**Social and cultural capital**

“Individuals who are inculcated in the dominant culture are the most likely to succeed, while other students are penalized” (Thomas 2002, p431).

BME students interviewed by Stevenson (17 students) felt that a lack of preparedness for learning in HE and their subsequent academic development once at university was a greater reason for the attainment gap than their ethnicity, culture or racism. These students considered “family, including parental lack of experience and understanding of higher education, class, poverty and prior schooling all to be highly relevant” (Stevenson, 2012, p13).

Stuart, Lido and Morgan (2011) concluded that “white middleclass students believe in their right to gain support and assistance from the tutors, peers and university… minority ethnic students, whether working-class or middle-class, believe they need to cope alone without support and assistance” (p506).

Examples from across the sector:

* It was found that a ‘difference-education intervention’ that included making students aware of the ‘rules of the game’ and encouraged students to make better use of college resources improved attainment for first generation students and psychosocial outcomes (such as more social and academic engagement) for all students (Stephens, Hamedani and Destin, 2014, p3).
* The [University of Derby](http://uodpress.wordpress.com/) are introducing ‘Professional Behaviour in the Classroom’ and ‘Professional Behaviour for Placement Students’ sessions as part of their strategy to reduce the BME attainment gap.

**Motivation and aspirations**

The [Male students: Engagement with academic and pastoral support services](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/male-students-engagement-with-academic-and-pastoral-support-services) research found that males were more likely to stay at university because of personal determination, the goal of completing their degree or money already invested in their degree than females (ECU 2012, p13).

The [Gender and Ethnicity Attainment Gap Research Project](http://www1.plymouth.ac.uk/research/pedrio/Documents/PedRIO%20Paper%202.pdf), found that BME students were more likely to be influenced by their family when choosing their degree and more likely to be motivated by external factors such as their future career (Cotton et al, 2013).

The [Disparities in Student Attainment Project](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=25312) found that BME students were less likely to be aware of the importance of a ‘good’ degree to further study and employment (University of Wolverhampton, 2012).

Examples from across the sector:

* The Open University, ‘[Great Expectations Project](http://www.open.ac.uk/equality-diversity/sites/www.open.ac.uk.equality-diversity/files/files/ecms/web-content/Annual-Report-2013-Final.pdf)’, aims to raise awareness among tutors of the influence of their expectations of students on student confidence and attainment “Tutors who actively communicate high expectations, while also challenging any low expectations that students have of themselves, will help to create positive environments that achieve positive outcomes”. (Open University, 2013, p12).
* A small project, [Raising Aspirations and Intellectual Capability](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=25312), aimed to “improve student attainment levels by raising all students’ awareness of the importance of developing an academic identity”: encouraging student confidence of being capable of study and behaviours that lead to success such as reading, critical thinking (Singh and Cowden, DiSA briefing paper 11).

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The Open University, 2013. Equality and Diversity Annual Report 2013 [online]. Available at: <http://www.open.ac.uk/equality-diversity/sites/www.open.ac.uk.equality-diversity/files/files/ecms/web-content/Annual-Report-2013-Final.pdf>. This is one of eight HEA funded projects looking at BME retention and attainment. Further details can be found here <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/workstreams-research/themes/retention-and-success/student-attainment/black-and-minority-ethic>

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**Institutional racism and unconscious bias**

A [synthesis of BME student research](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/node/2904) in 2009 suggested the possible role of institutional racism as, even accounting for other factors (such as family educational experiences, social deprivation), there is still a disparity in attainment between white and BME students (Singh, 2009, p6).

Although hard to measure, it is thought that students’ experience of racism in society and in previous education may affect their confidence to succeed at university and this may be a particular issue for black and African origin students (HEA and ECU, 2008, p21).

Research by the NUS reported that a “significant minority” of students felt excluded from their learning and teaching environment: with “23 per cent describing it as ‘cliquey’, 17 per cent as ‘isolating’, 8 per cent as ‘hostile’ and 7 per cent as ‘racist’” (NUS, 2011, p4).

Fielding et al and Richardson (see Sanders and Rose-Adams, 2014) found that student satisfaction of BME students is lower in institutions with a higher proportion of BME students. The DiSA project found that BME students performed better when in smaller cohorts, and where BME students were in the minority in a cohort (University of Wolverhampton, 2013).

Examples from across the sector:

* The [Open University](http://www.open.ac.uk/equality-diversity/sites/www.open.ac.uk.equality-diversity/files/files/ecms/web-content/Annual-Report-2013-Final.pdf) are beginning two projects looking at unconscious bias. One involves a statistical analysis of one module to explore the correlation between results, ethnicity and the quantity and quality of written feedback. The second project looks at whether there is an association between student names of different ethnic and cultural origins and assessment marks (Open University, 2013, p12).

**Building positive relationships with students**

The [Disparities in Student Attainment (DiSA) Project](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=25151) highlighted the importance of the student/lecturer relationship, of ‘feeling known’, to the success of BME students. They found that BME students tended to have a greater variation in grades than white students, typically gaining lower grades in modules that required a close relationship with a member of staff such as a dissertation or project module.

The DiSA Project also found that high achieving BME students often attributed a close relationship with a member of staff as a reason for their success but also described that they had different expectations about the student/tutor relationship than they subsequently experienced (University of Wolverhampton, 2013).

Examples from across the sector:

* The [University of Birmingham](https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/collaboration/equality/students/getinvolved/bme/index.aspx) has a website for BME students at the university, ‘Black and minority ethnic students - Be More Empowered’. This site includes case studies of high achieving students, information about the student-run Black and Ethnic Minorities Association, information about the BME ambassadors (including an ambassador toolkit), and details about their BME mentoring scheme which “provides opportunities for BME students to meet and network with successful BME business and community leaders in Birmingham”. They also run a BME peer mentoring scheme that pairs BME second and third years with BME first year students (University of Birmingham, 2014).

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## Seeking support

It has been found that when in academic difficulty males are less likely to be aware that they are having problems or that they are at risk of failing (ECU, 2012), (Foster et al, 2012), less likely to seek help (ECU, 2012) (Cotton et al, 2012) and more likely to wait until referred to formal support by a member of staff (ECU, 2012). They were also more likely to disengage from support (including tutorial support) if their initial contact had been unhelpful than females (ibid, p31).

The library was seen by males as the ‘most useful service’, although a more detailed look at data from one HEI found that male students entered the library more frequently, but borrowed fewer books (ibid, p27).

Differences between the ethnic groups studied also revealed differences in awareness and use of services (ibid, p29).

Examples from across the sector:

* Edinburgh Napier University have changed the way they advertise their academic skills and guidance provision to encourage young males to access this support. They offer a ‘one to one retention service’ that in 2010/11 was used by 240 students (49% male, 31% aged 18-20) compared with academic skills workshops used by 718 students (28% male, 1% aged 18–20) (ibid, p40).
* The Business School at the University of Central Lancashire use an attendance monitoring scheme to identify students potentially ‘at risk’ and to refer these students to the student support team. “The retention team see around twice as many men as women” (ibid, p38).

## Study habits, assessment and feedback

At NTU, the HERE Project found that first year undergraduate males were more likely to say that they were finding studies difficult, less likely to say they were working hard and less likely to say that they found feedback on their work useful than females (Foster and Lefever, 2011).

Woodfield et al (2006) found that male students’ academic performance was more likely to be affected by absence perhaps because males are less likely to study independently than females (p19).

The [Disparities in Student Attainment Project](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/default.aspx?page=25151) found that there was more likely to be a disparity in BME student attainment when non-traditional types of assessment were used. There was less likely to be a disparity in assessments that are most used in education prior to HE and where students perceived the assessment to be appropriate to the subject (Fairclough, DiSA briefing paper 14).

Cotton et al (2013) found that BME students in their study were less likely to participate in class and were worried about asking questions because this might reinforce prejudice about their lack of ability. They also found that males were “discouraged from studying by their peers” and that writing skills were more problematic for BME overseas and male students.

Examples from across the sector:

* A (male-dominated) faculty at Kingston University used a short anonymous survey delivered in a core module at the start of the year to encourage students to “identify any support or assistance that they would need to successfully complete the year”. The findings were published and a programme of activities set up in response (Morgan, 2013, p152).

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