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# ADDRESSING THE GAP

*The ethnicity attainment gap is well-documented across the UK HE sector. How can we address it at UWL?*

**B**AME students are less likely to graduate with a 'good degree' than white students, which is known as the 'degree attainment gap' or the 'ethnicity attainment gap'. Analysis of the University of West London data revealed that there is a statistical discrepancy in the rate of good degrees achieved by BAME qualifiers compared with white graduates, a discrepancy that persists after accounting for entry qualifications. This discrepancy for the 2017/18 academic year was 19%. This article provides information on the strategies the university is currently employing to address this matter.

## Students and attainment

Over the last decade, UK Universities have been seeking to address the attainment gap between black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and white students. Universities have a long way to go before models of ethnic equality and diversity are commonplace (Runnymede Trust, 2015), as there are important differences between the experiences and outcomes of BAME and white students in Higher Education (HE) (OFFA, 2015). These differences are related to retention rates, progression from undergraduate (UG) study to employment and/or postgraduate (PG) study and the achievement of a 'good degree' (2:1 or above). These all lead to the conclusion that there is an attainment gap between BAME and white students in higher education (Zwysen & Longhi, 2016; Richardson, 2012b; Singh, 2011; Richardson, 2008a; Broecke & Nicholls, 2007). However, student attainment is a complex phenomenon, as other factors such as socio-economic status, interpersonal relationships, lack of positive attitudes towards learning, as well as the student experience of the curricula, pedagogies and teaching delivery elements of university life may contribute to the degree attainment gap, which is the specific focus of this article (Banerjee & Lamb, 2016; Stephenson, 2012).

## Attainment rates: the national picture

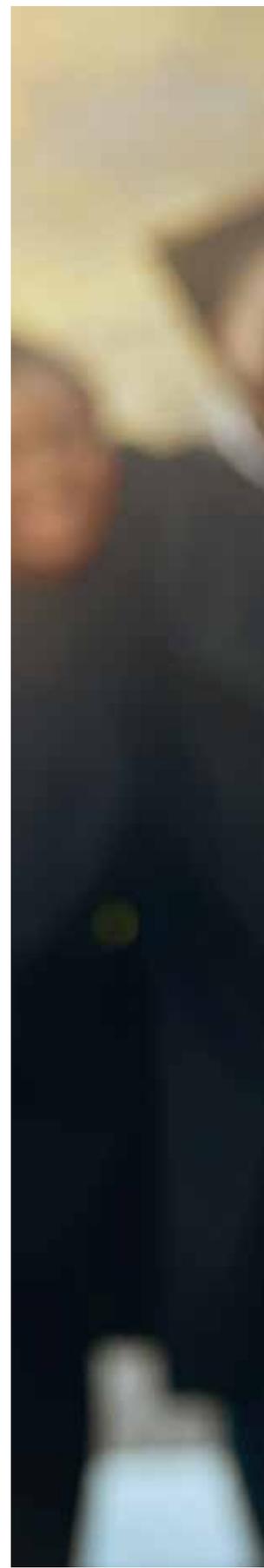
The attainment gap between BAME and white students has been reflected in national higher education statistics since the late 1990s. However, attention to the differences in 'good degree' attainment between BAME and white students has increased from 2003, when important disparities in degree attainment were

observed in the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 1998-1999 data by Connor et al. (2003; p 74-77). The data demonstrated that less than 30% of Black and around 36% of Asian graduates obtained a 'good degree' in comparison to the 53% of white graduates (Bhattacharyya, Ison, & Blair, 2003; Connor et al., 2003). These degree discrepancies highlighted the importance of looking at student experience, reviewing the curricula at university level and encouraging academics to reflect on whether their teaching style meets the needs of a diverse group of students.

The figures from the 2016-17 ECU data provide further support to the claim that the ethnicity attainment gap in HE persists. Nationally, 79.6% of white students achieved a 'good degree', compared to 66% of BAME students, a degree attainment gap of 13.6%. In addition, data from UK Institutions indicated that the ethnicity attainment gap exists (even in Russell Group universities and in universities that have received a Gold Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) award), as there were six UK Universities where not a single home BAME graduate received a first in 2015-16 (Buckley-Irvine, 2017). These findings should be taken into serious consideration, as they place BAME students at a significant disadvantage when it comes to progressing to employment and/or postgraduate study.

At the University of West London, in the 2017/18 academic year, 65.7% of BAME students graduated with a 'good degree' compared with 85.1% of white students, representing a degree attainment gap of 19.4%. Although the gap has been reduced in recent years from 26% in 2014/15 to 25% in 2015/16 to 22% in 2016/17, the figures indicate that the degree attainment gap between certain groups of students remains an issue at the university.

Acknowledging the attainment issue is the first step in providing a more inclusive and authentic educational experience to all students. The university's commitment to continuing to improve the educational experience by addressing the barriers to student success is demonstrated by its inclusion as a goal in the new strategic plan 'Achievement 2023', and as a target to reduce the ethnicity attainment gap by 2% annually to reach 12% by 2022/23, published in the University's 2019-20 Access and Participation Plan..





### Focus on student success

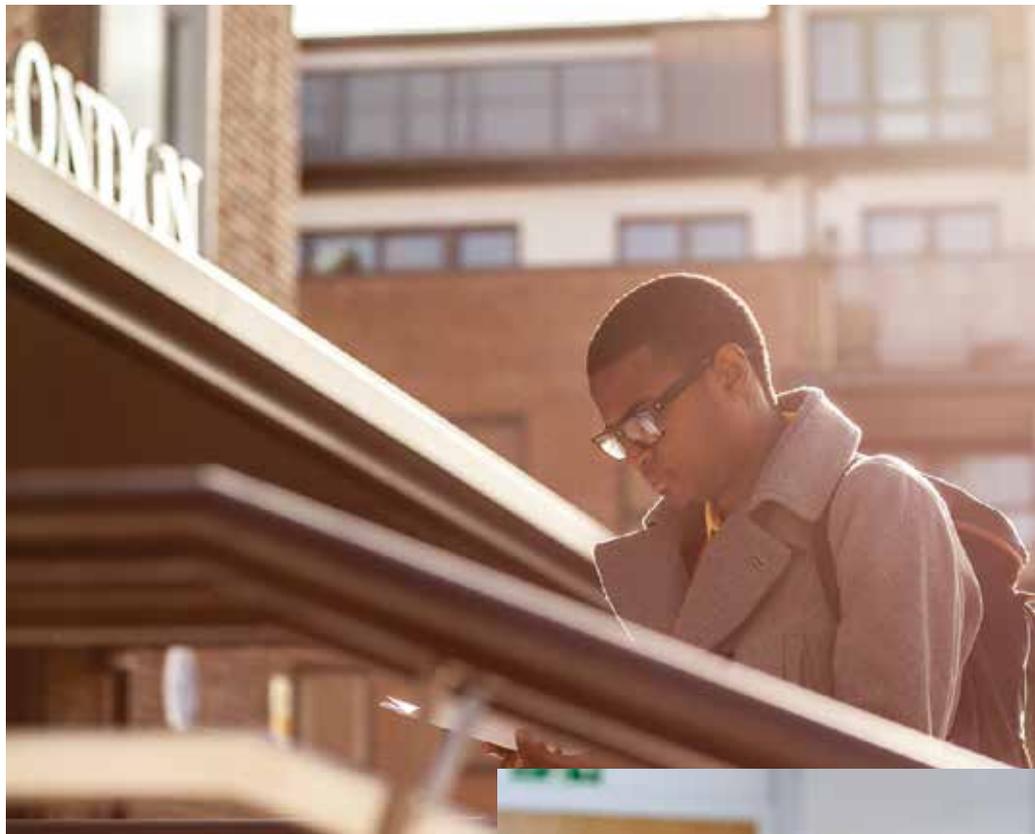
The university student community is diverse indicating that our students represent different ethnicities and religions, and varying socio-economic backgrounds. Taking into consideration the degree attainment gap between certain groups of students, the university aims to tackle gaps in attainment and address the barriers to student success by participating in an Office for Students funded project, the Student Attainment Project (SAP2). Along with SAP2, several university initiatives on inclusive pedagogies and student experience aim to promote authentic teaching and learning, as well as to build skills and awareness to improve equality, diversity and sense of belonging for all students.

### The student attainment project (SAP2)

The project is a part of the OfS Funded: Addressing Barriers to Student Success Programme through which 17 projects involving 64 institutions have been allocated part of £7.5 million of funding. It aims to raise awareness of the degree attainment gap between BAME and white students. Through a series of inclusive interventions, the project aims to address the barriers to student success and generate evidence as to the efficacy of the interventions in closing attainment gaps for different groups of students. Specifically, SAP2 is an extension of SAP1 which was originally developed by the University of Derby to close the BAME attainment gap at the university. SAP2 aims to:

- Work with partner HEIs to validate that the adoption of the SAP1 approach can deliver similar benefits in other institutions;
- Extend the SAP1 methodology so as to target attainment gaps in other contexts (for example: gender; disability; socio-economic background) in order to assess its efficacy in these contexts; and
- Provide evidence as to the optimal means of ensuring the sustainability of outcomes within institutions.

SAP2 was launched at the University of West London in spring 2017 and is a collaborative venture with the University of Derby (the project lead university) and Solent University. The project has been divided into three stages: in stages 1 and 2, we set up the framework for module selection to be deployed to answer the question: *'to what extent has identifying modules which experience attainment gaps and trialling the SAP2 interventions within them improved attainment of learners both generally and within targeted populations?'*. Using Appreciative Inquiry, in stage 3, the aim is to *'explore and identify where institutional working practices and policies best support the interventions in order to address differences in student attainment to support the sustainability of the approach for future working'*. Figure 1 illustrates the project timeline.



Overall, 57 modules were included across the three phases of the project at the university. The majority of the identified modules were chosen based on the degree attainment gap between BAME and white students, while a few modules were chosen based on the age and Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) gap. IMD is the government's official measure of relative deprivation based on income, employment, education, health, crime, barriers to housing and services, and living environment. This was due to large attainment gaps also being identified at the university for age and IMD. Students in IMD quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) achieved 20% less good degrees than those from quintile 5 and mature students (aged over 21) achieved 9% less good degrees than young students. Figure 2 illustrates the project implementation at UWL.

Academics and students from the selected modules were briefed about the project and its purpose. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and the project followed quality assurance and ethics regulations. A collection of seven inclusive intervention papers were available to all UWL academics to be embedded into their learning materials. These interventions have been created for the student attainment project in order to address the attainment of learners. Academics have had the flexibility to choose the interventions that mapped well into their curricula and their students' needs. It is important to note that the University of West London has updated the interventions (originally created by the University of Derby) in order to ensure inclusivity and ensure that these simple guides reflect the university's student body. It is believed that these interventions contribute to an inclusive education and active learning. They are simple and easy to be deployed



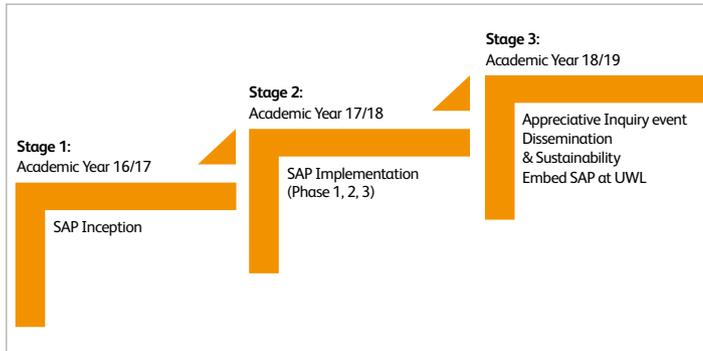


FIGURE 1: The SAP2 timeline

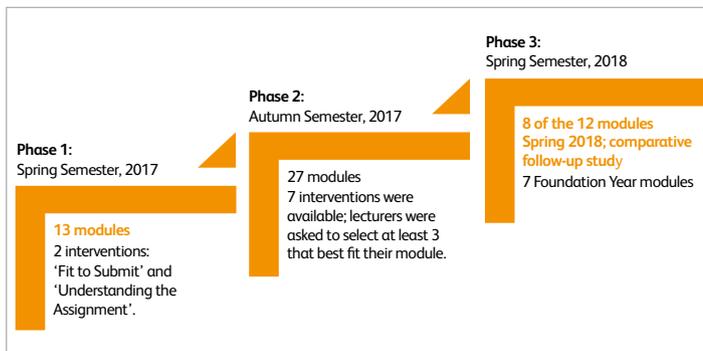


FIGURE 2: SAP2 Implementation at UWL

<b>Fit to Submit: Coursework Checklist</b>	Provides a checklist for students to work through prior to the submission of work to eliminate common mistakes.
<b>Fit to Sit</b>	Provides top tips for exam preparation, during the exam and reflection for future exams
<b>Improving Academic Writing</b>	Gives students an overview of the main issues to consider when writing a paper and provides advice on how to approach the process.
<b>Understanding the Assessment</b>	An activity for students to complete when handed an assignment in order to make sure they fully understand what is expected as an outcome.
<b>Study Skills for Successful Students</b>	Shows students an outline of key skills which are displayed by successful students and encourages them to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses for PDP
<b>Understanding your Students</b>	Identifies some of the issues which can cause students to perform poorly, fail or withdraw and encourages discussion around common anxieties, academic and personal concerns.
<b>Improving your Confidence</b>	Top tips to encourage students to build their confidence.

FIGURE 3: SAP2 Intervention papers (originally developed by the University of Derby)

into class and online, and they force students to stop and reflect on what they are doing before an assessment is submitted (see figure 3 for details)

Qualitative feedback gathered by academics who have delivered the interventions in their module(s) provides positive outcomes and fruitful implications for addressing attainment gaps. We anticipate rich feedback through the overall evaluation of SAP2, which is drawing on the experience of each delivery partner and their students, and in addition from the wider Addressing Barriers to Student Success Programme evaluation which will be completed during 2019. It is expected that the outcomes of SAP2 will also feed into the broader UWL initiatives, including the publication of student attainment data on the university website, as proposed by the OFS in a recent regulating access and participation consultation, preparation of UWL's TEF application, NSS results and the Student Union strategic plan. Moreover, it will build skills and awareness to improve equality, diversity and inclusion, and contribute to the development of inclusive curricula and reading lists as well as diverse teaching and personalised learning that all contribute to Internationalising the curriculum.

**Inclusive pedagogies at the University of West London**

The university is committed to improving student educational experience by developing authentic and innovative pedagogies. In addition to SAP2, several initiatives focusing on embedding cultural change are currently running at the university. The ExPERT (Expertise for Professionalism in Education, Research and Teaching) Academy and the university library team are currently working on projects that aim to address barriers to student success by ensuring that all students, regardless of background and other personal characteristics, are able to participate fully and achieve at equal rates.

A project on 'distinct UWL pedagogy' is under development by the ExPERT Academy. The University of West London is a modern University with many 'non-traditional' students who do not have the cultural capital and support systems of 'traditional' university students and, as such, can be more susceptible to negative outcomes. Non-traditional students (e.g. BAME, low socioeconomic class or mature students) encounter more difficulties than traditional students and might benefit from being taught by teaching staff that have developed a pedagogy aligned to their specific learning needs. It is expected that this project will have implications regarding inclusive curricula and contribute to the development of a framework for the university pedagogy that will be self-regulated by teaching staff and contribute to the delivery of personalised learning.

The under-representation of people from non-white ethnic backgrounds, and to a lesser extent

women of all ethnicities, in course materials and reading lists was a concern for the university Library Services. A lack of diversity in reading lists means that course materials do not reflect the different cultural experiences that university students have, which may result in the subjects they are studying being less interesting and engaging. The Library Service is currently undertaking work in partnership with academics that aims to combat under-representation of particular groups by encouraging and facilitating an increase in the demographic diversity of course materials. It is expected that all students, regardless of background, will benefit from this project as it will diversify their knowledge and academic experience; help break down stereotypes of academic authorship as White and male; and encourage all students to engage further with their subject.

### Student Experience at the University of West London

Student academic experience and sense of belonging are important factors to student success. The Student Engagement and the Student Union (UWLSU) teams are working towards improving student support, experience and satisfaction. The Student Engagement Team works collaboratively with all university staff, schools and departments to ensure timely support is offered to all students. In 2017-18 the team developed an outreach strategy that is targeted towards students who are demonstrating signs of anxiety, lack of confidence, academically or personally, or lack of belonging, or any signs that may contribute negatively to their academic performance. Many students have welcomed the timely offer of support provided by the team and this has helped them avoid situations where problems might have become overwhelming. While student focused, this work also aims to address the issue of retention which challenges the university and the higher education sector as a whole.

UWLSU is an active union whose scope is to provide a truly transformational experience to all students. UWLSU aims to enhance student experience, sense of belonging and provide them with the confidence that all students need to determine their own future. Through a series of campaigns, such as celebrating Black history, LGBTQ history and Mental Health awareness, UWLSU aims to build skills and awareness to improve equality, diversity and inclusion in the University. UWLSU is committed to continuing place UWL students at the centre of actions by having a diverse student representation and develop activities to address student success in all sectors, including degree attainment gap and student continuation.

### The AIM Project

The AIM (Achieve, Inspire, Motivate) project is a new initiative at the university, which aims to address student attainment, engagement and retention matters. Through a series of student-led workshops, the project creates active student engagement and helps students who are less prepared to student in higher education and students from underrepresented backgrounds develop their academic skills and academic independence in order to be successful as undergraduates. The main objectives of this project are to ensure that students are fully engaged with the curricula, as they develop the workshop materials, as well as become positive academic role models for their fellow students. Therefore, rather than 'telling the students' what to do in the classroom, the AIM tutors inspire and motivate their fellow students to achieve their goals by sharing their personal stories and study strategies. Expected outcomes are also to address continuation rates, and improve student performance to close the degree attainment gap.

### The future and food for thought

Research (Singh, 2011) indicates that in order to close the attainment gap we have to address external (e.g. gender, social deprivation) and internal factors (e.g. discriminatory practices, teaching, learning & assessment strategies, student support), and the contribution of the curriculum and pedagogy (i.e., internationalisation and inclusivity in the curriculum). We are aware that the university is currently working on improving student educational experience via several projects, however, in order to assess real-life impact we need to monitor and review the projects continually. So, what can we do to address the barriers to student success and optimise student experience?

### Our strategy for the future is to:

- Improve university processes: The Student Attainment Champions Group was established to champion diversity for staff and students, and stakeholders of the University in order to continue to improve the attainment of students. We aim to continue to research and learn from the best practice across the sector, both nationally and internationally;
- Enhance the knowledge and skills of staff: through a series of events and pedagogic research, we aim to encourage productive discussions about student attainment and how this could be addressed, share good practice, contribute to the development of an excellence framework for an inclusive curriculum and diverse teaching pedagogies.

*While student focused, this work also aims to address the issue of retention which challenges the university and the higher education sector as a whole.*





- Work closely with students in order to ensure that inclusivity and diversity is assured. The Student Attainment Champions Group has BAME student representatives whose mission is to enhance the student experience and increase the sense of belonging/community. We also aim to establish a BAME group mentorship scheme to celebrate BAME student success and promote role models. Students from the London College of Music are currently working on the development of 'drama stories' which are real stories from BAME students and their experience in HE. Moreover, students are involved in the design and delivery of curricula via the AIM Project.
- Collaborate with others: We aim to continue our collaborations across the sector, as our mission is to ensure that both students and staff have the support they need and enjoy being part of an innovative university community.

We are aware that all these actions may challenge conventional thinking and behaviours of university staff. However, being committed to improving performance and supporting cultural change will tackle institutional challenges, such as inclusive curricula, diverse teaching strategies, student retention, and assessment and feedback, which seem to contribute to student attainment at the university and in the higher education sector in general. Being committed to developing sustainable solutions, will enhance the student educational experience and satisfaction, which will contribute to the effective closure of the degree attainment gap.

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## Keywords

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