | 10.00 | | 80.00 | 20.00 | 100 |
| BME, 0-20, M | | 3 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 13 | | 23.08 | 23.08 | 53.85 | 46.15 | 100 |
| BME, 21-25, F | | | | 1 | | 1 | | | | 100.00 | | 100 |
| BME, 26-100, F | | | | 1 | | 1 | | | | 100.00 | | 100 |
| WHITE, 0-20, F | | 4 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 9 | | 44.44 | 11.11 | 44.44 | 55.56 | 100 |
| WHITE, 0-20, M | | 1 | | 6 | 1 | 7 | | 14.29 | | 85.71 | 14.29 | 100 |
| WHITE, 21-25, F | | | | 1 | | 1 | | | | 100.00 | | 100 |
| WHITE, 26-100, M | | | | 1 | | 1 | | | | 100.00 | | 100 |
| Total | 1 | 9 | 4 | 29 | 14 | 43 | 2.33 | 20.93 | 9.30 | 67.44 | 32.56 | 100 |

- In Subject H, the picture for White students in the same cohort is gendered in the opposite way. Out of the 9 White 0-20, Female students 5 (55.56%) graduated, whilst only 1 (14.29%) of the 7 White Male students in the same age group was able to graduate by 2007-8.
- If the picture is seen only in aggregated ethnic, or only in aggregated gender terms, that show similar degree result on ethnic lines (32-3% graduates in BME and White) and similar results on gendered lines (32-3% graduates amongst Males and Females) we would overlook an important variation hidden in the figures.
- Of all the subjects we considered, H had the worst degree results in 2007-8, but importantly on these figures, in Subject H, young BME male students are the best performers, followed by young White females in the second place and lagging behind them are young BME female students and young White male students.

## 4.2 Qualitative data analysis

### 4.21 Background of students, including parents' education

Of the 34 students in our sample, 21 students were working alongside their education, 7 had been working but 'not at the moment', 5 claimed not to work alongside, 1 datum unclear. 23 of the students interviewed were home students (17 from West Midlands, 6 from rest of UK) and 10 were international students, 1 datum unclear.

Work is not mentioned as an obstacle, although there is mention of difficulty in meeting deadlines.

One student specifically mentioned his background as a reason for low attainment:

*If I was with my family and they faced some problems instead of me (I am facing it now) I could maybe have 'A' even. For example, till now every month I am going to pay rent for my family at home. No matter how I can make it, I have to make it and I have to pay for my rent in England*

*and their rent there and give them some money to live. I got a sister; she is student like me….she is very clever, and I don't want her to be down. So I have to make money for her even if I don't have. So if I was a lucky person to have a dad and he could do what I have to do now, maybe I could dedicate my time for study and I could have done better. But this is life and I am proud of it!*

Important to note in this statement is the note of pride. The sense of pride comes from having overcome hurdles. He describes his early experience of being a minority ethnic student thus:

*When I see some people expecting that 'oh' I am a minority I cannot do this, I cannot do that. I am not. For the first time, let me tell you that… [when] I came to this country I went to City College and try to find some course to learn English. I went to the canteen and I could see nobody pay … attention…It was look like just some fly came in, some sparrow came it. Nothing…and I was feeling wow… I was a person in the University at home … even tables, chairs, staff cleaners, everybody knew me. I was in the centre of all activities. But now I am not even in the edge. I am nothing. I was thinking: OK When I can be a person again; to be a centre!*

The sense of rising against the odds is very powerful here.

## *4.22 Reasons and feelings about the being at University*

Many students have chosen the university because it is local or because it offers the combination of subjects that students wanted to do. For example, one student said:

*It was better for me to start study at this University rather than going any where else because I already was living here and I had some accommodation here.*

For international students, fee is an issue.

*London School was….the fees were very expensive for me. I couldn't afford that much loan in me. And that's the reason. This one (University of Wolverhampton) was as compared to that, it was cheaper, so I opted for this one.*

However, information about tuition fee seems have created problems for a Nigerian student:

*The other problem that the international students encounter, which I've seen one or two, you know is the issue of tuition fees. So many students that are coming from Africa, especially people that are doing a top-up programme, this top-up programme is not clearly defined. It's not clearly defined and the way international students understand that programme is quite different from what the university calls it.*

It appears that some international students, due to an insufficient understanding of fee requirements, are led to a point where a time-lag in fee payment leads to their being *'logged-out'* of the system and this adversely affects their performance. Such problems might even lead to students leaving as reported by the following remark by another student:

*One of my friends has actually left now, because he was having so many problems. And the fees were changing. And he couldn't meet the deadlines for the International Office or whatever. That was really bad...*

For most students it was a 'big decision' to join university. One mature male student said:

*I decided to change career, so I actually gave up my job to do this course full time. So, in that sense, it was a big decision.*

A female student said:

*It was a big decision, because I wasn't sure whether to go to university or seek full-time employment.*

Another, female student said:

*Yes, it was, it was. Because I having to pack in my work and all these things... to....to, you know, to go through it. Well, I got used to it now anyway.*

There were a few exceptions, such as:

*It wasn't a much big decision. I mean I've always wanted to come to university. I knew that after I finish my GCSE, I'll do my A-levels and then eventually going to a course at university and then progress from that.*

On their feelings about coming to University, one female student said:

*I liked the university from the day I saw it. So I decided to apply for two different courses here.....and I liked it.*

And a male student said:

*I had a good experience while being here. I mean when I came in here, I really felt nice about it. Just there was a fear about England, coming to the U.K. That was it. Nothing really about the university I was really O.K.*

University life is looked up to; thus a male student said:

*I felt new challenge in life. University is somewhere you meet people from all over the world and I think it is quite good to know people from all over the world.*

Most students have a mixed experience of communication with tutors: some good, some not so good. When asked what they think is the best way to communicate with students, one student said:

*Based on my experience I think the best way to communicate with students is face-to-face rather than email because..., you know, I think (in the) academic field they usually use a very very complicated language, if you like, and students don't always understand, especially ethnic minority who their (sic) first language in not English. So I think face-to-face would be more realistic approach.*

About insufficient communication another student said:

*Some student sends you two big paragraphs, tells you about his or problem, but you just answer: see you tomorrow or 'as discussed in class'….I know she or he doesn't have time to write, to read all and write back exactly, but this is a right for the student to learn. He did pay for that, and he wants to have good study. So when he sees the situation, he thinks this is wrong.*

A British Asian female emphasised face-to-face feedback thus:

*I think they should give more individual one-to-one time even if it's they are giving assignments back for feedback, get to know the student and helping them understand their feedback and how they can develop. They should spend more one-to-one time.*

A mature male student said:

*E-mail is obviously the most efficient. Maybe the time pressure is on tutors and asking them to meet students in person can be too much. But occasionally, meeting some of the students personally goes a long way, rather than communicating by e-mails, which is a bit impersonal.*

This comment captures what might be a balanced view to take about face-to-face contact – face-to-face individual contact may appear difficult to provide on a sustained basis due to pressure on tutors, but it must be recognised as being productive in the long run.

On the whole students found the tutors approachable. There were dissenting views, such as the following:

*(T)here were some we knew that there was no point, because even if you e-mail them, you don't get a reply, or….you know, even if you want to set up an appointment; there were few….one lecturer in particular….we used to make appointments and the person never used to be there..*

However, a typical comment is:

*They are very approachable. Any time any problem, you just approach any of them and they are always willing to help.*

## 4.23 Views of Curriculum, teaching methods, assessment, support and achievement

Students have mixed feelings about the quality and uniformity of support they get from their tutors. One student said:

*…I really feel bad to be honest because as I said you know if I do an essay I show it to study skill people; I book an appointment and they said absolutely nothing wrong with it, it is a perfect essay; you should be given pretty good grade. When I get grade it was D you know. I got disappointed and one of the factors they mentioned is English structure. I…because I took my essay to study skills again…they said nothing wrong with it but when tutor marked it they say something wrong with it. So I don't…hmm I'm confused.*

One student reported getting different feedback from within the Study Skills support team:

*(O)ne person checked all the grammar mistakes carefully and put lots of time, some of them looked at the reference and said it was O.K., but it wasn't true, so…*

These students' experience suggests that the feedback given by the Study Skills tutors needs to be fine-tuned to complement the tutors' feedback to minimize the possibility of creating confusion in the mind of the student. The work of the Study Skills tutors is much appreciated, as in the following comment:

*(B)ecause English not being my first language, sometimes I have problems in my grammar and the Study Skills support available is really brilliant. Every time you just go and they check your grammar for you. It's really good.*

The problem of apparently mixed messages was experienced by this student in another way, which led to so much disappointment that he had considered leaving the university at one stage:

*(I)n a module when you have two tutors one tells you to do this and the other one marks it then...Because somebody told me to do which I did it and the person marked my work gave me less grade because obviously he didn't like what I have written. Hmm that is why I feel kind of confused. I think they're not in...you know...in touch with each other and plus...most of my essays didn't see second marker, you know. Nobody to check whether it is fair or not!*

The expression of lack of trust in the marking system in this comment is worrying. It seems that the student does not have any idea of the moderation process followed by teaching teams.

A further comment about mixed messages came from a female student:

*... I feel that with some subjects I've been marked unfairly. Particularly one in my second year. I read down the feedback and approached the marker. I wanted to know where I did go wrong and I found out that it was for stupid reasons. I was marked down for not using double-line spacing. And the thing is, in my previous work, I never used double-line spacing. No other lecturer minded. So, why this particular one?!*

Some international students find writing papers difficult with little prior experience. One post-graduate student said:

*I was O.K. with giving the exams, and I was... I scored well, but when it came to write a paper, it was difficult for me, because I really did not know what they expected in the paper and there was no one who could explain or guide me properly through the process.*

On what in their view makes a student do better in one module compared to another, many students said it depended upon whether or not they enjoyed it, and that in turn depended upon the lecturer.

*Some tutors are, I would say, a bit more lazy than other tutors...Like we had one tutor, who I fell asleep with (sic), because she had the same tone.... If I don't enjoy the lesson,*

*I wouldn't want to work hard....Some (tutors) are very lively and some are very boring.*

A female British Asian student echoes the sentiment above:

*I think that all depends on how the module is taught and who teaches it. If you've got a good tutor, you'll concentrate, if you've got a boring old man, standing in front of you, yakking away, nothing is going to go into your head. Whereas if you are having an enthusiastic person, someone who knows what they are talking about, someone who is passionate about what they are talking about, then you'll actually learn something. Otherwise you won't.*

So does this one:
*I think it's to do with the lecturer. If they make you feel comfortable while you are in the lecture, and they are approachable before or after and they make themselves available, it makes you want to be part of it.*

Whilst some students squarely blame tutors for the loss of interest in learning in particular modules as evident in the statements above; others count the tutor's role as one of the contributory factors to improving achievement and do own responsibility for their performance:

*It depends on the students. It depends on the subject and I can say that on the teacher as well. Sometime the lecturer, they make it more interesting and explaining it in a very clear way. So, the students will enjoy and they will get a better mark on that.*

In a general remark applicable to staff expectations of all students, not just BME students, one student complained that:

*We were not encouraged to read a lot...*

We need to have a more fine-grained picture of the level of responsibility BME students take for their own effort and commitment to work. Whilst some students blame the tutors, others clearly take a lot of responsibility for their achievement.

Thus in response to the question what might have improved her grades a female Black African student said that:

*Me spending more time on revision and all that; because I tend to leave it last minute, which is not good. I think if I spent more time on revision. Things I don't understand I can get help as soon as possible. I think that's better.*

When asked if her 'first language' had an impact on her performance, a female student of African origin said:

*I don't think so, because English is my third language and I have friends, who were born here and I have higher grades than them. So, I don't think it really matters - the first language. It depends on how hard you work on your assignments.*

When asked about his achievement, an Afro-Caribbean British born Male Student says:

*At this current moment I'm not very happy with my grades. I know that I can do better than I'm doing at this present moment in time. But due to circumstances beyond my control, outside my studies, a lot of personal issues that need to be sorted and as I said before, it impacted on my ability to give my studies 100% dedication and commitment.*

A mature student gave this answer to what might have improved her grades:

*Yes, either I get more support in my year one I believe my grades could have been improved. More support like, you know, having somebody sort of a mentor, you know, sort of, helping me with the assignments. I do think I would have achieved much more. But I mean, some people learn fast, some people learn quick and with me, I am a mature student, so you know, I can say it was not until year two that I, sort of, get into the core of things really.*

Students were asked what might improve the performance of BME students in general and one female student said:

*It's difficult to say. The fact that they have lower rates of achievements in certain types of work: maybe because they value different activities more. It doesn't mean that they are worse, so it's difficult to change the perspectives. And I'm not sure which is the best way to reach them because they have the same opportunities to use different facilities as other students. And making especially for some students, it would look a bit strange to be honest, because if we are equal, everyone is important, everyone has the same facilities. But generally, for students who have difficulties in certain areas, do help; but not for a specific group.*

This is an interesting remark in that firstly, it begins by stating the equal potential of all students, albeit, it may not be equally tapped. Secondly, again on the basis of equality, it argues against special provisions for BME students although recognising that there is a need to 'reach them'.

A vast majority of students in the sample attended lectures regularly, some citing as a reason the fact that they were paying for it!

Nothing definitive can be concluded about the preference for assessment pattern, some prefer essays, others exams, some even presentations. The overseas students tend to want more support in essay writing, especially on literature review and referencing.

Language does seem to be an issue for most international students. One student had this comment to make about the feedback he received:

*I've never been told exactly what grammatical errors that I do, but it's only coming to grammatical errors and I approached my tutor back again to understand what the grammatical error was, but they've never given me a feedback about it. Now, that would help. Someone like me, at least who wants to improve my paper, it would have helped me if they would have said "O.K., this is your grammatical error. You need to form the sentence properly or maybe your paragraphs are not related to each other, or what you write, we couldn't understand. So, that would have helped me, but there were no comments. Comment was "grammatical*

*error". Now, I would love to know what grammatical error means. Was it a spelling mistake, was it a grammatical mistake, some adjective went wrong, some noun went wrong. But they couldn't explain me that, so that's a bit difficult.*

The narrowness of the content of the curriculum was also mentioned by some students.

*I have got this from a tutor once in a while that you should not be writing papers from India, based on Indian strategies. It would be better to write it on our UK system, health care systems and we had an argument in a classroom, by a Nigerian person, a Nigerian student argued with the tutor "How could you just expect us to write on the U.K. care systems. You should be –well-versed with other systems and so you should assess us on that basis, and not just on U.K's health care systems...I can understand, completely understand, where he was coming from, because we, I face the same problem.*

In a contrasting view, a mature male student said:

*In the (Subject A) course we've discussed various issues in relation to people's ethnicity, religious persuasions, gender....And there were some issues that obviously were more sensitive than others. Yes, although these areas came in discussion through the lectures, I felt that I was prepared to discuss it and other people felt confident to express their opinion about a particular ethnic need.*

## *4.24 High and low points in University life*

All students were asked if they had considered discontinuing their studies at any point and what might have helped them stay. This is what a mature, Black British male student said:

*At some point, yes. When I started the first semester, I was a bit disappointed with the seminars. Then I was thinking of dropping out because I wasn't challenged sufficiently. I had the impression that some of the students weren't at my level and I didn't feel challenged at all. I wished I belonged to a*

*more intellectually demanding group than I found myself into.*

A female student expressed a similar view that she wanted to leave in her first year partly due to low tutor expectations. She was of the view that:

*It (the University) could be more stimulating in academic terms.*

In talking about the worst period in the university one student said:

*Well, the worst part in the university is mixing within the minorities to a certain extent.*

When asked further what he meant by it, he said:

*Well, for example, you see, if you are looking to my class, you see the Pakistanis sitting together, the Indians sitting together, the whites sitting together. Also if you see outside, you see groups rather than an integration. And sometimes, being Kurdish, you kind of have to go around and (it) becomes uncomfortable slightly. That's what I mean.*

A Black British male student reported a similar feeling:

*(An Asian) friend of mine… from Birmingham… said during a lecture that when she came to Wolverhampton University, what she found was that all the Asians stick together, all the Blacks stick together all the White stick together. I didn't really see it like that until she pointed out, because I was mixing with everyone.*

It seems from this student's expression that the perception of students from different ethnic groups 'sticking together' within their group is a variable perception and dependent upon individual behaviour.

A male Indian international student identified this as a problem *with* the international students:

*They always stick to their own communities only, they don't try to open up, although they are in the U.K., they have travelled such a far distance from their own land, still they are restricted on their mind set. They try to speak their own language and they try to be gathered only within their own communities. They don't try to mix and mingle with others.*

By way of explanation, a Black Caribbean female student said:

*I think for me (it) is easy to get on with minority people. Black minority people or other instead of white. It depends. It depends on the white. How do you see on the white? Maybe the white are less friendly sometimes. I don't know. I see it like that. The others, you know, like Turkish or Spanish, they are more friendly. I approach them easier, you know. So, for me it is better to get along with minority ethnic people.*

A similar sentiment was expressed by another female Black student:

*When I first arrived I used to get odd looks, but you know, because my friend is Asian and I'm black and apparently to see Asian and black people get along is a bit weird up here, so when I first started university, we used to get stares and looked up....I talk to everyone, but I suppose...it was mainly...probably mixed ethnic people that I spoke to and that's only because they want to talk to you. It's not the white people. They are quite reserved. They are to themselves and to be fair some of the Asians are like that as well.*

Most students had not used the University Counselling service, but one male student who had used the services, said:

*I made use of them on several occasions and they are very helpful and supportive. However, there's no black people there that can look at the situation from black people's perspective. At the end of the day, there are not enough black faces in the university as heads of departments or senior lecturers. It is too Eurocentric for my liking.*

The proportion of BME staff in the University has been a subject of monitoring; it is interesting to note that students

experience the low proportion as 'not enough black faces'. (See Appendix for proportions of BME students and BME staff in the University).

One female student mentioned a particular problem faced by international students:

*Loneliness! A couple of my friends are international students from India. What they told me most of the time is that they are bored and they miss their family.*

A low point noted by a male student was:

*Worst point was a time, when I had two-three essays together in a matter of two-three weeks, so I couldn't do it. I think that was wrong, because all your assignments and essays at the end of your modules all come together and you are kind of struggling and you don't know what to do. That was the worst experience.*

In noting the best point of her time in the University, one female student said:

*I think in terms of dedication this university is really good, in terms of resources for students.*

Due to financial stress coupled with demands of academic work this student had considered leaving; what made her stay was, she said:

*I had sort of one-to-one with my personal tutor and I explained what the problem was to her. And she said "You've done well so far. And I'm sure you'll do it well. Just try and save the cause." It was a lot of encouragement to be honest and made me change my mind.*

## 4.25 Perceptions of possible discrimination

There were very few voices reporting racism; one male student said:

*When Eurocentric people see me as a black male, walking down the street, they are either clutching their bags, looking behind them. Even when I sit on the bus and I left the space for them. The bus will be absolutely crammed and they won't sit down. And they are looking at me as a worthless thing and you don't sit next to dogs, you don't sit next to animals. That's how I feel. That's how this Europe people make me feel.*

This was the strongest and one of the few voices in the whole sample that expressed such deeply felt experience of racism and pessimism. Even this student felt 'valued' in the University as he was elected a first year representative.

A female student of African origin said:

*In the city, it's always there. We get comments sometimes, unpleasant comments, but that's just...* [End of comment].

A perception of bias emerged in response to a question about the possible reason for underachievement amongst BME students noted nationally, when one international student said:

*The major reason I think - lack of communication between the tutors and the students. Major reason! Second part is, I think... the students also, some students... do not have the initiative to understand what the education system is all about.... And the third reason is somewhere, I think, they are biased, when they...assess the study....I mean I have not seen an Asian student getting A5 in all his modules. Some of them but.....some courses are good, I don't say...But with my course, I haven't seen any Asian student getting very good grades, not an Asian born and brought up here, not a British Asian, but an Asian from abroad.*

This perception of bias against overseas Asian students is a worrying element of this post-graduate student's experience.

Many other students categorically denied experiencing any discrimination, some even stating that it was not an issue. One male Kurdish student admitted 'subtle discrimination' thus:

*In funny remarks, yes, but I don't think it was much of an issue.*

However, with respect to the city he said:

*I used to live somewhere far and on the way to the university, I used to go through a bad area and there were people, who used to shout some racist remarks, but what can you do?*

Another student said:

*The first question facing you is: Where are you from? It means you are a minority, otherwise very rarely some English girl is asking another English person where you are from? 'Oh I am from Wolverhampton' 'Oh I am from Birmingham'. They don't say that but in your face they tell you: Where are you from originally?*

There is a note of amusement, and annoyance is only slightly present. The student commenting on 'where are you from?' questions, hastened to add that it has something to do with the way he looks.

In a contrasting view, a British born female student reports her experience thus:

*Even though I wear a scarf, I don't think I ever had any issues with it.*

When prompted to recall if she had any experience of 'subtle discrimination' she remembered an incident:

*Actually, yes, in the library. They didn't do it on purpose. It's just, I think it was just, because they didn't know, that… because of the way I look, because I look Asian, I think they thought I couldn't speak English and so, they talked really, really slowly to me and explained in real detail, I feel like… as soon as I speak they'd be like "Oh, O.K.". Do you know what I mean? … Oh, she can speak English kind of thing, so…but I mean I understand, because they must have a lot of students that can't speak English and they are just trying to*

*help them. But I found it really funny that they were talking really slowly to me.*

.

This British Asian female student's testimony is telling. A conflation of scarf-wearing with non-Englishness that this student generously interprets as the attempt of the staff to be helpful to a perceived non-English speaker could also be seen as subtle racism. Perhaps there's a lesson here that appearances should not be used to draw any conclusions about people's capabilities.

A contrasting view came from a female Polish student who said:

> *I never felt discriminated. I think it's a pretty welcoming university and city, and people are used to people from different countries and nations, so they don't pay as much attention. Some people will listen to your accent and ask you where you come from, and other people ignore it, like you are from here, so I haven't experienced any discrimination. I think it's better in these terms than in Poland.*

Other students report experiences of being made aware of their ethnicity in a negative way. Thus a student said:

> *Yes, sometimes...sometimes....because ... you know (of) my background or my ethnic minority I don't get what I really deserve.*

In response to the question if she thought she was valued in the university, a British Afro-Caribbean female student said:

> *No, no. I'm just another statistic. I'm just another student loan, am I not? So, no, I don't... my opinion is not taken into account... As a young black woman there is not enough integration with other black students maybe or maybe black lecturers, or Asian lecturers. I just think I'm another statistic for the university, which isn't good.*

Not many of the students interviewed felt 'valued', a typical response could be:

> *I can't say that I feel valued. I just feel like I'm half heard.*

## 4.26 Suggestions for improvement made by students

In the course of the interviews, students were asked what might improve their experience and their achievement. They were also asked what they thought the University could do to bring about these improvements.

One student was particularly sceptical about what the university might do to improve the experience of BME students. He said:

*Well, they should. But it's just a paper exercise. Shoulda, woulda, coulda....I'm trying to do this....But the facts are we are living in a racist environment. The racist environment is still inherited among the educational system the social services. Obviously it is going to float to other institutions - university, Police as well.*

Other students were not sceptical. Some comments about improvement in achievement relating to personal circumstances are noted above. The following comments relate to what they said the University can do to improve the experience and achievement of BME students.

- *Best way for this improvement (better communication) is making more hours for teachers to have tutorials to tell face-to-face to students what they want.*

- *It is good to challenge students, not just give them what they like all the time... It (the University) could be more stimulating in academic terms.*

- *Proper social meetings, where people don't drink alcohol all the time*

- *Making (provisions) especially for some students, it would look a bit strange to be honest, because if we are equal, everyone is important, everyone has the same facilities. But generally for students who have difficulties in certain areas, do help, but not for a specific group.*

- *I think students should be guided through the living and accommodation cost...I think the university needs with the careers and development, the university can make some placements like for students who (do) not get jobs.*

- *Mentoring sessions. Somebody who comes from the same background. They can help them not only with academic, but also with cultural issues.*

- *Just encourage them (BME students). Be positive. They just need to be encouraged and believe in themselves.*

.

- *I think what can be done is some activity at the weekends to bring people together.*

- *(W)e can have maybe a free IT forum, where we can talk about small IT problems to non-IT students and where I can give my input, free of cost, to help them, just to get rid of small IT problems and they wouldn't have to run and pay money to get these things sort out.*

- *I think the best thing will be to attach them (international students) to a peer mentor, who's from the same ethnic background, but have got more positive outlook...*

- *I think during the Induction week if the students are made aware of the facilities that are provided for them and how should they go about writing the essays and doing the modules, like how they should be writing a dissertation and piece of course work, reports and all, so if the students are made aware of that. It's like knowing to play the right key when you need to play the right tone. I think if the students are made aware of that, they would be able to perform on a much higher level.*

- *What the university can do is give the students the information about where they can buy some cheap food like they are accustomed to, like rice, potatoes and some other basic stuff, naan. Like students mainly*

*at the university, they only know about Asda, but there are a lot more other shops. Big shops like Sainsbury, Tesco, Iceland.*

- *I guess it's higher accessibility to tutors, being able to meet them more frequently, rather than through the sum system. Some tutors are only available two days a week and that's not good enough.*

- *I think they can, as a group, (help) all international students, for example, take them to the town centre, show them the buildings, where is the bank, where is the hotel, the main part of the town – the park, the hospital.*

- *I think integration would be a good start. There are not that many ethnic teachers. There are not many ethnic lecturers that I've seen or taught by. So, maybe that would be a good start. And maybe a bit more awareness of what the Black British Community has to offer. You know, from Wolverhampton.*

- *Maybe have an international day where all the international students get together, then they don't feel lonely and Spanish students don't stick with Spanish students, because it's safe and French students don't stick with French students and so forth. So, maybe an international day, so they can all can come together.*

- *Just trying to bring international students and home students together. Involving international students and home students in sort of exploring themselves and get to know each other. Any assessment or task can involve that. That would be helpful.*

- *Be creative about more activities to help them out, like workshops in a more interesting way, besides the induction week.*

- *Making sure that the Study Skills Advisers are always there, because at the moment the School (X) has only*

> *one day a week Study Skills Adviser. And I think that one day a week is not enough.*

> ▪ *I think that they should make it compulsory that they (the students) go and see their personal tutor…at least once a week or however many times. I think if they did that, they would know that they have to keep on top of everything.*

# 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

We found support for many of our hypotheses, but some need further research. We can *conclude* that:

- Coming to the University of Wolverhampton is a big decision for most BME students, as predominantly they are the first generation of University goers in their families.
- Majority of students work to support their education, but this is not reported as a reason for low achievement.
- BME students have mixed feelings about the quality and uniformity of support they get from their tutors.
- Whilst many students link the quality of their performance with the perceived ability of the tutor to make a module interesting, some take personal responsibility for their achievement.
- A significant majority of students believe that more contact with subject staff outside formal lectures or classes would improve their performance.
- There is some perception of unfairness connected with lack of knowledge or mistrust in the moderation regimes.
- Not having English as a first language makes International BME students vulnerable to miscommunication, to a perception of variable standards set by tutors and to consequent low achievement.
- For international students the change in the cultural setting of educational practices is an issue.
- BME students highly value Study Skills support, albeit sometimes riddled with a problem of mixed messages.

- BME students would like to see more BME staff in the University.
- BME students do make suggestions for better provisions, (see section 4.26) that might improve their performance.
- A hidden factor that the qualitative analysis has revealed, is that we do not expect enough or do not challenge BME students as much as we should, and that low expectation may contribute towards lowering achievement.

Based on our key findings, and bearing in mind the suggestions made by BME students, the following recommendations may be considered for implementation:

## 5.1 Data gathering and monitoring

On the basis of the finding of recurrent variation in module results within the same course we recommend that all data collected at the level of subjects should be disaggregated to module level and module leaders be provided with benchmark performance data from the subject against which to monitor the results from their own module. We also recommend that course teams consider identifying and discussing any evidence of variation in BME students' performance in different modules in course team meetings.

Similarly, the hidden variation in aggregated progression data of particular subjects suggests that the progression data supplied to the course team leaders for monitoring must be by Ethnic grouping and gender and age of entry simultaneously to enable identification of a pattern in the achievement profile, if any, and to give a more accurate picture of the most vulnerable group in a course.

## 5.2 Improving experience

### 5.21 Mentoring of new entrants

We recommend that a pool of mentors from current students (home as well as international) be set up with assistance from the Student Councils in the Schools and with due incentive to mentors, preferably determined by discussion in the Student Councils. Incentives such as a certificate for peer support and in exemplary cases the addition of book tokens could be considered. It is recommended that in due course, every new

entrant be provided with an opportunity to sign up with a student mentor.

## *5.22 Trans-cultural activities*

It is recommended that level 5 and 6 students be encouraged to set up trans-cultural activities such as the Debating Society in existence in the School of Law, Social Sciences and Communications. Schools might consider initially setting up a small fund, which voluntarily formed student groups can bid for to organize inclusive trans-cultural activities, not tied to any particular religious, ethnic or national group. As examples, the activities could be 'welcome' events for new entrants (quiz shows, food festivals, arts workshops, open mic music events) guest lecture series, celebrations of International women's day (8 March), Human Rights day (9 Dec). In due course students could be encouraged to organize self-funding trans-cultural events.

## *5.23 Increasing face to face contact*

It is recommended that face-to-face contact be built into modules in the form of small group tutorials at least in one module at each level. Course teams may consider finding space for such tutorials in the planned year long modules. Where tutorials are necessary outside the allocated teaching time for a module, staff must get additional hours for running such tutorials. Tutorial time must be kept separate from office hours.

## *5.24 Year level tutors*

Course teams must consider allocating academic counselling duties to a designated year level tutor. Thus in every course, it is recommended that there must be a year level tutor for level 4, level 5 and level 6. Course teams with only two members of staff might consider having a separate tutor for level 4 and one for level 5 and 6 students. Course leaders for post-graduate programmes could get additional hours for tutoring level 7 students. The year level tutor should be responsible for inviting students for face-to-face meetings, for maintaining a record of concerns raised by students and for reporting these to the course team.

## 5.3 Improving achievement

### 5.31 Monitoring moderation processes

It is recommended that students be systematically informed of the process of assessment and moderation to generate trust in the robustness of the systems in place. It is also recommended that course teams might consider year level moderators, who check a small sample of marks and feedback on every module at the level for which they are the designated moderator. The year level moderator could look for parity in marking and feedback levels across modules, which might reduce the striking variation in module results found for the same cohort of students in many subjects.

### 5.33 Integrating study-skills within modules

It is recommended that at level 4, at least one of the core modules must include dedicated sessions for study skills. Staff from the Study Skills team might be invited to lead such sessions with emphasis on structuring of essay/report/portfolio, presentation of work and accurate referencing. At level 5, study skill sessions on preparation for independent study to be undertaken at level 6 may be built into core modules.

### 5.34 Raising staff expectations of BME students' academic attainment

It is recommended that the differential performance of BME students with some achieving remarkably high grades whilst others underachieve should be highlighted, with a view to challenge the likely perception of a general low achievement generated by aggregated figures showing underachievement by BME students. It is recommended that a staff training session be organised whereby course teams generate a leaflet: 'What we expect of students studying X (the course/subject) and how they can achieve it'.

### 5.35 Creating a repository of measures that work to improve achievement

It is recommended that a WOLF topic: *Improving Achievement*, be set up where staff can enter blogs detailing the measures they have taken to improve achievement within their course/subject with specific mention of what worked for their course/subject and what did not work.

## 5.4 Staffing issues

### 5.41 Improving proportion of BME staff

It is recommended that the University redouble its effort to improve the proportion of BME staff at all levels. Students looking for role models report a dearth of BME 'faces' amongst tutors in the University.

### 5.42 Work-load allocation for additional duties

It is recommended that in adopting recommendations 5.23 and 5.24, due consideration be given to allocation of hours in staff work-load allocation.

## 5.5 Further research

### 5.51 Quantitative

The findings of this project based on quantitative research at module level, is at best indicative of what might be found if further research is conducted. It is therefore recommended that further research at module level be conducted to identify variations in achievement between modules.

### 5.51 Qualitative

This research is based on an analysis of 34 interviews with BME students only. It is recommended that a survey using the questions that formed the basis of the interviews in this project be devised with suitable modification to ascertain the views of BME students in general. This could be achieved as a part of a general survey including all students conducted to ascertain what students offer as recommendations to improve their achievement. A parallel survey of staff opinion on what they think might improve student achievement in general and BME students in particular, should also be conducted.

The recommendations of this project might then be revisited in the light of the findings of suggested further research.

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# Appendix

[From a presentation dated June 2009 by the Planning Unit]
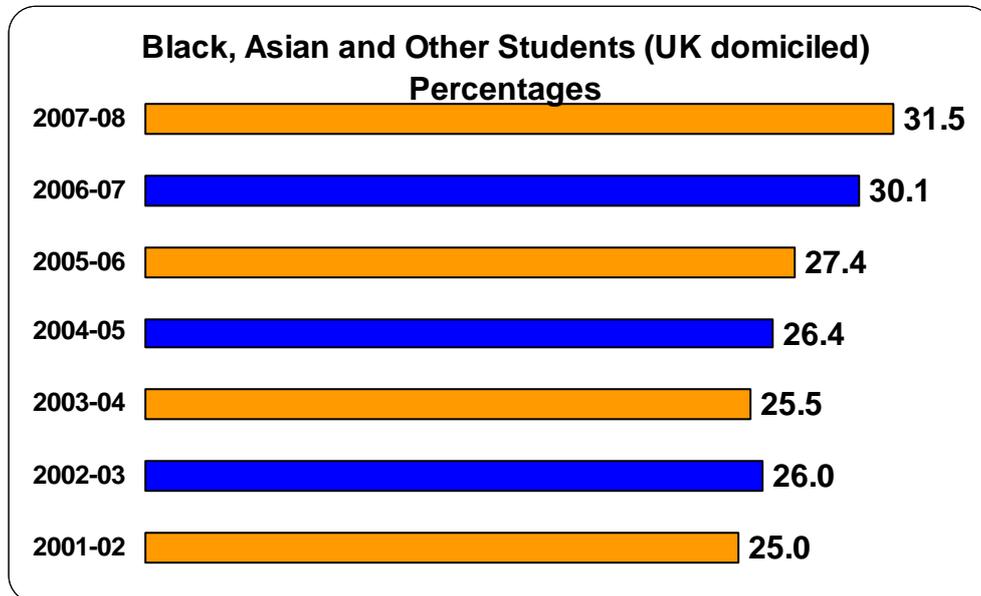


**BME Staff by Type of Post**
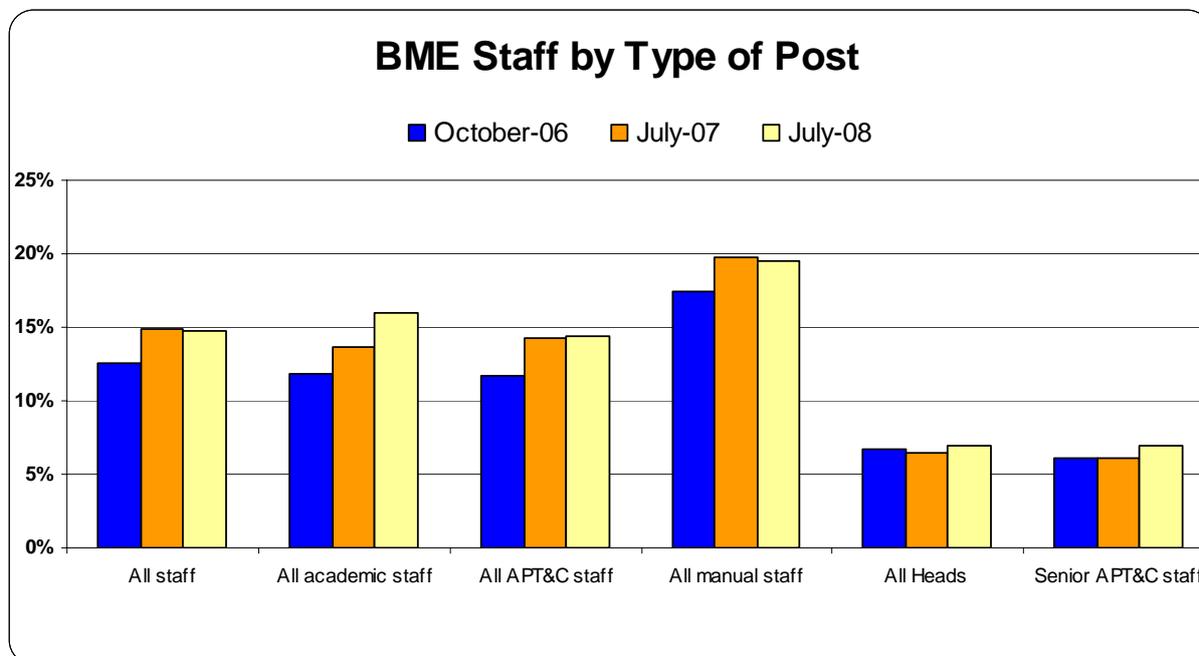
University data (excluding VLs and casuals) shows that 14.8% of our total staff were BME as at July 08; a slight decrease from the previous July's figure of 14.9%. Manual staff had the highest proportion of BME staff (19.5%). As in previous years, the lowest proportions were for all Heads (7.0%) and senior APT&C staff (7.0%) however both these groups have shown an increase in BME staff numbers from the previous year.

## BME Staff Percentages

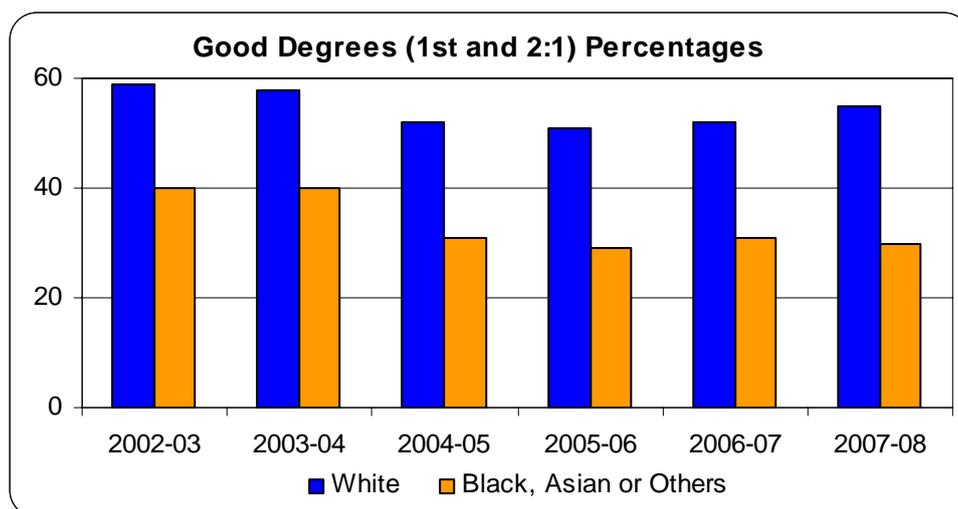|  | University of Wolverhampton | UK HE Institutions |
|---|---|---|
| **2007-08** | **16%** | **9%** |
| **2006-07** | **15%** | **9%** |
| **2005-06** | **14%** | **9%** |

HEIDI data (this includes VL and casual staff) shows that in 2007/08 16% of the staff population were BME staff. This has risen from 14% in 2005/06. This figure is above the UK HE sector average of 9%, a figure which has remained static since 2005/06. The figure is also above the average for the University's nearest regional HE comparators, which stands at 11% for the same period.

# BME Students Percentages

**Black, Asian and Other Students (UK domiciled) Percentages**

| Year | Percentage |
|------|-----------|
| 2007-08 | 31.5 |
| 2006-07 | 30.1 |
| 2005-06 | 27.4 |
| 2004-05 | 26.4 |
| 2003-04 | 25.5 |
| 2002-03 | 26.0 |
| 2001-02 | 25.0 |

The number of our UK domiciled students who are Black, Asian or Other has increased for the fourth successive year. In 2007/8 31.5% of our total student population was Black, Asian or Other as compared with 16.3% for the sector.

# Good Degrees

**Good Degrees (1st and 2:1) Percentages**

| Year | White | Black, Asian or Others |
|------|-------|------------------------|
| 2002-03 | 59 | 40 |
| 2003-04 | 58 | 40 |
| 2004-05 | 52 | 31 |
| 2005-06 | 51 | 29 |
| 2006-07 | 52 | 31 |
| 2007-08 | 55 | 30 |

In 2007/8 the proportion of Black, Asian and Other students awarded a 1st or 2:1 degree was 30%. This represents a decrease of 1 percentage point from 2006/7. By contrast the proportion of white students attaining a good degree in 2007/8 was 55% which represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 2006/7. The disparity in attainment levels between Black, Asian and Other and White students obtaining a good degree (25 percentage points in 2007/8) is the largest in the past six years.