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The Minoritisation of Higher Education Students

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Abstract

Research into 'ethnic' attainment differences in British higher education tends to depict students from minority ethnic backgrounds as disadvantaged, marginalised, discriminated against and excluded. This shapes the current theoretical perspective adopted by university policies and informs practice. However, the consequences of this perspective for students, their educational attainment and university education as a whole are largely unexamined. This study explored the teaching and learning experiences of students, alongside their views concerning how these experiences may have impacted on their attainment. To arrive at a more unbiased and better informed understanding of ethnic attainment differences, the student narratives in this study were analysed from a realist philosophical position.

The experiences students related included student interactions, participatory and intellectual engagement, (un)equal treatment and academic study and support. The richness and variety of the individual narratives defied simple analysis and required further discussion of perceptions, interpretations, meaning, understanding and categorisation. Some students talked of social interaction in terms of race, colour, ethnicity, nationality, culture, class and age, while others thought such social grouping unproblematic. Engagement was seen either as participatory engagement in the learning process or as intellectual engagement with the subject. There were perceptions of unequal treatment due to race or ethnicity which contrasted with suggestions of straightforward unprofessional practices. Attitudes to academic study ranged from descriptions of struggling with the academic workload to feeling the lack of intellectual challenge.

The analysis and discussion revealed a process of minoritisation that resulted from the current approaches to ethnic attainment. The continued use of group-based social differentiation inadvertently fosters the idea that ethnic and social attributes matter and creates a divisive subtext which loses any sense of our common humanity. Group-based social differentiation can undermine the resilience and human agency of students because it suggests that educational attainment is predominantly determined by ethnic and social attributes, downplaying the students' capacity to act in pursuit of educational goals. As a result, university policies and practice perpetuate rather than ameliorate the status of minority ethnic higher education students.

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1 Introduction

Research into 'ethnic' attainment differences in British higher education tends to depict students from minority ethnic backgrounds as disadvantaged, marginalised, discriminated against and excluded (Tyrer and Ahmad 2006; Gillborn 2006, 2008; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Byfield 2008; Pilkington 2008, 2013; Leonardo 2009; Jessop and Williams 2009; Warmington 2009; Mirza 2009; Bhopal 2010; Dhanda 2010; Sheard, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, Brookfield and Associates 2010, National Union of Students (NUS) 2011; School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Student Union 2016). This depiction of students shapes the current theoretical perspective of university policies and informs practice. However, the consequences of this perspective for students, their educational attainment and university education as a whole are largely unexamined. This study explores the teaching and learning experiences of students, alongside their views concerning how these experiences may have impacted on their attainment.

Starting point

The initial motivation for this research was the broader concern over reported ethnic attainment differences in British higher education in general and in the post-1992 university where this study was conducted in particular. To date, ethnic attainment differences have been largely explored from critical race theorist, multiculturalist and identity perspectives – which all adopt relativist group-based approaches that categorise students along ethnic and social lines. An initial literature review suggested numerous problems

associated with relativist group-based approaches. It is unclear whether the ethnic categories used to report ethnic attainment differences or the act of dividing students along ethnic and social lines is either relevant or valid. The statistical evidence which suggests that ethnicity is a significant factor when explaining educational attainment can be criticised. There are broader questions to be answered about the theoretical coherence of relativist theories.

British universities have rapidly implemented measures to address ethnic attainment differences over the last ten years since the publication of the influential Institute of Employment Studies Report *Why the Difference?* (Connor, Tyrers, Modood and Hillage 2004). This study argues that this has obscured the fact that these measures, alongside the ideas they embody, perpetuate the minoritisation of higher education students in British higher education. The process of minoritisation is a consequence of a shift in educational thinking towards student-centred education and learning, process-oriented teaching and the broad equalities perspective that has been adopted by universities. The equalities perspective draws on relativist group-based theories and embraces group-based social differentiation alongside relativist ideas about truth. Taken together, the shift in educational thinking and universities' broad equalities perspective tend to draw attention to the ethnic and social background of students. This reinforces the idea that students from minority backgrounds are vulnerable because hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases are thought to work to their disadvantage.

Similar shifts in educational thinking can be observed in the USA and Australian higher education sector. In the USA, as in Britain, 'race' researchers, such as the influential writer Leonardo (2009), have warned against 'colorblindness' in American higher education. They insist on the recognition of race and racism as present realities in higher education. These academics reinforce the assumption that students from minority ethnic backgrounds are vulnerable to hierarchical power relations, an assumption that determines policy and practice in British universities.

This shift in educational thinking appears to be global. Bhopal and Danaher's (2013) international comparison between the UK, the USA and Australia has also claimed that formal education systems favour the majority white mainstream culture because they are racialised, gendered and class-based.

One negative consequence of depicting students as vulnerable is that this encourages the underrating of those students' resilience and agency. A secondary negative consequence is that group-based social differentiation tends to emphasise particular ethnic and social attributes of students, transforming these attributes into divisive differences between students. This inadvertently functions to 'essentialise' these attributes, often making them the sole determinant of educational attainment. Historically, ethnic, more commonly referred to in the past as 'racial', attributes were conceptualised in terms of personal and social deficiencies that determined educational attainment, placing the 'problem' with the person. Today, ethnic and social attributes are thought to determine educational attainment because social structures are believed to disadvantage ethnic minority groups, placing the 'problem' with structural arrangements. Less commonly acknowledged is that both views essentialise ethnic and social attributes: historically, this was achieved intentionally by suggesting that personal and social deficiencies were the determinants of educational attainment, while more recently, it has been achieved unintentionally by suggesting that structural biases are the determinants of educational attainment. Consequently, attainment continues to be seen as determined by ethnic and social factors, while group differences continue to be emphasised over commonalities.

The realist position adopted by this study posits the concept of objective truth: issues are discussed without making assumptions about group differences or depicting groups as 'homogenous, clearly bounded and mutually exclusive' (Barry 2001: 11). Objectivity in this context means that realist approaches draw two conceptual distinctions. The first is between experiences (people's perceptions) and knowledge (objective

truth); the second is between the judger (subject) and the judged (object). These two distinctions are fundamental to advancing knowledge in educational research. The experience-knowledge distinction allows experiences to be reported as perceptions and conclusions drawn from experiences to be understood as opinions. The reporting of experiences as perceptions is different from making claims to knowledge which require that all relevant evidence is taken into account and presented objectively (Pring 2004). The judger-judged distinction allows ideas and opinions to be examined and either advanced or rejected, irrespective of the ethnic and social background of the judger, the person who advances the ideas and opinions.

One major driver in the implementation of measures to address ethnic attainment differences is the interpretation of the statistical research data on student attainment. Interpreting the 'statistical research data' rather than the 'statistics' means examining the way in which statistical data on attainment has been researched and reported. For 2012/13, the statistical data shows an overall gap between black and minority ethnic students and their white counterparts of 17.6 percentage points of students graduating with a high degree classification (1st and 2:1) (Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) 2013: 85). This refers to UK-domiciled undergraduate students and is reported to have fluctuated in the past decade between 17.2 and 18.4 percentage points (ECU 2012). Both the terms 'black and minority ethnic' (BME) and 'black Asian and minority ethnic' (BAME) refer to students who may be born and/or educated in Britain but come from a so-called minority ethnic background, which broadly refers to those parts of the population who are not white British. In this book, students are referred to either as ethnically minoritised, as minoritised or simply as students unless for reasons of accuracy it is not possible to use these terms. This choice of terminology is based on the finding of this study that students are not actually minorities in the way the terms suggest, but in fact are being minoritised through research as well as by policies and practice.

The first indication that current measures implemented to address ethnic attainment differences actively minoritise higher education students emerged from reviewing the statistical research data on student attainment. The data review in Chapter 2 investigates whether the ethnic attainment gap is indeed an 'ethnic' gap or whether current reporting inflates ethnic differences and may even create differences where none exist. Although the use of statistics has been criticised by critical race theorists, among others, for downplaying the 'lived experiences' of ethnically minoritised students, it is important to examine the statistical research evidence to avoid inaccurate reporting as well as false knowledge claims.

The review of literature concerning ethnic attainment differences in Chapter 3 supports the claim that ethnic attainment research nurtures a process of minoritisation because current approaches give rise to a new type of deficit talk that underrates resilience and agency in students. This new type of deficit talk affects some students disproportionately because they are depicted as lacking resilience and agency due to their ethnic and social backgrounds. Furthermore, in Chapter 4 it is argued that by adopting the concept of group-based social differentiation as fundamental to its theoretical framework, ethnic attainment research minoritises students because it assumes that race and ethnicity matter and are 'essential' attributes of students.

To avoid the process of minoritisation inherent in current approaches to ethnic attainment research, an 'absolute' rather than a relational approach to perceived inequality was adopted in this book (see Chapter 4). The theoretical basis of this approach draws on Miller's discussion of 'absolute' scepticism and Parfit's discussion of the 'Priority View', which does not compare the relative levels (of attainment) of individuals but examines their 'absolute levels' (Parfit 1997: 214; Miller 2006: 151). The absolute approach can be defined both negatively and positively. The negative definition rejects the assumption that students' educational attainment must be approached through essentialised group-based social

differentiation. It rejects this comparative approach as inherently divisive of the student body as a whole. The positive definition approaches student attainment by looking at the student body as a whole and seeks to identify issues that affect attainment both in a general way and in particular circumstances. Significantly, the absolute approach sets student attainment within the holistic context of contemporary higher education and the shift to student-centred education and learning process-oriented teaching, which has altered traditional university subject-based education and teaching methods.

To explore ethnic attainment differences using this distinct approach, thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate students from a post-1992 British university. The aim was to explore the teaching and learning experiences of students, alongside their understanding of how these experiences may have impacted on their attainment. The research strategy and methodology is described in Chapter 6 along with the interview technique, the sampling and data analysis procedure and ethical considerations that have been taken into account.

The four chapters addressing the findings of this study each start with a description of the teaching and learning experiences the research participants recounted, alongside their views concerning how these experiences may have impacted on their attainment. At the end of each chapter, the experiences related became the basis for discussion of issues which are often more complex, contradictory and problematic than might have been assumed.

Chapter 7 presents a theme that emerged from the student narratives and has been conceptualised as 'student grouping'. This term refers to how students form groups when interacting or making friends in learning situations. The chapter's discussion of student grouping pivots around the problematic role the university plays in attempting to promote social interaction in the interest of ethnic and social equality. This discussion questions the assumption that promoting social interactions in the interest of equality is an appropriate purpose of a university.

In Chapter 8, a distinction emerged from the student narratives between what is called 'participatory engagement', defined as engagement in the learning process, and 'intellectual engagement', defined as engagement with subject content. This distinction led to a discussion about the assumed link made in much of the literature on ethnic attainment differences between social characteristics, student engagement and educational attainment. This raised the question of whether universities should take a subject-centred rather than a student-centred approach to engagement, as is currently the case.

In Chapter 9, student narratives indicated that the behaviour of some lecturers and support staff in higher education can foster feelings of unequal treatment. Although some students felt that they are being treated unequally, the discussion shows that what some research participants interpreted as unequal treatment may not be a result of discrimination but of poor professional practice. From this emerged questions about professionalism in higher education teaching and, in particular, whether 'cushioning students' by avoiding serious criticism of their work to protect the academic confidence of students actually impedes educational attainment.

In Chapter 10, student narratives related academic experiences, especially the difficulties some research participants had while studying for their degrees. The discussion centred on what some students thought were demanding workloads and the question of whether universities should ease or modify in line with current student-centred approaches to education. The final discussion considers whether universities must lessen student workloads, as current student-centred approaches to education recommend, to minimise the personal and intellectual struggles students have or if demanding workloads are normal in higher education and should in fact be fostered.

In Chapter 11, the need for discussion and debate that emerged from the student narratives is explained. Can 'experiences' be used to make claims to knowledge given the different ways in which a wide range of

experiences can be interpreted? Without discussion of the complex, contradictory and problematic narratives, it is difficult to determine what, if anything, can be said about student experiences of higher education. There is a greater need for discussion and debate if, in the British higher education sector, policy making is to avoid damaging processes which minoritise students because of a pervasive relativism that allows claims to knowledge on the basis of student experience.

In the final chapter, a brief summary of each section is given and the factors that perpetuate the minoritisation of higher education students identified are summarised. Broadly, these factors are the adoption and use in research, academic thinking and university policies of group-based social differentiation, relativist relational approaches to inequality and interventionist policies and practices to address ethnic inequalities in British higher education. The final section of this chapter, and of the study, explores how research into ethnic attainment differences may proceed in future and what alternative approaches may be used to prevent the minoritisation of higher education students in British higher education. Underpinning these suggestions is the need for researchers, lecturers, university support providers, university managers and students themselves to engage in critical debate and discussion about the issues identified. Failure to do so will perpetuate the current approaches to ethnic attainment research and exacerbate the process of minoritisation.

2 The 'ethnic' attainment gap

The statistical data on student attainment are said to reveal a marked gap in attainment between students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds and their white counterparts (Connor *et al.* 2004; Broecke and Nicholls 2007; Richardson 2008; ECU 2012, 2013). The annual statistics published by the Equality Challenge Unit have, during the past decade, consistently shown an overall gap in attainment of 17.2 to 18.4 percentage points between white and black and minority ethnic students graduating with a high degree classification (ECU 2012, 2013). These figures vary considerably between ethnic groups so that the gap is persistently widest among black students, with 28.8 percentage points in 2010/11, and narrowest among students from mixed ethnic backgrounds, with 6.6 percentage points in 2010/11 (ECU 2012).

This section examines the research that draws on attainment statistics by examining how the statistical data on attainment was researched and reported. It would be perfunctory to report a complex measure like attainment simply in relation to one variable, in this case ethnicity, without taking into account other factors known to impact on attainment. Even studies such as the one conducted by Broecke and Nicholls (2007), which have controlled for other factors, have been inconclusive about the extent to which ethnicity is a determining factor in educational attainment. The questioning of statistics has been criticised by critical race theorists, among others, for downplaying the 'lived experiences' of ethnically minoritised students (Gillborn 2006: 11). It is nevertheless important to examine the

statistical evidence in support of the ethnic attainment gap to prevent inaccurate reporting and false knowledge claims and reasoning.

Attainment scrutinised

Attainment in higher education is measured by the final graduate degree classification using a classification system that is divided into first, upper second, lower second and third class degrees. A degree awarded with either a first class or an upper second class is referred to as a 'good' or a 'high' degree (Connor *et al.* 2004; Richardson 2008; Fielding, Charlton, Kounali and Leckie 2008; ECU 2013). The attainment gap, in turn, refers to the difference in the percentage, usually percentage points, of students who graduate with a high degree classification. The degree classification system has been criticised on various grounds: for its narrow scope in assessing a complex concept like education in simple numerical terms; for its limitations in the reliability and validity of the decision making processes; for its doubtful relevance in today's higher education world; and for the obsession with marks and top degree classifications it has created (Yorke, Barnett, Evanson, Haines, Jenkins, Knight, Scurry, Stowell and Woolf 2004; Universities UK 2007). It is nonetheless used as a broad indication of attainment and as a measure that allows comparison between programmes, institutions and groups of students.

According to the Equality Challenge Unit, the gap in attainment between white and black and minority ethnic students amounted to 17.6 percentage points in 2013 (ECU 2013). This refers to 'UK-domiciled' (students whose normal residence was the UK prior to entry into higher education) undergraduate students graduating with a high degree classification (ECU 2012: 84). While the gap has been reported to have fluctuated in the past decade between 17.2 and 18.4 percentage points, it has remained relatively stable (ECU 2012). When the inter-group variations illustrated in Figure 2.1 are taken into account, it becomes apparent, however, that a sector-wide comparison between white and black

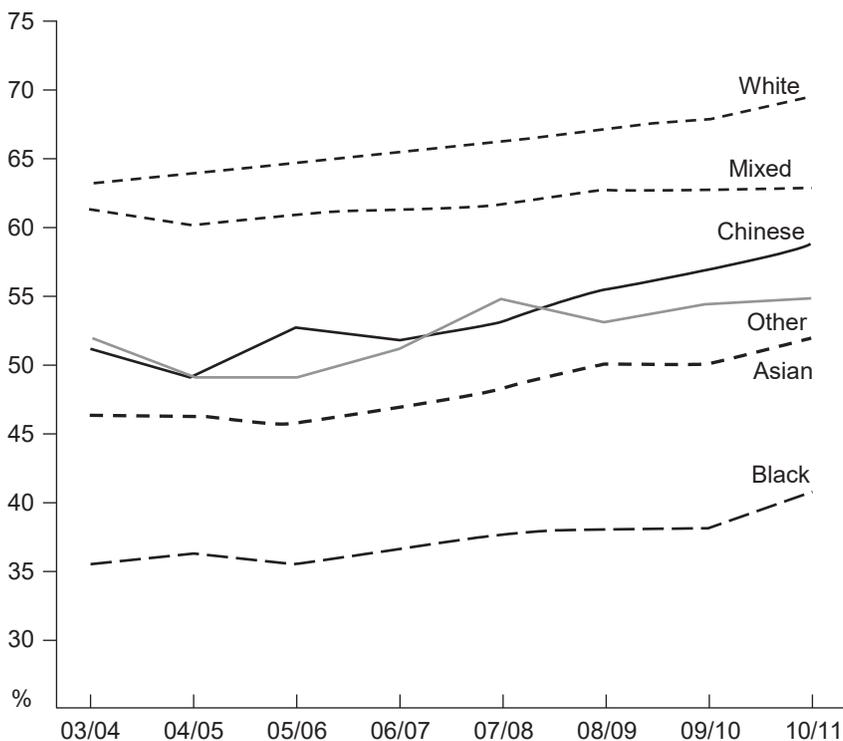


Figure 2.1: UK-domiciled graduates achieving a first class or upper second class honours degree by ethnicity from 2003/04 to 2010/11.

and minority ethnic students is meaningless because the gap varies considerably between ethnic groups.

The inter-group variations illustrated in Figure 2.1 show that the gap in attainment is persistently widest for black students with 28.8 percentage points in 2010/11 (ECU 2012). For the other categories, the gap is narrower but still present. In 2010/11 the gap was 17.4 percentage points for Asian students; 10.8 percentage points for Chinese students; 6.6 percentage points for students from a Mixed background; and 14.6 percentage points for the category 'Other' (ECU 2012). Similar trends in attainment have been reported by Owen, Green, Pitcher and Maguire (2000), Connor *et al.* (2004), Richardson (2008), Fielding *et al.* (2008),

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2010) and the ECU (2011).

The conclusion drawn in the literature from these statistics is that ethnic attainment differences exist and that ethnic inequalities are deeply ingrained in the British higher education system, so that much of the literature talks of inbuilt institutional and social biases that are thought to exclude some groups while privileging others (Mirza 2009; Pilkington 2008, 2013; Leonardo 2009; Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, Brookfield and Associates 2010; NUS 2011; Singh 2011). It is disputable, however, whether the ethnic gap is indeed an 'ethnic' gap or whether the use of broad ethnic categories, and the reporting of ethnic attainment differences without taking into account other factors known to influence attainment, inflates differences and may even create differences where none exist.

For instance, when broad ethnic trends are compared to the school sector this shows that, until recently, broadly similar ethnic attainment patterns have become more complex. The complexity emerges, according to the Interim Report of the 2012 *Mayor's Education Inquiry* in London, from the increasingly varied attainment patterns that are emerging within rather than between the various ethnic groups. The report refers, in particular, to the black African Nigerian and Ghanaian children who 'comfortably met the national benchmark of 5 GCSE grade A*-C, including English and Mathematics 2010/11', while black African Congolese and Angolan pupils were far less likely to reach these levels (*Mayor's Education Inquiry* 2012: 34-35). The report concludes that broad ethnic groupings mask significant intra-group variations which need to be examined if the attainment gap is to be addressed (*Mayor's Education Inquiry* 2012). This undermines the validity of the broad ethnic categories that are still applied to ethnic attainment research in British higher education and suggests that it may be nationality rather than ethnicity that impacts on attainment.

The reporting of ethnic attainment differences without accounting for

other factors known to impact on attainment inflates differences and, as the Broecke and Nicholls (2007) study has shown, creates differences where none exist. The Broecke and Nicholls (2007) study included 65,000 UK-domiciled undergraduate students and found that 'after controlling for the majority of factors which we would expect to have an impact on attainment, being from a minority ethnic community (except the "Other Black", "Mixed" and "Other" groups) is still statistically significant in explaining final attainment, although the gap has been significantly reduced' (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 3).

The fact that 'the gap has been significantly reduced' when other factors were taken into account indicates that ethnic differences are inflated when other factors are ignored, which were not only found by Broecke and Nicholls but also by Richardson (2008) and Fielding *et al.* (2008) to impact on attainment. This is because differences in attainment become attributed solely to ethnicity. Exaggerating the importance of ethnicity as a determining factor in attainment has serious implications. It may minoritise some higher education students by attaching the stigma of underachievement to them (Law, Philips and Turney 2004; Jacobs, Owen, Sergeant and Schostak 2007; Byfield 2008; Singh 2011).

Reporting ethnic attainment differences without taking into account other factors known to impact on attainment misrepresents 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other' students groups who were exempt from the Broecke and Nicholls' assertion that 'being from a minority ethnic community is still statistically significant in explaining final attainment' (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 3). Being exempt means that there is no 'ethnic' gap for students in the categories 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other'. The attainment differences that occurred between these categories and the white reference group were explained in the Broecke and Nicholls study by a combination of other factors. The factors controlled for were ethnicity, gender, prior attainment (although not a full control of prior attainment), disability, deprivation using the Index of Multiple Deprivation, subject area, type of higher education institution, term-time accommodation and age (Broecke

and Nicholls 2007).

The evidence of the Broecke and Nicholls study shows that some ethnic groups are clearly exempt from overall judgements about the applicability of generalised statements about ethnic attainment differences. Therefore, studies that generalise attainment by ethnicity may actively create differences by taking only the two variables, attainment and ethnicity, into account. Creating differences where none exist, even if this is unintentional, perpetuates the perceived minority status of many higher education students in Britain. This occurs because attainment is reported as being at least partially determined by the students' ethnic background which, in the case of 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other' student groups, has been contradicted by Broecke and Nicholls (2007).

The exemptions Broecke and Nicholls identified questions the assertion that inbuilt institutional and social biases are responsible for the ethnic attainment differences currently being observed in the British higher education system. Institutional and social ethnic biases are held to exclude some groups while privileging others and to cause ethnic inequalities and attainment differences (Mirza 2009; Pilkington 2008, 2013; Leonardo 2009; Sheared *et al.* 2010; NUS 2011; Singh 2011). The fact, however, that ethnicity was not found to be significant for the categories 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other' indicates that inbuilt institutional and social biases are unlikely to be responsible for ethnic attainment differences in British higher education: exemptions would be less prevalent if inbuilt biases were at work.

The Broecke and Nicholls (2007) study has limitations which further discredit the claim that inbuilt institutional and social biases are responsible for ethnic attainment differences. Broecke and Nicholls emphasise that the results from their study 'do not automatically imply' that 'there is some form of ethnic bias within the higher education system' (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19). This is partly due to the 'quality of the variables' included and partly because the variables excluded from the study are important for any analysis of attainment (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19).

Because the factors that were controlled for (listed above) are not exhaustive, it is reasonable to assume, according to Broecke and Nicholls, that the 'gap would have been further reduced' if other variables had been included or if the quality of the variables that were included had been improved (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19). The extent of the reduction or whether the ethnic attainment gap 'would have been eliminated entirely' is difficult to ascertain (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19).

The factors excluded for practical reasons in the Broecke and Nicholls study were: parental income and education, term-time working, English as an additional language, the level of the English when an additional language, prior institutions attended, communal and or parental responsibilities, immigration status, reasons and motivation for embarking on the degree course and the academic aspirations for graduating with a high class degree (Broecke and Nicholls 2007). Given that these are arguably vital factors when analysing attainment, it is neither justifiable to talk of ethnicity being statistically significant in explaining final attainment nor to extrapolate that inbuilt institutional and social biases within the British higher education system are causing ethnic attainment differences. What can be questioned, however, is whether ethnicity is at all a determining factor in attainment.

Careful analysis of the research data on student attainment is important to avoid inflating differences or possibly creating differences where none exist. However, this analysis is not always welcome, especially when statistics are believed to be unimportant compared to the lived experiences higher education students recount (Gillborn 2006). It is true that attainment statistics which try to determine the statistical significance of social indicators have little explanatory power, not least because many social indicators are conceptually intangible. It is not surprising, therefore, that studies which attempt to determine the statistical significance of a variety of social indicators¹ in relation to covariants have been inconclusive (Connor *et al.* 2004; Bhattacharyya, Ison and Blair 2005; Leslie 2005; Universities UK 2007; Richardson

2008; Fielding *et al.* 2008). It is nevertheless important that statistics are reported accurately because misreporting and conclusions drawn based on incorrect statistical research data may unjustly perpetuate the perceived minority status of many higher education students.

Summary

This review has shown that any claim that ethnic attainment differences exist and persist across British higher education is not substantiated by the statistical research data. What appears to be a significant gap when attainment is reported by ethnicity has been shown to be significantly reduced when other factors known to impact on attainment are taken into account. For the categories 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other', the gap disappeared altogether. Therefore, treating ethnic attainment differences as universal when the 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other' student groups have been shown to be exempt from the 'ethnic' gap creates for these three categories differences where none have been proved to exist.

For the remaining categories, it is tempting to accept the Broecke and Nicholls statement that ethnicity is 'statistically significant in explaining final attainment' (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 3). However, the fact that the Broecke and Nicholls study had to make compromises on the quality of the variables included and that factors such as term-time work, English as an additional language, academic aspirations as well as communal and parental responsibilities were, among other factors, excluded for practical reasons, makes it all the more reasonable to assume, as Broecke and Nicholls have pointed out, that the gap 'would have been further reduced' or might even have been 'eliminated entirely' had all factors that are thought to impact on attainment been taken into account (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19).

The statistical evidence does not confirm ethnicity as a determining factor in the educational attainment of higher education students in Britain. This suggests that the ethnic attainment gap is a supposition rather than a

real phenomenon. Any claim to the contrary contributes to the mistaken perception that ethnically minoritised students are underachieving and unjustly perpetuates the perceived minority status of many higher education students in Britain.

Note: 1 The social indicators that were considered in the various studies included: ethnicity, gender, age, deprivation (Multiple Deprivation Index), socio-economic class, residency, entry qualifications, institutions, mode of study, subject area and the proportion of black and minority ethnic population at the institution (Connor *et al.* 2004; Bhattacharyya *et al.* 2005; Leslie 2005; Universities UK 2007; Richardson 2008; Fielding *et al.* 2008).

3 Discussions and debates emerging from the literature

This chapter outlines the three dominant theoretical paradigms commonly applied to ethnic attainment research in British higher education: the deficit model, critical race theory and multiculturalism. The paradigms are then contextualised through a discussion of the recent ideological shifts in academic thinking, race legislation, higher education and wider politics. Understanding the academic, legislative, educational and political context is important because it is this context that has enabled the current dominant theoretical paradigms to thrive. In particular, much of today's thinking is underpinned and supported by a widespread cultural relativism which, as will be shown in the chapter on 'Equality and education', has been criticised for being theoretically incoherent.

Ideological shifts are shifts in the set of ideas which form the framework through which an issue is viewed or understood. The first ideological shift described here occurred in academic thinking. It marked the decline of the deficit model, which focused on social and personal deficit model to explain attainment differences, and the rise of an increasing concern with inbuilt institutional and social biases and how these biases disadvantage ethnically and socially minoritised students. The second ideological shift, briefly outlined here, occurred in British race legislation with the promulgation of the *Race Relations Amendment Act 2000*. It led to the introduction of relativist ideas into British race legislation and contributed to the corresponding decline in the search for objective truth by giving people,

based on their perceptions of discrimination and harassment, the power to decide what may or may not be defined as a racist incident. The third shift described here occurred in higher education. It concerned the decline of subject-based teaching alongside a consistent rise in student-centred and learning process-oriented teaching which officially took hold in British higher education with the publication of the *Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* in 1997 (Dearing Report). The fourth and last shift outlined here occurred in wider politics. It marked the shift from assimilation politics in the 1960s, to multiculturalism in the 1970s and identity politics in the 1980s, all of which occurred alongside the growth of anti-racism.

Significantly, these four ideological shifts are underpinned by relativist ideas that often imply the pursuit of quite clear political objectives. While the pursuit of political objectives may be expected in the political arena, it is disturbing when this occurs in academic thinking, race legislation and university education.

Theoretical paradigms

Ethnic attainment differences in British higher education have in the past been explained through 'assimilation' theories using a deficit model that focused on personal and social deficiencies. Today, it is critical race theorists, multiculturalists and identity theorists that dominate the research, offering their own explanatory models. These existing theories and the underlying ideas are briefly outlined and discussed in this chapter because they provide the context within which ethnic attainment research is currently being conducted.

Paradigm 1: deficit model and anti-deficit approaches

The deficit model focusing on assimilation was the dominant approach to ethnic attainment prior to the latter half of the 1990s. This model explains ethnic attainment differences in education, by claiming that people from

low socio-economic and minority ethnic backgrounds 'cause their own social, economic and educational problems' because of personal and social deficiencies, such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations and due to familial deficits and dysfunctions (Valencia 1997: x-xi, 9; Turney, Law and Phillips 2002; Jones and Thomas 2005; Jacobs, Owen, Sergeat and Schostak 2007; Ahmed 2007). Such deficit-type explanations are still present today, both in the popular mind and in academic research. Several studies have reported, for example, that Asian women in general and Muslim women who wear the hijab in particular tend to be seen as passive, oppressed, domesticated, compliant, alien and not being serious about higher education because they are believed to be destined for marriage and motherhood rather than for careers (Archer 2003; Tyrer and Ahmad 2006; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Bhopal 2010). Asian men students, by contrast, are often represented as 'criminalised and violent', a stereotype that emerged in the wake of the 'Rushdie Affair' and the subsequent media portrayal of 'book-burning Muslims' in 1989 (Archer 2003: 34-35). The 'Asian men' student stereotype was enforced after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks in the USA and the UK (Archer 2003). The black stereotype, in turn, focuses on black masculinity which perceives black men as violent, criminal, sexual and anti-school (Jackson and Dangerfield 1997; Sewell 1997, Frosh 2000; Archer 2003, Stevenson and Whelan 2013).

The deficit model and deficit thinking in general have been criticised for 'blaming the victim' since they attribute comparatively lower ethnic attainment to the individual by focusing on their 'social and personal deficiencies', while disregarding social and institutional structures (Valencia 1997: xi). In particular, their disregard for the policies and practices of educational institutions that some claim may be responsible for ethnic attainment differences in higher education (Valencia 1997). 'Blaming the victim' is a shorthand for this model of thinking which is believed to have a negative effect on the students' self-esteem, especially when it leads to low teacher expectations, since low expectations are thought to have a detrimental effect on students' academic confidence,

achievement and self-esteem (Ball, Reay and David 2002; Connor *et al.* 2004; Higher Education Academy (HEA) 2008; Byfield 2008; Harper 2009; Dhanda 2010). To address these negative impacts of deficit thinking, Byfield (2008) and Harper (2012) have promoted an anti-deficit model. The anti-deficit model involves studying factors that promote success among ethnically minoritised students rather than investigating factors that cause low academic achievement (Byfield 2008; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park and Umbach 2011; Harper 2012; Stevenson and Whelan 2013). The focus, therefore, lies with helping students to achieve rather than with trying to raise aspirations (Byfield 2008; Wells *et al.* 2011; Harper 2012; Stevenson and Whelan 2013).

More recently, equality and diversity initiatives implemented in the higher education sector have aimed to address deficit thinking through staff development sessions. Staff development sessions that promote equality and diversity aim to raise awareness about both conscious and unconscious cultural assumptions and stereotypes (ECU 2013). In these sessions, university staff members explore how assumptions and stereotypes may affect teacher expectations and the implications this has on student attainment (Tikly, Hayes, Caballero, Hill and Gillborn 2002; Connor *et al.* 2004; ECU 2013).

Paradigm 2: critical race theory and anti-racist pedagogy

Critical race theorists and anti-racist pedagogues argue that ethnic inequalities in higher education are the result of systemic racism, that is, a system of white supremacy and minority ethnic subordination (Jeffrey 1999; Leonardo 2005, 2009; Garner 2006; Gillborn 2006, 2008; Sheared *et al.* 2010; Ladson-Billings 1998). Unequal power relations and 'deep-rooted processes of racist oppression' are seen to be embedded in the education system and contribute to, if not cause, ethnic attainment differences in British higher education (Raby 2004: 379; Gillborn 2006: 15). According to critical race theorists, racism is not only to be understood as a 'normal' and permanent feature of society but also

believed to permute over time and only be exposed if the various forms it takes are unmasked (Delgado 1995 cited in Ladson-Billings 1998: 11).

The assertion that racism is a permanent feature of society, and that it is perpetuated through a system of white supremacy, is one of three tenets that define critical race theory. The second tenet criticises liberalism for its alleged inability to address 'business-as-usual' or embedded forms of racism and for lacking mechanisms that could bring about the radical social change required to transform race relations (Ladson-Billings 1998; Gillborn 2006: 10). The third tenet relates to the 'use of story-telling', particularly the telling of counter-stories, that is, counter to the mainstream, as a way of exploring people's lived experiences (Ladson-Billings 1998; Gillborn 2006: 12).

An additional feature of critical race theory is that it is called a 'theory' but in effect lacks a 'canonical set of doctrines or methodologies' that would turn it into a theory (Crenshaw 1995: xiii cited in Gillborn 2006: 8). Instead, critical race theory is a political project that questions social and political relations of power in order to uproot and reshape current structures, challenge racial oppression and eventually bring about a social transformation (Jeffrey 1999; Gillborn 2006, 2008). How this social transformation is to be prompted is not specified.

One aim pursued by critical race theorists is to understand the regime of white supremacy and the process by which some people are subordinated (Crenshaw 1995: xiii cited in Gillborn 2006). White supremacy refers to the belief that 'in a racialised society where whiteness is positioned as normative, *everyone* is ranked and categorised in relation to these points of opposition' (Ladson-Billings 1998: 9). Leonardo (2002) points out that the term 'whiteness' is a social rather than a cultural concept because functions that are part of white culture, such as drinking coke or 'Protestant weddings', are not harmful themselves, but there are some aspects of white culture that assume 'superiority over others' (Leonardo 2002: 32). Whiteness encompasses 'the unwillingness to name the contours of racism, the avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or group' and 'the

minimisation of the racist legacy' (Frankenberg 1993 cited in Leonardo 2002: 32). Overall, critical race theorists consider some facets of so-called 'white culture' as 'benign or even liberatory, such as critical traditions of the Enlightenment', but whiteness as a whole, and as defined by Frankenberg, is nevertheless considered oppressive (Leonardo 2002: 32).

Leonardo notes that claiming aspects of white culture are oppressive does not mean that white people *per se* are racist (Leonardo 2002). The term 'white people' represents, according to Leonardo, a 'socially constructed identity, usually based on skin colour', but it does not mean that white people necessarily reinforce whiteness (Leonardo 2002: 31). White people are, however, often the subject of whiteness because the 'system' is thought to benefit and privilege white people (Bonnet 1997 cited in Gillborn 2006). Consequently, the word 'critical' in critical race theory does not relate to the term 'white' people *per se*; instead, it relates to being critical of what whiteness has come to mean as a socially constructed system of power that reinforces white identification and interests (Housee 2008; Gillborn 2006). This means that 'whiteness' refers to the 'attempt to homogenise diverse white ethnics into a single category for purposes of racial domination', while the term 'white people' refers to being subject to whiteness and the term 'white culture' refers to the 'amalgamation of various white ethnic practices' (Leonardo 2002: 32).

In line with critical race theory, anti-racist pedagogues believe in exposing racism in education and proposing radical solutions for addressing it (Ladson-Billings 1998). For white supremacy to be addressed, voices that have previously been silenced require foregrounding (Walcott 1990 cited in Raby 2004). It is not enough, according to Walcott, to simply add on a component of anti-racist education (Walcott 1990 cited in Raby 2004). Anti-racist education requires 'teachers to reflect on their own racialised locations' and to 'involve others, such as community and parents' in the process in order to rupture the dominant power structures that continually exclude 'people of colour and marginalise them in society' (Walcott 199: 110 cited in Raby 2004: 379).

Paradigm 3: multiculturalism and inclusive education

While critical race theory dominates much of the contemporary literature on ethnic inequalities in British higher education, a related multicultural emphasis on inclusive teaching and learning has become widely advocated to address ethnic attainment differences (Skelton 2002; Thomas and May 2010, Hockings 2010, Berry and Loke 2011; NUS 2011, Livsey 2011; Stevenson 2012). Inclusive teaching and learning aim to embed considerations about equity into 'all functions of the institution'; to treat equity considerations as an 'on-going process of quality enhancement'; and to apply equity considerations to support practices and environments as much as to teaching and learning (May and Bridger 2010: 6; Thomas and May 2010: 4). Inclusive teaching and learning approaches embrace, like critical race theory, the idea that hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases disadvantage some groups while privileging others. However, instead of advocating, like critical race theorists, the need to challenge unequal social structures, the inclusive teaching and learning approach aims 'to include those who are excluded into the dominant framework or state of being' (Archer 2003: 23). To achieve this, inclusive teaching and learning uses group-based approaches and so embraces the 'politics of difference' and recognition that multiculturalism stands for (Barry 2001: 5).

The central focus of inclusive teaching is to take account of and value students' differences within the mainstream curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Hockings 2010; May and Bridger 2010; Thomas and May 2010). Inclusive teaching and learning encourages teachers to become aware of the 'impact of staff and student diversity on the learning process, and the importance of avoiding stereotypical constructs' of students as non-traditional and lacking the ability to excel (Hockings 2008 cited in Singh 2011: 41). It means engaging with 'difference in a positive and constructive way' (Grace and Gravestock 2009: 41). But, as Grace and Gravestock argue, although fairness and equity are important, being

'culturally and individually specific' is not always the answer to inclusive teaching (Grace and Gravestock 2009: 2). More importantly, inclusive teaching and learning, according to Grace and Gravestock, is about 'reducing students' discomfort' (Grace and Gravestock 2009: 33). That is, discomfort based on the students' background or lives rather than intellectual discomfort, because intellectually, Grace and Gravestock argue, students must be taken to 'the edge of risks' (Grace and Gravestock 2009: 33). This is a difficult balancing act because, as Grace and Gravestock point out, it carries with it the danger of treating students as if they were some sort of 'special cases' (Grace and Gravestock 2009: 41).

Conceptually, inclusive teaching and learning are rooted in multiculturalism, a theoretical approach that advocates the celebration of differences and promotes tolerance, understanding, acceptance of diversity and empathy for minorities (Raby 2004; Hocking 2010). Contemporary multicultural education, upon which inclusive teaching and learning is based, has been criticised for engaging in 'trivial celebrations of diversity' (Ladson-Billings 1998: 22). In the schooling sector, according to Ladson-Billings, it encourages the 'singing of "ethnic" songs', the 'eating of "ethnic" food' and 'dancing of "ethnic" dances' instead of engaging students in thinking about lived realities and preparing them to reconstruct society (Ladson-Billings 1998: 22).

Celebrating diversity in this superficial manner has been described by Sharma (2004) as an additive form of inclusion. It is a form of inclusion that refers to practices such as using non-white students as multicultural resources, introducing cultural diversity to mono-cultural curricula, adding non-Eurocentric ideas and bodies of cultural knowledge, including black authors on the reading list and correcting teacher attitudes (Sharma 2004). Sharma argues that education which 'seeks merely to include "other knowledges" or reveal the truth about "other cultures" is doomed to failure, as it ultimately serves to reproduce existing hegemonies of cultural authority and racialised knowledge' (Sharma 2004: 106). This critique equally applies to identity politics, which like multiculturalism, uses

group-based social differentiation, the notions of inclusion, tolerance and recognition and aims to reduce people's discomfort based on their background or lives. What emerges from this brief review of three dominant theoretical approaches to ethnic attainment differences is that academic thinking has seemingly abandoned the deficit model, which explained student attainment differences in terms of personal and social deficiencies. In its place, critical race theory, multiculturalism and identity theories have taken hold, all of which assert that hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases disadvantage some groups while privileging others.

Shifts in thinking: the law, higher education and wider politics

The ideological shift in academic thinking away from the deficit model and towards an increasing concern with institutional and social structures and notions such as diversity and inclusion has shaped contemporary ethnic attainment research. The shift in academic thinking marks the first of four ideological shifts that have influenced contemporary thinking. The three remaining shifts described here concern race legislation, higher education and the wider political context. A contextual understanding of the changes in thinking is important because it explains the popularity of current theoretical paradigms adopted in ethnic attainment research and the relativist ideas and group-based differentiation they represent.

The *Race Relations Amendment Act 2000* not only placed new duties on public authorities, schools and universities to 'have a written policy on race equality', to 'monitor their activities for signs of bias (especially focusing on student achievement) and to 'actively plan to eradicate race inequality', but also introduced a legislative focus on individual perceptions of discrimination and harassment which effectively resulted in the introduction of relativist ideas to race legislation (*Race Relations Amendment Act (RRAA) 2000*; Gillborn 2006: 5). The new definition of race discrimination, which goes back to the *Macpherson Report* (1999) on

the police handling of the killing of Stephen Lawrence, the black teenager in South London, defines a 'racist incident' as 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person' (RRAA 2000; Gillborn 2008: 123). This is a subjective definition based on 'association and perception' which was 'previously applicable to race, sexual orientation and religion or belief', only to be extended in the *Equality Act 2010* 'to include age, disability, gender reassignment and sex' (Equality Act 2010; ECU 2012: 5; Sian, Law and Sayyid 2013: 133).

Anti-racist campaigners celebrated the introduction of the new definition of what constitutes a racist incident to the law because it is no longer the 'intent' but the 'outcome' that matters, and an incident may be judged as racist irrespective of whether the action or policy was intended to be racist or not (Gillborn 2008). One consequence has been that unwitting and thoughtless acts have since been considered as equally problematic as direct racism (Gillborn 2008). A second consequence is that the law is no longer concerned with finding any objective truth about the matter: when what constitutes a racist incident is defined only by the perceptions of the purported victim, the law itself becomes arbitrary.

The deeper consequence of introducing relativist ideas into race legislation is that this fosters a climate where relativist approaches to ethnic attainment research flourish, while realist approaches, which are concerned with finding the objective truth, are dismissed. The relativist approach turns reality into a subjective matter, exhaustively determined by a person's background. Moreover, race legislation, which require universities to be more proactive in the pursuit of race equality and expect universities to adopt the relativist ideas that are adopted in race legislation, encourage universities to promote group-based social differentiation and inclusive teaching and learning, without taking into account the implications such an approach has for university education and its students.

This change in law was preceded by a shift in education which abandoned subject-based teaching in favour of student-centred and learning process-oriented teaching. This ideological shift in education was officially

introduced into British higher education by the Dearing Report in 1997. Recommendation eight of the report entreated that ‘all institutions of higher education give priority to developing and implementing learning and teaching strategies which focus on the promotion of students’ learning’ (Dearing 1997). The shift away from subject-based teaching towards student-centred education and learning process-oriented teaching prompted a growing concern with the student experience, to the extent that today ‘student experience’ has become an integral part of university policy and practice.

The preoccupation with the student experience has also given rise to the term ‘relevant knowledge’, which refers to the idea that students can only develop their full academic potential if knowledge is relevant to their background or lives. According to this approach, if knowledge is relevant to students in terms of their ethnic and social background, their lives or their ways of thinking, this will foster a sense of social and academic belonging among students (see O’Hear 1981; Furedi 2006; Thomas 2012). This idea gains support from the work of Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993), who argued that academic and social integration enhances the students’ commitment to their individual goals and to the university and that this will have a positive effect on retention and completion rates.

It has rarely been asked whether teaching students knowledge ‘relevant’ to their background might constrain them to this background and hence function to reinforce ‘existing social divisions and inequalities’ (O’Hear 1981: 20). Teaching students ‘relevant’ knowledge might also imply not teaching them the ‘best’ knowledge or the ‘best known’. In this sense, the relevant knowledge argument is clearly an example of deficit thinking: it suggests that ethnically and socially, minoritised students lack the capacity to engage intellectually with knowledge deemed unrelated to their background or lives. Rather than enabling students to develop their full academic potential, as the literature on relevant knowledge and social

and academic belonging suggests, teaching relevant knowledge effectively minoritises higher education students by restricting their access to knowledge.

The ideological shift in British higher education towards student-centred education and learning process-oriented teaching has created a climate where approaches to ethnic attainment research that embrace relativist ideas have been able to thrive. It is this change in approach to higher education and teaching that facilitates the spread of relativist ideas in ethnic attainment research, without any questioning or discussion about the implications of this approach.

The fourth ideological shift described by this study occurred in the wider politics. It marks a movement from the politics of assimilation in the 1960s, to the philosophy of multiculturalism in the 1970s, to identity politics and, more recently, to intersectionality theory in the 1980s. This ideological shift occurred alongside a growing concern about anti-racism which started in the post-war period. Assimilation policies were designed to encourage ethnically minoritised groups of the population to blend into the dominant society by adopting the customs and attitudes of that society (Malik 1996). Multiculturalists, in turn, encourage communities to retain their customs, attitudes and cultures. They call for equal respect for cultures and for policies designed to maintain and promote the existing cultural diversity (Parekh 2000; Modood and Acland 1998; Malik 2008; Furedi 2011). Identity policies and intersectionality theory both embrace multiculturalist ideas, but instead of solely promoting cultural diversity and identity policies, proponents of intersectionality theory in particular holds that people's self-identified social interest groups are likely to include not only cultural aspects but also other social descriptors, such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability (Furedi 2011; Malik 2006, 2008).

What is noticeable about the ideological shift in wider politics is the increasing consolidation of approaches that rely on group-based social differentiation. People are routinely divided along ethnic lines either for

ethnic monitoring purposes, often because of legal requirements, or to celebrate cultural differences and awareness, a practice that is thought to increase respect and promote equality between groups. This, along with contemporary ethnic attainment research which endorses the same relativist ideas that shape current academic thinking, race legislation and higher education, heightens people's awareness of differences. The differences are, however, presented as unitary features of particular groups without much recognition for in-group differences and the changing and contradictory aspects related to it (Hewitt 2005).

There has been an ideological shift towards adopting relativist ideas about truth and the practice of group-based social differentiation in academic thinking, race legislation, higher education and wider politics. This has led to a situation where relativist approaches to ethnic attainment research have established themselves despite having been criticised for being theoretically incoherent (see chapter 5 'Equality and education') and without having examined the implications of adopting relativist approaches to ethnic attainment research.

Contextualisation and criticisms

The aim of the discussion in this chapter was to draw out and develop criticisms of ethnic attainment research from the wider political and cultural context in which it takes place.

One important criticism made was that group-based social differentiation is in danger of making inflated claims about ethnic differences or even of creating differences where none exist. Claims about differences between ethnic groups get inflated as group-based approaches tend to emphasise particular features and talk about them as if they were major differences while ignoring important in-group differences. Moreover, the ethnic categories that are currently used in group-based approaches are both too broad and too arbitrary to serve any meaningful purpose. The broad ethnic categories that are currently in use serve nothing more than the facilitation

of the contemporary bureaucratic practice of ethnic monitoring. Beyond that, group-based social differentiation tends to inadvertently essentialise ethnic and social attributes as determining factors in student attainment, not least because differences between ethnic and social groups are established but rarely subjected to intense scrutiny.

Another criticism was that relativist group-based approaches to ethnic attainment research can be criticised for pursuing implicit political objectives has implications for both ethnic attainment research and the university policies and practices derived from it. Once university education advances political objectives, it is effectively indoctrinating students with whatever views may be deemed 'right' at a particular point in time. Indoctrination of this sort is clearly not what university education is for. On the contrary, university education is about excellence, critical attitudes, rationality, independent thinking and above all, the pursuit of knowledge. Universal standards in university education can only be maintained, if it is concerned with the unhindered pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Indoctrination, in contrast, minoritises students as it disrespects and undermines the students' capacity for intellectual thought and rationality and so denies students everything that in any sense may be called a university education.

Furthermore, relativist group-based approaches are criticised for adopting a perspective that focuses on hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases. This has serious implications for the way students from ethnically and socially minoritised backgrounds are depicted and seen in student attainment research and at British universities. When students are depicted as vulnerable to hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases, they are by default also depicted as lacking resilience and human agency: the capacity to act in pursuit of conscious goals. But this is, of course, not acknowledged in the literature. It has been argued here, however, that depicting students as vulnerable to power relations and social biases in ethnic attainment research gives rise to a new type of deficit thinking. The new deficit talk, unlike the old type

which focused on personal and social deficiencies, underrates resilience and human agency in students and by doing so minoritises higher education students because it fails to respect human potential in students.

This brief critique of relativist group-based approaches to ethnic attainment research has brought to the fore a need for greater scrutiny of the research and the literature. Currently, relativist group-based approaches to ethnic attainment research claim a certain degree of legitimacy from the wider prevalence of relativism in society and research. It would, however, be foolish to succumb to the common sense appeal of relativist approaches. Instead, it is important that the underlying principles and assumptions of relativist group-based approaches to ethnic attainment research and the implications of adopting such an approach are investigated if researchers are to be said to be truly interested in advancing understanding.

Categories and categorisation

Questions about the relevance and validity of the ethnic categories currently in use ought to be part of any discussion concerning ethnic attainment differences in higher education. Using ethnic categories is problematic because the categories are known to be socially constructed, yet, although acknowledged as social constructed 'pigments of the imagination', the use of these categories is thought to be essential if ethnic inequalities in higher education are to be addressed (Anwar 1990; Gilroy 2000; Cousin 2002; Gillborn 2008, Warmington 2009; Singh 2011). Ethnic categories are used in higher education to quantify student attainment by ethnicity, to specify group identities, to determine groups that are vulnerable to discrimination, to identify cultural learning styles and to develop culturally inclusive curricula as well as inclusive teaching and learning practices. Amid the rush to identify these and other differences in the name of diversity, inclusion and equality, the consequences of categorising people are rarely discussed.

The practice of categorising people is based on the assumption that group-based social differences exist. This assumption is rarely questioned. In consequence, the repercussions of applying group-based social differentiation in higher education policy and practice are not being examined. Warmington (2009) supports the continued use of ethnic categories. He argues that although 'we are post-racial in having moved beyond pseudo-genetic notions of race', 'we are not post-racial *per se*' because racial discrimination is still a 'lived experience' and that 'educationalists concerned with social justice' are 'caught in a bind: working both with and against conceptual tools that have yet to be effectively replaced' (Warmington 2009: 295). Warmington, therefore, suggests that categories must be used if ethnic inequalities in education are to be addressed, even if the use of these categories to some degree reinforces the racial and ethnic differences it aims to dispel.

Ethnic categories themselves have very little meaning but have become widely adopted. One reason is that universities in Britain are, by law, required to gather and publish information on how they are meeting the general duties of the Equality Act 2010, and, although there is no prescribed process to meet the legal requirements, ethnic monitoring, using broad categories, is now universally adopted as a mechanism for gathering equalities data. One limitation of these categories is the arbitrary combination and uneven spread of a wide range of characteristics. These include continents (African, Asian), colour (black, white), nationality (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Chinese), geographical areas (Caribbean), people (Arab) and even lifestyles (traveller) (Equality Act 2010; HESA 2013). Then, there is the 'mop up' category 'other' and the 'unknown', 'refused' or 'prefer not to say' options, which presumably is used either by people who reject the ethnic monitoring exercise or who do not see themselves as fitting into any of the predetermined categories (Cousin 2002).

The categories themselves are effectively bureaucratic identities. It is not surprising, therefore, that many students are 'unsure about self-defining' their

ethnicity in accordance with predetermined categories, which is in itself a contradiction in terms between self-definition and predetermination (Cousin 2002). Cousin found, in a study that examined the ethnic categories used in higher education, that some Overseas and European students, who are not familiar with ethnic monitoring, are unsure whether they ticked the correct box, while some home students thought that the categories 'did not capture their dual roots in Britain and their parent's country of origin' (Cousin 2002: 49). Furthermore, given that the category 'mixed heritage' includes a large and growing number of people, it is disconcerting that ethnic monitoring is unable to capture the 'mixed heritage' category adequately (Khan 2012; ONS 2011: Census data from KS201EW). Not being able to capture the complexity of the 'mixed heritage' category indicates the limits of statistical monitoring and the reasoning that emerges from it.

Although Warmington (2009) discusses the necessity of using categories if ethnic inequalities are to be addressed, this is not as self-evident, as he suggests. On the contrary, categorisation, or the practice of allocating people to various predetermined ethnic categories, is problematic on various grounds. First, ethnic monitoring forms list the category 'white' on top. This has been considered problematic because it reflects the racial hierarchies that were established during the enlightenment period when scientific racism was at its height and is thought to reinstate the category 'white' as a signifier of dominance (Brah 1992; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992). If categorisation were really a progressive approach, the 'white on top' issue could be resolved by rearranging the order of the categories. However, the concerns regarding the categorisation of people go beyond the 'white on top' issue.

Categorising people is divisive. It overemphasises differences between groups of people but also suggests that the experiences of some groups are fundamentally distinct from those in other categories (Good 2013). Once the question of how experiences differ is asked, it answers itself. Minor particularities gain in significance; groups are then differentiated

on the basis of these particularities and in-group differences; people's *individuality* is downplayed. Gilroy has pointed out that identity, based on group membership, 'looked most seductive where all differences had been banished or erased from the collective' (Gilroy 2000: 102). Once individual differences within groups are ignored, differences between groups gain in significance. In this way, group membership becomes more important than a person's individuality. Questions about how experiences differ between groups are, therefore, inherently belittling since they deprive people the possibility of recognising their individuality.

Group-based thinking presumes that one category dominates over the oppressed other. Each individual, Good has pointed out, belongs to one of the following three categories: white or non-white, male or female, heterosexual or homosexual, and the 'first category in each case is perceived as dominant, the second as oppressed' (Good 2013). Without the assumption that one dominates over the oppressed other, group thinking would have no significance. Group thinking requires clear boundaries between groups. Once the boundaries are erased or indistinguishable because in-group differences have been accounted for, there is no longer any logical basis for group thinking. By ignoring in-group differences and establishing clear boundaries between groups, group-based social differences are provided with an empirical base. Consequently, group-based thinking reifies 'race' and 'ethnicity' because it relies on generalisations that would not apply were in-group differences considered.

Stanfield and Dennis have argued that the continued use of ethnic categories suggests that race and ethnicity matter and matter in an essential way (Stanfield and Dennis 1993 cited in Cousin 2002). It 'perpetuates the myth that race is relevant in defining human differences', and it 'conforms the stratified racial order' (Stanfield and Dennis 1993 cited in Cousin 2002: 50). Race and ethnicity become reified rather than dispelled. Gilroy (2000) has further argued that we are currently living through a period that presents a chance to prevent the rehabilitation of race but this requires us to abandon the use of the term. This 'crisis in

raciology', that is, a crisis in racial science and thinking, has emerged because 'the idea "race"' has lost much of its common-sense credibility', the 'cultural and ideological work that goes into producing and reproducing it is more visible than ever before', and raciology 'has been stripped of its moral and intellectual integrity' (Gilroy 2000: 28–29).

Although the producing and reproducing of the term 'race' is more visible than ever before, a trend that has also been noted by Warmington (2009) who acknowledges the issue associated with the continued use of the term, there is a reluctance to abandon the use of both the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity'. The worry associated with abandoning the use of the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' is that racial and ethnic discrimination would go unnoticed and discrimination thrive unbridled. This raises the question whether the continued use of the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' or the abandonment of both terms does more damage. The argument made here, and throughout this book, is that abandoning the use of the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' and with it the idea that racial or ethnic differences exists between groups of people would do more to dispel the myth about racial and ethnic differences than the continued use of these terms. If categories are used as if they existed, their relevance can hardly be denied.

An alternative approach to categorisation, adopted by the literary theorist and philosopher Spivak, is to treat essentialism as a pragmatic device that she labels 'strategic essentialism'. This means seeing essentialist accounts of human beings 'not as a description of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique of anything' (Spivak and Adamson 1990: 51). Adopting 'strategic essentialism' as an approach allows a researcher or writer to acknowledge that 'essentialist categories of human identity should be criticised, but emphasises that one cannot avoid using such categories at times in order to make sense of the social and political world' (Morton 2003: 75). Despite the seeming ease and efficacy in Spivak's approach, there remains the possibility that using social or ethnic categories for political, social or research purposes may still tend to essentialise and confirm these categories.

Furthermore, the categorisation of people creates neither equality nor a sense of our common humanity. Good (2013) has argued that the categorisation of people, far from creating equality, 'perpetuates an atmosphere where certain kinds of people are preferred to certain others' because 'all that changes are the actual preferences' (Good 2013). The result is a reversal of previous inequalities of respect: white people, men and heterosexuals are seen as culprits, and a person from one category cannot speak about the experiences of a person from another category because understanding is thought to be determined by group-membership (Good 2013). Consequently, the categorisation of people nurtures rather than addresses inequalities.

Good (2013) also argued that the categorisation of people's backgrounds damages both their individuality and their humanity by confining them to specific categories of identity. 'To see a person primarily as a "white male" or a "black female" is to diminish both their humanity and their individuality' (Good 2013). The power of group thinking is revealed by what happens to individuals when they negate sharing the group experience. Individuals then 'risk being told that they are 'in denial' or that they have been 'intimidated or co-opted', which illustrates how individuality is taken away from people (Good 2013). This also denies people membership of any common humanity because, as Malik has pointed out, group thinking emphasises the plurality of meanings over the common yardsticks or measures of judgements that are the basis of equality and humanity (Malik 1998). Without common measures of judgement, Malik has argued that the meaning of equality is reduced to 'the way racists used to define equality, that is, "equal but different", in defending segregation or apartheid' (Malik 1998).

The desire to identify differences in the name of diversity, equality and inclusion means that the self-defeating nature of the use and application of ethnic categories is overlooked. Instead, it is argued that the use of ethnic categories is necessary if ethnic inequalities are to be addressed, because otherwise, current practices of oppression will remain the status

quo. The bureaucratic identities created when current ethnic and racial categories are used have little grounding in reality, partly because of the range of characteristics arbitrarily used to define various ethnic categories and partly because people are asked to self-define their ethnicity yet are restricted to a range of predetermined and bureaucratically established categories. The arbitrary and bureaucratic nature of the ethnic categories invalidates any conclusions that might be drawn on the basis of these categories. The discussion in this section has illustrated how the practice of categorising people does more harm than good. It is not only having the category 'white' on top of ethnic monitoring forms that is problematic because it reflects the racial hierarchies of the past, but the practice of categorisation is further divisive because it suggests that experiences of some groups are fundamentally distinct from those in other groups. There are other problems. The categorisation of people reverses the previous inequalities of respect in that the culprits, for example, 'white middle-class men', become the disrespected victim, which means all that is changing is who is 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' without addressing the underlying issues. Categorising people also elevates minor differences between groups to the level of major differences, while reducing important in-group differences to the point of non-recognition. By repressing differences within groups, differences between groups gain importance. This drives a wedge between people and any sense of our common humanity. The continued use of the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' suggests that race and ethnicity matter and inadvertently advocates essentialism as well as the idea that current ethnic categories are valid for defining human differences.

The continued use and application of ethnic categories is a well-intentioned attempt to address ethnic inequalities but fails to recognise people's individuality and humanity. The inevitability of using categories, if ethnic inequalities are to be addressed, is not as self-evident as suggested in much of the literature on identity, inclusivity and critical race theory. As Good has pointed out, 'treating people as individuals rather than category-members is at least as anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic as the

group approach', and in the long run, it is 'probably the best guarantee of security against discrimination' (Good 2001, 2013).

Categorisation and its implications

Critical race theory, multiculturalism and identity theories have justified the categorisation of people, that is, group-based social differentiation, in both ethnic attainment research and the literature. How categories and the categorisation of people turns into a divisive force by stressing particularities based on forms of appearance over the universal and our common humanity, is illustrated in the way research findings are reported and ethnic attainment differences are discussed in the literature. The examples referred to here to illustrate the implications the categorisation of people has on ethnic attainment research and university education include the National Student Survey and the literature on critical mass, role models and curricula.

Reporting of statistics on attainment

One way of reporting the scores of the National Student Survey is by using broad ethnic categories. How the use of broad ethnic categories tends to inflate, and, in some cases create, differences has been discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to the statistics on attainment. The misreporting in student attainment statistics that results from comparing only two variables, ethnicity and attainment, and the use of broad ethnic categories, is likely to also affect the reporting of the National Student Survey scores as the same limitations apply. Reporting attainment or, in this case, the National Student Survey scores in relation to one variable only, ethnicity, assumes that differences occur along ethnic lines and that broad ethnic categories, despite their limitations, are suitable to capture the differences that are thought to exist. That other variables may also affect the National Student Survey scores or may even refute the reported

'ethnic effect' is disregarded.

A case in point is the HEFCE Report *National Student Survey: Findings and Trends* (2011). The report states that in the National Student Survey the 'satisfaction profiles varied significantly depending on students' ethnic background' and that the 'differences in satisfaction score for respondents with known ethnicity were significant', particularly in the two sections in the National Student Survey that concern teaching and learning and academic support (HEFCE 2011: 23). A previous study by SurrIDGE showed, however, that differences in the National Student Survey are not attributable to ethnicity but to subject area (SurrIDGE 2008). Likewise, a study conducted by Fielding *et al.* showed that the scores of the National Student Survey in the assessment and feedback section are higher among some ethnically minoritised groups than those of their white counterparts, meaning ethnically minoritised students are more satisfied than their white counterparts (Fielding *et al.* 2008). The differences between the SurrIDGE and Fielding *et al.* study and the HEFCE Report is that the former took into account additional variables rather than simply reporting National Student Survey scores by ethnicity.

HEFCE reported ethnic differences in student satisfaction without considering other variables or how these variables might affect the scores of the National Student Survey. The HEFCE study throws into question the use of group-based social differentiation in ethnic attainment research because it lends itself to incorrect reporting when other variables that may also impact on student satisfaction or attainment are not taken into account. What is needed, therefore, is more differentiated attainment research. This conclusion also emerged from the literature on ethnicity and the fact that there is a critical mass of ethnically minoritised students at British higher education institutions.

'Critical mass'

The term 'critical mass' here refers to the proportion of students and staff in

universities who come from an ethnically minoritised background. Having a critical mass of students and staff from ethnically minoritised backgrounds at university is thought to reduce racist incidents, improve cultural awareness and diversity confidence, create a more welcoming environment, provide role models for students, reduce feeling of isolation among students, provide a source of support and ultimately improve student attainment (Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Fielding *et al.* 2008; Jessop and Williams 2009; Bhopal 2010). According to Bagguley and Hussain, who interviewed 100 British women students from South Asian backgrounds, having a critical mass of students and staff from one's own ethnic background can be particularly important for students who come from 'being a majority at school' to 'being a minority at university' or 'a minority in a programme', as it tends to ease the transition from school to university for students (Bagguley and Hussain 2007: 28, 32-33). The absence of a critical mass can, according to Bagguley and Hussain, intensify ethnic clustering because students may decide to 'detach themselves from those who [are] not from the same ethnic group' when they are in the minority (Bagguley and Hussain 2007: 28, 32-33). Some students in Jessop and Williams's study described, however, how being a minority gave an 'impetus to belonging and joining in on campus' (Jessop and Williams 2009: 99).

Fielding and colleagues conducted a study in 2008 that examined the critical mass issue. They correlated student attainment with the critical mass of students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds while controlling for other factors that are known to impact on attainment. What they discovered was only a slight 'net disadvantage' for most minority ethnic students and the reverse effect for the black Caribbean student group, who performed better in situations where the percentage of minority ethnic students was low (Fielding *et al.* 2008: 25). While the Fielding *et al.* study shows no or only a slight correlation between attainment and the critical mass of students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds at university, the Fielding *et al.* study does not invalidate the critical mass argument *per se*. The presence or

absence of a critical mass, may still impact on students although it has not been shown in the Fielding *et al.* study to impact on attainment.

Use of terminology

There are further issues that affect much of today's ethnic attainment research. One is the often inaccurate use of terminology, for example the term 'racism', and another is the generalisations often made from studies that rely upon unrepresentative samples. Bagguley and Hussain's use of the term 'racism' is a case in point that illustrates the inaccurate use of terminology that can be noticed in some of the literature. Bagguley and Hussain state, for instance, that 'racism in universities seemed to be most frequently encountered in those institutions and courses with very small numbers of minority ethnic students' (Bagguley and Hussain 2007: 33). The problem with this statement in Bagguley and Hussain's text is that the term 'racism' is used without being defined. Instead, Bagguley and Hussain, in their role as researchers, decide for themselves what constitutes 'racism'. They do that by referring to the experiences the research participants interpret as prejudicial or discriminatory, as 'racism', even if the research participants have not used that term themselves.

Bagguley and Hussain use the terms 'racism' and 'racist' to denote a wide range of incidents from physical assault to people making certain assumptions. They summarise their findings, for example, by saying that 'forms of racist behaviour varied from physical attacks to cultural assumptions, especially about the gendered character of South Asian culture' and 'much of the racism was also in the form of Islamophobia', that is, a hatred or fear of Islam or Muslims (Bagguley and Hussain 2007: 33). Although holding 'cultural assumptions' and certain prejudices and behaviour referred to as 'Islamophobia' are mentioned in much of the literature as examples of racism, the appropriation of the term 'racism' to describe cultural assumptions and so-called 'Islamophobia' is contestable. First, the use of the term 'racism' in this way fails to acknowledge that

incidents are often described by researchers as 'racism', while the students themselves do not actually refer to the incidents as racist. Examples of this arbitrary use of the term 'racism' can be found in Bagguley and Hussain (2007) and Jessop and Williams (2009). Second, the arbitrary use of the term 'racism' means that the significance and extent of 'racism' at British universities tends to get inflated.

Having a debate about what constitutes racism is important. However, Macpherson's description of institutional racism, which states that racism 'can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination', must not be taken at face value because it supports arbitrary interpretations (Macpherson 1999: 49). The current arbitrary use of the term 'racism' in much of the literature about ethnic attainment differences implies that attitudes and cultural assumptions lead to discriminatory behaviour. However, attitudes and assumptions do not necessarily lead to discriminatory behaviour, which makes it wrong to refer to cultural assumptions as racism.

Another example of the random use of terminology can be found in the literature on 'critical mass' discussed above. The term 'critical mass' refers to some kind of numerical baseline, a certain minimum number of students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds studying at university at any particular point in time, that has yet to be calculated. Until the term 'critical mass' is defined, however, researchers, who apply the term without elaborating on what exactly they have in mind, are in danger of making unspecified and inflated claims, rather than contributing to the understanding of the issue they claim to have identified.

The problem of making unspecified and inflated claims is further exacerbated by studies which rely on unrepresentative samples yet generalise their findings across the ethnically minoritised student population and even across the British higher education sector as a whole. Bagguley and Hussain, for example, state that 'racism in universities seemed to be most frequently encountered in those institutions and courses with very small numbers of minority ethnic students' (Bagguley and Hussain 2007: 33).

They make this generalisation on the basis of their study of one hundred women, all students from South Asian backgrounds, but they suggest it applies to the ethnically minoritised student population as a whole. To avoid inaccurate and even false claims, more careful reporting and discussion about findings and the use of terminology are vital if student attainment research is to advance understanding.

The discussion of the literature on the National Student Survey and on critical mass has shown that categories and the categorisations of students can lead to inaccurate and even false statements about ethnic differences in British higher education. The danger of making inaccurate or false claims is further aggravated by the arbitrary use of terminology and generalisations that are made from studies based on unrepresentative samples. Studies that use unrepresentative samples may throw a new light on an issue, but it is wrong to extract generalisations from these studies. Another issue that emerges from the literature is that contemporary relativist group-based approaches to ethnic attainment research do not appear to endow students with the capacity to deliberately act in pursuit of conscious goals. The issue of human agency is explored next in relation to the literature on role models and curricula.

'Role models'

The literature on role models asserts that students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds are more likely to achieve their academic potential if high-achieving professionals and academic staff from ethnically minoritised backgrounds come to speak at university or are mentoring students. Research initially provided in support of this view was conducted by Modood and Acland, who found that students questioned the institutional commitment to equal opportunity when there was an 'absence of sufficient minority ethnic role models' in higher education and that students wanted role models as well as somebody they could consult about racist experiences 'who would understand at first hand' (Modood and Acland 1998: 82). More recent calls for role models in higher education

have come from a variety of scholars and commentators, including Connor *et al.* (2004), Bagguley and Hussain (2007), HEA (2008) Dhanda (2010) and NUS (2011). Bagguley and Hussain in particular have mentioned some of the nuances in relation to role models when they relate how women students from South Asian backgrounds found role models in 'older sisters, cousins or friends of the family in the community' and that they were 'important sources of information about how to apply to university and potential careers' (Bagguley and Hussain 2007: 19). Whether, however, role models help to raise student attainment is disputed. According to Sewell, the idea of the 'role model' is mistaken, since 'identification is much more than imitation' based on social indicators and achievement (Sewell 2009: 27). Questions about the extent to which staff are accepted as role models on the basis of a shared ethnic background, what the nature of identification with members of staff might be and, more fundamentally, whether there is a need for students to identify with staff to raise educational attainment have yet to be discussed. The idea that identification with academic staff is necessary to achieve academically gained importance with the spread of critical race theory, multiculturalism and identity theories but has never properly been questioned. Instead, it appears that the widespread application of relativist group-based approaches to ethnic attainment research provides a context for assumptions that having ethnic role models improves student attainment to flourish without engaging in a serious discussion about the nature of identification, imitation, motivation and achievement in higher education.

'Eurocentric curricula'

Much of the literature on ethnic attainment differences claims that curricula at university are Western or Eurocentric. The term 'Eurocentric' is used to argue that ethnically minoritised students are disadvantaged not only because 'their' cultures and perspectives are not represented, but also because the content is thought to be presented such that it favours the

European perspective (Purwar 2004; Turney *et al.* 2002; NUS 2011). Ethnically minoritised students are thought to be less likely to relate to the teaching content that is thought to be 'Eurocentric' and to perform to their full academic potential (Avir, Jones, Mashengele and Patel 1997; Modood and Acland 1998; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Jessop and Williams 2009). It is interesting that the literature on Eurocentrism tends to claim that ethnically minoritised students are disadvantaged by Eurocentric curricula without discussing the fact that many ethnically minoritised students are British born and the implications this may have.

Bagguley and Hussain describe how Eurocentrism may affect the curricula. They mention that students talked about how 'assumptions about Islam and Muslims crept into the teaching context in those subjects where issues around relationships between Islam and the West were encountered' (Bagguley and Hussain 2007: 35). One Muslim student reported having felt uncomfortable about the way the topic was treated by the lecturer (Bagguley and Hussain 2007). Similarly, Jessop and Williams, who interviewed six students at a predominately white university, have argued that 'unintentional and subtle forms of racism were mediated through the curriculum, either through the invisibility of minority cultures, or through awkwardness and/or inappropriateness in drawing on the experiences of black and minority ethnic students' (Jessop and Williams 2009: 104).

The belief that students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds are less likely to relate to 'Eurocentric' curricula relates to an earlier discussion in this chapter which queried the arguments about 'relevant knowledge'. It was argued earlier that providing students with 'relevant knowledge' traps students in their world rather than making knowledge universally available. The 'Eurocentric argument' is similarly an example of deficit thinking because it dwells on the human incapacity to develop as thinking beings and human actors. The argument that knowledge must be relevant to a student's ethnic, social and cultural background only makes sense from a relativist theoretical viewpoint. Instead of getting students to read and to think

about 'the best that is known and thought in the world', in Matthew Arnold's words, it suggests that students seemingly can only cope with knowledge that is related to their background and lives (Arnold [1864] 2003: 50). As a consequence, knowledge is no longer judged by whether it presents universal truths and values from 'the best that is known and thought in the world' but must be selected to reflect the particular background of the student and even authored by those from a similar heritage.

This discussion on the implications of categorising students in ethnic attainment research showed that the categorisation of people tends to lead to inflated, if not false, claims about ethnic differences. The categorisation of people is a process that is supported by the relativist ideas that underpin contemporary ethnic attainment research as well as by the increasing attention paid to student backgrounds when analysing attainment. The act of categorising spreads the message that attainment is primarily determined by ethnic and social factors without recognising that human agency or the capacity to act in pursuit of conscious goals, may be equally if not more important than the ethnic and social attributes of a person. Given the implications the use of categories and the categorisation of people has, it is time to have a more fundamental debate about whether categories and the categorisation of people, also referred to here as group-based social differentiation, is at all a useful way to conduct ethnic attainment research.

A new type of deficit talk

The first part of this chapter showed how in ethnic attainment research categories and the categorisation of people tend to both create and inflate ethnic differences. In this part of the review, the nature of the discussion on ethnic attainment differences as conducted presently is examined. It is argued that current theoretical positions which hold hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases

responsible for ethnic attainment differences are flawed, first, because they give rise to a new type of deficit thinking and, second, because they politicise ethnic attainment research. These two issues are discussed here, looking first at what is meant by the new type of deficit thinking that current approaches to ethnic attainment research give rise to.

Although research on ethnic attainment differences has shifted away from deficit-type explanations towards a greater focus on hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases, there is a general awareness that deficit thinking which examines people's social and personal deficiencies has not entirely disappeared (Valencia 1997; Turney *et al.* 2002; Jones and Thomas 2005; Jacobs *et al.* 2007; Ahmed 2007). It is argued here, however, that with the ideological shift in academic thinking, race legislation, higher education and wider politics, deficit-type explanations for differences in attainment are no longer about personal and social deficiencies, but about human agency: the capacity to act in pursuit of conscious goals. The underrating of human agency is a new type of deficit thinking with implications for student attainment, ethnic attainment research and university policy and practices derived from it.

Ethnically minoritised students are commonly referred to in the literature as disadvantaged, marginalised, excluded and discriminated against. The notion that ethnically minoritised students are disadvantaged and discriminated against by hierarchical power relations and inbuilt biases in institutional and social structures, suggests that student attainment is determined primarily by social attributes. Choices open to students based on deliberately acting in pursuit of conscious goals or taking agency are downplayed, while ethnic and social attributes and identities are described as all important when it comes to attainment (Malik 2006). These viewpoints emerge from the literature that discusses issues such as self-esteem, the stereotype threat, the level of intellectual challenge at university and the concept of 'folk pedagogies' that has been introduced to ethnic attainment research as part of a joint project on Disparities in Student Attainment Project conducted at the University of

Wolverhampton and Coventry University (DiSA 2011).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem has emerged as a topic in the literature on ethnic attainment differences as part of the discussion on social approval and recognition. The concept of 'self-esteem' is used to promote the idea that students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds are predisposed to lack self-esteem as a consequence of being held in low regard by others, mainly from the majority group (Sewell 2001; Donnell, Edwards and Green 2002; Byfield 2008; McLaughlin 2012). This argument is based on the assumption that a person's self-esteem and identity is strengthened through the recognition of other people and manifests itself when people seek respect from others based on their identity, a demand central to critical race theory, multiculturalism and the concept of inclusion and diversity (Malik 2006; Furedi 2011; McLaughlin 2012). The request for respect re-enforces the notion that self-esteem is determined by third-party recognition and by doing so downplays the human capacity to act deliberately in pursuit of their conscious goals and the self-esteem that people may gain from this (Malik 2006; McLaughlin 2012).

The assumption that, as Sewell put it, 'a core of self-doubt lurks in the heart of every black child and young adult', strips people of their capacity for self-determination (Sewell 2001: 177). It gives rise to a new type of deficit thinking in ethnic attainment research that questions people's capacity to mobilise as human agents. Sewell draws from his work with young black male pupils as part of the *Generating Genius: Creating Talented Youth* charity, and from Gray-Little and Hafdahl's (2000) study on self-esteem in the USA, to argue strongly against the idea that self-esteem is determined by a person's social status (Sewell 2001). The Gray-Little and Hafdahl study, for instance, found that 'black children, adolescents and young adults have higher average self-esteem than their white counterparts' (Gray-Little and Hafdahl 2000: 40). From these studies, it may be reasonably concluded that low self-esteem is not determined by

socialstatus.

'Stereotype threat'

The belief that the absence of third party recognition will disadvantage and discourage students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds also appears in a modified form in the literature on the 'stereotype threat'. The term 'stereotype threat' refers to the idea that the performance of students who have internalised stereotypical beliefs about ethnically minoritised students will suffer as a result (Steele and Aronson 1995; Osborne 2001; Woolf, Cave, Greenhalgh and Dacre 2008; Steele 2010; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; NUS 2011). This idea is closely related to the literature on the 'Pygmalion effect'. For example, the Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) study, which found that teachers' expectations can affect the performance of pupils negatively or positively, depending on the labels that have been internalised by the pupils. The Rosenthal and Jacobson study is dated, but the argument about the 'Pygmalion effect' has been revived in contemporary ethnic attainment research (Singh 2011).

A study conducted by Woolf and colleagues with medical students from Asian backgrounds found that 'stereotypical beliefs' about 'ethnic groups' 'negatively affect the performance of people from ethnic minorities in educational contexts' (Woolf *et al.* 2008: 1). Woolf and colleagues point out that the performance of medical students is not only determined by internalised stereotypes but also by personalities and resilience. The idea, however, that university students internalise negative ethnic stereotypes and that this affects the students' performance, shows a lack of confidence in the resilience and agency of students to act deliberately in pursuit of their goals. A sceptic might argue that university students are not faced with stereotypical beliefs in isolation but face them over the span of their education, increasing the chances of internalising and performing in accordance with negative stereotypes. But the claim that students internalise negative stereotypes and that this affects student attainment has

yet to be substantiated.

The research conducted on stereotype threats does not suffice to make claims about whether the stereotype threat is real and, if so, whether it affects the academic performance of ethnically and socially minoritised students. What can be said, however, is that the line of thought pursued by stereotype threat researchers is informed by a deficit view of human potential. It is a perspective which implies that students' ethnic backgrounds are more influential than the students' capacity for agency. This means that the literature on both self-esteem and the stereotype threat nurtures a new type of deficit-talk, a type of deficit-talk that no longer dwells on personal and social deficiencies, but questions instead resilience and agency in students.

Lack of intellectual challenge

Two further examples that illustrate the emergence of the new deficit talk can be found in the literature that discusses the lack of intellectual challenge in the academic studies of students at university and in the increasing concern with unconscious bias in teaching that results from the existence of 'folk pedagogies'. Dhanda (2010), in her study on ethnic attainment differences, found that some students interviewed were disappointed about the lack of intellectual challenge presented by their academic studies, an issue also raised by Connor *et al.* (2004) and the Higher Education Academy (2008) (Dhanda 2010). Students in Dhanda's study talked about not being sufficiently challenged, wishing to belong to a more intellectually demanding group or for university to be more stimulating academically (Dhanda 2010). It is not clear from the literature whether the lack of intellectual challenge some students talked about was observed uniquely by ethnically minoritised students. A feature of the shift in education away from subject-based teaching towards student-centred education and learning process-oriented teaching is that it contributes towards the lack of intellectual challenge some students discussed.

Student-centred education and learning process-oriented teaching leaves little room for intellectual debate and discussion since much of the time is taken up by talking, reading and writing about the learning process instead of about the subject content itself (Hayes and Wynyard 2002; Evans 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes 2009; Williams 2013).

Since there are students, as we shall see, who report a lack of intellectual challenge in their academic studies it is not justifiable to generalise low academic self-esteem across the ethnically minoritised student population as the literature on self-esteem, recognition and stereotype threat seems to suggest. Instead, there is a clear desire among students to be academically challenged. Intellectual challenge is a feature of subject-based teaching which requires students to read and debate knowledge rather than to reflect on the learning process. The ideological shift towards student-centred education and learning process-oriented teaching denotes a general disregard for the students' capacity to take charge of their learning. Teaching students how to learn rather than getting them to read and debate subject knowledge casts doubts on students' capacity to take charge of their own learning and effectively questions resilience and agency in students.

'Folk pedagogies'

The term 'folk pedagogies' was introduced to ethnic attainment research as part of the *Disparities in Student Attainment* (DiSA) Project to draw attention to unconscious biases lecturers may have and that these may affect the academic achievement of ethnically minoritised students (DiSA 2011). The term suggests that in teaching, 'everyday intuitive theories (or lay theories) affect our interaction with others' (Bruner 1996: 45). Bruner has argued that the 'teacher's concept of the learner shapes the instruction' and suggests that folk and textbook pedagogies are competing with each other (Bruner 1996: 48). According to Bruner, if folk pedagogies take precedence over textbook pedagogies, this can only be

ameliorated if teachers are consciously aware of the folk pedagogies that impact their teaching (Bruner 1996). The 'folk pedagogies' argument is not unlike the 'low teacher expectations' argument, which is also thought to disadvantage ethnically minoritised students.

The term 'unconscious bias' is used by the Equality Challenge Unit 'to describe the associations that we hold which, despite being outside our conscious awareness, can have a significant influence on our attitudes and behaviour' (ECU 2013: 1). The literature on unconscious bias, notably Bruner (1996), DiSA (2011) and ECU (2013), relies upon two assertions. First, that academic attainment is determined by social attributes and second, that the actions of lecturers are directed by unconscious biases (Malik 2006; NUS 2011; ECU 2013). Unconscious biases are thought to proceed over conscious judgements by lecturers. Mullan (2013), as part of an essay on unconscious bias, defended the human capacity for objectivity and rationality, arguing that humans, unlike animals, are able to reason and act and that 'by privileging unconscious bias, we trivialise people's conscious activities' as well as the human capacity to supersede the unconscious mind. It is clear from reading Mullan that the literature on 'unconscious bias' assumes that unconscious biases precede over conscious judgements made by lecturers and that resilience and human agency are disregarded in students.

Given the absence of reliable research on unconscious bias, the current popularity of the unconscious bias argument in ethnic attainment research appears to emerge from the widespread application of critical race theory, multiculturalism and identity perspectives on the ethnic attainment question rather than being based on conclusive evidence. The advocacy of ideas concerning hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases further give weight to the unconscious bias argument rather than research evidence or the theoretical coherence of multiculturalism and critical race theory. Current theoretical approaches to ethnic attainment research have also supported the new deficit talk,

which, instead of talking about personal and social deficiencies, distrusts the human capacity to deliberately act in pursuit of conscious goals.

One consequence of arguing that attainment is primarily determined by social attributes is that this downplays resilience and agency, although it is now lecturers rather than students who are thought to be at fault. Students are thought to be at the mercy of hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases, at worst portrayed as victims. The assumption that university students are victims makes it difficult to question and criticise current approaches to ethnic attainment research without being accused of being a persecutor of vulnerable students or even racist.

In addition, the new deficit talk, which downplays resilience and agency as a determining factor in student attainment, not only reinvents deficit talk but makes a bad situation worse. Unwarranted as it was, the old deficit talk allowed for the possibility of remedial action. The new deficit talk, by contrast, which discredits resilience and agency as determining factors in attainment, accommodates only failure because students are no longer thought capable of achieving. Lack of trust in students' capacity to achieve comes across in both the nature of the discussion on ethnic attainment differences, as illustrated so far, and in the shift in education away from subject-based teaching towards a growing concern with student centeredness and the learning process. If students were generally thought to be capable of taking charge of their learning, the growing concern with learning process-oriented teaching would be irrelevant.

The examples described here have shown that current theoretical approaches to ethnic attainment research have given rise to a new type deficit talk that questions resilience and agency in students and has become a defining feature of ethnic attainment research today. The examples discussed next illustrate how current theoretical approaches to ethnic attainment research have politicised both university education and ethnic attainment research.

Deficit thinking and the politicisation of ethnic attainment research

The politicisation of ethnic attainment research means that this research is undertaken in a climate in which relativism has taken hold in academic thinking, race legislation, higher education and the wider politics. This has two consequences. First, in this climate, where social attributes are considered to be the primary determining factors in people's lives, above and beyond human agency, exploiting research and university education for political purposes appears quite normal. Second, people are thought to be disadvantaged because of their social attributes, and research is undertaken from hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social bias perspective which aims ultimately to ameliorate disadvantage through social interventions. However, these social interventions, if applied to university education, politicise education and imbue education with a sort of indoctrination that runs against the ethos of subject-based or liberal education. Subject-based education introduces students to new ideas and encourages independent thinking but does not indoctrinate.

Politicisation is a trend that emerges in the literature as much in relation to university education as to ethnic attainment research, as the reporting of racism at university and the literature on perceptions of unfairness, cultural assumptions and stereotypes illustrates. 'Racism' or a 'racist incident' is defined, as mentioned previously, as 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person' and the term 'race' is used to mean 'colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins' (RRAA) 2000; Equality Act 2010). The law prohibits:

- Direct discrimination: a person discriminates against another because of a protected characteristic;
- Indirect discrimination: a person indirectly discriminates against another person if that person applies a criterion or practice which is discriminatory in relation to a relevant protected characteristic;
- Harassment: a person engages in unwanted conduct related to a

relevant protected characteristic and the conduct has the purpose of effect of violating the person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that person; and

- Victimisation: a person victimises another person, if person A subjects person B to a detriment because of a protected act such as bringing proceedings under the *Equality Act*, giving information in connection with proceedings and making allegations that a person has contravened the *Equality Act* (see the *Equality Act 2010*: art. 13–27).

One point that emerged from the discussion of the literature is that reports of racism or racial discrimination at British universities must be carefully evaluated because accounts of racism tend to get inflated by arbitrary uses of the terms 'racism' and 'racial discrimination'. There is also a current but implicit understanding that negative experiences, occasionally reported as negative by the researcher rather than the students, automatically amount to racial discrimination. What is frequently missing, however, is a thorough investigation into claims of racial discrimination that emerge from ethnic attainment research projects. The shift in race legislation which defines racial incidents in terms of perceptions has encouraged both the lack of investigation into racial discrimination claims as well as the arbitrary use of the term 'racial discrimination'. The lack of zest to establish truth is perhaps not surprising given the current climate where perception is all that is required for an incident to be racist and where relativist group-based approaches to ethnic attainment research depict students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds as vulnerable to prejudicial attitudes and behaviour.

The problem with contemporary ethnic attainment research is that, rather than seeking to find out what is the case, researchers are working within a wider political framework. Although they do not say, or may not believe that they are advancing political aims, they are doing just that, because they

are seeking to show what they know *a priori*, that racial discrimination exists and persists across the British higher education sector. It is a subtle process that emerges in the reporting of racism at university. The two studies that have tried to quantify racism in higher education, Connor *et al.* (2004) and the National Union of Students report, *Race for Equality* (2011), as well as numerous qualitative studies, illustrate that ethnic attainment research is shaped by political aims. Connor and colleagues, for instance, report that out of the 1,300 students who participate in the sector wide survey, 7% of the ethnically minoritised UK-domiciled undergraduate students, from a total of 785 ethnically minoritised students, reported to have experienced racial discrimination on their course (Connor *et al.* 2004). The NUS, which surveyed UK-domiciled as well as international students, reported that 16% of a total of '938 survey respondents' have had experiences of racism in their institution (NUS 2011: 37).

While any account of racial discrimination in British higher education warrants consideration, it is equally important to establish the facts. The faults in the research methodology in both the Connor *et al.* and the NUS study means that the figures of neither of these two studies can be taken at face value. The problem with the Connor *et al.* study is that the percentage of racial discrimination was reported without enquiring into what the students had in mind when they said that they experienced racial discrimination at their institution. Given that race legislation define a racist incident as 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person', the need for understanding what constitutes racial discrimination may seem obsolete. The lack of interest in finding the truth which is supported by race legislation has consequences. It means that the term 'racism' has become an intangible concept and as a result the authority to act upon it has been lost.

The NUS report (2011) also fails to explore in any meaningful way what is meant by racial discrimination, although the interviews that were conducted alongside the survey provide a few examples of the kind of incidents students had in mind when referring to racial incidents.

Another problem with the NUS report is that it relies upon a skewed sample: it relied upon self-selection rather than random sampling, which means the survey results are not representative and cannot be generalised from. All that can be concluded from the NUS report is that there are some students who report having had experiences of racial discrimination at their institution, but nothing can be said as to the extent of racial discrimination that may or may not occur at British universities. Any claims to the contrary misrepresent the findings of the NUS report and may even be used to serve political aims.

The skewed sample of the NUS report also invalidates the statement that international students were more likely to view their learning and teaching environment as racist (9%) than home students (5%) (NUS 2011). It also invalidates the statement that the percentage of students who perceived their 'teaching and learning environment to be racist' and those who had 'experienced racism at their institution' increased with age of the respondents (NUS 2011: 37). A further shortcoming of both the NUS report and the Connor *et al.* (2004) study is that neither mention the 84% of students in the NUS report and 93% in the Connor *et al.* study who neither reported having experienced racism at their institution nor had perceived their institution as racist. It is the fact that neither of these studies mentions, despite it being a large proportion, the percentage of students who reported not having experienced racism that supports the argument that ethnic attainment research has taken a political turn.

To determine the nature of racial discrimination in British higher education, ethnic attainment-related research has frequently relied upon interviews and student experiences (Connor *et al.* 2004; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Tyrer and Ahmad 2006; Byfield 2008; Jessop and Williams 2009; Bhopal 2010; Dhanda 2010). Dhanda reported that there is a 'perception of unfairness' among students that is 'connected with lack of knowledge or mistrust' of or in the assessment process (Dhanda 2010: 42). Tyrer and Ahmad, Bagguley and Hussain, and Bhopal, in turn, raised issues related to cultural assumptions, stereotypes, visual differences,

verbal comments, name calling, Islamophobia and treatment in learning environments (Tyrrer and Ahmad 2006; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Bhopal 2010). Tyrrer and Ahmad, who interviewed over 100 women students from Asian backgrounds, referred to cultural assumptions students held as 'racialised and gendered stereotyping', while Bagguley and Hussain referred to cultural assumptions as 'liberal stereotyping of Asian women' (Tyrrer and Ahmad 2006: 19; Bagguley and Hussain 2007: ix).

Other issues students raised included: feeling uneasy about 'ethnic jokes'; black students' contributions being ignored in class, lecturers making derogatory comments towards black students; black students being reprimanded for behaviour that white students had also shown but were not reprimanded for; lecturers frequently getting the names of black students wrong; verbal abuse and harassment; Asian women being thought not to be serious about higher education because they are believed to be destined for marriage and motherhood rather than for careers; Asian women being depicted as 'rebels and tearaways' when they attend university; 'regularly facing irritating racist questions'; 'being expected to act as a spokesperson for Muslims and Islam'; 'reading racist representations of Muslim women in set course texts'; and 'being subjected to' Islamophobia, that is, 'a wider general atmosphere of hostility particularly in the wake of 9/11' (Archer 2003: 31; Malik 2005: 22-24; Tyrrer and Ahmad 2006: 19-20; Bagguley and Hussain 2007: 32-35; Jessop and Williams 2009: 103; Bhopal 2010: 72; NUS 2011: 38).

These examples illustrate that the issues mentioned and often referred to in the literature as racial discrimination are incredibly wide ranging, and yet there is no apparent attempt to explore the nuances to advance understanding. What, for example, constitutes as a racist question? When does a comment become verbal abuse or amount to harassment? Where is the line to be drawn between a critical and a derogatory comment? Is feeling uneasy about 'ethnic' jokes a racial incident? What makes a representation of Muslim women in course texts racist? What does a general atmosphere of hostility amount to and how do we know it is geared

towards ethnically minoritised students? And, who commits acts of racial discrimination? These and other questions need to be explored and must not be discharged as an attempt to downplay racial incidents as is occasionally suggested, especially by critical race theorists. Critical race theorists argued, for example, that whiteness, which is understood to be the oppressive power, encompasses 'the unwillingness to name the contours of racism' and 'the avoidance of identifying with racial experience or group' (Frankenberg 1993 cited in Leonardo 2002: 32). It is important to explore nuances without being accused of wanting to downplay racial incidents if understanding is to be advanced.

Summary

Failing to explore nuances related to racial discrimination means studies such as the NUS report (2011) and Connor *et al.* (2004) that explore experiences of students may raise a range of issues, but nothing concrete can be said about the existence, extent and nature of racial discrimination in British higher education. Any attempt to do so amounts to exploiting ethnic attainment related research for political purposes because unsubstantiated claims are effectively opinions and student experiences are no basis for making knowledge claims (see 'Introduction' for a more detailed discussion on the difference between experience and knowledge).

One explanation of the failure to explore nuances in ethnic attainment research could be shortcomings in the research methodology rather than ethnic attainment research being politicised. What supports the latter interpretation, however, is that the research is framed within a broader academic framework in which critical race theory, multiculturalism and identity theories are influential and which are unsurprisingly supported in turn by research findings. In this way, ethnic attainment research is a self-sustaining research economy.

4 Equality and education

The use of the term 'absolute' to describe the philosophical approach adopted here requires explanation. When first mentioned in the 'Introduction', this was an attempt to show how absolute levels of standards could be used in place of relational comparisons of student attainment. There are, however, deeper issues involved. These issues can be brought out by referring to what could even be called 'absolute' equality. Absolute equality refers to a traditional notion of equality that has been lost. 'Equality' in its new sense no longer refers to the universal, to our common humanity, but to the particular, to the way in which we are different. When equality comes to refer to the particular it becomes merely the recognition of difference and 'exponents of the "politics of difference" typically inveigh against the "abstract universalism" they attribute to liberalism' (Barry 2001: 11). Talking about 'absolute equality' is a way of marking out this older liberal and universal notion of equality and distinguishing it from 'equality' seen as the recognition and respect for many differences. This use of the term 'absolute' is inspired by critical rationalist David Miller's discussion of what he calls 'absolute scepticism' in order to distinguish it from other forms of scepticism that accommodates to relativism and Parfit's discussion of the 'Priority View', which considers 'absolute levels' (of attainment) of people instead of comparing relative levels between groups of people (Parfit 1997: 214; Miller 2006: 151).

To defend 'absolute equality' as a view, a more abstract discussion and rejection of cultural relativism and epistemological relativism are necessary. This is because equality in its new sense, the view that equality is about

difference, gains support from and in turn supports cultural relativism and epistemological relativism. The discussion here will show where the fundamental problems with cultural and epistemological relativism lie and that these approaches are theoretically incoherent. In the chapter, 'Discussions and debates emerging from the literature' this change of meaning and the problems inherent in it were indirectly addressed through the discussion of the impact of relativist group-based approaches to ethnic attainment research such as critical race theory and multiculturalism. The theory of 'intersectionality', which is an amalgam of critical race theory, identity politics, privilege theory, multiculturalism and demands for recognition, might be an influence that will have to be addressed in future, as it is a more recent expression of the politics of difference that adopts the new meaning of equality.

The universal versus the particular

Writing in the mid-1990s, Malik argued that it was time to reclaim the older sense of equality and defend 'the right to be the same' in a universal sense rather than defending 'the right to be different' which reduced the notion of equality to the particular (Malik 1996: 261). 'Equality' as difference is the commonplace understanding of equality today so that treating people as equal means merely accepting and respecting difference. It is argued here, however, that this is not a change that should be accepted as a shift in meaning that must be recognised but as a politicised change that should be contested. Fanon, writing in *Black Skin, White Masks*, made his attitude to the conflict between the universal and particular very clear. He was conscious of being a 'black man' but also a 'man' and of not trying to be one particular 'black' or, more disastrously, trying to be 'white', but to recognise the universal in himself and his thought, something that was a constant struggle (see Malik 2014: 275–278). Fanon expresses this view, for example, when he writes that 'the negro, however sincere, is the slave of the past. None

the less I am a man, and in this sense the Peloponnesian War is as much mine as the invention of the compass' (Fanon[1952] 1993: 225).

The shift towards the celebration of difference is often supported in wider society by cultural relativism as well as by the culture of relativism, while at university, it is supported by both cultural and epistemological relativism. The difference in meaning and how it relates to the idea of a university and of higher education will be discussed in this chapter.

The culture of relativism and cultural relativism

The term 'culture' has been defined in different ways by anthropologists, ethnologists and sociologists. In much of educational thought, the sociological definition of culture describes 'the thoughts and habits whereby people define their group identity, and stake out a claim for social territory' (Scruton 2007: 1). In order to clarify some of the complex issues relating to relativism, Scruton's definition of culture as 'the habit of judgement' is useful. This makes sense of the idea of a 'culture of relativism' that influences today's academic thinking, race legislation, higher education and wider politics. Scruton defines a culture as 'composed of judgements' and argues that it 'exists so as to pass on the habit of judgement from generation to generation' (Scruton 2007: x). A culture of relativism, however, is one in which judgements of aesthetic, moral, social and political value are anathema or as Kennedy put it, 'the irony of the state of culture today is that society fears the individual expression of judgement' (Kennedy 2014: 6). This fear of judgement is the contemporary state of Western culture which is 'uncomfortable with making value judgements' (Furedi 2011: 80). 'Western culture' is usually the focus of these discussions, although the discussion could arguably be extended to the state of all cultures in a global world.

Cultural relativism, in turn, feeds off and supports the culture of relativism by avoiding judgements about the value of particular beliefs, customs and practices and by adopting the general cultural condition of

non-judgementalism. By doing so, cultural relativism appears to empower a multiplicity of 'cultures' against dominance by other cultures, yet it merely avoids judgement. Therefore, what is commonly seen as the recognition and respect for different cultures which are incommensurable and cannot be challenged from without is an appeal to the non-judgmentalism that constitutes the culture of relativism. But, as we will see, there are damaging consequences of non-judgementalism for so-called minority cultures and groups.

Quick refutations of relativism

Cultural relativism has been criticised by many for its claim that 'there is no common standard by which cultures, and the practices embedded in them, can be evaluated' (Barry 2001: 252). These critiques emphasise the universal enlightenment values of morality and open discussion and debate against those who censor judgements in the name of the non-judgementalism (Barry 2001; Pring 2004; Furedi 2011; Malik 1996, 2008, 2014; Kennedy 2014). Although the debates are heated, the facts about universality have been stated in more moderate ways in Pring's discussion of educational research:

Educational practices are conducted or engaged in within societies of shared values and understandings. There are national, indeed global debates, which create common understandings. And there are generalisations about how people are motivated and learn, however tentative these must be and in need of testing in the circumstances of particular classrooms.

(Pring 2004: 140-141)

Pring draws attention to the fact of globally shared understanding, communication, generalisation and discussion which is often forgotten in debates about incommensurable cultures. Forgetting facts about the world is a feature of the debates on relativism which strengthens the appeal of cultural relativism.

Another forgotten, ignored or simply not known critique of cultural relativism is the philosophical refutation of epistemological relativism on

which all other forms of relativism are dependent. If the philosophical refutation, or refutations, of relativism was more prominent, then relativism and cultural relativism would have little intellectual appeal, although it may have emotional appeal. It is its emotional appeal that, although relativism is easily refuted, allows it to persist. Discussed here are a few philosophical refutations before considering the reasons for the persistence of relativism.

The most famous quick refutation of relativism is over 2,000 years old. It is found in a passage in Plato's *Theaetetus* (s 170a–171d), where Socrates is arguing against the relativistic idea put forward by Protagoras's in his book *The Truth*. In this book, Protagoras argues that every person's judgements are true for them although thousands may disagree with their opinions. Many people may also disagree with Protagoras's opinion that every person's opinions are true for them:

SOCRATES: [. . .] Protagoras admits, I presume, that the contrary opinion about his own opinion (namely, that it is false) must be true, seeing he agrees that all men judge what is.

THEODORUS: Undoubtedly.

SOCRATES: And in conceding the truth of the opinion of those who think him wrong, he is really admitting the falsity of his own opinion?

THEODORUS: Yes, inevitably.

SOCRATES: But for their part the others do not admit that they are wrong?

THEODORUS: No.

SOCRATES: But Protagoras again admits *this* judgement to be true, according to his written doctrine?

THEODORUS: So it appears.

SOCRATES: It will be disputed, then, by everyone, beginning with Protagoras – or rather, it will be admitted by him, when he grants to the person who contradicts him that he judges truly – when he does that, even Protagoras himself will be granting that neither a dog nor the 'man in the street' is the measure of anything at all which he has not learned. Isn't that so?

THEODORUS: It is so.

SOCRATES: Then since it is disputed by everyone, the Truth of Protagoras is not true for anyone at all, not even for himself?

(Burnyeat 1990: 298)

A vast literature on Plato and this argument exists, but it will not be

discussed here because arguments of a similar sort to that given here are still used by philosophers today. Nozick refers to his version of this argument as a 'quick refutation' of relativism. If someone argues that 'All truth is relative', this assertion is easily dismissed by asking, 'Is that view relative?' (Nozick 2001: 15). These quick refutations are well known. All show statements asserting the relativity of truth are self-refuting.

Siegel also provides another example which he calls the 'self-refutation' argument against relativism. Siegel even suggests that a statement be put on the white board, or more likely on a PowerPoint slide in today's higher education world, which reflects the students' relativistic views and makes them think about the logical coherence or incoherence of relativism.

Siegel suggests the following statement:

Statement A: There is no right or wrong concerning the constitution of good reasons. Such judgements are just opinions; probative force is in the eye of the reasoner.

. . . *Then ask. . .*

Is [statement] A right, or just your opinion?

(Siegel 1997: 21)

Siegel's pedagogic suggestion would be welcomed by Bloom, who sees all undergraduates as being predisposed to relativism as if it were a 'moral postulate' (Bloom 1987: 25).

If researchers investigating ethnic attainment and policy makers in universities were familiar with these arguments, then they would perhaps be less inclined to adopt relativism and rush to policy and instead more inclined to debate and discuss. Relativists, however, face a yet more general problem. When relativists utter any statements, they must engage in 'truth talk'. For example, when relativists assert propositions like '*there is no universal truth to which our construction is a more or less good approximation*', they engage in 'truth talk' (Bridges 1999: 610). Beyond simple self-contradictory statements, relativists also engage in 'truth talk' through their work, for example, when they state beliefs or discuss

evidence. This propositional 'truth talk' also self-refutes the claim that all 'truth talk' is relative.

These knock-down arguments are, of course, subject to criticism. Siegel is sanguine about them (Siegel 1987, 1997), whereas Nozick is uncomfortable with quick refutations (Nozick 2001). One of the many attempts to escape self-refutation is that of Rorty, who would argue that statements of relativism are not the same as those in 'normal discourse' but belong in 'hermeneutic discourse' and are not true or false statements (Putnam 1992: 71). However, this is a rejection of the idea that relativism reveals a metaphysical truth about the world. If 'All truth is relative' is not a proposition with a truth value, it is simply rhetoric aimed to get us to 'change our ways, to give up talk about truth and falsity' (Putnam 1992: 71).

Writing in 1992, Putnam declared that 'first-person relativism', the view that truth is what I agree with, or would agree with if I investigated it for sufficient time, was 'virtually unfindable on today's philosophical scene' (Putnam 1992: 73). But over 20 years on, that view is everywhere in academic scenes, if not in philosophical scenes. Part of the reason for this return is the popularity of cultural relativism, or relativism with a 'we' rather than an 'I'. For Putnam, both collapse into solipsism: the view that 'truth' is merely a disposition to believe on the part of the relativist. Putnam argues that truth, or the language game of truth, is something that is 'not simply conventional, is not simply determined by consensus, but something that requires evaluation' (Putnam 1992: 77). He recognises that this is 'troubling to many a contemporary sensibility' and that 'the distrust of the normative in present-day philosophy is evidenced above all by the lengths to which philosophers will go to avoid admitting that truth – that is, the rightness of what is said – is a normative notion' (Putnam 1992: 77).

The arguments against relativism have to be refined as relativists refine their arguments. Take as an example of a more sophisticated relativism the view that our truth statements are only true relative to a theory that we accept. The acceptance of a theory is a statement about some absolute facts

about our beliefs so it does allow some absolute facts. Furthermore, if truth is in fact only relative to a theory we accept, how does the relativist deal with this fact? He must argue that 'according to a theory that we accept, there is a theory that we accept, and according to this latter theory, there is a theory that we accept and . . . there have been dinosaurs' (Boghossian 2007: 56). We are in an infinite regress and relativism comes down to an unintelligible infinite statement.

This brief discussion shows that relativism is self-contradictory and incoherent. It survives in philosophy because of what Putnam calls the 'distrust of the normative', which we can place in a wider context of what Boghossian calls 'fear of knowledge' or what Bailey calls 'veriphobia' or 'fear of truth' (Bailey 2001, 2004). These are not primarily philosophical but political and cultural states.

The persistence of relativism

Relativism, despite being self-contradictory and incoherent, persists. It persists, according to Putnam, because relativism, like scepticism, is eternal, a part of the human condition:

Relativism and scepticism are all too easily refutable when they are stated as positions; but they never die, because the attitude of alienation from the world and from the community is not just a theory, and cannot be overcome by purely intellectual argument.

(Putnam 1992: 178)

It is debatable whether the alienation Putnam mentions is an eternal condition. Assuming it is, for the sake of argument, it has expressions that are particular to historically specific circumstances. In the present time, the persistence of cultural relativism within the culture of relativism can be explained by it seeming to empower.

Boghossian makes the point that relativism seems to empower after refuting both relativism and related social constructivist views of knowledge. Boghossian argues that if all knowledge is relative, then 'any

claim to knowledge can be dispatched if we do not happen to share the values on which it allegedly depends', and this appears to 'protect oppressed cultures from the charge of holding false or unjustified views' (Boghossian 2007: 130). The problem is, it does just the opposite. It does not silence criticism by the powerful of minorities and the oppressed:

If the powerful can't criticise the oppressed, because the central epistemological categories are inexorably tied to particular perspectives, it also follows that the oppressed can't criticise the powerful. The only remedy, so far as I can see, for what threatens to be a strongly conservative upshot, is to accept an overt double standard: allow a questionable idea to be criticised if it is held by those in a position of power – Christian creationism, for example – but not if it is held by those whom the powerful oppress – Zuni creationism, for example. (Boghossian 2007: 130)

The 'strongly conservative' outcome would be that the powerful would be beyond criticism, and the oppressed could do nothing about their views. Of course, there is no need to accommodate to relativism in Boghossian's censorious and unworkable way. It would be far better to allow everyone to criticise everything.

In higher education, relativism persists for different, although related, reasons. The changing notion of equality from the universal to the particular means that equality in contemporary ethnic attainment research is conceptualised as relational, which means it examines how the education or attainment of one group compares to another. Such relational conceptions of equality generate powerful emotional responses by appealing to people's moral sense for justice when confronted with group inequalities. It is this emotional appeal that makes relativism persists in education and educational research, despite it being intellectually quite easily refutable.

In universities, managers, staff developers, student support staff, administrators and even academics are for the most part unaware of the changing conception of equality and the wider ideological shift in academic thinking, race legislation, higher education and wider politics

towards both cultural relativism and a culture of relativism. Relativism and the changing conception of equality are, however, absorbed into academic and management thinking. This absorption occurs because of a general lack of debate and when 'debate' does take place it happens in the sealed self-referential vacuum of specialist conferences. This has helped create a climate where relativist approaches such as critical race theory, multiculturalism and identity theories dominate ethnic attainment research.

Liberal universalism and liberal education

Although relativism is refuted, it does mean that the powerless are unable to criticise the powerful. Malik argues that this may seem to be the case because 'at the heart of the discourse of cultural relativism [. . .] there lies a hostility to Enlightenment universalism' (Malik 1996: 145). These Enlightenment values or 'liberal universalism' are essentially a commitment to reason, the pursuit of truth and a belief in human potential. The university is the embodiment of Enlightenment values in its commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. The university has the unique educational function of advancing knowledge as well as teaching existing knowledge, although schools and colleges may also have that latter commitment. The way in which knowledge is passed between generations or advanced is through a 'liberal', 'knowledge-based' or 'subject-based' education. Teaching in a university is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake and the development of the mind that results from knowledge (Hirst 1965). Drawing on Matthew Arnold's famous definition of culture, the aim of teaching could be defined as 'a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world' (Arnold [1864] 2003: 50). In liberal education, all teaching must be rational, and whatever is taught must be based on reason and logically consistent intelligent justifications (Newman [1873] 1960; Hirst 1965; Oakeshott 1989; Halstead 2005).

In liberal education, thoughts, ideas and theories are presented in a way that leaves them open to critical and rational evaluation. Indoctrination is impossible if teaching is carried out by educators who are committed to reason (Halstead 2005). Advancing the search for truth through debate and the critical examination of alternative beliefs requires open-mindedness, impartiality and the willingness to revise opinions as new evidence emerges (Halstead 2005). O'Hear most succinctly expressed the importance of this approach: 'knowledge and learning and the critical attitude that it is to be hoped a liberal education will foster remain the best defences against false enlightenment' (O'Hear 1981: 9).

Liberal education has been criticised for overemphasising the academic study of subjects and for neglecting other purposes of education besides the pursuit of knowledge (Martin 1994 cited in Mulcahy 2010, O'Hear 1981). This criticism has led to the introduction at all levels of education of 'normative commitments about what people ought to be like' (Mulcahy 2010: 7). These instrumental 'other purposes' of education, such as ensuring graduates are 'employable', 'environmentally aware' and committed to 'inclusion' and 'diversity' are now so commonplace that they seem to be part of the mission of the university. Newman in *The Idea of a University* argues, however, that 'knowledge is, not merely a means to something beyond it', it is 'an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake', 'knowledge is capable of being its own end' (Newman [1873] 1960: 78). The broad context of this study is a major historical shift over two decades from 'elite' to mass higher education which has changed the nature of the university (Schuller 1995; Warner and Palfreyman 2001; Stevens 2005; Williams 2013). The process of massification has occurred alongside the progressive 'marketisation' of higher education which essentially means that the university is oriented in both teaching and research towards instrumental or economic goals.

In 1994 *The Society for Research in Higher Education* (SRHE) published a collection of influential essays focusing on the student experience of higher education and why it matters (Haselgrove 1994). The topics discussed, such

as 'shades of discrimination' in entry data, 'student perspectives', 'student satisfaction' and 'student learning experiences' are now part of the framework through which universities look at students. Stevens argued that the university has become the 'Uni' and the complexities of this shift can be seen in the voluminous publications of the SRHE and other bodies. One leading academic over this period, Ronald Barnett, recorded and provided an interesting commentary on the intellectual response to these changes (Barnett 1990; 2000; 2003; 2011; Barnett and Griffin 1997). What his work shows, particularly *Being a University* (2011), is an interest in, and sometimes an acceptance of, various 'models' of the university. Among the new aims of the university are to help students cope with 'uncertainty' in a world where 'reason' and 'knowledge' are no longer the sole province of academic authorities (Barnett 2000; Barnett and Griffin 1997).

A discussion of all these changes is beyond the scope of this study, but what they did produce was a substantial if defensive backlash of works defending 'liberal education' and the idea of the university as the site of liberal higher education (Graham 2002; Maskell and Robinson 2002; Hayes and Wynyard 2002; Evans 2004; Collini 2012; Williams 2013). These declinist works talk about 'the university in ruins' or 'the death of the universities' and the need to set about the 'recovery' of the university (Readings 1996; Graham 2002; Evans 2004). Only Ryan, while defending, as others do, rational, universalist, liberal higher education provides a more nuanced perspective. He offers a more 'cheerful view' arguing that, in the United States, 'the number of students getting some exposure to a liberal education is rising rather than falling' (Ryan 1999: 130). He also points out that the numbers attending the top liberal arts colleges has increased without damage to the education they traditionally provided. We can possibly say the same of the situation in the UK 15 years on. More and more students are, or could potentially have some exposure to a liberal education.

The restatement of 'liberal education' as the purpose of the university in the context described above is important precisely because the modern

university has taken upon itself 'other purposes' than the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. In this context, the rejection of Enlightenment values by 'postmodernists' and various 'relativists' is made easier. However, any rejection of Enlightenment values by cultural relativists is appealing because, as has been argued previously, it has the 'other purpose' of seeming to empower people, when in reality, it leaves people powerless. Likewise, it has been argued that relativism survives despite its logical incoherence because of the culture of relativism. Relativism can be undermined, however, particularly in the university, by pointing out its self-contradictions. Relativism should be undermined in universities because they are a special place that embodies Enlightenment values, and it is Enlightenment values, particularly the openness to criticism, which allows universities to house even those who reject these values.

Summary

This brief diversion into the realm of philosophy aimed to clarify the deeper issues involved in having adopted an absolute approach to equality and inequality in this study. The term 'absolute equality' is used here to mark out and bring back the traditional notion of equality, which refers to the universal and the right to be the same. It marks a break with the currently more widely used notion of 'equality' which, by defining equality in terms of the particular and the right to be different, has been reduced to the mere recognition of differences. This new sense of 'equality' is rejected for two reasons. First, defining 'equality' in terms of the particular has resulted in a lost sense for the universal and the common humanity we all share. Second, it gains support from and in turn supports both cultural and epistemological relativism, but, given that relativism is self-contradictory and theoretically incoherent, its supposed philosophical basis is non-existent.

Surprisingly, none of these arguments have done much harm to the persistence of relativism or even the popularity of the new sense of

equality. One partial explanation of why this may be so is the false sense of empowerment relativism gives to minoritised groups. It is a false sense of empowerment because it appears to 'protect oppressed cultures' as 'the powerful can't criticise the oppressed', while in fact, it censors 'the oppressed' as the 'oppressed can't criticise the powerful' either if the same logic is applied (Boghossian 2007: 130). Another partial explanation is that both relativism and the new sense of 'equality', which focuses on differences, are conceptualised in relational terms. Relational conceptions of equality produce strong emotional responses because they appeal to people's moral sense of justice when describing group differences. It is this emotional appeal that makes relativism and its offshoots persist irrespective of the fact that they are intellectually quite easily refutable.

Cultural relativists express an attitude of dislike for the values of the university which revolve around the pursuit of knowledge and understanding without fear or favour. This is sometimes seen as a 'radical' position, but what this really does is to take away the power of criticism. To have the power of criticism, it is necessary to hold to the values of liberal universalism, especially in higher education and educational research. This is the purpose of using the term 'absolute equality' in this study, since it is meant to recapture the liberal education value of human equality which holds to liberal universalism and defends the right to be the same. It is important to reassert liberal education values in British higher education because this sector is under threat both from what happens outside of mainstream university life and from current approaches to ethnic attainment research and university policies and practices within it.

The values of liberal universalism and the Enlightenment are embodied in the university but the modern university has replaced liberal education and the pursuit of knowledge and understanding with 'other values' among which relativism and cultural relativism thrive. The purpose of this chapter has been to show that the university cannot reject values pilloried as 'abstract universalism' without rejecting the essence of the university. This discussion forms the intellectual scaffolding for the methodology adopted

in this study, which contrasts current relational approaches with a more holistic approach consistent with liberal universalism.

5 Research strategy and methodology

This study explores undergraduate students' experiences in teaching and learning as well as their views on how these experiences may have impacted on their attainment. It is a qualitative study that, contrary to research convention, underpins semi-structured interviews with a realist research philosophy based on the argument that realism is fundamental to educational research if it is to advance the understanding of the social world (Pring 2004; Bailey 2004). In this chapter the research strategy is outlined: the interview process is described, the sampling and data analysis are explained as are the ethical aspects of this study. The post-1992 British university where this study was conducted is referred to here as 'the research institution'.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviewing with single respondents is a commonly used method to explore students' experiences because it gives students a voice and allows research participants to express the significance they attribute to the described events (Gaskell 2000; Pring 2004; Cousin 2009). In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted because having a few main interview questions, as is commonly the case in semi-structured interviewing, ensures that the collected data is relevant to the research question. However, the methodological flexibility of semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to intersect the interviews with prompts that helped to extract more detailed information for a deeper

understanding of events (Gaskell 2000; Flick 2002; Cousin 2009; Maxwell 2012). Bryman explains that prompts can produce a deeper understanding because they 'get the interviewee to think more about the topic' and 'provide the opportunity for a more detailed response' (Bryman 2004: 329). It is the scope semi-structured interviews provide for extracting clarifications and for exploring atypical responses that made semi-structured interviewing so attractive for this research project.

One interesting feature was the variation in the time that the interviews took. Bryman has suggested that variations in the time interviews take results from 'interviewee non-cooperation or anxiety about being recorded' (Bryman 2004: 331). In this study it was, however, the interviews with research participants who related positive experiences that tended to be shorter and there were no signs of anxiety among those students. A greater challenge, however, was to reduce the possibility of bias caused by memory lapse and distortions and to avoid asking leading questions (Bryman 2004). To minimise memory lapse and distortions, caused when events are explored retrospectively, I as the interviewer was careful to take on Flick's advice to 'give interviewees as much scope as possible to introduce his or her views' besides allowing time for reflection by sending the questions to interviewees in advance (Flick 2002: 79).

To give interviewees the opportunity to relate their views, the interview guide consisted of no more than five main questions formulated to extract both positive and negative experiences. There was also room for research participants to relate events that were not directly connected to teaching and learning, but which the students nevertheless considered important. An additional measure adopted to give interviewees scope to relate their views was Bryman's three-step interview procedure whereby first an initial open question is asked (one of the five main questions), followed by prompts (Can you tell me a bit more about this? Why do you think this happened? How did you react to this? What did you do about it? How did you feel about it? How do you

think it has affected your academic achievement?), and rounded up by asking ending questions (What improvements would you like to see? Is there anything else you would like to mention about this event that has not been mentioned yet?) (Bryman 2004).

Further measures that were applied to ensure that the interviews met research standards included the piloting of the questions, a review of the two initial interviews with the supervisor, an evaluation of the interview process which was based on Kvale's qualitative interview criteria (see Appendix 3), the scanning of the interview transcripts for leading questions and lastly, the verification of the interview transcripts by research participants (Kvale 1996 cited in Bryman 2004). These measures have all contributed to improve the quality of the collected data. Given, however, that not all relevant factors relating to the events have been taken into account, the data relates experiences, meaning people's perceptions but without making any knowledge claims (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion).

A further limitation related to the size of the study rather than specifically to the process of interviewing is that the research participants were recruited from one university only. Although thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate students from a wide range of backgrounds and subject areas, the study was based in a single institution. This restricts the research value to 'those who are in that unique situation - unique because to be understood only through the ideas and beliefs of the "actors" within the situation' (Pring 2004: 39). Being too fragmented to serve policy and professional interests is a feature of many small-scale studies which reduces the research value of this study to the institution where it was conducted (Bauer and Gaskell 2000; Pring 2004; Cousin 2009; Buchanan 2011). The study generated, however, ideas for discussion and debate which are relevant to the wider policy and professional debates that are occurring within the sector.

The thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted during the

academic year 2010/11 and 2011/12, using Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique. This technique aims to collect incidents which are of significance to the participant and helps to elicit experiences because it encourages participants to reflect upon them (Flanagan 1954; Flick 2002). An incident is defined as 'any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act' and typically is unplanned, unanticipated and uncontrolled (Flanagan 1954: 327). Such incidents become critical when they 'occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects' (Flanagan 1954: 327).

For the purpose of this study Flanagan's definition of a critical incident has been extended. The term refers here to incidents that were considered critical by the research participants even if neither the purpose nor intent of the act was clear to the participants, nor the consequences sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects. This wider definition of an incident was possible because, unlike Flanagan, this study acknowledges that recounted incidents are people's perceptions of the social world (experiences) rather than knowledge equivalent to objective truth. This wider definition of an incident was also reflected in the interview questions that were used.

The questions for the interviews were adapted from Brookfield's (1995) critical incident questionnaire. The questions were: can you describe an experience you had in a learning situation when you felt engaged with what was happening? Do you remember an example in a learning situation when you felt distance from what was happening? Can you tell me about an action that anyone (teacher or student) took in a learning situation which you found reassuring and helpful? Can you think of an action that anyone (teacher or student) took in a learning situation which you found puzzling or confusing? Can you describe an occasion in a learning situation when you were surprised? (Brookfield 1995).

Particular attention was paid during the interview to observe Flanagan's quality criteria for collecting critical incidents: a) avoid asking leading questions, b) ensure the actual behaviour is reported, c) establish what was observed by the research participant, d) ensure all relevant factors in the situation were given, e) ensure the observer made a definite judgement regarding the criticalness of the incident and f) ensure the observer made clear why the incident was considered critical (Flanagan 1954).

The advantages of collecting critical incidents are threefold. First, asking for critical incidents and exploring the particularities enhances the interviewees' recollection (Flanagan 1954; Flick 2002). This reduces the possibility of biases caused by memory lapse and distortions. Flanagan has gone as far as to argue that 'if full and precise details are given, it can usually be assumed that this information is accurate' while 'vague reports suggest that the incident is not well remembered and that some of the data may be incorrect' (Flanagan 1954: 340). While Flanagan's measure of accuracy serves as a useful guide, it is also possible that a detailed description might result from the importance research participants attributed to a particular incident rather than being a sign of accuracy, as Flanagan argued.

Second, the critical incidents technique gives a clear focus to the interview and produces tangible outputs that are directly relevant to the research question although the incidents themselves 'represent only raw data' and do 'not automatically provide solutions to problems (Flanagan 1954). Third, the request for detailed accounts of the incidents provided space for reflection and enabled the interviewer to explore the research participants' views on how described events might have affected their academic achievement. It was the research participants, therefore, who assessed the impact of an event rather than the researcher.

The disadvantages of the critical incident technique is that it is 'traditionally restricted to the collection of problematic incidents' and

that this focus presents a fragmented and potentially distorted picture of a person's experience (Flick 2000: 85-86). To avoid the trap of collecting solely problematic incidents the five main questions asked for both positive and negative incidents, adopting aspects of the appreciative inquiry research method which works on the assumption that positive incidents can shed as much light on a research topic as negative ones (Cousin 2009). Asking for both positive and negative experiences also helped to reduce the risk of presenting a fragmented picture of the research participants' experiences by aiming to extract a balanced representation of events. Research participants were also asked about the frequency as well as the significance attributed to events to acquire a balanced representation. In other words, exploring critical incidents through semi-structured interviews has produced rich descriptive data as there was scope for exploring atypical responses, extracting clarifications, gauging students' opinions and for acquiring balanced representations.

Sampling

The research participants have been recruited through theoretical sampling, a sampling technique used to generate and develop theoretical ideas rather than to produce findings that are representative of a population as in random sampling (Bryman 2004; Gorard 2001; Hammersley 2006; Trochim 2006). It is a technique that recruits research participants recurrently rather than at a single point in the research process, not least because the selection of the research participants is guided by the emerging ideas (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Bryman 2004; Hammersley 2006). The focus, therefore, is on sampling people's views and it is conducted to the point of theoretical saturation, the point when 'emerging concepts have been fully explored and no new insights are being [generated]' (Bryman 2004: 544).

To draw from a wide range of experiences research participants have

been recruited from a range of subject areas, including: Business, Media and Social Studies; Law and Criminology; Education; Music Technology; Computer Science; Creative Writing; Psychology and Languages. There were a total of 17 women and 13 men who took part in the study as well as 18 native English speakers, 12 second language speakers of English, 23 home students, two European students and five international students. In terms of ethnicity, there were a total of three black Caribbean students, six black African students, two black other students, two Asian Indian students, four Asian Pakistani students, one Chinese student, one mixed white and one black Caribbean student, one mixed other student, seven white British students and three white other students. The ethnic categories that were questioned in Chapter 2 were used solely during the sampling process to secure a wide ethnic representation. This is consistent with an ethical implication from that discussion which means that any use of categories and any reporting of statistical data related to this study is undertaken judiciously throughout in order to avoid accidentally minoritising the student participants.

The research participants were recruited in three stages, first in November 2010 and then again in April and September 2011. The aim was to secure a wide ethnic representation across a range of subject areas in order to sample a broad spectrum of experiences that would help to develop an understanding of teaching and learning experiences and how these impact on attainment. The recruitment methods included an all-student email, an email to the various Student Union Societies, an email to international students, a recruitment message on blackboard, recruitment flyers in the library, recruitment talks in various lectures, recruitment through lecturers and through research participants.

The disadvantage of using a theoretical sampling technique is that findings cannot be generalised across the sector. The technique was nevertheless used in this study because, as a single researcher with a capacity for roughly thirty interviews, it was unlikely that a random

sample across a undergraduate population of 15,540, with an ethnically minoritised student population of 15% in the academic year 2011/12, would have produced a sample that would have resulted in the ethnic representation achieved through theoretical sampling. Nonetheless, a wide ethnic representation was considered important because the students' teaching and learning experiences were explored with the ethnic component in mind.

Theoretical sampling has, however, exposed the study to the kind of representational or sample bias Gorard cautions against (Gorard 2001). Possible representational biases have been minimised in this study by abstaining from making knowledge claims and instead reporting experiences as people's perceptions and extrapolating from the experiences ideas for discussion and debate. To refrain from generalisations quantitative statements such as 'the majority', 'many' and 'a few' have been omitted when reporting findings to avoid the kind of fuzzy generalisation Bassey (1999) warned against. Fuzzy generalisations are predictive statements that are prone to sample bias because they are based on non-randomised samples (Bassey 1999; Gorard 2001). The expression 'some' has, however, been used in this study to indicate that not all research participants have raised a particular issue under discussion. It is a linguistic feature which neither serves a numerical function nor to make any generalisations.

Data analysis

The challenge related to the data analysis process in this study was to transform the descriptive data into comprehensible accounts. More specifically, the challenge concerned devising an analytical and interpretative procedure which would serve to examine thirty semi-structured interviews in a way that reflected the research participants' perspectives while maintaining the critical analytical and interpretative stance. To achieve that goal the data was analysed rather than solely

presented as a descriptive account. The latter would have left the bulk of the data interpretation to the reader, while relying upon minimal prior analysis by the researcher. Taking an analytical rather than a descriptive approach supported the process of condensing the content of thirty semi-structured interviews into a thesis.

The data analysis itself followed an eight-step procedure. First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher to become familiarised with the content and then sent to the respective research participants for verification. Second, incidents related by the research participants were separated from more general comments and analysed, using an adapted version of Tripp's Critical Incident Analysis Framework to accommodate the analysis of learning and teaching related incidents from a pedagogic and equality perspective, see appendix 4 (Tripp 1993; Brookfield 1995). Third, incidents were grouped according to themes, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' that minimally organises data in order to allow rich descriptions (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). The data was analysed thematically in order to emphasise the content, what was said, rather than the language, how it was said. Fourth, once the incidents were grouped thematically, emerging patterns were identified and exceptions were also included in the analysis in order to avoid making claims that were not supported by the data. Exceptions are important to consider, according to Gomberg, if researchers are to retain epistemic modesty because exceptions will help researchers to avoid starting from a point where they make assumptions which then close off advances in understanding (Gomberg 2011).

Fifth, the more general comments that were separated from incidents were analysed thematically. Sixth, the data was left to rest for a month to obtain some distance from it before reviewing the interview transcripts in their entirety. Seventh, the interview transcripts were analysed

thematically. Eighth, the emerging themes from the incident analysis were compared with the themes from the interview transcript analysis to establish the final overall themes.

As straightforward as this process might appear, there are challenges to qualitative data analysis. One major challenge is the question of what constitutes a 'theme'. Braun and Clarke define a theme as capturing 'something important about the data in relation to the research question' and representing 'some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82). This raises the question of how prevalent a theme has to be in order to deserve attention. According to Braun and Clarke, prevalence can be determined in terms of 'space within each data item' or 'across the entire data set' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82). The reference to space should, however, not necessarily be understood in numerical terms, as Braun and Clarke point out, because the question of whether a theme captures 'something important in relation to the overall research question' is equally, if not more important (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82). The term 'space' is misleading because qualitative research is about exploring a topic rather than quantifying it. Moreover, the prevalence of a theme in terms of space is determined by the researcher pursuing certain topics at the expense of others, which is part and parcel of a semi-structured interview. Based on these considerations, the idea of space was applied as a guiding principle. However, themes that appeared important in relation to the research question but did not take much space in Braun and Clarke's terms were still considered. This links in with Gombert's discussion about 'epistemic modesty' and the idea of paying attention to exceptions, because if exceptions in terms of lack of prevalence in space are ignored, qualitative research, which explicitly aims at exploring a topic rather than quantifying it, might be ruled by assumptions.

The question – what constitutes a theme? – exemplifies the subjective aspect of qualitative data analysis and that a researcher's judgement is

inevitably necessary to arrive at some kind of conclusion (Attride-Stirling 2001). This is one reason why some qualitative researchers choose a descriptive approach over the analytical approach that was taken in this study because then it is left to the reader to draw conclusions. The rigour with which judgements made are scrutinised undermines the criticism levelled at qualitative research that ‘anything goes’, which refers to the danger of making analytical claims that are not supported by the data (Braun and Clarke 2006: 95). However, the reader would spot such a mismatch because the descriptive parts are provided in support of the analytical claims, which means they can be verified.

The eight-step procedure was followed to bring clarity into the data analysis process and to do justice to the research participants’ perspectives while maintaining a critical analytical and interpretative stance. The question of what realistically can be expected in terms of findings from this data set has been answered when asserting that this study reports experiences rather than making claims to knowledge (see Chapter 6). The findings have generated ideas for discussion and debate. They are clearly identified as ‘issues for discussion’ in the relevant chapters. They are of particular importance for the research institution and its benchmark institutions. Furthermore, if read and debated in relation to previous research and the current literature, the ideas generated in this study are undoubtedly relevant to the national debate on ethnic attainment differences in British higher education.

Ethical considerations

This research project has followed three core ethic principles: upholding scientific standards, compliance with the law and avoidance of social and personal harm. All three principles are part of the research institution’s *Research Ethics Policy: Code of Practice* (2010), the British Educational Research Association’s *Ethics Guidelines for Educational Research* (2004)

and the Social Research Association's *RESPECT Code of Practice for Socio-Economic Research* (2004). The study was also reviewed and approved by the research institution's ethics committee in November 2010.

To uphold scientific standards researchers have, according to the Social Research Association, 'to take account of all the relevant evidence and present it without omission, misrepresentation or deception' (SRA 2004: 1). The ten-step data analysis process outlined as part of the research strategy supported the process of upholding scientific standards. The intention was to present the findings without omission, misrepresentation or deception. While steps could be taken to minimise possible misrepresentations, taking into account all the relevant evidence was beyond the scope of this project. That is why the findings have been reported as experiences rather than as knowledge. The distinction has been discussed in detail in the research philosophy section in Chapter 6.

To ensure compliance with the law the data was stored and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. That means digital recordings were protected by a password and destroyed once the interview transcripts were approved by the participants and transcripts were securely locked away and kept separately from the consent forms and participants' personal information sheets. Regarding the *Equality Act 2010*'s legal requirements for reporting discriminatory behaviour, priority was given to the research participants' right to confidentiality and anonymity. Research participants were informed about their right to confidentiality and anonymity and that this meant that any reporting of discriminatory behaviour would be kept confidential. The research participants were, however, provided with contact details of support services.

Lastly, to avoid social and personal harm participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. To this effect interview transcripts were anonymised and incidents at times reported only partially to avoid second guessing. Also, participation in the study was based on informed consent. This included the right to refuse the answer to any question or

withdraw at any stage of the research process without penalty, loss of their rights as students or giving reasons. Silverman refers to this procedure as 'process consent' (Silverman 2010: 159).

Project information was communicated via the participant information sheet and distributed together with the consent form, the interview questions and contact details of support services prior to the interview. Several research participants have taken advantage of the opportunity to raise questions before consenting to participate. Questions related to terms like 'race' and 'ethnicity', to literature available on the topic and to the research process itself. Some participants were also concerned about whether they met the participation criteria or not. The consent form had then to be signed prior to the interview. In other words, participation was based on overt, voluntary and fully informed consent.

Summary

This study explored undergraduate students' teaching and learning experiences and their views on how these impacted on their attainment. For this purpose thirty semi-structured interview were conducted with undergraduate students at a post-1992 university, using Flanagan's critical incident technique. Research participants have been recruited through theoretical sampling as random sampling across a student population of 15,540, with an ethnically minoritised student population of 15%, was unlikely to have resulted in the same ethnic representation obtained through theoretical sampling. But a wide ethnic representation was considered important because the students' teaching and learning experiences were explored with ethnicity in mind.

To uphold research standards, the interviews were first piloted and subsequently reviewed using Kvale's qualitative interview criteria. Semi-structured interviews were used because it is a method that enables the researcher to extract clarifications and explore atypical responses. The

data was subsequently analysed using an adapted version of Tripp's Critical Incident Analysis Framework and Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis which helped to identify, analyse and report patterns within the data. Students' experiences were reported as experiences rather than knowledge, being aware of the conceptual difference between knowledge and experience which is discussed in the next chapter which outlines the research philosophy.

6 Research philosophy

Much of today's qualitative educational research is conducted from a relativist theoretical position and ethnic attainment research is no exception (Pring 2004; Bryman 2004; Silverman 2010). As this study diverts from this convention, the rationale for combining semi-structured interviews with a realist research philosophy is explained in this chapter. The argument made is that although semi-structured interviews are conventionally used in combination with a relativist theory, there is no reason why this must be so. Underpinning semi-structured interviews with a realist philosophy is perfectly viable, not least because of the conceptual distinction realists draw between experiences (people's perceptions) and knowledge (objective truth). This conceptual distinction ensures that experiences are reported for what they are – people's perceptions of the social world – rather than being linked to knowledge claims by referring to experiences as 'lived realities' or 'truths'.

Bailey has gone as far as to argue that if research is to contribute to the understanding of the world, it has to be underpinned by realism, because it is only research that is based on realism where truth can be challenged (Bailey 2004). Relativist theories which talk about socially constructed 'realities' and multiple 'truths', claiming that various 'truths' are equally valid, do not provide the context within which truth can be challenged. This is because if 'truths' presented by groups identified as powerful are equally valid as 'truths' presented by minoritised groups, 'truths' cannot be questioned (Scruton 1994; Bailey 2004). The tenets of the realist philosophy adopted in this study are outlined here and discussed alongside the research implications that emerged from underpinning this study with a realist philosophy.

Realism

Realists affirm the notion of objective truth (knowledge) and assert that there is 'a single way of being or truth' (Anderson 1962a; Anderson 1962b; Baker 1986: 20; Bridges 1999; Swann and Pratt 1999). Realists support the claim that there is 'a reality, a world, which exists independently of the researcher and which is to be discovered' (Pring 2004: 59). This differs from relativists, who are interested in people's perceptions of reality and who claim that multiple 'realities' exist and that equal validity must be attributed to each person's socially constructed reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Smith and Lusthaus 1995; Lyotard 1999; Pring 2004; Bryman 2004).

In social and educational research, the term 'reality' or 'objective truth' refers to what Pring calls 'inherited understandings' about the social world (Pring 2004: 60–61). These understandings refer to a reality through which 'we understand what is happening independently of us' without being 'our creation', even though inherited understandings 'have evolved over the millennia through intricate social interactions' (Pring 2004: 61). This conceptualisation allows for social forces and structures, whether people are conscious of them or not, to shape relationships, but contests that people can 'simply create another way of conceiving the social world' (Pring 2004: 61). Individual creations of the social world are not possible because, according to Pring, the 'world is constituted' and already shaped by inherited understandings which evolved over time rather than being constructed individually at a specific point in time (Pring 2004: 61).

The idea of 'inherited understandings' equally applies to studies which involve cultural and ethnic aspects because, as Pring points out, 'however culturally specific any one description or reality is, such a description has to come up against the hard facts of reality' (Pring 2004: 62). 'Different cultures might mark out different ways of conceptualising reality', 'but the viability of those distinctions depends upon features of the world which makes them possible' (Pring 2004: 62). This means that there is a reality that is based on what Pring calls 'inherited understandings' which

evolved to become 'hard facts of reality' that apply universally rather than being culturally or ethnically specific (Pring 2004: 62).

Understanding reality in this way means accepting the conceptual difference between knowledge and experience. Knowledge involves understanding reality and is pursued to establish truth. Experiences, on the other hand, are constructed and understood to refer to people's perceptions of the social world (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Pring 2004). Failing to draw the conceptual distinction between experience and knowledge can lead to equating knowledge with experience. When these two terms are conflated, knowledge, according to Young, is reduced 'to what is known by different groups, the power relations between them and their different experiences', but it says little about knowledge (Young 2008b: 27). Making the experience-knowledge distinction allows for these experiences to be reported as 'perceptions' and helps to guard against making unsubstantiated claims to knowledge.

Realists assert that knowledge is advanced if truth is established, which requires that all relevant evidence is taken into account and presented objectively (Pring 2004). The common relativist idea that reality or knowledge is equivalent to people's experiences is contested in this study because experiences are people's perceptions of the social world and as such cannot be counted as knowledge. O'Hear has argued that 'just what effect experience is to have on any belief of ours will always be left in doubt' (O'Hear 1985: 109) because causal accounts of knowing, where a belief is caused by conscious or unconscious 'perceptions of various cues', may give reason for a belief, but tell little about reality (O'Hear 1985: 101). Therefore, combining semi-structured interviews with a realist approach requires a conceptual distinction between knowledge and experience and demands that the experiences related by the research participants are reported as people's perceptions of the social world rather than as knowledge.

In an attempt to capture both the concept of an objective truth as well as people's socially constructed 'realities', various strands of realism have

emerged, notably critical realism (Bhasker 1989), transcendental realism (Miles and Huberman 1994) and social realism (Young 2008a, 2008b). None of these strands has been adopted in this study because, rather than representing a distinct philosophical approach to realism, it is argued here that each of these strands fails to acknowledge the fundamental realist distinction between the judger (subject) and the judged (object) (Anderson 1962a, 1962b; Baker 1986). Instead, critical, transcendental and social realism combine ontological realism with epistemological relativism to 'retain an ontological realism (there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories and constructions) while accepting a form of epistemological constructivism and relativism (our understanding of this world is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoint)' (Bhasker 1989; Miles and Huberman 1994; Young 2008a, 2008b; Maxwell 2012: 5). Critical, transcendental and social realism have gained 'acceptance as an alternative both to naïve realism and radical constructivist views that deny the existence of any reality from our constructions' (Schutz 1967; Blumer 1969; Berger and Luckmann 1967; Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds 1975; Lyotard 1986; Trochim 2006; Maxwell 2012: 5).

Critical realists insist on the distinction between ontological realism and epistemological constructivism, but whether such a distinction can be made is disputed among both realists and relativists (Bhasker 1989; Lincoln and Guba 1985, Maxwell 2012). The distinction is also questioned here because it does not appear to add anything new to realism. Critical, transcendental and social realists, by combining ontological realism with epistemological relativism, make a distinction between the subject and the object. But this distinction is already made by realism as it differentiates between the judger (subject) and the judged (object). The distinction between the judger and the judged is the same distinction critical, transcendental and social realists all make when differentiating between ontological realism (objective truth or the object) and epistemological constructivism (people's perception of reality or the subject).

Moreover, critical, transcendental and social realism are said to offer an alternative to naïve realism which, according to Pring is thought to suggest 'that there is a one-to-one relation between our description of reality and reality itself' (Pring 2004: 61). The realist distinction between the judger and the judged recognises, however, that the 'description of reality' and 'reality itself' equals the distinction between reality (objective truth) and experience (people's perceptions) and so rejects naïve realism (Pring 2004: 62). This means that critical, transcendental and social realism present neither an alternative to realism nor to naïve realism by making and emphasising the distinction between ontological realism and epistemological constructivism.

Acknowledging the distinction realists make between experiences and knowledge, as well as between the judger and the judged, eliminates the need to underpin qualitative research with relativist research philosophies, an idea promoted in many of the major textbooks on research methodology, notably Lincoln and Guba (1985), Bauer and Gaskell (2000), Flick (2002), Bryman (2004) and Silverman (2010). The convention of combining qualitative research with relativist philosophies emerged with the rise of postmodernism, not least because postmodernism gave rise to many of the research methods associated today with qualitative research, rather than it being the case that qualitative methods were thought necessary on the basis of practical or philosophical considerations (Siegel 1998; Swann and Pratt 1999; Scott and Usher 2011).

Realism, then, is fundamental to educational research if it is to advance understanding (Bailey 2004). Furthermore, Bailey argues that abandoning the pursuit of objective truth would be fatal for research because it would produce reactionary instead of progressive ideas, even if relativists regularly make claims to the contrary (Bailey 2004). Recognising the distinction between knowledge and experiences leaves no doubt as to the nature of the data qualitative research produces. The semi-structured interview approach used in this study, for example, explored students'

perceptions of the social world, and these are deliberately reported as perceptions without making any claims to knowledge. The data, however, can be used to generate ideas for discussion and debate which may or may not be relevant on a wider scale. Reporting experiences as people's perceptions rather than as knowledge is important because the understanding of the social world is advanced through knowledge derived from the pursuit of truth and not on the basis of opinions derived from experiences (Bailey 2004; Pring 2004).

Lastly, it is important to underpin qualitative research with a realist philosophical approach when the research involves minoritised groups. Bailey has pointed out that Foucault, in his denial of truth, suggests that truth has to be understood in the context of power relations (Bailey 2004). However, identifying regimes of truth and describing them as tools of domination, power and control without making the distinction between truth and falsity 'disempowers the very people it claims to represent' (Bailey 2004: 205). This is because if, as relativists argue, there are multiple 'truths' and socially constructed 'realities' and that 'truths' and 'realities' are equally valued, relativists are eroding the very basis on which power relations could be challenged. If socially constructed 'realities' are equally valid, 'truths' presented by groups identified as powerful are equally valid as 'truths' presented by minoritised groups and cannot be challenged. It is only research that is based on realism, where truth can be challenged, because without truth, Bailey argues, the 'deception of the tyrants, the liars and sometimes the majority will remain forever unexposed', and the minority view will go unnoticed (Bailey 2004: 205).

Summary

Bailey has argued that if research is to contribute to the understanding of the world, it has to be underpinned by a realist philosophy, not least because realism is the basis upon which truth can be challenged (Bailey 2004). 'Truth' cannot be challenged when research is conducted from a

relativist position because relativists talk about multiple 'truths' and maintain that 'each truth' must be attributed equal validity. Not being able to challenge truth means experiences and opinions are reported as 'lived realities' or 'truths' and are predisposed to be subjective, especially when based on the assumption that there are differences between groups of people.

The reporting of experiences as 'true' contrasts sharply with realist approaches which aim to find truth through discussion and debate and by challenging ideas and opinions. When a realist approach is taken experiences are reported as perceptions without any claims to knowledge. But the data provides a rich source from which ideas for discussion and debate can be drawn. Student narratives were, therefore, analysed with the view of establishing 'issues for discussion' that are explored in this study free from any prior assumptions that there are differences between groups of people. By ruling out prior assumptions about group differences and aiming to find truth, the realist approach in this study aimed to be more objective.

7 Student grouping

Student interaction in learning situations

JONINA: We all gelled together as a class; we all talked to each other as such. You had your own little groups that you would always sit by but as a class in general we all really gelled together.

GARAI: What I didn't like was people were grouping themselves. Maybe, people maybe who were born here or white people, they just grouping themselves there.

MARTA: Sometimes I see the [pause] Islamic people like the Pakistani and those kind of people, they stick together and they sort of don't interact a lot with the rest of us, which I don't think is right because we've not been racist or anything towards anyone [...] But overall we don't have a problem, nobody has had a problem.

The issues raised in these accounts relate to the way students grouped when interacting and making friends in learning situations. This phenomenon is referred to here as 'student grouping' to reflect the language used by research participants. According to the research participants who talked about student interaction – not everybody did – student grouping occurred along racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, social class and national lines, all of which intersected with one another. The narratives indicate, however, that for each research participant, there are one or two social factors that dominated.

The reactions of research participants to student grouping varied considerably. The narratives show that some students perceived it as normal and were not further concerned about it. Others resigned themselves to it fatalistically not least because, in their view, '*nobody has had a problem*' with it, while yet others perceived it as deeply problematic.

Research participants who said they interacted easily with other people tended to discuss student grouping as a normal occurrence. And those research participants who did not mention student grouping at all in the interview may have not noticed it or did not attribute much importance to it.

Merwin, on the other hand, perceived student grouping as deeply problematic:

MERWIN: It shows that there is still, for me, a lot of divisions that are there in terms of, which are basically race, based on racial appearance. Background still plays a lot on how the group formation takes place and how people interact.

RONUKA: But the next thing is, if you are of a different race, the first thing that comes to your mind is, maybe it's because of my skin colour.

Student grouping was perceived as problematic in this case because it affected Merwin both personally and socially. On a personal level, it created a feeling of exclusion from the '*larger group*' which required Merwin, in his view, to establish a separate study group in order to keep up academically. On a social level, Merwin perceived student grouping as problematic because it reflected wider social divisions that, in his view, are still prevalent in society today. This raises an issue described by Ray within the USA higher education context, in terms of micro-level classroom dynamics reflecting macro-level structural forces (Ray 2010).

Interestingly, in the narratives relating to student interaction most research participants talked about student grouping in terms of the 'others' grouping themselves, but less so about their own role in the process. These exceptions were Jonina and Merwin:

JONINA: At first I was like, first year I was shy to meet no nobody, it was a bit, like, I don't really want to talk to no one else and mingle. But as it went on during the first year and the years, it was easy, it was easy, yeah; very helpful as well because obviously you get to see other people's points of view.

MERWIN: Initially when I first came, in the first, this degree, I was really: okay, guys blah . . . blah . . . blah . . . But after a few weeks you get exhausted because you can see, oh, really I'm trying this but I'm not getting. I've tried, I've tried to be as friendly, as open, but you are not,

you are not. Then you say, oh, let me leave it, let me just come and do my work.

These accounts reveal a difference in need for social interactions with Jonina being '*shy*' and reluctant to '*mingle*' with people other than her friends, and with Merwin trying to socially integrate with the '*majority*' group but not managing to '*gel*'.

While most research participants spent little time discussing their role in student grouping, they did raise factors which were perceived to influence this:

RONUKA: And there would be some who have issue because you are not [pause], you are not white, but, by all God, they wouldn't say it.

OLAF: In one of my courses, one of the Asian groups is an example because they are quite big and they are quite loud and you just think, wow, it's a bit big. [. . .] It's just the fact they've got the [pause], you get the impression they've got the group and that is kind of it, rather than [pause], they tend to stick to the group rather than sort of say, hi or anything like this to anyone.

EMILY: I thought, well, we probably wouldn't have the same interests because you think, you don't know what they listen to, because you don't bother to fi out so you stay with the same group of, like, white people.

SAM: Like, what I've realised is, like, you get on especially with people, like, you live with near uni, or people that you come from the same town with and stuff like that. And I live off campus.

SAM: One thing I have realised that makes life hard for international students in university, this particular University, is the fact that people like to stick in their comfort zones [. . .] Most of my international friends [who] have really been suffering with integration is those who always spend a lot of their time with their own, sort of, you know, sort of people.

MERWIN: As an adult student I did find it very, initially, difficult to sort of gel in with the other students because most of them are young students. And culture-wise we didn't really get along 'cos most of them were, I would say, white background.

JASON: It's like the people that are in my seminar are, like, not the people that I'd mix with. It's like, if I was to say to you banter [. . .] it's, like, on a whole different level, it's, like, just not the kind of people that I'd mix with [. . .] I see them as, like, middle class and I sometimes get the feeling that, like, they are looking, like, down upon me.

Students' experiences are varied with regard to student grouping. The factors which, according to the research participants, posed obstacles to student interaction included social factors such as race, age, culture and social class, assumptions, such as not sharing the same interests as Muslim students, behaviour such as people's tendency to stick to their comfort zones and the size and energy level of some groups, perceptions, such as the feeling of being *'looked down upon'*, and residential issues, such as living at a distance from other students and from the campus.

Student grouping was thought to occur because of a general lack of awareness among people of how exclusion operates, how it affects people and because some students appeared to have issues with people's skin colour. Some people's perceptions are, moreover, tuned to social divisions because of prior experiences which, as Ronuka put it, made a person sometimes wonder whether a particular incident occurred because of their skin colour. The point raised about a general lack of awareness of social divisions in learning situations is not supported by the research data, because research participants from various social backgrounds discussed student grouping, which suggests that there is such awareness. But the way student grouping was perceived varies significantly between research participants as has been illustrated so far.

The narratives suggest that student grouping becomes an issue when it gives rise to feelings of inequality. In Merwin's case, it was racial divisions; in Charlene's case, it was attitudes along the lines of *'What do they know coming from Africa?'* and in Ronuka's case, it was people having issues because *'you are not white'*, which refers to race again. There is little evidence to verify these experiences, but the significance they carry for some research participants does come across in the student narratives quoted in this chapter. It is also the wider social structures and the historical legacy of colonialism, scientific racism and the British eugenics movement that must be considered when it comes to impact. In fact, it was Merwin who linked his classroom experiences to the wider social structures, and the *'divisions'* based on *'race'* and *'racial appearance'* that, according to him, still

influence how *'group formation takes place and how people interact'*.

Student grouping is, however, not simply a case of the *'majority'*, the *'white'* or the *'British'* grouping together and excluding students in the process. Student grouping happens on both sides, as Olaf's and Marta's examples illustrate, because people from minority backgrounds are just as likely to form groups among themselves as everybody else. Therefore, if interventions designed to enhance student interaction across social boundaries were to be developed, such subtleties would have to be carefully considered, as well as the fact that student grouping is neither a universal phenomenon nor a one-sided process whereby the *'majority'*, the *'white'* or the *'British'* group together and exclude the students in the process. This still leaves open the question though whether policy makers and academics should interfere with students' personal relationships within universities.

Issue for discussion: the nature of the 'student'

Impact of 'student grouping' on education

The impact student grouping had on the education of the research participants who perceived it as problematic was not always obvious, which might relate to it being a social rather than an education observation:

MERWIN: It doesn't really affect me education-wise, my performance, I would say. But I would say probably again unconsciously it does, 'cos I don't think I then gain the whole experience of being at university, which is the whole group interaction. I don't, because I'm then limited to a specific number of students which, I think, are more comfortable [pause] and are comfortable to have me in their group, which, in a sense, can be limiting for, in a sense, which is what is just happened now with the other group. I'm not really comfortable [with] the idea [of forming a separate study group] but that's the only option I feel I have to, to at least, to improve my education. Otherwise if I don't, I know I won't have any other study group besides that, as I said, because that's how I feel. So in that sense, I'd say it has, it does, it has an impact on my education, you know.

LADISLAV: I didn't have many friends from my course last year and

when you have friends from your course you can always talk about some tasks, some course work and it's easier to write a coursework together, for instance, to share your experience with different people. I didn't have that last year; I do have it this year because I made few friends from my course so yeah, it's quite easier this year.

CHARLENE: Even if I didn't like it [student grouping] [I had] just to get along with it, do the work, try the best, work to the best of my ability so that we can get the work done and pass the assessments.

CHARLENE: You have to prove yourself in many ways. So, you have to work very hard. It's quite difficult, you know. I've been, I've been in this country for a while as a student and, you have to prove yourself because sometimes people will just assume that, oh, you don't know anything. Because when international students, probably like I am from Africa, they'll think, oh some do have perceptions I feel, what do they know? What do they know coming from Africa? What do you know? Well, we speak English as well.

Seeing students as parts of seemingly homogenous groups was perceived by some research participants to have impacted on both their overall university experiences and their education. Charlene thought that some students had unpleasant and prejudicial attitudes towards students from Africa. It was as if they thought, *'What do they know coming from Africa?'* This conveyed to her a feeling of having to prove herself.

The personal impact, by contrast, was a lot more obvious to the research participants who described student grouping as problematic:

MERWIN: If you are not from the majority group, it's hard to fit in. [. . .] You can talk but in terms of being, feeling equal, I haven't felt that, I can't feel it. I've tried as much as to gel in and to interact without losing what I think is my identity, but unless [pause] if I go another step, which I'm not comfortable to do, that's the only way, I think, I can really get in and do it.

MERWIN: And in terms of interaction, that had an impact where I never made really any friends, just say other than the odd one, who was black, who came to join later on.

MERWIN: I wouldn't say I felt excluded, it was more like the level of understanding were, we didn't gel, my, in terms of interaction, we did not. So it was more, like, even when we're sitting, I sit on my own. I was fine with it and I'm still fine with it.

CHARLENE: Sometimes it's quite difficult; it's quite difficult if you are from a different background to everybody else, it's quite difficult. So, if you are coming from the minority, sometimes you have to try to fit in even if sometimes you feel left out. [. . .] But for the sake of progress

you sometimes end up feeling forced to get on with it.

CHARLENE: Well physically and mentally it's challenging because obviously sometimes you get frustrated and angry because of situations that you feel, oh, I can't change this, I can't do this.

This illustrates how student grouping provoked both feelings of not being equal and in some cases feelings of having to fit in '*for the sake of progress*', which proved both physically and mentally challenging to some research participants.

Despite facing both educational and personal issues related to student grouping only a few research participants took actions to deal with the situation:

LADISLAV: I didn't. I just sit there silent because I couldn't say anything. This year I just don't care pretty much. I have my friends and that's who I care about.

CHARLENE: And in trying to, it was also very difficult for us to go to the tutor to say, you know, we feel, we feel [pause] it's quite difficult, you know, to start and say while we are feeling discriminated against. [...] Going through complaints and whatever, is also, that's an extra headache, because obviously you might be asked to make, to write statements, you know, and that's a whole, lots of things that can, it can work out for your good or it might not work out.

But Sam and Merwin did address their experience of student grouping:

SAM: One thing I realised, it makes it easier when you joke about a situation like, you know, where I'm from we don't do a, b, c and d, you know, just make it into a joke so that they feel comfortable about talking about, you know, general subjects, especially when it comes to cultural stuff and things like that.

MERWIN: The nature of the situation that it can be, it's very delicate. I had to consult my lecturer, which I did, and he did tell me and he said, okay, that's very interesting. Then he told me, okay, the best thing is, present to them [the class], you know, and I did. I did try my best to just make sure that I presented in a way that no one really feels as if I'm trying to point the racist finger in any way or sense.

MERWIN: When I raised it initially they didn't understand and there was more denial [...] because of the race and racism issue which no one wants to be, I understand, I wouldn't want to be put in a category, in that category.

Inaction was a common response to student grouping by those research

participants who perceived it as problematic because the students feared repercussions, were aware of power relations and were unsure whether the outcome would be favourable to them or not. Merwin, who addressed student grouping directly with his lecturer and the fellow students, welcomed that there was '*at least some understanding that these things are quite possible*'. He attributed the success of his action to the subject discipline which deals with social issues and might have prepared the grounds for a successful intervention.

Student grouping and educational attainment

The phenomenon of social grouping produced different reactions in the research participants. While some described it as a normal occurrence and continued interacting with people regardless, others perceived it as deeply problematic. Where racial and national factors were involved, student grouping tended to be experienced negatively, but student narratives describe invariably how various social factors intersect in the way students group, which means that attributing student grouping, when it occurs, to one social factor, would be too simplistic.

The impact student grouping had on the education of the research participants is difficult to elicit. Some research participants thought it had impacted on their overall university experience because it limited their social interaction network which, in turn, they believed to have impacted negatively on their education since they were exposed to fewer people. This would support the findings of Thomas who argued that there is an optimal size for 'communication networks of freshmen' (Thomas 2000: 609). Thomas has built an empirical research project around Tinto's (1993) student departure theory to examine the relationships between social integration, commitment to the university and persistence (Thomas 2000). His findings suggest that there is an 'optimal size' for the 'communication networks of freshmen' (Thomas 2000: 609). Thomas argues further that this finding 'might encourage those working in student

life to identify and support activities' which 'encourage a moderate and supportive set of student relations', but warns against the 'potential negative effects of situations that promote an overabundance of such relations' (Thomas 2000: 609).

The claim that there is an optimal size for sets of social networks for each first-year student is a rather mechanistic approach to social relations which raises the question whether policy makers and academics should interfere with students' personal relationships in such ways. Despite these problems, policy makers and academics increasingly recommend interventions designed to encourage student social integration (Thomas 2000; Mann 2005; Chang, Denson, Saenz and Misa 2006; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Tyrer and Ahmad 2006; HEA 2008; Jessop and Williams 2009; Dhanda 2010; NUS 2011; Singh 2011; Thomas 2012). Such interventions are based on student integration theories, such as Tinto's student departure theory (1993) mentioned previously, Astin's (1984) theory of involvement and Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) concept of cultural capital and habitus, which all indicate that academic and social integration enhances the students' commitment both to their goals and to the university, and this is thought to have a positive effect on retention and completion rates (Thomas 2000; Grace and Gravestock 2009).

However, according to Thomas and Guffrida, Tinto's theory is only partially supported by empirical research (Thomas 2000; Guffrida 2006). Consequently, the claim that academic and social integration enhances commitment and as a result improves retention and completion rates is an assumption rather than empirically proven. It also should be emphasised once more that not all research participants spoke about social interactions between students and for those who did they not necessarily perceive it as problematic. As the sample is not statistically representative, it would be meaningless to put a number to it, but this does raise a broader question of how much of an issue student grouping actually is.

Student grouping and interventions

As a way forward, Merwin decided to raise the issue of student grouping directly with his classmates and he was successful because he felt that after raising it a second time, *'the blanket was taken away'* and that *'people were openly able to discuss and understand'*. But is discussion and debate within a classroom setting a model that should be adopted? Anti-racist pedagogues who promote the idea of self-reflexivity and the examination of white privilege and racism in education would welcome the idea because, as discussed in the chapter on 'Discussions and debates emerging from the literature', this method serves to uncover white supremacy in education (Ladson-Billings 1998; Jeffery 2005). Teaching anti-racism is, as Wagner has rightly pointed out, a political project and it takes up time allocated to the subject content of the degree course (Wagner 2005). In Merwin's case, the social issues that he raised were indirectly related to the subject, but it nevertheless dealt with a student's personal issue during time that was allocated to the degree course.

Examining Merwin's example from a pedagogic perspective, addressing personal issues during class time has potentially a demotivating effect on students who enrolled on the degree course to study about their subject and yet are confronted with discussions about a fellow student's personal issues. In Merwin's case, this was not just an isolated discussion but a repeated event. Considering that some students, as previously discussed in the chapter on 'Categories and the categorisation', were disappointed about the lack of intellectual challenge they were presented with in their academic studies, the danger of demotivating students by discussing social interactions instead of the subject content is substantial. An alternative approach would have been to provide a platform for discussion outside the allocated teaching time. This might result in reduced attendance at, and interest in, the discussion, but it respects the students' ability to take independent decisions and is more likely to lead to a long-term change in social behaviour – if that is the aim – than imposed discussions about

personal issues during class time.

The alternative is to increase student interaction through conscious group allocation in an attempt to change social behaviour. Instead of letting students choose their own groups or grouping them according to, for example, post codes, the lecturer allocates students in ways that ensure greater social mixing. However, manipulating social interactions raises questions about the legitimacy of social engineering personal relationships among higher education students. Social engineering, according to Furedi, promotes 'values that are yet weak' but believed to be 'necessary for society to move forward' (Furedi 2009: 120). With regard to student grouping, such a value might be related to cross-cultural interaction. The promotion of cross-cultural interaction among students is an attempt to alter their behaviour, based on the assumption that cross-cultural interaction enhances cross-cultural understanding. Such attempts to modify people's behaviour amounts, according to Furedi, to soft social engineering: soft because it is more about behavioural changes and less about ideological changes such as occurred in Stalin's Russia and Mao's Communist China (Furedi 2009).

Attempts to alter social behaviour may seem to be advantageous, especially when prevailing values are considered outdated and wrong, and people are believed to be in need of 'more enlightened values' that have the potential to change attitudes and 'create a better world' (Furedi 2009: 120). However, these attempts remain political projects because they aim to question social relations of power in order to uproot and reshape current structures, challenge oppression and eventually bring about a social transformation (Jeffrey 1999; Sharma 2004; Wagner 2005; Gillborn 2006, 2008; Grace and Gravestock 2009). Once such implicit and explicit political objectives enter university education the basic principle of the liberal education tradition is abandoned in favour of ideological and behavioural change, which explains the fierce opposition among liberal educationalists to social engineering (Peters 1966; White 1967; Hirst and Peters 1970; O'Hear 1981). The question is, as Furedi

has pointed out, not only whether education should be used to attempt to solve deeply seated social ills, but also whether this putative social engineering of behaviour is efficacious in any positive way and may be counterproductive (Furedi 2009). In particular, it may have the diminishing and, therefore, minoritising consequences identified in this study.

Thomas (2012), in her report on *Student Retention and Success*, states that engagement, loosely defined as developing relationships with others and promoting connectedness, can be enhanced at the academic, social and professional service level, but she fails to provide the research evidence in support of the statement (Thomas 2012). Habermas, the German sociologist who discusses social engagement and interactions in *Legitimation Crisis*, has pointed out that behavioural change instigated through social engineering relies on 'administratively regenerated values', that is, values that have been constructed through the work of experts and policy makers and are designed to fulfil a strategic purpose (Habermas 1976: 47). Such values have a weak organic relationship with society and, according to Furedi, are exposed to changing social and political trends, which give them an arbitrary and contingent character (Habermas 1976; Furedi 2009). Consequently, Habermas argues that administratively regenerated values are a weak force for social change because they lack an organic relationship with society and the necessary historical continuity to bring about sustained social change (Habermas 1976).

If it is doubtful whether social engineering effectively changes behaviour, it is equally doubtful whether strategic interventions designed to enhance social interactions among students in learning situations as a means of addressing self-selection biases in student grouping are effective. As we have seen, there is some indication in the narratives that some students also perceived social grouping in learning situations as problematic.

These caveats aside, it appears from the literature that there exists at present an intervention overload. Thomas, in the study on *Student*

Retention and Success, argues that ‘friends and peer relations can have a range of positive impacts on student experience’ and that ‘facilitating social integration in the academic sphere is particularly important as it develops cohort identity and belonging to the programme’ (Thomas 2012: 48). This is an idea that, like other intervention literature, builds on Tinto’s (1993), Astin’s (1984) and Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) theories which have long advocated the advantage of integrating students into university. There are degrees of difference thought between these theories because Bourdieu and Passeron understand social integration as students assimilating to the culture of the university, while Astin and Tinto emphasise inter-personal relationships (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Tinto 1993; Astin 1984; Guffrida 2006).

Most disturbing about the report by Thomas is the claim that ‘students do not always recognise the value of engagement, or have the ability to engage’ and ‘need to be educated about the value of widespread engagement in their higher education experience and encouraged and facilitated to engage in appropriate opportunities and given the necessary skills’ (Thomas 2012: 20). This claim is largely contradicted by the student narratives collected in this study (see chapter 8 ‘Participatory versus intellectual engagement’). However, there are two fundamental problems with the statement Thomas makes. First, as Mann has pointed out, there are different degrees of engagement students feel comfortable with which means a uniform approach to encouraging engagement may create pressure for conformity and result in alienation and disengagement (Mann 2005). Second, and more importantly, recognising the importance of academic and social integration and interaction does not in itself justify social interventions designed to instigate a change in behaviour among higher education students.

The justification for interventions is based in the ‘student-centred’ approach adopted by many universities, which questions the capacity of young people to interact socially. When authors claim that ‘students do not always have the ability to engage’ and must be ‘given the necessary skills’

(Thomas 2012: 20), this suggests that students are incapable of forming social relationships and are dysfunctional when it comes to developing relationships in learning situations. It is a well-intentioned but disquieting report and one of many that feed the intervention overload aimed at addressing social ills through education.

Summary

Interventions to address social ills suggested in the literature, besides ethnic monitoring, focus on issues in university leadership and management, staff development and student support. Here are some examples. Leadership interventions aim at addressing the 'lack of diversity in senior ranks' and at interrupting the 'culture of silence' by starting a genuine debate on the topic (Bebbington 2009: 2; Rusch and Horsford 2009: 303–305). Equality and diversity committees are given the task to generate an 'inclusive ethos' and 'supportive policy and practice' which reflects the sectors multiculturalist approach to addressing equality issues in higher education (Tyrer and Ahmad 2006, HEA 2008: 3). Human resource departments are requested to increase the number of minority ethnic staff members employed, particularly among its academic staff, to increase the number of staff that can act as role models (Bagguley and Hussain 2007; Dhanda 2010; NUS 2011; Singh 2011). Marketing departments are required to ensure the public face of universities 'reflects diversity' and that it is a 'true reflection of internal culture and experience of students' (Tyrer and Ahmad 2006; Stevenson 2010: 8; Singh 2011). Staff development events are expected to raise awareness about diversity, inclusion, discrimination as well as outlining legal and organisational duties of teachers and support staff (Tyrer and Ahmad 2006; Jessop and Williams 2009; Singh 2011; NUS 2011). Student experience teams and support services are expected to develop holistic action plans that

consider the whole student cycle and relate to all seven diversity strands, as outlined by the Equality Challenge Unit when designing intervention to address social ills (Willcott and Stevenson 2007; Tyrer and Ahmad 2006; NUS 2011; Singh 2011; Dhanda 2010).

This list of interventions is remarkably broad, but all advocate the idea that education must address, if not solve, social ills. Sims has argued that 'UK universities have a significant role to play in creating successful multi-ethnic societies', and Dhanda, the NUS and Singh wrote that universities must 'encourage cohesion among students through a range of reactive and proactive actions' and, through 'celebrating cultural diversity', provide opportunities for students to mix as well as 'increasing discussion and interactive work' in classrooms (Sims 2007: 11; Dhanda 2010: 41; Singh 2011: 49; NUS 2011: 61).

The widespread support for social interventions in higher education arises because ethnic attainment research, as discussed in the chapter on 'Categories and categorisation', has become implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, a political project. This trend has been supported by the shift in education from subject-based teaching to an increasing focus on student-centred and learning process-oriented teaching, inasmuch as it redirected the educational focus away from subject content towards a whole range of learning, employment and social-related skills (Schuller 1995; Warner and Palfreyman 2001; Hayes and Wynyard 2002; Evans 2004; Stevens 2005; Williams 2013). The fact that the widespread advocacy of social intervention in higher education has occurred largely in the absence of any debate about the what university education is for, explains, at least partially, why no questions have been raised whether interventions designed to address social ills are at all appropriate in higher education.

That education has the potential to change people is undisputed. This might help to explain the current interest in interventions, but a problem arises when students are indoctrinated with values rather than provided with the intellectual resources and capital to bring about change as and

when they see fit (Furedi 2009). Indoctrination, Peters writes, has whatever else it may mean ‘something to do with doctrines, which are species of beliefs’, and ‘these have to be understood and assented to in some embryonic way, for indoctrination to take place’ (Peters 1966: 41–42). Indoctrination, therefore, involves either ‘the inculcation of beliefs or the addition of a rationale which discourages the evaluation of beliefs’ (Peters 1966: 261).

If education is about providing intellectual resources and developing students’ intellectual capital, then indoctrination is counterproductive, whether it occurs through interventions designed to encourage greater social mixing among students, through anti-racist pedagogy determined to expose racism and oppressive structures in higher education or through inclusive teaching and learning intended to raise awareness about diversity and inclusion. The problem with these initiatives is that they pursue a purpose, be it to encourage greater social mixing, expose racism or raise awareness about diversity, while education is about pursuing knowledge as an end in itself. According to Peters, teaching, as opposed to indoctrination, involves the ‘passing on of knowledge’ in such a way that ‘the learner is brought to understand and evaluate the underlying rationale for what is presented to him’ (Peters 1966: 261). This is very different from indoctrination. The moment interventions designed to address social ills are introduced into education, students are being indoctrinated with values and/or beliefs, especially given the politicised nature of current approaches to ethnic attainment research and the resulting university policies and practices, discussed in the chapter on ‘Categories and categorisation’. If ethnic attainment differences are to be addressed through absolute non-comparative standards in education, as argued in the chapter on ‘Equality and education’, social interventions in university education prove counterproductive because they undermine the educational ideals of a university education. Peters has argued that indoctrination involves a ‘lack of respect’ for students because it is ‘intended to produce a state of mind’ in which ‘an individual has either no grasp of the

rationale underlying his beliefs or a type of foundation which encourages no criticism or evaluation' of the beliefs (Peters 1966: 42).

The 'lack of respect' Peters discusses is understood here as an attack on both human rationality and agency. By refusing them respect, students are being denied the capacity both for rationality and action in pursuit of conscious goals. Therefore, indoctrination resulting from interventions designed to address social ills through education is not only incompatible with the ideals of a university education, but it also minoritises higher education students. This is because instead of seeing students as rational human beings, capable of acting in pursuit of conscious goals, students are degraded because they are being socially engineered to fit a predetermined model rather than being educated as rational individuals.

Therefore, when the literature advocates social interventions designed to enhance student interactions, it betrays a disregard for both human rationality and agency and suggests that students are incapable of forming social relationships. The answer is not to engineer relationships socially, but to rebuild trust in the belief that social relationships form organically and that organically formed social relationships will reach across social boundaries.

8 Participatory versus intellectual engagement

Engagement

JASON: Engaging to me is like, okay, he said like a critical evaluation about x or something like that. So it's, like, I have to think about it and I have to interpret it as well because there is no point in me writing down everything that's just on the PowerPoint.

SANDRA: It's more about listening, applying. Looking at, obviously, the tutorial lecture slides, applying what I've been taught to exactly what she wants in the assignment. And also applying those theories as well, you know. And engaging is wanting to do well and wanting to learn because you enjoy what you've been taught.

Jason's and Sandra's narratives illustrate the divide between participatory and intellectual engagement that emerged from the student narratives. Intellectual engagement refers to engaging with the subject content, while participatory engagement refers to engaging with the learning process. It is an interesting divide although not always a clear-cut one. This is because both intellectual and participatory engagement are, at times, closely interlinked in the way some research participants described them. This section explores the nature of the divide between participatory and intellectual engagement and discusses the implications. It is argued here that the divide between participatory and intellectual engagement reflects the shift from subject-based teaching towards an increasing focus on student-centred learning and process-oriented teaching which was formally introduced in higher education following the *Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* in 1997 (Dearing Report).

Issues that have been raised in connection to the participatory versus

intellectual engagement debate are related to the meaning and significance of student engagement, the levelling down of educational standards by prioritising the learning process over the subject content, the significance of having role models from the student's ethnic background and to the rote/deep learning divide which is frequently discussed in relation to cultural differences.

Intellectual engagement

ALICE: It makes me really want to work and follow it up at whatever the cost in terms of both time, extra work, peripheral research. Just to get to grips with it. It's when your interest is really fired up by something.

JAKE: Hold your attention, your full attention. To be engaged in something it's when you are gripped on the subject matter or the topic. It's like when you are reading a book, you can be so engrossed or engaged into a book, you forget about time, and before you know it you finish the book and it's midnight.

PAUL: I guess it is approaching things with an open mind and being able to question your own beliefs. Because I think where you can question your own beliefs and your own knowledge set that by default reaches engagement, you know [. . .]. It encourages us to go out and get more information to look at that and, you know, to start to debate those views. So I think that in itself is engagement.

What comes across in these narratives is the students' enthusiasm for their intellectual engagement with subject content. Phrases like, *'your interest is fired up'*, *'gripped on the subject'*, *'question your own beliefs and your own knowledge'*, *'debate those views'*, *'drags you in'* and *'you just don't wanna let go'* are powerful reflections of the students' enthusiasm for intellectual engagement. These comments underscore the importance of the subject content and the *'critical'* engagement with the content through *'debate'*. This enthusiasm for intellectual engagement contrasts sharply with other students' narratives which described engagement as participatory process.

Participatory engagement

MARTA: Engaged [pause] involved, taking part in the whole, probably teaching, learning process and there and back. [. . .] Because, obviously, if you don't care about it, there is no way the lecturer can

make a good teaching lesson.

SANDRA: If we are talking about a particular module I'd say [. . .] I mean obviously I did my first year but I can't really say I really engaged with any particular subject. I think because she made it interesting, she made the learning experience interesting and that made me want to engage more.

SAM: To me engaged means being part and parcel, participating fully. Like if we've got an assignment you are supposed to engage with that assignment. It means meeting the requirements of that assignment. [. . .] Yeah, to me that's what 'engagement' is, dedicating yourself to whatever task you've been assigned.

JOHURA: I felt engaged in all my placements when I was actually doing the practice, I really felt engaged. There is not one practice learning that I felt, oh God, I don't wanna be here. But theory was a completely different thing all together.

The emphasis on actively participating in the learning process which comes across in these accounts illustrates that some students define engagement as a participatory process. The students are focused on *'dedicating yourself to whatever task you've been assigned to'*, *'getting to grips with [. . .] referencing and report writing'*, *'taking part in the whole, probably, teaching, learning process'*, *'being part of the discussion and participating'* and *'when doing the practice'*. There is an emphasis on active participation in the learning process, but little mention of the subject content that comes across quite strongly in the student narratives which talk about engagement as an intellectual process.

The divide between participatory and intellectual engagement also comes across when students describe situations they thought engaging or disengaging:

PAUL: I just find the whole topic really interesting because it sort of challenges your views and sort of thinking.

STEVE: I think, particularly situations where I find myself more engaged with what is happening, is where I'm in a situation where I can just discuss with various different people.

JAKE: It was the level of conversation that we had between people of ethnic races and with other people in there. And it was kind of like a questions and answers, backwards and forwards, from argumentative procedures, that was quite good.

NASRIN: At any point the lecturers feel that you are dozing off or not

paying attention, they will put in an activity or something enthusiastic, that gets you back up on your feet again. [. . .] I remember one time they made us stand up in the lecture theatre and we did the 'hey macaroni' in French. So they definitely know how to engage us.

ANDREW: In general, when you work in groups and you have tasks and you, kind of, you are moving about and sometimes you've got the posters. When it's more interactive and hands on I've always found this approach more useful.

ILIANA: My placements are good because they were practical and they were different.

Comparing these narratives, intellectual engagement is illustrated by phrases such as '*challenges your views and sort of thinking*' and the '*level of conversation*' Jake was talking about. The interest in the learning process and interactive teaching methods comes across in phrases like '*learning how to research things thoroughly*', '*learning how to critically evaluate what you are looking at [. . .] but also yourself*'. Personal relevance was also important, which is illustrated in phrases like '*I could relate to a lot of the subject matter*' and '*talk a lot about current events*'. The idea of the educator as an entertainer or '*edutainer*', a term used by Johnson and McElroy to describe a teacher as a combination of an educator and entertainer, comes across in Nasrin's example of a lesson when the students were asked to do a '*hey macaroni*' in the lecture room (Johnson and McElroy 2010: 4). She saw this as the lecturer trying to keep the students awake through interactive teaching methods when they '*doze off*'. This example raises the question whether it should be the lecturer's role to entertain students as part of the learning process.

In terms of participatory engagement, Ladislav's narrative also illustrates how the language skills of second language speakers can determine the level of participatory engagement. What Ladislav has pointed out in his interview is that language skills improved as he progressed through the years and that it was '*kind of fine*' in his second year. The transitory stages some students undergo is important to keep in mind, not just for second language speakers but also for mature students. Sandra's narrative illustrated, for example, that as a mature student, in year one, she was

'trying to get to grips with things' such as *'referencing'* and *'report writing'* and that she *'started to get a bit more comfortable'* in the second year. This means the term *'engagement'*, whether it refers to intellectual or participatory engagement, has to be treated as a dynamic concept that alters as students progress through the years.

Lack of critical engagement with subject content

Some students were discontented about the lack of critical engagement with the content their education exposed them to:

PAUL: The seminars serve no useful purpose, you know, they don't reinforce your learning. [. . .] We literally had to choose a journal article, get some nice lines of bits of the brain and things like the factory tube we call them, and group together with a little PowerPoint presentation and just present it to ten people, but didn't really, didn't really learn anything from it. I just learned that far little brain picture which is on 'Google Scholar'.

VALERIE: People don't really have that high standards here, I think. Like, I have quite good grades and, I think, lecturers are surprised by that.

JOHURA: In my first year I never used to come to class and people were surprised; how do you do your assignment? And you think, well, the things are on blackboard and all I need to do is a, b, c. Coming to class really; yes, it helps going through the discussions and stuff like that. You learn about different people. But maybe to an extent the syllabus or the – is it the syllabus? – wasn't, for me. It wasn't [. . .] the whole syllabus of the whole [programme]; it wasn't very challenging to me.

ILIANA: Some of the lectures were not very stimulating and [. . .] you have got everything on blackboard anyway, right? So you can log on, and you can prepare for your lecture. And you go into the lecture, and you can tell somebody just comes into the lecture, stands there, goes through every little thing that you have prepared anyway and there isn't any different. And I mean you tend to think, what's the whole [pause] what's the point actually? I would like to discuss other things other than what I just read on the blackboard. Let's do examples, let's do other things. But sometimes it came across as some of the lecturers are a bit, I don't know, a bit lazy maybe.

Education that neglects critical engagement with subject content has a disengaging effect, not just on students who defined engagement as an intellectual process, but also on students who defined it as participatory. This is mainly because such education conveys facts, ideas and concepts without thinking critically about them and merely serves to learn that *'little brain picture that is on Google Scholar'*, as Paul put it. 'Google Scholar teaching', to use Paul's phrase, is a style of teaching that conveys the subject content without questioning it and is characterised by an absence of critical debate. Coupled with the low standards Valerie talked about, education sometimes fails to be intellectually challenging for students.

In contrast, some students considered the question of engagement irrelevant because they entered higher education for social status rather than educational reasons, as the following narratives illustrate.

AFRA: I'm not, to be honest with you, I'm not really a study person. I just did it because I thought, I'm just doing it. I might as well do it. But now, obviously, if I didn't do my degree, I wouldn't be where I am right now, to be fair, if it wasn't for that.

INTERVIEWER: So, what was the motivation for doing it?

AFRA: Getting a better, decent job; having the respect, that kind of thing. If you tell someone you've got a degree they have more respect for you. I don't know why but yeah [. . .]. People treat you differently, I think, as well. They do. I think, there is a lot of discrimination there, I think, with that. Like, for example, if someone says, if I turn round to someone and said, oh, I only did my GCSEs and that's it. Some people say, oh, she is not educated. So, people do discriminate in that, I think.

For Afra, the question of engagement was irrelevant because she did not consider herself to be a *'study person'*. Her reason for enrolling in a degree course was the perceived social status associated with higher education and, with hindsight, the employment prospects that resulted from it. Engagement for her, therefore, was only 'participatory' in terms of completing set tasks.

Jason's narrative, moreover, highlights a preference for an intellectual challenge over a lively and charismatic lecturer who uses anecdotes and

'cracks jokes':

JASON: So I feel engaged when I am doing a lecture because I can, like, build up on the knowledge that I've already got anyway. So I think, lectures really [pause] lectures are generally when I feel most engaged with what the lecturer is talking about.

JASON: [Lecturer] is like more charismatic and it's like sometimes he'll deviate off the subject and he told like anecdotes and everything like that. And it's, like, I prefer the PowerPoints. You are just going through and I have to make, like, key notes that are good enough for me. But others like more [lecturer] type of character that's more, like, more entertaining in a sort of way. But I like the fact that you have to have this added pressure of writing down key information and everything like that. So that's what I prefer and that's how I engage more. Because it just means that you have to be more attentive to the information that is being told to you.

JASON: I don't know like [lecturer] is just so charismatic. It's like his aura as well. You can just sense his presence [. . .]. And then he will just crack jokes all throughout the lecture, just to make it more lively as opposed to just like boring. People call it boring but that's how I like it anyway. That's what I think is different about him like, he's just got the comedy side of him.

Jason refers to his preference for an intellectually challenging lecture over a lively and charismatic lecturer who uses anecdotes and *'cracks jokes'*. To him, an intellectually challenging lecture involves writing down *'key information'* and to *'be attentive to the information'*. Such students are generally referred to in the education literature as *'rote learners'* because they are thought to memorise facts and routines, whereas students who seek interactive teaching methods are described as *'deep learners'* who engage with the subject content (Kember 2004). However, Jason's narrative may be said to bring into question the divide between so-called *'rote'* and *'deep'* learning.

Rote versus deep learning

A consequence of student and learning process-oriented engagement endeavours is the nurturing of the idea that there is a dichotomy between *'rote learning'* and *'deep learning'*. *'Rote learning'* refers to memorising facts and routines and is associated in Western universities with poor

academic outcomes, while deep learning refers to a profound intellectual engagement with the subject (Kember 2004; Haller, Fisher and Gapp 2007). A student-oriented approach to engagement nurtures the rote/deep learning dichotomy because it tries to identify learning differences so as to then associate them with social characteristics. This is instead of understanding, as a subject-oriented approach to engagement would, that the rote/deep learning divide is a false dichotomy because it ignores that memorising principles, propositions, concepts and facts precedes the development of analytical skills and therefore is integral to a university education (Furedi 2013).

Yorke develops the idea of the contrast between 'rote' and 'deep' learning in his study on student engagement. He distinguishes instead between what he calls a 'strategic' and a 'deep' learning approach (Yorke 2006). Students who adopt the strategic approach to learning seek optimal outcomes in terms of academic grades and employment prospects, while students who opt for deep learning are engaging with the subject matter 'beyond minimal curricular requirement' (Yorke 2006: 5). This particular way of making this distinction promotes double standards, especially once strategic and deep learning approaches are associated with social characteristics, because it suggests that the different approaches to learning must be adopted for different groups because they matter at an essential level.

It magnifies social group differences and fosters prejudices that stigmatise and minoritise higher education students. Two relevant examples emerged, one from the literature and one from the interviews conducted in this study. First, Kuh and colleagues recommend, based on their study on engagement, that institutions are 'to examine whether they can make the first year more challenging and satisfying for a group of students who seemingly come from backgrounds that indicate they can perform well in college' (Kuh *et al.* 2008: 557). Such a statement encourages lecturers to judge students by their social background instead of focusing on the subject content that is

being taught and recognising that the development of the mind will result from pursuing knowledge without lecturers having to know about a student's social background.

Second, an even more interesting example emerged from the narratives in this study when Jason talked about preferring *'the PowerPoints'*, which he associates with more traditional lectures, and adds that other students *'call it boring'*. Jason's narratives show that he has absorbed the negative connotation associated with rote learning, especially as he goes on to justify his liking for *'PowerPoints'* or traditional lectures over more interactive teaching methods. Jason prefers traditional lectures because in his experience, they are more intellectually demanding than lectures or seminars based on more interactive teaching methods:

JASON: I prefer PowerPoints. You are just going through and I have to make, like, key notes that are good enough for me. [. . .] But I like the fact that you have to have this added pressure of writing down key information and everything. [. . .] That's how I engage more. Because it just means that you have to be more attentive to the information that is being told to you.

JASON: And I look at the seminar notes too, of what you are going to do in the seminar. I'll do it as well and I'll do it in the space of like five minutes. [. . .] I'm trying to give you an example, I've done this seminar by myself basically and when it came to doing it in the seminar it was too protracted. It was, like, I've done it in the space of five minutes, but like in the classroom it was like done in 35 minutes, just asking, going through it. It was just so boring. [. . .] It was just going on and on. It was just dragging on; it wasn't engaging.

The problem with the rote/deep learning dichotomy is that as long as it remains an accepted wisdom, students who express a preference for traditional over interactive teaching methods are inevitably stigmatised as rote learners, that is, inferior learners. This is because, as noted above, there is a failure to recognise the importance of memorising principles, propositions, concepts and facts (Furedi 2013). There is the flawed assumption that *'rote learning'* is a distinctive feature of traditional teaching methods while *'deep learning'* is thought to be specific to interactive teaching methods. The latter is based on the assumption that

students understand rather than just memorise information when interactive teaching methods are being used because students are actively performing tasks and are thought to demonstrate understanding. This idea has been popularised by Dewey (Dewey 1916).

The liberal education tradition, on the contrary, defends the view that it is the learning and debating of ideas that contributes to understanding and to the development of the mind and less so the performing of tasks or being entertained (Newman [1873] 1960). Learning and debating ideas are very different from performing a task which is more of a skill that does not necessarily enhance understanding. That is why Newman cautions educators against saying 'the people must be educated, when, after all, [they] only mean, amused, refreshed, soothed, put into good spirits and good humour, or kept from vicious excesses' (Newman [1873] 1960: 109). The point here is that interactive teaching methods might give the appearance that students are learning, while in fact, time, mind space and effort are diverted away from engaging with ideas.

Another issue that emerged from the interview with Jason, which relates to the student-oriented engagement endeavours discussion, is the fact that Jason experienced the lively and charismatic lecturer, with whom he shared the same ethnic background, as less engaging than lecturers who use traditional teaching methods. This throws into question the role model argument, discussed in the chapter on 'Categories and categorisation', which states that universities require a critical mass of lecturers from minoritised groups to act as role models. By prioritising intellectual aspects over social connections, Jason's comment appears to suggest that the role model argument does not apply to students who understand engagement as an intellectual process. Students, however, who described engagement as a participatory process, appear to appreciate personal connections between themselves and the lecturers. Lenie, for example, describes how having '*a black lecturer*' made her '*feel comfortable*'. Questioning the role model theory based solely on Jason's

narrative is insufficient to draw conclusions from, but his narrative certainly supports the call for more nuanced debates to discuss the subtleties before continuing with the approach based on group-based social differentiations.

This discussion explains why the rote/deep learning divide is a false dichotomy and how it contributes to the minoritisation of higher education students. It is partly because the rote/deep learning divide is taken to represent superior and inferior learning. Once the distinction between superior and inferior learning takes hold and is linked to student and learning process-oriented engagement endeavours, which try to identify differences in learning and to associate them with social characteristics, it mutates into a force of minoritisation. Alternatively, if engagement were subject-oriented, the attention would be on the pursuit of knowledge rather than on the students, meaning the forces of minoritisation that come into play in student and learning process-oriented engagement endeavours would be eliminated.

Issue for discussion: the nature of the university

Student versus subject-centred engagement

The difference in how engagement is understood that emerged from the narratives reflects the shift from subject-based teaching towards an increasing focus on student-centred and learning process-oriented teaching, described in the chapter on 'Discussions and debates emerging from the literature'. This is evident from the narratives since research participants understood engagement either predominantly as intellectual engagement, which refers to engaging with the subject content, or mainly as participatory engagement, which refers to engaging with the learning process, although there is some overlap. This difference in understanding that emerged from the narratives collected in this study is not something discussed in the literature on student engagement, which focuses on

participatory engagement.

The student engagement literature brings 'together considerations about student learning, institutional environment, learning resources and teachers' and looks at the 'extent to which students are engaging in a range of educational activities that research has shown as likely to lead to high quality learning' (Coates 2005: 26). It seeks to position students at the centre of the learning process and assumes that 'learning is influenced by how the individual participates in educationally purposeful activities' (Coates 2005: 26; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea 2008). Such activities include, according to Coates, 'active learning, involvement in enriching educational experiences, seeking guidance from staff or working collaboratively with other students' (Coates 2005: 26).

Unlike much of the literature on student learning and engagement, the narratives in this study point towards an understanding of engagement that has an alternative focus in intellectual engagement with subject content. Therefore, we need to consider whether it is the student or the subject that should take centre stage in these debates. Engagement that places students at the centre focuses on understanding student activities and situations as well as the meaning students attribute to the learning process (Coates 2005) This suggests that learning 'depends on institutions and staff providing students with the conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved' (Coates 2005: 26).

This is very different from placing the subject at the centre stage of engagement, which coincides with the ideals of the liberal education tradition that focuses on criticality, rationality and objectivity and considers the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself. Liberal educationalists recognise that academics have the power to impart the ability to pursue learning simply by pursuing their daily academic activities. Oakeshott claims that academics know 'how to engage in the activity of learning' and argues that 'every genuine scholar unavoidably imparts to those capable of recognising it something of his knowledge on how to pursue learning' without 'having expressly to teach it' (Oakeshott

1989: 99). The difficulty lies with the phrase 'those capable of recognising it', but he argues that a new undergraduate student 'has learned enough, morally and intellectually, to take a chance with himself upon the open sea' or, as it were, at university (Oakeshott 1989: 100).

The academic power to impart the ability to pursue learning springs, according to Oakeshott, 'from the force and inspiration of his knowledge' and 'from his immersion in the pursuit of knowledge' (Oakeshott 1989: 99). This supports the idea of placing the subject at the centre stage and shows that student-centred engagement endeavours not only underrate students as rational human beings capable of taking charge of their own learning, but also discredit the academic power of lecturers to impart the ability to pursue learning by following their daily academic activities. By underrating the students' ability to take charge of their own learning, student-centred engagement endeavours minoritise higher education students because they disregard the students' capacity for human agency. This minoritisation disproportionately affects students from non-traditional backgrounds, that is, students who have demographic characteristics not normally associated with students who enter higher education. These include underrepresented social classes as well as ethnic and age groups which are the focus of 'student engagement' initiatives.

Social attributes and engagement

The assumed link between social attributes and engagement, which is characteristic of student-centred engagement endeavours, is not evidenced in the literature. A review of the engagement literature by Trowler and Trowler has shown that there is only a 'very weak' relationship between the social characteristics of students, be it gender, ethnicity or the ability levels on entering higher education and the extent to which they engage as students (Trowler and Trowler 2010: 11). This finding has been supported by Pike (1999, 2000) and Kuh and Love (2000). Kuh and colleagues, who set out to 'determine the relationship between key

student behaviours and the institutional practices and conditions that foster student success' and tried to establish the effects it had on students from 'different racial and ethnic backgrounds', have shown that 'the effects of engagement are generally in the same positive direction for students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds' (Kuh *et al.* 2008: 555). This means that the link between social attributes and engagement is assumed rather than evidenced.

The danger of designing interventions based on an assumed link between social attributes and engagement is that this communicates the message that social attributes matter essentially. This reifies differences along group lines, which have not been shown to exist, and creates an unjustified and divisive subtext which ultimately minoritises higher education students. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of engagement that has emerged from the narratives, when students described how their engagement changed as they progressed through the years, shows that engagement evolves and that human agency is an important factor, but it is not being talked about when social attributes are believed to determine engagement. It also ignores positive student narratives such as the one mentioned in Jessop and Williams's study, where students said that they were aware of being a minority in a predominantly white campus but felt nevertheless 'at home and at ease' within the institution (Jessop and Williams 2009: 100)

In addition, Thomas (2012) especially has argued that social and academic engagement are intimately related to the idea of belonging. Yet again, linking engagement with belonging functions to nurture a divisive subtext because it suggests the idea of a 'divided campus'. A 'divided campus' assumes that there is a general hostility at universities towards engaging with others, referring as much to the people at the institution as to the institution itself (Jessop and Williams 2009: 100; Sims 2007: 7). Thomas explains that the term 'belonging' is 'used to explain how the potential mismatch between a student's background and that of the institution may result in students not feeling like they belong' and that the term 'recognises students' subjective feelings of relatedness or

connectedness to the institution (Thomas 2012: 12). This means that social attributes, especially social background, are theorised as exhaustively determining a student's sense of belonging. Students are assumed to 'belong' with people from their own social background, as if people were not able to relate to each other beyond social characteristics. This is a degrading view that can only have a minoritising effect on students by confining them to interactions with others from their own social background.

Summary

The differences in the understanding of 'engagement' that emerged suggest that engagement is either broadly understood by students as intellectual engagement, engaging with the subject content, or broadly as participatory engagement, engaging with the learning process. This applies quite broadly, although the participatory versus intellectual engagement divide is not always as clear cut. Given that some research participants understood engagement as a subject-related intellectual process raises important questions that are not being addressed by the existing engagement literature which focuses on students, their social backgrounds and the learning process. The first question it raises is whether engagement should continue to be student and learning process-oriented or whether subject-oriented engagement endeavours would be more effective to improve educational standards and ultimately attainment.

Subject-oriented engagement upholds liberal educational ideals and recognises that academics have the power to impart the ability to pursue learning simply 'through the force and inspiration of his knowledge' and 'from his immersion in the pursuit of knowledge' (Oakeshott 1989: 99). Subject-oriented engagement does not minoritise higher education students because, unlike student-oriented engagement endeavours, it respects students' ability to take charge of their own learning and with it students' capacity for human agency. Engagement endeavours which

underrate students' capacity for agency assume a link between social attributes and engagement and spread the message that social characteristics matter at an essential level.

The relationship between social attributes and engagement implied by the current student and learning process-oriented engagement endeavours is assumed rather than evidenced by the literature (Trowler and Trowler 2010, Pike 1999, 2000; Kuh and Love 2000). This assumption is particularly problematic because it creates an unjustified and divisive subtext which implies there are essential differences between groups of students, causing the stigmatisation and minoritisation most especially of students from non-traditional backgrounds, for whom the current engagement endeavours have been designed. By contrast, the narratives collected by this study showed that engagement develops as students progress through their studies, illustrating that individual agency plays an important role when determining engagement.

When the assumed link between social attributes and engagement is connected with the concept of belonging, as in Thomas's (2012) study, it implies that there is a general hostility in universities against engaging with others. This 'divided campus' idea, as it is referred to in the literature, advances the idea that students are not able to relate to each other unless they have shared social characteristics, it suggests that there is even a general hostility in universities between people from different social backgrounds. This negativity demonstrates the disappearing respect for the students and their ability to form relationships beyond social boundaries.

Lastly, it has been argued in this chapter that student and learning process-oriented engagement endeavours nurture the idea that there is a dichotomy between rote and deep learning because they try to identify learning differences between social groups and for this differences in learning have to be established. This inevitably creates double standards because lecturers are encouraged to judge students by their social background, forgetting altogether that the rote/ deep learning divide is a

false dichotomy. Once differences in learning between social groups are established, hierarchical ranking inevitably follows and with it the minoritisation of higher education students.

To give a taste of the negativity that is ingrained in the literature on student engagement and the interventions it recommends, it suffices to look at Kuh and colleagues' recommendations. Kuh and colleagues argue that lecturers and institutions are expected to 'channel student energy toward educationally effective activities, especially those who start college with two or more "risk" factors – being academically unprepared or first in their families to go to college or from low income backgrounds' (Kuh *et al.* 2008: 555). They then go on that 'faculty and staff must use effective educational practices throughout the institution to help compensate for shortcomings in students' academic preparation and to create a culture that fosters student success' (Kuh *et al.* 2008: 556). Such student and learning process engagement interventions put staff and institutions in charge of student learning instead of respecting the students' ability to take charge of their own learning.

Whether engagement is understood as intellectual or participatory and whether engagement endeavours are subject or student and learning process-oriented, is ultimately a question about the meaning of a university education and the attitude taken towards humanity. Student and learning process-oriented engagement endeavours tend to adopt a negative view of humanity inasmuch as engagement is seen to be determined more by social attributes than by independent rational thought. It is, once again, a view that minoritises higher education students because it questions their human capacity for rationality and agency.

The fact that students themselves interpreted engagement either as participatory or as intellectual cannot by itself be taken to mean that those who understand engagement as a participatory process require student or learning process-oriented interventions because it might simply be a reflection of the time, a time when the focus on the learning process precedes over subject-based teaching. What is required, therefore, is a

debate about the meaning of university education and how 'engagement' as a concept might be, if at all, positioned within that discussion, if educational standards and attainment are to be improved.

9 (Un)equal treatment

Feelings of (un)equal treatment

PAUL: I certainly get the feeling [pause]. With some lecturers you know full well that some lecturers have their favourite students. And, you know, they seem to be doing extra little bits for them, you know, and leaning over backwards to help. And things like this. And you just think, hang on a bit.

JOHURA: I think, talking as a black student who was at [this University], I can safely say, I don't know if I am completely out of line here, but I can safely say, every black student that I have come across, that I have spoken to, about the way perhaps the marking of the paper was delivered, you just always felt like, hmm is this my correct mark?

JONINA: No, they didn't have like favourites; if they helped, they helped everybody.

SANDRA: I've never felt [pause]. I've never felt as though I have been treated differently because of my colour, put it that way. But I would say [pause], I would say because people think I'm younger, maybe, that students [pause]. I think students on the whole get treated very much like children – I do. I think they get treated like children. But I can't say I've had an encounter to do with my colour as such. I haven't been treated any differently in terms of colour.

The research participants' views on (un)equal treatment diverged substantially, and the narratives above illustrate that the students who felt treated unequally did not necessarily or exclusively attribute it to their ethnicity. (Un)equal treatment was seen either as a combination of various factors or 'social descriptors', such as age, gender and class as well as 'ethnicity', or as something particular and perhaps specific to the contemporary university. A good example of the latter is Sandra's

assertion that *'students on the whole get treated very much like children'*. The narratives identified practices in education that can foster feelings of unequal treatment. They include inconsistent feedback, favouritism, assessment, resubmissions, (un)interest and institutional procedures. While the experiences related here do not provide outright evidence for discrimination, they can be seen by students as indicators of *'discrimination'* based on an awareness or feeling of differential treatment because of unprofessional practices within higher education.

Inconsistent feedback

PAUL: I got a really poor mark for an [subject] essay. Without sort of blowing my own trumpet I sort of get As and Bs as grades [. . .]. But I got an FM [marginal fail] on an assignment and I sort of looked into it and they put things like my style of academic writing was poor and that I've not answered the question. And that's all email. And I said, I don't accept this at all [. . .]. And I was sort of challenging on what they were saying. And so they said, you have not answered the question. So I said, well, I have, it's there. And they said, oh yes, you have, yeah, I can see that, but it's not explicit it's implicit. That's garbage, absolute garbage. And then she said [. . .] the academic writing is poor and I sort of challenged it. I said, well, at the risk of blowing my own trumpet, I'm getting As and Bs. Yeah? So I said, something really bad must have happened for me to, you know. Sort of, that implies [pause]. That's a style and level of academic writing. In the meeting she said your level of academic writing is good and you researched the questions and it shows that you understand the question.

JOHURA: In exam week, there was one student who had a piece of work and they said, failed. And she went and said, I would like to know actually why I failed because I can't find faults. And they couldn't find any [. . .]. And she was one of those students, she would study and she would start an assignment perhaps three, four weeks or even a month before.

Claims of *'inconsistent feedback'* were an issue for some research participants, and Paul's narrative illustrates the circumstances under which inconsistent feedback might occur. *'Inconsistent feedback'* in the narratives refers to feedback students think does not justify the mark they got for their assessed work, or feedback that is inconsistent. In Paul's case it caused him to lose trust in both the lecturers and the institution to the point that he

considered *'packing in'* the course. It is likely to spring from either students not understanding tutor feedback about assessed work or from lecturers being reluctant to give harsh or real criticism, as in Paul's case, thinking that it might affect the students' academic confidence negatively.

Students, however, might perceive it as prejudicial treatment, especially when there is a considerable discrepancy in marks students achieve in various assessments. As Paul suggests, there might be prejudicial judgement in some instances, but other academic factors may explain the judgement.

Lecturers who avoid giving real criticism to students necessarily see students as vulnerable human beings, and, even if it is with well-meaning intentions, avoiding giving criticism limits a student's opportunity to develop intellectually. Paul's case has illustrated that avoiding real criticism can result in inconsistent feedback if a lecturer, for example, says something critical and qualifies it immediately with a positive comment which might contradict the previous point. Another instance where the lecturer avoided giving real criticism was described by Rashida:

RASHIDA: She gave me a C+ although she said it was brilliant [. . .]. And she loved it, she said, it was a really brilliant read [. . .]. At one point she even said, she was gonna add some of this stuff to her lecture.

Such an approach disregards the fact that real criticism is an intrinsic part of intellectual development and that students are resilient human beings with the capacity to develop with real criticism. Linked to seeing students as vulnerable might be a heightened sensitivity to minoritised student groups, who are depicted within the higher education sector, and in society at large, as vulnerable human beings disadvantaged by institutional and social structures (see chapter 3 'Discussions and debates emerging from the literature'). Being over-conscious and oversensitive about building students' confidence can create situations where students feel treated unequally. Or, in Sandra's words, it can be experienced as

being 'treated like children'.

Avoiding real criticism, or as in Johura's case, being unable to justify a student's mark, also limits the students' opportunity to develop their intellectual potential because there is little constructive feedback on aspects that could be improved. The work overall is portrayed as being of good quality although this may not be reflected in the grade. Inconsistent feedback, therefore, impedes the students' intellectual development and can also foster feelings of being treated unequally. It is damaging both from an educational and from an equality perspective. Instead of building the students' educational capacity it constrains their intellectual development, and instead of building the students' confidence through open and honest discussion, it creates an environment of mistrust and 'insincerity' which fosters feelings of unfair and unequal treatment.

Favouritism

JASON: I must admit as well that I don't answer the questions too much [. . .]. But I still think that the seminar leader should have, like, asked different people as opposed to the same people.

RASHIDA: This certain student was the shining star. Whatever the lecturers were told, they would say, well [. . .] she knows what she is talking about.

LENIE: Because last year in [subject], for example, I had, like, the feeling that, oh, the tutor had like preferences, you know. Like, towards certain people. And he didn't like women and especially also then from ethnic, other ethnic backgrounds. He did not. You could always tell. He was like, you know, just spent [a] short [time] with them and then he went on to his favourites and spent, you know, God knows how many minutes with them.

PAUL: I think there is a range of things. But I think some clearly has to be along ethnic lines and some clearly on [pause] inappropriate lines perhaps. I think there are a range of reasons why. But it's so clear to see within the University. So, you know, you are just sort of looking and thinking, no that aren't right, why are they getting extra help with this? And why, again, the essay is virtually written for them and checked before they submit it. And, you know, it gives it, you know, and you can see it every time.

Although not all narratives talk about 'favouritism', the favouritism some

research participants claimed to have observed in learning situations was described by Paul as *'so clear to see'*. Less obvious, however, was what favouritism was based on as various social descriptors intersected, making it difficult for students to attribute incidents to a single social descriptor that might have influenced some of the lecturers' behaviour. Narratives quoted here mention gender, ethnicity and nationality. Lenie described, for example, how one lecturer in her foundation course *'didn't like women'* and *'especially also then from other ethnic backgrounds'* and that she could tell because he *'just spent [a] short [time] with them and then he went on to his favourites'* and spent *'God knows how many minutes with them'*. Paul, Rashida and Garai talked about the preferential treatment and extra help some students received. Garai, in particular, questioned the extensions some students got for their assignments, while he was declined support when he requested help with his academic work. Jason's narrative, in contrast, illustrates how *'just asking the people on the left'* can give rise to feelings of favouritism, and in Jason's case, given the relative homogeneity of the class, it was not a case of favouring certain student groups who happened to sit together on the left of the classroom.

Favouritism, when seemingly identified by some students from ethnically and socially minoritised backgrounds, may, if and when it does occur, could be seen as prejudicial and unequal treatment. The narratives, however, do not provide evidence that favouritism exists at universities; they merely illustrate that some students identify what they see as favourable treatment towards some students. One way of addressing the favouritism some students see may be to make information more widely available. In Garai's case, the availability of information about getting extensions for assessed work may have prevented him feeling treated unequally because he would have understood why some students got extensions. If some students, on the other hand, are dissatisfied with the way lecturers interact with students in learning situations, it is the responsibility of the students to deal with the situation either by asking lecturers for more support or by finding an alternative solution.

Assessment

The issues raised by some research participants with regard to assessment are related to anonymous marking, to students who work together on assignments and get different marks for the assignment and to students with prior further or higher education experience being given low marks for their assessed work:

PAUL: I don't believe that assignments are graded anonymously. I just don't believe that at all.

STEVE: From a supports position it [anonymous marking] is disadvantageous because, you know, if a student has certain problems then when they get the work, they are not going to know that that particular student has these issues. And I think that that is another way of denying support to some of the students.

ILIANA: It's like somebody, the person who marked it, just didn't like you and just put a zero without even reading or doing anything. But you are not supposed to do that. You are supposed to be professional. When you mark a paper you do not mark people's names. You are supposed to mark the paper as it is, not who the person is.

LADISLAV: I got a D, D+ for this one [essay] and I didn't [pause]. Well, I knew that it would be a low mark because I spent two days on this course work, but, like, I didn't expect D+. So I felt that it was a bit, like, the lecturer who marked it was a bit biased or something [...]. Well, not like, biased is not the quite correct word. I mean like maybe she was tired when she was marking it, maybe she was, I don't know, in a bad mood and so. I don't know. I think this might affect the way you mark the course work.

While anonymous marking was generally welcomed, some research participants were sceptical about whether the marking system was truly anonymous. For example, Paul believed that *'any lecturer can still go into the computer system and get your name'*. Iliana, on the other hand, thought that having an anonymous marking system in place was good because she did not think lecturers deliberately searched for the names of students when marking work, saying that deliberately searching for the names of students would be *'spiteful'* and unlikely to be the case. Paul's and Iliana's discussions of marking indicate an important difference of opinion. Paul, Johura and others described how they thought lecturers could easily identify students when marking assessed work and that anonymous

marking did nothing to prevent the identification of students. Both Paul and Johura thought that lecturers will try to identify students when marking work and that once students were identified, prejudices would start to affect marking. Iliana, however, did not think lecturers were deliberately attempting to identify students when marking work, trusting that lecturers were not intentionally discriminating against students when marking work and that a system of anonymous marking would safeguarded against potential biases. The difference in opinion about whether lecturers will deliberately try to identify students when marking work or not points towards a difference in opinion among the research participants about whether the unequal treatment some students experienced resulted from intentional as opposed to unintentional prejudicial treatment.

As regards addressing unequal treatment, Paul said that if the institution is *'really'* concerned about equal opportunities and anonymous marking then it must aim to get *'every grade re-checked'* by *'the independent moderator'*. Steve, however, was concerned that anonymous marking was *'disadvantageous'* to students who were on support plans designed to help students who have a disability because without lecturers being aware of the issues students with disabilities had, it would be impossible for lecturers to take issues students with disabilities raised into account when marking. Steve, therefore, suggests that allowances must be made for students who are on support plans. The question is, however, whether allowances should be made for students who are on support plan or whether students on support plans should instead be enabled to achieve under existing circumstances. Making allowances tends to increase the dependence of students on special arrangements while enabling students to achieve under given circumstances is more likely to prepare students for a life of independence.

Another issue about marking emerged from Ladislav's narrative. Ladislav thought that the lecturer's *'mood'* at the time of marking might impact on the grading of assessed work. He believed that if a lecturer was

in a '*bad mood*' at the time of marking it may have a negative effect on how the lecturer grades assessed work. Ladislav, therefore, suggests that there may exist a potential 'mood bias' when it comes to marking, that is, a bias related to the lecturer's temporary disposition when marking work students submitted for assessment.

Two further issues related to assessment were raised by Rashida and Iliana. Rashida talked about helping a fellow student with an assignment, a student who struggled and was unwilling to put in the necessary work into her studies, only to get a lower mark for the assignment than the fellow student she helped. Iliana, in turn, refers to the complexity associated with students who may already hold a degree from their home country and are therefore educated to a degree level yet are being given a low mark for their assessed work:

RASHIDA: It was, honestly, it was like somebody punched me in the stomach because all I remember is sitting there [pause], telling [student name] word for word what to do. Go and get that book, go and get this book. Because [she] was absent a lot, not interested at all, didn't understand the subject, didn't even want to be there, and was still doing it. And I understood everything. I, you know, would say, well, I have patterned it [the assignment]. That's what you need to do, how you go about it. I'd put so much time into mine and took time to help her, you know, she is my friend. And then for her to get a better mark than me and not putting in any effort [pause].

ILIANA: The other thing that they didn't look at, I feel, you know, is some of the students [...] like some of the African students and people that had already been to university in African and have degrees already, you see. So it's like, nobody has bothered to find out what's that about? People that are highly educated already, you see. And, I think, that's the qualms. [Student name] said, I already have a degree. I've been a teacher all this while. And somebody is telling me that your assignment is zero.

Experiences such as the ones described by Rashida and Iliana can foster feelings of unequal treatment, especially if these experiences occur in combination with the kind of inconsistent feedback described earlier in this chapter. Rashida telling her friend '*word for word what to do*' and with her friend being '*absent a lot*', and Rashida understanding everything and putting a lot of time into her own work and then getting a lower mark than

her friend was understandably frustrating. However, concluding from this experience that students are being treated unequally and that the different marks the two students got was an expression of prejudice and discrimination is not really substantiated by Rashida's narrative. It may be that although Rashida's friend may not have done the work herself, she may still have understood the content more clearly and been able to write a better assignment based on Rashida's input.

Iliana believed that feelings of unequal treatment can be fostered when students who already hold a degree get low marks for their assignments. She felt that holding a degree and having worked as a teacher guarantees academic success. She argued that the students' educational backgrounds should be taken into account and that it was not possible in her view that a student who was well educated and held a degree could fail an assessed piece of work. Students who asked for educational backgrounds to be taken into account when assessing work, ask for students' work to be graded based on prior merit, rather than being based on the quality of the work submitted. Iliana, of course, wanted educational backgrounds to be taken into account because she thought that it was the *'students' names that get marked'* and because she believed that taking educational backgrounds into account would be a precautionary measure against unequal treatment.

What the extracts from the student narratives in this section on assessment illustrate is that there is no room in university education for lenient or inconsistent feedback. Lenient and inconsistent feedback which does not correspond with the mark the student is given tends to raise questions among students and foster feelings of not being treated equally. The challenge lecturers and universities face is to provide students with robust, rigorous and critical feedback that maintains and where necessary restores the students' faith in the marking of assessed work.

Resubmission

ANDREW: I sent in an essay and the essay was failed. Now on further examination of the essay I realised where I had gone wrong, but I wasn't convinced. I think perhaps, he had been quite [pause]. He had treated me more harshly than he had with other students. So I spoke to one of my close friends. I said, look, you got a B in your essay, right? He goes like, yeah. Give me your essay, let me use all your sources. That's not plagiarism if I actually physically go and get the books or go and get the journals, and write the material down in my own way. That's not plagiarism. If I use a similar structure in the way that, in the flow of your discussion, that's not plagiarism either, that's like a format, you know. So I used about 15, 20 sources then I added to that 20 more of my own and I figured there is no way that I can get lower than a B. I just scraped a C and this is before the anonymous marking thing came in. And I thought, no, no, no. I got my friends to read it and they were like, I really don't know what to say.

JOHURA: Because we also had another student. She wasn't black but she was British but she was of Asian origin. And she [pause]. There was one white student who put a paper in and got an A+ for it. And she failed the paper and she was, like, guys help me. I don't know what to do. Can you help me? And one guy – which is maybe we shouldn't be saying this, it was complete plagiarism – the white guy said, okay, here is my paper. And she, because we hadn't started to do the Turnitin thing then, so she just submitted the paper exactly as it was and changed the name.

Andrew's and Johura's narratives illustrate how some students who failed assessed work asked fellow students for help. Andrew described how he used his classmate's references, added his own and, by adopting the format of the essay his classmate wrote, expected to get an equally high grade in return. When this did not happen he thought that this particular lecturer '*had treated*' him '*more harshly than he had with other students*'. To get a second opinion, he consulted his friends, who after reading the work, confirmed his view. Johura recounts a similar story of a friend who submitted an identical copy of her classmate's essay, which was possible before Turnitin, the plagiarism software, was used, but then got a lower grade than her classmate. Johura interpreted the incident as evidence for unequal treatment because her friend who was from a British Asian background resubmitted an identical copy and received a low mark, while the

classmate who was white and originally wrote the essay got a top grade for the essay.

Andrew's case was interesting because he thought that the lecturer was treating him more harshly than other students, but he did not attribute it to his ethnic background. Andrew maintained throughout the interview that *'anykind of sweeping statement would be ignorant'* and that being treated more harshly by this particular lecturer could have been for a variety of reasons. The possible explanations Andrew mentioned were that the lecturer maybe *'was having a bad day'*, that the lecturer maybe was *'being racist'* or that Andrew maybe looked like a *'childhood bully he had'*. In his words, *'it could have been anything or it 'could have been nothing'*. Johura, in contrast, thought that this particular student who copied the classmate's essay was being treated differently because of her ethnic background. Johura expressed her dismay about being unable to tackle the issue of unequal treatment in the following words:

JOHURA: But how do you present a case where you say, I've got three or four students who are black and they feel that they're not being treated equally when it comes to marking their papers? How do you deal with it?

JOHURA: I think as a student, as a student you knew that you had to work damn hard.

Andrew's and Johura's narratives illustrate that the process of resubmission can foster feelings of being treated unequally and perhaps the current process of resubmission provides room for prejudicial treatment, but the experiences related by research participants provide no evidence to support such a claim. Andrew clearly thought that using the same references, adding a few more and copying the format the classmate used who got a top mark for his essay would get him also a top mark. But this is a mistaken belief because it does not consider differences between students in articulating an argument and writing academic essays. Moreover, Andrew's narrative indicates that he is not familiar with the university's resubmission rules which state that *'referrals are capped at*

40%', a pass mark (Rights Regulations and Responsibilities 2012/13 and previous regulations). Had Andrew and Johura known the resubmission rules and that 'referrals are capped at 40%', the misunderstanding could have been avoided. Whether it is the lecturers who failed to communicate the resubmission rules or whether it was Andrew and Johura who failed to read the rules and regulations about resubmissions is not apparent from the interviews. However, communicating regulations whether these regulations are related to resubmissions, or any other areas related to academic study, can help to reduce the number of students who feel treated unequally at the university.

(Un)interested

STEVE: I sent him an email, but I am probably one of many that did 'cos, obviously, he never got back to me.

ILIANA: I feel that sometimes they just didn't take the time to find out, you know. Because like in our class it was quite a mixture of different students, different ages as well and different backgrounds. And you looked at the amount of students we had in our class that were actually African that were not British. You see, that wasn't looked into. That, okay, how do you deal with student that are actually not British? Because in the first year, we needed to learn things about social policy. I had no clue what is the British social policy. I wasn't British. I wasn't born and bred here. But they made assumptions that, oh, you need to know what happened in 19 whatever, you know. How labour came about. How the conservatives came about. I had no clue of that.

RONUKA: Well, I think maybe the style of doing things. The style of writing that some of them, they will not have the exposure, or they will not understand the way to write. And maybe I, the way I'd write is informed by my background, you see. So, if somebody is not exposed to that, or doesn't have an understanding of my background, it's so easy to just assume, you know, that this person, what he is doing is wrong until somebody said, no, it's only because he does things differently. So maybe if you look at things differently, you will be able to understand some of it.

These narratives suggest that if lecturers do not respond to emails or are uninterested in the students' educational and cultural background, it can foster feelings of not being treated equally. While Sandra and Steve reported

uninterested attitudes among some lecturers without linking it to social descriptors, Ronuka and Iliana lamented that some lecturers were uninterested in the students' cultural and educational background. Johura and Iliana described lecturers who are uninterested in their students' educational and cultural background as '*closed-minded*':

ILIANA: It's good to be a little open-minded. There is nothing wrong with learning because you are [pause]. This is a university, learn a bit more about different cultures!

Ronuka disliked that, as he saw it, some lecturers '*assume [. . .] that this person, what he is doing is wrong*' simply because some lecturers do not understand that '*the way I'd write is informed by my background*'. Ronuka is suggesting that there are cultural differences in the way students write and that this is not always taken into account in assessed work. Students, however, write differently not because there are cultural differences affecting writing, including academic writing, but because there are different levels of competency in writing. These differences in writing skills among students are likely to result from the schooling students received rather than being caused by cultural differences. Ronuka, for instance, recounts how linking paragraphs when writing an essay was not considered important in the country he was studying for his A-levels, while at university in Britain, linking paragraphs and ensuring that the essay was '*flowing*' linguistically were considered important.

The narrative from Iliana, in turn, illustrates that international students might not be familiar with the political history of Britain and that some lecturers assume prior knowledge and ignore the different educational background of students. This can put international students at a disadvantage because, as Iliana pointed out, as an international student who '*wasn't born and bred here*', she might require that little bit of guidance on how to catch up with country specific knowledge related to the subject. Iliana argued that if lecturers lack the understanding of her situation in terms of prior knowledge, they will not provide her with the

specific guidance she requires. The effect it has on students when some lecturers appear to fail to consider the student's prior knowledge depends on the individual person. In Iliana's case, it did not seem to affect her much because although she lamented the lack of understanding of some lecturers, she coped with the situation by approaching lecturers for help rather than resigning herself to the situation.

Iliana, however, insisted that lecturers must be told that some international students may require certain background knowledge that British students already possess when they begin studying at university. This means that Iliana is attributing the responsibility for students to be provided with the necessary background knowledge to lecturers, and making this a requirement re-enforces a diminished concept of students. Any student finding a gap in their knowledge can, just like her, approach lecturers for help as and when required or they can visit a library and read up on any missing subject background. This would probably constitute the 'advice' given by any lecturer approached by a student over their lack of knowledge.

Institutional procedures

JOHURA: Because you are anxious and you want to know what's going on and you feel, why is everybody getting a placement and not me? Have I done something wrong? Are my grades that [pause] my grades were not terrible, they were okay but have I done something, you know. Why didn't I? Of course, there were contributing factors that I lived outside [town] and so on. But there were other people who lived outside [town], who lived outside of it. I don't know, but they got placement before me.

INTERVIEWER: So, why do you think?

JOHURA: [Pause] I don't know, I really [pause], I really don't know. Because each time you called the placement coordinator, you would be told a different story. One time it would be, like, because you live out of town [..]. And if you called again, maybe you were waiting three weeks, a month and then you called again. They would say, oh, things like, because you are not a driver, we are not gonna, nobody wants you. And you think, but half of the class don't drive, so how is that possible. So, sometimes it just makes you think, is this really happening? It makes you ask questions, but I can only ask question, the

answers, I don't know if I can ever know them, really. I can only presume and assume but I can never really say maybe this was the actual, the actual problem.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of questions did you ask yourself?

JOHURA: I don't know, you know. It's, it, it sounds a bit [pause]. First of all, I'm a foreign student. Second of all, I don't wanna sound a little bit corks, but I am black and sometimes you think, if this was happening to white students, would they be in the same situation as me? Or would they understand maybe their problem or their anxiety better? Or if I went and did, said something in a different way. I don't know, I don't know. So those are the questions I would ask and of course, nobody is ever gonna come to me and say, yes, if it was part of the problem.

JOHURA: I don't think, I'm the only one who felt [pause]. To an extent sometimes you ask yourself, you are black, you've got to do better than the average standard because if you don't, you're not gonna, you are not gonna succeed, simple.

Johura's narrative illustrates that institutional procedures, if handled unprofessionally, can foster feelings of not being treated equally. If her placement allocation was delayed, and she was given different reasons as to why she was not allocated a placement, this may nurture doubts as to why this may be so. Whether a student associates such incidents with social or ethnic prejudice or not depends on the individual student. Jyoti, for instance, described at great length how the problems in her placement were handled unprofessionally without attributing the incident in any way to her social or ethnic background. The narratives collected in this study illustrate that interpretations of incidents vary considerably between students and that interpretations of incidents by students provide no evidence for prejudicial treatment even if it is experienced as such by students. What has emerged from the interviews is that lack of professionalism and shortcomings in procedures, such as the allocation of placements, can foster feelings of not being treated equally among students.

Issues for discussion: the nature of equality in higher education

Perceptions versus evidence

The student narratives quoted in this chapter illustrate how the behaviour of some lecturers and support staff can foster feelings among students of not being treated equally. The narratives from the research participants do not provide evidence for discrimination – for this, all the evidence would have to be taken into account and presented objectively – but the narratives illustrate the students’ experiences and how some students felt they were being treated unequally. The discussion of assessment illustrates that experiences and interpretations of experiences vary with the students’ attitudes as to whether prejudicial treatment is intentional, unintentional or non-existent. That is one reason why it is important to treat experiences as perceptions rather than as evidence of unequal treatment. What also emerged from the narratives is that students’ attitudes varied considerably concerning what was happening concerning marking and assessment. While some students believed the marking system to be fair, others, like Iliana, thought that marking was open to biases and that *‘names get marked’* when they were openly visible on the work that is to be assessed. Iliana, however, did not think though that lecturers were deliberately trying to identify students when marking assessed work because in her view, that would have been *‘spiteful’*. Paul and Johura, on the other hand, thought that lecturers were likely to try to identify students when marking work submitted for assessment. Whether an anonymous marking system which students can supposedly trust is the way forward, as the literature on ethnic attainment differences suggests, is at least questionable.

In the literature, anonymous marking is thought to safeguard against prejudice and discrimination (NUS 2011; Singh 2011). A problem with the recommendation for anonymous marking is that it suggests prejudice and discrimination is a given fact without any querying of the legitimacy of

any such claim. Students' perceptions of having been treated unequally or more harshly are taken as proof for the existence of unequal treatment. But perceptions alone provide no evidence for prejudicial or discriminatory treatment, especially as there are some students who think assessment is fair. Without conclusive evidence, the damage caused by assuming there is prejudicial treatment in British higher education is enormous. It spreads the message among students that there is prejudicial treatment in marking despite the lack of evidence and nurtures feelings of being treated unequally. There is clearly a need for a more elaborate study which goes beyond student experiences, if the British higher education sector is to find out whether there are elements of unfairness in marking that disadvantage ethnically minoritised students in particular.

Discrimination versus professionalism

When it came to identifying what may have influenced the behaviour of lecturers, the opinions of students diverged considerably. Garai and Johura described, for example, how they both used to think whether some incidents occurred because they were *'from an ethnic minority'*, *'a foreign student'* or because they were *'black'*. Sandra, in contrast, did not feel treated differently because of her *'colour'* but felt that *'students on the whole get treated very much like children'*. Jyoti, compared to the other research participants, talked about unprofessional or strictly by the rule handling of incidents which turned some incidents into negative experiences.

What emerged from the narratives is that students interpreted experiences related to feedback, assessment, favouritism, resubmission, interest or a lack of interest among lecturers very differently. Ladislav even thought that lecturers who are in a *'bad mood'* when they mark work submitted by students may be marking more harshly than they would if they had been in a good mood. The range of perceptions and opinions recounted by students raises the question whether feelings of being treated

unequally may be a result of unprofessional practice rather than of prejudicial treatment. There are two cases in particular which support the idea that it might be poor professional practice rather than prejudicial treatment that may result either in unequal treatment or the perceptions of being treated unequally among students.

Andrew, for instance, when he describes how he got a C for an essay he resubmitted, despite using the references and adopting the format of a fellow student who got a top mark for the essay, took the fact that he got a lower grade as an indication for being treated '*more harshly*' than other students. Similarly, Johura, who describes how a classmate who had to resubmit a paper, resubmitted the exact same paper as her classmate who got an A+, only to receive a lower mark, took this to illustrate how students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds are being treated unequally.

Neither Andrew nor Johura mentioned that university regulations on resubmissions state that 'referrals are capped at 40%', a pass mark (Rights Regulations and Responsibilities 2012/13 and previous regulations) for undergraduate students at the university where this study was conducted. It is fair to assume given the comments that probably neither Andrew nor Johura were familiar with the resubmission regulations. So both Andrew and Johura felt treated unequally or more harshly when in fact the regulations provided the answer as to why the students received the marks they did. Whether those two experiences occurred because the students failed to familiarise themselves with the resubmission regulations or lecturers failed to communicate the regulations is hard to tell from the narratives. If, however, lecturers failed in any way to communicate the resubmission regulations, this suggests a lack in professional practice and demonstrates how unprofessional behaviour can foster feelings of being treated unequally, rather than it being a case of unequal treatment.

The narratives and discussion on inconsistent feedback in this chapter also illustrated how unprofessional behaviour can foster feelings of being treated unequally. Paul's narrative illustrated how he lost trust in both the lecturers and the institution because of inconsistent feedback he received, to the extent

that he considered *'packing in'* the course. One tendency that comes across in the narratives is that lecturers cushion students. They avoid giving real criticism either for lack of a critical perspective themselves or for fear of negatively impacting on the students' academic confidence. Whatever the reasons, this behaviour can foster feelings of unequal treatment.

Cushioning students can be interpreted as poor professional practice because, although well intentioned, student narratives have shown that cushioning students can be experienced as *'insincere'* and as being *'treated like children'*. Cushioning also denies students the educational opportunity to develop intellectually. Instead of an open and honest discussion, students are being flattered and congratulated. Even when they do face some criticism, they are soon comforted and patted on the back again. It is not surprising, therefore, that some students were confused about feedback and what it actually meant.

Another example of unprofessional behaviour emerged when Johura recounted her story about the allocation of placements in her undergraduate degree course. The time it took for Johura to be allocated a placement and the number of different reasons she was given as to why other students were allocated a placement but not herself, made her doubt whether being *'a foreign student'* and being *'black'* had anything to do with the allocation of placements; whether the same *'was happening to white students'* or whether *'their problem or their anxiety'* were better understood. Whether, as Johura put it, being *'a foreign student'* and being *'black'* had anything to do with it is hard to evidence and this has to be balanced by a consideration of possible unprofessional behaviour among support staff in making placement allocations.

Cultural versus educational differences

An interesting point for discussion was raised by Ronuka, who suggested that his academic writing was informed by his background. Although Ronuka believed that the school he attended put him at an educational

disadvantage because of its low educational standards, he also said that *'the way I'd write is informed by my background'*, suggesting in the interview that his cultural background informed his academic writing style. The misconception that cultural learning styles and cultural differences in academic writing exist is widespread in the literature yet, as Clark and Gieve point out, the idea that cultural learning models exist is an assertion rather than demonstrated (Clark and Gieve 2006; Haller *et al.* 2007). Such deterministic or trait approaches believe, according to Gutierrez and Rogoff, 'in a built relationship between learning styles and minority ethnic groups', they 'treat what is 'known' about a group as applying to all individuals in the group' and 'essentialise on the basis of group labels' without allowing for the human capacity for adaptation (Gutierrez and Rogoff 2003: 20–21; Clark and Gieve 2006).

The danger of essentialising learning traits is, according to Spack, that individuals are offered a restricted social identity based on how outsiders construct the students' learning styles (Spack 1997). Outsider constructs of students' learning styles can lead to inaccurate predictions, can have a stigmatising effect and can reify the very stereotypes an approach sensitive to cultural learning differences claims to address (Spack 1997). What is referred to as a cultural learning difference when a student's ethnic background is taken into account is most likely to be a part of a student's educational background. Ronuka, for instance, when saying that the way he writes is informed by his background, describes how linking paragraphs when writing essays was not important in his previous school but was considered important in his undergraduate degree course. While Ronuka used this example to illustrate how his writing was informed by his cultural background, it is quite clearly an educational aspect rather than being linked to a student's ethnic or social background. This shows that there is a danger that educational differences are too readily asserted as cultural learning differences, stigmatising ethnic groups and perpetuating the minority status of many higher education students.

Summary

While the experiences of the research participants recounted in this chapter illustrate how the behaviour of some lecturers and support staff can foster feelings of unequal treatment, it is important to treat experiences as perceptions and not as evidence upon which discrimination claims can be made. This is not least because the discussion of discrimination and professionalism has shown that much of what may appear as unequal treatment may actually be a case of poor professional practice. The narratives have shown that it was experiences with resubmissions when students were not familiar with university rules and regulations that fostered feelings of being treated unequally. Other experiences that also fostered feelings of being treated unequally related to feedback on assessed work where lecturers, rather than providing real criticism, cushioned students either for lack of criticality or for fear of negatively impacting on the students' academic confidence. And there were also experiences related to the allocation of work placements that made some students feel treated unequally.

Another issue discussed in this chapter relates to the myth of how 'cultural' learning styles impact on academic study and writing. Coffield and colleagues (2004), in a systematic review of learning style models, discredited the claim that learning styles exists, which means the study also discredits the existence of cultural learning styles. What Ronuka, for example, has described as 'cultural differences' in academic writing, looks upon closer examination more like a developmental stage in the learning to write process rather than being linked in any way to Ronuka's cultural background. The fact that Ronuka thinks that the way he is writing '*is informed by [his] background*', referring to both his cultural and educational background, illustrates just how entrenched assertions about cultural differences have become in students' minds.

Essentialising learning traits, misconceptions about cultural learning styles and cultural differences in academic writing perpetuate the minority status

of many higher education students because these misconceptions stigmatise students and suggest that students must be treated differently, depending on their ethnic and social background. What some research participants in this study really wanted was to be treated as individuals:

ILIANA: I think being treated well, as any other individual, you know, being treated like a human being, as a person [...] just like everybody else in class. Without any – what do you call it? – prejudices in class. Without people making you feel that; no, you are not like everybody else.

10 Academic study

Studying for a degree can be hard

CHARLENE: It is very difficult but we have to, we have to stay on top of things and work very hard and be on your guard because if you don't, you know, constantly, you know, reflect on whatever, what is happening around you, sometimes you might miss things and find at the end of the day you failed or something is going wrong. So you have to constantly look and evaluate and see what's working and what is not [. . .]. Sometimes I feel as if I constantly have to prove myself.

CHRISTINE: I felt very [pause] not vulnerable when I first arrived. I just had no idea what the course was going to entail, how it would be taught, and how, what the expectations would be. And I have never studied before where assignments have been the only form of assessment. I've always had the examination process right from childhood, right starting from my eleven plus which we had in England back in the dark ages [. . .]. I did surprise myself. I didn't think I was going to be as good as I turned out to be in my first year, anyway.

Some students say studying for an undergraduate degree can be hard because they are either unsure what to expect or because they think they constantly have to prove themselves. Regardless of how demanding studying might be, it has helped some students to become a '*much stronger person*', and Ronuka in particular felt that he could '*do anything now*' that he had finished his university education, which had been not just challenging for him as an international student but also for students who were '*born here*'.

Personal struggles

RONUKA: Back home you'd assume that if you are talkative you are

confident [. . .] Here it's about skills [. . .] and knowing capabilities, liberties and your restrictions and look at what you can do to manage those restrictions [. . .]. We didn't know that [. . .]. It was like, oh, my God, this is how they do things here. It was sort of a panic and you lost everything [. . .]. It wasn't just my problem, you could see it with other students as well, even that were born here, it was sort of an issue as well.

RONUKA: I did [have] to do counselling, and that also helped me. You know, understand how I was feeling. Because I could not understand why I was feeling the way I was doing. Why I was getting to that point, you know, I was kind of paranoid.

RONUKA: It was quite [pause] a very challenging experience. But in the end it opened my eyes, you know. It made me a much much stronger person. But at that time it was like the world was coming to an end. I'm quite surprised how I managed it.

RONUKA: That too involved the language because with group work, like in small groups, I was so confident, I was like in charge. But in case of speaking to the whole class I'd become so nervous so, that in a way, I had to sort of understand myself, why does that happen. To the point that I was able to grow in my confidence.

RONUKA: It was so easy for me to just drop out because a lot of them they dropped. Even a lot of the natives would drop. They found it very very challenging because you are being tested in every angle, but look now who I am. So, in a way I can still look at it in a positive way, that it has made me a much much stronger person. It helped me to push myself to the level and to learn to persevere and be patient and to work hard because now I can start seeing the hard work. [. . .] So, now that's why I feel I can do anything now.

These extracts from Ronuka's narrative illustrate the personal struggles he experienced when studying at university. What emerged from the narratives is that although some students experience university education as 'hard' and struggle with 'having constantly to prove yourself', they nonetheless acknowledged how they learnt to be 'patient' and to persevere, how they 'surprised' themselves and how they feel they 'can do anything now'. To free students from such experiences, or to make their passage through university easier to reduce personal struggles, would deprive students of the opportunity to grow both personally and intellectually while studying at university.

Students who struggled while studying at university had difficulties with different aspects of their studies. Ronuka, for example, was 'kind of

paranoid' about speaking in large groups and panicked when he realised how things were done here, while Sam found it initially challenging to acknowledge '*gaps in knowledge*' and admit '*that you really don't know everything*':

SAM: It's one of those things. You either keep your mouth shut and appear like you know everything or open your mouth and prove to everyone that you really don't know everything, you know, that sort of attitude. And initially I had that problem, I admit, I did have that problem. If I didn't understand anything I would say, yeah, yeah, yeah. But in the back of my head I knew I had to research that. But right now it has come to a point when [. . .] I'm asking, you know.

SAM: It's been a learning process to some extent. It has been a learning process [. . .] because back home it's a slightly different case. If you don't know it [. . .] you've got to do the research yourself. And this sort of attitude and things like that. But I got to the stage, if I don't understand something, I'll just simply ask.

SAM: It's just that, you know, you always have the two or three who are really loud in class, who '*know everything*' sort of people. It's always, I think, it's a self-achievement thing [. . .]. I think it's a self-improvement sort of attitude, like, if he knows that, then I need to know what that is, especially if it's something you are interested in.

Acknowledging '*gaps in knowledge*' was not easy for Sam, especially because he was accustomed to an education system where he had to do the '*research*' himself if he did not know something. The drive towards '*self-achievement*' and '*self-improvement*' also motivated him to get to know things others knew and he did not, but it was difficult for Sam to decide whether to contribute to discussions and so expose his gaps in knowledge or simply remain silent and give the impression that he knew what was being discussed. Learning to overcome these challenges is part of studying at university and for Sam it was part of the '*learning process*'.

Lenie, by contrast, struggled in her foundation year because she did not understand '*how you learn over here*':

LENIE: God, I felt so stupid at the beginning. I was like, I'm not gonna get it, I'm not gonna get it. Even though I did pretty good. I had a triple B in the end for everything [. . .]. But I was, God, I was a nervous wreck.

LENIE: In [country] it's a different teaching style [. . .]. It's, like, if you come in a class and we learn about [subject], they tell you exactly this, this and this you need to know. And in [country] you get tested on, have you listened to what has happened in class? While in [subject] or [subject] they told us, yeah, no, you need to find out if I told you the truth. So, then you go, research and see if that's true. While in [country] it's, like, only what you learn in class is the truth and you need to show that you listened to it and that you can recall it. And that was like really hard.

LENIE: No matter if I went to [subject] teacher. If I went, they could not understand that I don't understand it. Yeah, it was an absolute nightmare. I mean I spoke to [. . .], I have like study-buddies I spoke to them, but nobody could really break it down. It was like, you are doing well, it's not your first language this and that. I was like yeah, but I do not understand how you learn over here, I don't understand your learning style.

LENIE: Over here nobody seems to know what is important to achieve good grades. And that's another thing. Why don't they tell you what you need to do to get a good grade? They don't, they wanna be like, you know, they just wanna be very vague about it. Why can't they not tell you exactly, you need to do this this this and that and then you can have an A*?

The directive teaching style Lenie describes as being the norm in her country is commonly discussed in the literature as specific to international students and the rote learning environment international students supposedly have as their background (Kember 2004; Yorke 2006; Haller *et al.* 2007; Kuh *et al.* 2008). While the extracts from Lenie's narratives may at the first glance seem to confirm that teaching styles in other countries are more directive than in Britain, there is in fact a discrepancy in understanding between the experience of international and British students, particularly in the first year of the undergraduate degree. International students get stigmatised for supposedly being rote learners, while British students, who are equally challenged by more independent studies at university, are thought to be in what Briggs and colleagues call a transition phase from school to university education (Briggs, Clark and Hall 2012). As both British and international students must become accustomed to independent studies at university, singling international

students out as 'different learners' who require special provisions minoritises international students for being rote learners, while, in fact, they may be said to undergo the same transition period as British students. Furthermore, what might appear like a personal crisis when students say they were a '*nervous wreck*' and thought '*the world had come to an end*' can actually also be seen as normal in university education, especially given that the two students referred to managed their studies successfully despite having faced the additional challenge of speaking English as a second language. In fact, a university education that is neither personally nor intellectually challenging hardly does it justice. Trying to ameliorate or even eliminate challenges students encounter while studying at university could undermine the value of a university education.

Judging from the narratives, studying at university is even more challenging when students have commitments outside the university. Extracts from Sandra's and Jake's narratives give a glimpse into the commitments students have besides their studies and the pressure this exerts on them:

JAKE: I think sometimes as well though, you can get a lot of burnout mentally. I think that is something sometimes lecturers don't quite take into account. You know, like, I don't know what it was like when they were studying, but for myself, working full-time and doing this, you can get just so fatigued. And so things are bound to go wrong.

SANDRA: I feel as though I've developed an extra coping mechanism. I thought it out, you know, going to bed early, getting up, doing my work, maybe going to bed for a couple of hours before [son] gets up and then starting my day [. . .]. Being thrown into a different situation where I'm now studying, my husband is still working away, but I have the responsibility of the house. Keeping the house, also look after my husband's side of the business and looking after [son], you know.

Difficult as it might be, students are coping even when faced with heavy workloads and competing commitments. Sandra developed an '*extra coping mechanism*' which enabled her to meet the various responsibilities while successfully managing her studies and getting top grades while Jake managed to balance full-time education with full-time work. Although Jake thought that the combined pressure of full-time education and full-

time work was affecting his grades, this must be respected as the student's choice. Whether lecturers should be making allowances for that, as Jake suggests when he says '*something sometimes lecturers don't quite take into account*', is doubtful. Doing so would certainly lower universal educational standards and no doubt create a complex process of differential treatment based on the workloads and personal commitments of students. Instead of being apprehensive about challenges students face while studying at university, it may be worthwhile acknowledging the potential for resilience in students.

Issues for discussion: the nature of academic study

Demanding workloads

Academic study, as described by the research participants, involves personal struggles not least because of demanding workloads, having to accept '*gaps in knowledge*' and because of having to '*prove*' oneself. This can be '*hard*' as Ronuka's, Charlene's and Sam's narratives have illustrated, but once the students have reached the end of the degree programme, they appreciate having learned to be '*patient*', to '*persevere*' and to feel they '*can do anything now*'. This not only illustrates that personal struggles are part of a university education but also that any attempt to make university studies easier for students would deprive them of the opportunity to develop both personally and intellectually while studying for their degree. University education is supposed to be hard and demanding, and the fact that for some students it may be more demanding than for others does not justify attempting to make university education easier. If students are to develop their full potential academically, university education has to be as intellectually demanding as it can possibly be. This includes learning to discuss and debate in large groups, never mind how intimidated and '*paranoid*' students might feel about it.

What was interesting about Lenie's interview was that she thought

studying at university and getting top marks meant following prescribed procedures. Lenie expected lecturers to *'tell you exactly'* what student had to do to get top marks, an expectation rooted in her prior school experience where directive teaching styles were the norm. Lenie's frustration about not being told exactly what to do to get top marks made her feel like a *'nervous wreck'* and for Ronuka it was as if *'the world had come to an end'*. Despite the strong emotional language used by some research participants to describe their personal struggle while studying at university, the resilience the students demonstrated must not be underrated.

Being personally and intellectually challenged is normal at university and is only understood as a call for making university education easier for students if resilience and agency is underrated in students. It is not just universities who underrate the resilience and agency in students when they endorse student experience initiatives, but also students who think or came to think, likely because of university initiatives, that the student experience must be taken into account, that lecturers, according to Jake, must take the pressure students are exposed to *'into account'*. This is a mistaken conception that, once again, ultimately minoritises students by underrating resilience and agency.

Apathy and 'dominant students'

ANDREW: There seems to be a lot of apathy in the classroom environments [. . .]. One thing that I find really irritating is when people have their small laptops or those iPads and they are playing games or they are going on Facebook or they are playing online card games. My attitude is, you are here to learn, if you are not gonna do that then please piss off, you know. Because you are irritating me or disturbing me and you are not giving the lecture your full attention. They come with the whole, oh, you know, I learn more when I go home and read. And I say, look, that might be the case, but if you don't need to be here then don't come, don't turn up.

ANDREW: A lot of the time the teachers are not aware of it. Which is past the problem and I think the attitude a lot of lecturers have, which is the right attitude, is for those who want to learn and for those who want to listen, listen, those who don't want to learn that is completely up to you but that will show in your final grades. Because

even if you work better at home when you doing reading materials. And the classroom environment is just like, oh, I've got to wait two more hours until this is over. It's still part of your overall experience at university.

OLAF: They [students] don't seem [pause]. They've got no interest and they just plug together a few bits and bobs for the assignment or the exam and that's it [. . .]. It irritates me. It's a little bit frustrating, especially if you are in a group doing something [. . .]. I tend to be, if I like something, I tend to be very passionate about it and I don't understand why people aren't if I am.

VALERIE: It actually makes me quite mad [. . .]. I think it's quite disrespectful when you have students and they are just sitting there. And some of them, I remember, once there was a guy who was like listening to his earphone the whole way through the lecture. I think that is just really disrespectful. Not just to the lecturer but to the students as well who are there to actually learn something. And, I don't know, it sounds kind of nerdy, but I mean it's true. And, like, I work really hard at uni and I think everyone should. It's just nice to have people who really wanna learn things.

VALERIE: People don't really have that high standards here, I think. I have quite good grades and I think lecturers are surprised by that [. . .]. I think lecturers who have students who do well are happy because they know that they are doing a good job and that people wanna to learn and so they are even more engaging in the class.

VALERIE: I don't think it [apathy and not having high standards] affects me at all. I mean, I guess it makes me want to work even harder and get a great grade 'cos it makes me feel good about myself.

The extract from Andrew's narrative describes how student apathy and negativity was an issue for him because it irritated and disturbed him.

Valerie also talked about apathy among students but, unlike Andrew, felt it spurred her on and made her '*work even harder*' to '*get a great grade*' because it made her '*feel good*' about herself. It is interesting that both Valerie and Andrew considered such behaviour disrespectful to fellow students and lecturers alike although, as both Andrew and Valerie stated, many times, lecturers appeared unaware of it.

Whether lecturers are aware of the kind of apathy and negativity among students described by Andrew and Valerie is not important in Valerie's and Andrew's cases because both place the responsibility to remain motivated with the students themselves. Andrew thinks that lecturers

have *'the right attitude'* when they adopt a laissez-faire approach accepting that there are *'those who want to learn'* and that *'those who want to listen, listen'* and if there are *'those who don't want to learn that is completely up to [them]'*. Valerie, in turn, thinks that *'lecturers who have students who do well are happy because they know that they are doing a good job and that people wanna learn and so they are even more engaging in the class'*. Both comments place much of the responsibility for what is happening in the classroom with the students. It suggests that how engaged lecturers are depends partly on the students because if students are interested and want to learn, lecturers are *'happy'* and *'even more engaging'*.

Where Andrew and Valerie differed, however, was in the way they responded to student apathy and negativity in the classroom. While this made Valerie work even harder, it discouraged Andrew because he thought *'if no one else bothers'*, then why would he *'need to do anything other than reading the notes quickly before the lesson'*? Such a stark difference in the responses to student apathy in classrooms illustrates that when considering attainment, much of the responsibility lies with the students. Students have very little influence over other students' behaviour in classrooms, but what students can do is decide just how much time and effort they are prepared to invest into their studies.

By contrast, some research participants have described how they disapproved of students dominating learning situations:

ILIANA: In every class you will have one student that is outstanding, that was [name]. Everybody knew, come rain come sunshine, no matter what, [name] will always have a question, no matter how daft it is. And everybody was sitting there and thinking: oh, yeah [name] is gonna ask a question and it's gonna drag on and on and on. And she would ask a question and then she would answer it as well because she had all the answers. What's the point? Why are you even asking? Can we get on with other things?

JOHURA: I think some teachers, you see, it's a question maybe them wanting to be politically correct and not debating it, look what you are talking? [. . .] But they could have simply said, you are going out of topic. We don't need to discuss that.

Johura and Iliana thought the length of time the dominant student took to say things that were irrelevant to the topic was wasted time. They were surprised the lecturers did not deal with the situation whereas Emily recounted how the dominant student in her class made the lecturer look 'silly' because the student would not '*let the lecturer speak sometimes*'. Surprisingly, Iliana and Johura thought that lecturers might not have attempted to handle the situation because they were being polite by not interrupting the student or '*maybe them wanting to be politically correct and not debating it*'. It is difficult to say what might have caused the lecturers' passivity described by the various research participants. There seems to be a desire for lecturers to effectively chair discussions in learning situations. Without strong chairing, discussions may lose focus, and it is not surprising that students lose interest because they think their time is being wasted.

Andrew said that students think he is dominating discussions, though this was because other students were not '*talking enough*' rather than it being a case of him wanting to dominate discussions:

ANDREW: I was the most outspoken person out of the whole classroom. In group work when I work in a group with four five women and they say, when it comes talking to the lecture, you talk because you are more confident. And I said no, I'm sitting this one out. What do you mean? I said, well, you know, I know I can talk but I'm not giving you an opportunity to talk, am I? So you are gonna talk in this. And, no, no I can't do it. And I said, you have already given your ideas, I tell you talk about a, b, c, d and I talk about these other ones. And it's like, if you've got certain members in the group who don't much talk and then you talk, then it looks like you've dominated the group but what people don't hear, they've said, please Andrew, I'm not gonna, please can you read this out. And I go fine I read it out so [. . .] I try and say come on look, why are you embarrassed about that? You made a really good point there why aren't you tell it? Why aren't you?

ANDREW: And then it kind of makes it, oh here we are again, Andrew is expressing his opinion, which is like, you know, you can't [. . .]. You are damned if you do, and you are damned if you don't [. . .]. If I appear outspoken that's because other people don't talk enough, I don't think I talk too much, I think they aren't talking enough. That's why I stand out, potentially in a negative way.

The statement by a dominant student, '*if I appear outspoken that's because*

other people don't talk enough', illustrates the way in which some students are complicit in the creation of unbalanced participation in discussion. The interesting question raised here is why students are not taking part in discussions, whether it is because they lack confidence, as Andrew's narrative seems to suggest, or because some students are not sufficiently knowledgeable in the subject area to contribute to discussions. In Kate and Charlene's case, whether they made a contribution seemed to depend on their self-confidence and the way fellow students and lecturers behaved during class discussions:

KATE: Now I'm getting to know the class. I feel I could put my hand up if I was unsure. But say, if I wasn't sure [. . .] if I doubted something, I would be a lot less likely to put my hand up because some students are very overpowering. [. . .] If I had an opinion, oh, no, I don't think that's right. I think, so and so. Someone would, oh, what do you mean by that? And it would be just. It would be a student, three or four really strong students in the class. [. . .] You've got to be careful. And a lot of people are not so sure about putting their hand up because you will get the strong ones who get off each other because they sit together. And you get some who put their hand up, oh, I don't think that's right, can make you feel not to put the hand up again, I suppose.

CHARLENE: In my class, we've got people who are quite dominant. They've got very dominant cultures who would want to take over in discussions. I don't know how I can explain it. Every time they want to have a voice, have a say whatever issue of discussion. Or if there is a hot topic, they'd want to be the ones who have the last say or to be heard. And at the end, I do feel, like, ah, let me just leave them to speak. [. . .] And sometimes I feel like, oh, maybe they do know better.

CHARLENE: Well, most of the people who are dominating are home student, they've worked here, you know, in [profession]. So they've got, they are the ones with the experience. And for the international students, there are few in my class. They don't participate as much as the home students

CHARLENE: [Lecturers] do try to encourage that we participate and well I do participate sometimes. Most of the time I will not volunteer to say something, but if I'm chosen to, I do participate and would give my views. They do encourage participating. [. . .] Because some of the times I will be knowing the information but not being sure, not being that confident. But if I'm chosen to say, oh can you just give us your view, I will give my view. But if I'm not chosen I'll not say anything.

There will always be differences in the way people behave during discussions. However, it seems that when Charlene mentions that *'they've worked here'*, *'they are the ones with the experience'*, that having work experience and being able to draw on these experiences encourages students to contribute to class discussions. *'Academic apathy'*, as mentioned by some of the participants, covers a range of issues, such as students not attending lectures or attending but not contributing to class discussions, occupying themselves instead with their iPads. This was experienced as either *'irritating'* by some or *'encouraging'* by other students. How students react to academic apathy in classrooms depends on the individual student: some, like Andrew, get demotivated, while others, such as Valerie, will work even harder. The question is, however, why is there academic apathy in the classroom? It is easy to assume that lectures and seminars are not engaging and so thrust the blame onto lecturers. While teaching styles play a role, judging from the narratives quoted in the section on teaching, the problem is likely to go deeper.

Research participants repetitively mentioned how students would either not attend, or attend but not read set texts or contribute to class discussions. Without having completed the reading students would not be able to engage in discussions because they have neither read nor thought about the principles, propositions, concepts and facts that are likely to be discussed. Why some higher education students display such reluctance about reading, thinking and discussing ideas is not evident from the narratives collected in this study. It is likely that the reluctance to engage intellectually with ideas is at least partly encouraged by the shift from subject-based teaching towards a greater focus on student-centred education and learning process-oriented teaching. Students who are busy learning to learn and are assessed accordingly, require only a minimal engagement with the subject content. There is a considerable literature on the decline of standards in higher education and the possible reasons for this which supports the contention made above. This *'declinist'* literature argues that the traditional liberal university has lost its way or even been destroyed and must be rebuilt

(Graham 2002; Maskell and Robinson 2002; Hayes and Wynyard 2002; Evans 2004; Collini 2012; Williams 2013). If the university has lost its way, then it is not surprising that students view what is expected of them at university with either little enthusiasm, confusion or apathy depending on their particular experience.

Curriculum

JASON: I don't want to sound too like ethnocentric or anything like that, but as part of my undergraduate degree, I've got lectures on key figures in psychology. And the very first lecture that I had on that, it was just on about, like, it started from ancient Greece, then moved to the enlightenment period, on about European and just German and English people really. And I just feel, like, they are neglecting the whole other spectrum. And, as a part of psychology, I have to look at like cultural diversity as well. So look at like collectivist societies as opposed to just individualist societies etc. And it's like, it was just like constantly Freud then going back to Plato and Aristotle. And it's, like, [pause] African and Chinese and other philosophies weren't accounted for. And it's, like, I'm thinking, is it just me that can notice this? It's like no one else exists apart from European people. And it does frustrate me a bit because it's like psychology ain't like an ignorant subject, it's like it meant to encompass everyone and I don't feel that it is doing that especially in the key figures of psychology.

LADISLAV: Oh, yeah our lecturers do mention cases from America. And, for instance, we study human rights and civil liberties and we consider cases from all Europe, from different countries, even from my country once so [. . .]. Yeah, I was quite – how do you say it – surprised, we got this word again [. . .]. I just read it, it was quite interesting to read how people from my country litigate.

GARAI: I can't say it was really difficult. But I thought it was difficult to understand because it is more about British, maybe British social policy, benefits, about the government, everything. So, it took me time to really understand it, so I didn't enjoy my first year. But I did enjoy it later because most, all of the modules that I was doing, did social policy. So I did enjoy it later. But when I started it, first year, I didn't enjoy it [. . .]. Because I was understanding it later because all the modules that I was doing, they had a bit of social policy so I was beginning to understand it.

The idea of curricula being 'Eurocentric' was introduced by Jason in his interview based only on the very first lecture he had in his first year as an undergraduate student. 'Eurocentrism' is a concept used in the literature

to describe the practice of viewing the world and the subject from a European or Western-centred perspective, often resulting in studying ideas of European scholars and as a result neglecting scholars from other parts of the world. Under such circumstances, students, according to Thomas and May (2010), can feel alienated, and this might impact negatively on their academic achievement. It is not possible to say whether Jason's degree programme is Eurocentric or not based on the experiences of one lecture, but the extract from Jason's interview does illustrate how early on in a course 'Eurocentrism' is identified by students. At the heart of the discussion of Eurocentric curricula is not whether students experience curricula as Eurocentric or not, but whether 'Eurocentrism' is a useful concept.

When asked whether he had raised his concerns with the lecturer, Jason said that he had not because he did not want to '*out-cry*' '*what about black people*':

JASON: I don't know. Now you made me think that whether I should say something because, I don't know. Chances are, chances are being realistically I won't say nothing.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think so?

JASON: Why? [. . .]. I think I don't know whether I'm being too, like, ethnocentric talking about, like, what about black people? What about this and what about that? I don't know, if others will share my opinion. Because, as I said, it's not like, I'm in a minority. I can think of a black girl and a black boy and the rest are just white people. So I don't know if they could like see the point where I am coming from. Because I know that over, definitely over the last few years, there has been more, like - I'm trying to think of a word - like, more consciousness in relation to race issues and everything like that. So I don't know whether I am being too, what about black people and everything like that. You know, out-crying for this and that. But, I don't know, I just can't see myself doing it.

A somewhat different issue was raised by Jonina, who as part of the course requirements had to attend a module called 'Common Learning' for three consecutive years, but disliked it because in her view, it was irrelevant to the degree programme, and she did not learn anything in that module:

JONINA: It was, common learning, it was [pause]. What did we learn in common learning? In year three we talked about [pause]. I can't even remember [...] I was like, what's that to do with [subject]? It was just learning common. I don't know what it was, so I didn't, everyone didn't. Well, I didn't think it had anything to do with the course and I think a lot of person didn't need that, but it was each three years.

Overall, Jonina was happy with the teaching content, but could not see the purpose of the 'common learning' module. To judge by the module title, this appears to be a module that aims at improving the students' learning skills. Whether it is appropriate to run a learning skills module over three years and make it compulsory for students to attend is highly questionable, especially considering the experience Jonina's recounts about the 'common learning' module. The shift from subject-based teaching to a greater focus on student-centred and learning process-oriented teaching, described in chapter 3 'Shifts in academic thinking', perhaps explains why a learning skill module has been included and made compulsory in Jonina's degree programme, but it does not justify it. As argued previously in the chapter on 'Participatory versus intellectual engagement', academics have the power to impart the ability to pursue learning simply by pursuing their daily academic activities, and students have the ability to take charge of their own learning, and there is a strong educational case for prioritising subject-based teaching over learning process-oriented degree courses.

Eurocentrism

The concept of 'Eurocentrism' raised in the narratives has gained popularity throughout universities with the spread of relativist approaches to ethnic attainment research which build on the idea of multiple 'realities' and 'truths'. However, the claim that everything is relative, and perspectives differ according to a person's ethnicity, gender, age, class or whichever social indicator may determine the debate, is based on a logical

error. In relativist viewpoints, ideas exist and are accepted or rejected not for their intellectual value and logical coherence, but based on a person's ethnic and social background. Logic and objectivity are abandoned in favour of considerations relevant to the person who makes the assertion. This amounts to an *ad hominem* argument as it favours or refutes an idea based on the person's background rather than based on the value of the idea itself (Copi 1982: 99–100). Therefore, the concept of 'Eurocentrism' confuses the judger (person) with the judged (object), a difference that has been outlined in the introduction which discussed the research philosophy that was adopted in this study.

When curricula are criticised for being 'Eurocentric', the same faulty logic is applied. It is the scholar as a person who is examined rather than the educational or intellectual value of the curricula. Lecturers do, of course, have a responsibility to read widely and educate students accordingly, but the ethnic or social representation of the scholars should not be a consideration. Given that relativism, as has been argued, now influences academic thinking as well as race legislation and wider politics through multiculturalism and identity politics, it is not surprising that students have come to see education in relativist terms. As Bloom put it, 'there is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative' (Bloom 1987: 25). Therefore, rather than taking experiences related by students at face value, there is room for engaging in a more fundamental debate on the respective value of relativism and realism in higher education and, perhaps more specifically, in ethnic attainment research.

Academic support

RONUKA: There was some positives about them [lecturers]. Because what they didn't want is to make it an issue, in a way that [. . .] it will knock our confidence and to make us feel that we are inadequate, or we [second language speaking international students] are not to the

level, the required level that we need extra support. To the point that even the other students they just assumed that we have no problem, there would be no problem. They even looked at us as if we can do it and we needed to be treated the same. So it was positive because if they [lecturers] didn't do that it would have caused a lot of friction and people thinking that they are different and stuff.

This extract from Ronuka's narrative shows that he was happy with the academic support he received from lecturers and greatly appreciated this support because he did initially struggle with the academic language of his studies, and it took him a while until he started to understand how things were done '*over here*'. However, Ronuka was not always positive about this. It was only with hindsight that he started to appreciate the academic support he received while studying for his undergraduate degree. What he lacked at the time was the ability to appreciate critical feedback and to '*understand it, to see it as positive criticism*':

RONUKA: Sometime, as a student, the way you look at things is different. You might look at things on the surface. You don't understand why maybe your tutors are telling or they are advising you to do something. Like, I remember, I used to have problems with my writing and even on placement, you know, there is another placement that I had to do because of the problems with that. But I never thought it was a problem until it got to the [pause] to a crisis. So, it took me longer to understand. Had it not, maybe I would have sought support earlier.

RONUKA: They did pick it up [that I had problems with academic writing] but for me to be able to understand it, to see it as a positive criticism; it was something else. I did not take it as positive criticism.

RONUKA: English was like my best subject or the one that I achieved the highest grade in my O-levels. So, I could not, because in my school we had 97% pass rate in English, so I could not understand, I couldn't take it serious.

RONUKA: I thought they were kind of prejudiced against me. That's what I thought.

RONUKA: And, you see, for you to be able to support somebody you need to understand how the person is thinking so that you will be able to support that person effectively. So, that lack of skill, I think, it was a problem because it doesn't make sense just to say, you know what? Your writing skills they are poor. Why do you think it's poor? Okay, we need to do change that. But it's easier just to say that without a solution. And when you have that it becomes a problem because you

are not going to be able to address it.

Ronuka illustrates here how he moved from thinking that the tutors '*were kind of prejudiced against*' him to coming to a better understanding that the criticism he received was positive criticism. What seems to have contributed to the fact that Ronuka initially took the criticism he received from lecturers to mean they were '*prejudiced*' is that he used to be told that his writing was '*poor*' without being given any advice on what needed to '*change*', which meant he was not '*able to address it*'. In Ronuka's case, the feeling that lecturers '*were kind of prejudiced*' emerged when his previous inability to see criticism as something positive collided with the lack of professionalism of some of the lecturers who judged his written work but failed to provide guidance on how he might have improved.

Whether students received academic support or not depended, according to some research participants, largely on the willingness of the lecturer to provide academic support and on how well students got on with the lecturers. The narratives quoted here illustrated the problems some research participants faced with regard to academic support, but these negative experiences are not the only experiences research participants had. Alice, Valerie, Ladislav and Yong, for instance, were largely positive about the academic support they received from lecturers, and indeed, all of the research participants quoted here with a negative experience related also good experiences they had regarding academic support. It is important to keep this in mind when reading the narratives in order not to get the impression that it was all negative:

RONUKA: Support was there because obviously there was the tutors, depending with the relationship that you had with the tutor.

GARAI: My course, wasn't a very difficult one. But by not getting enough help, I felt it really had an impact on my assignments and my grades as well. I felt maybe if I got enough help, I would have done much better.

GARAI: When you had problems about the module before writing the assignment, they give a chance to write a draft and then you send it to her. And then when you write the assignment you know what to write. So I really liked it [. . .]. The others would say no, if I mark your rough draft which means I'd have done half of your assignment.

JONINA: When certain issues would take place in class you would go to the module leader. [The module leader] always kept saying, if you've got a problem you go to the programme leader. [The programme leader] kept saying, if you've got a problem go to the module leader [. . .]. It was like you'd go to her and then she was saying, no, she can't give you extra help outside the lectures. So, it was, like, wow, who is there left to go to? So, it's like, when that happened a couple of times, you just won't bother.

JONINA: You couldn't get extra time. If you needed extra help you couldn't get it. Sometimes you could get it closer to the assignment deadline. They would give out tutorials for assignment highlights. But for a lecture, if you didn't understand a lecturer, they didn't really give you help outside lecture time; just saying that they've got other lectures to do and other stuff to do and that we have to do the research and like do our own understanding for ourselves.

JONINA: You was angry, you was frustrated. It was, like, why can't you do, when other lecturers can do it? Why can't you do as well? So it was frustrating.

The 'frustrating' nature of academic support can be illustrated by the varied amount of feedback students received from lecturers. Some lecturers looked, for example, at first drafts, while others said they were not able to do that. From the students' point of view, it was understandably confusing to be told one thing by one lecturer and something else by another, especially as this gave the appearance that whether students received academic support or not depended on the lecturers' willingness to help students:

JONINA: For my dissertation, for instance, I didn't have all my supervisions for my dissertation. I had one over the phone and when it was over the phone it was for my last chapter. And she said, it was okay. And then I [. . .] ended up failing the dissertation the first time round because the last chapter was wrong. So I said to the lecturer, can you check over my last chapter as a draft? And she said, no. And I went to another lecturer for extra help for the last chapter because she specialised in what my dissertation was about. And she said, she offered, she said, once you've done your last chapter, when it's complete, send it to me and I check it over before you back submit it in. And she wasn't my supervisor. My supervisor told me, no she can't do it [. . .]. So that was like an example. Why can't my supervisor do it and you are not the supervisor really. I didn't need to ask her, she offered to do it.

KATE: Some of them, you might be able to go up to them and knock on

their office and say, hi, can you help me? Sometimes you feel they are under a lot of stress and strain because you know that there marking lots of placements reports. [Some], like [lecturer] is only in every Thursday. So you kind of got that strain of that, she is only in on a Thursday. So you've either got to email and wait till the following Thursday for her reply or you got to go and knock on her door. So, sometimes it can add that extra strain if you can't get to someone for support.

SANDRA: She gave you the time that you needed. And although there were over 200 students in the class, she would say, look if any of you got any problems make an appointment to see me. She would make the time. And she is the first lecturer that I know that tried to make the time for each of her students. I think, when I approach some of the other lecturers it seemed as though they are a little bit stressed so you felt a bit funny going back, if you know what I mean? So it was hard to sort of [pause], okay I'll just struggle on, if you know what I mean.

To '*struggle on*' meant, for some students, finding their own approaches to deal with the situation:

JONINA: Our class ended up having a study group. So what we've done for each assignment, we just like met once a week for each assignment that was coming up. And then everyone had their own concerns and we just helped each other out in that way around.

Students who recounted negative experiences with academic support would have liked academic support to be '*more personalised*' in what might be associated as a traditional liberal university tutorial system, involving a fixed appointment '*once a fortnight*', a '*face-to-face*' conversation rather than written feedback and '*constructive feedback*' that says '*what's wrong and this can be improved*':

PAUL: I would like to see things more personalised. [. . .] The only time I see my tutor is if I email them to say, can I have an appointment to see you. [. . .] But, that places a lot on the student.

PAUL: In my opinion we should be having, certainly once a fortnight, we should be having a tutorial session. And it should be a case where you can literally go along and say this is my essay.

OLAF: Normally I will do it face-to-face. I find it quite hard to word an email sometimes. I mean what I can say in one sentence would take me [pause] must be ten minutes to write in an email.

JONINA: More tutorials from the module leaders, more like one-to-one time. [...] So just have that available or just have that option like you can go to a lecturer, end of the lecture have that little 15 minutes with the lecturer to just quickly go over your problems. Or even so if that's not possible through email.

OLAF: I had lecturers and they would actually say this is what's wrong, this can be improved, this is what you can do in the future and not everyone does it.

The issue with academic support that emerged was not whether students received support, since all research participants had at least some lecturers that were willing and able to help, but that the students expect the same quality of support from all their lecturers. How realistic it is to expect uniform academic support and how open students are to critical feedback are two issues that need to be considered alongside the actual support that students can access.

The academic support research participants received clearly varied between lecturers. While this is positive in the sense that all research participants had at least one lecturer that provided them with good academic support, it also illustrates that much of the academic support students receive depends on the individual lecturers. Differences occur quite naturally. Therefore, rather than advising universities to take a uniform approach, making improvements along the lines suggested by the research participants, that is, having regular and more personal face-to-face talks, seems more appropriate while simultaneously placing greater responsibility with the students. Students do, after all, as illustrated in this study, take initiative and learn to help themselves as and when required.

Teaching

Teaching-related experiences recounted by the research participants varied considerably, and, just as with academic support, each research participant related both positive and negative experiences in relation to teaching. One issue that emerged from the narratives relates to the practical side of

teaching. A positive extract from Christine's narrative has been used here before moving to the more critical voices to show that research participants related both positive and negative experiences:

CHRISTINE: He brought real insight and new perspectives. I think a lot of the students were surprised at how they got carried along with this enthusiasm for the subject. There was nothing bone-dry about it or, you know, one thing after another. And, of course, he also got the class interacting, we had debates, we had discussions.

MARTA: He also had a very steady voice, he is very smart guy, he knows quite a lot, he can teach us quite a lot, but his steady voice was just killing me.

OLAF: I mean you will get people that talk of the slides and it's almost, it's a drone they put out, it's not, it feels that they aren't there. [. . .] Then you get the odd one that's actually there.

EMILY: All the way through my three hours I could not hear a word he was saying because he was talking to the people at the front and he spoke down a lot. [. . .] So we would sit there, I would sit on Facebook on my laptop and just be talking to my friends.

EMILY: I think, because first years he doesn't seem to bother that much [. . .] because of the fact that he thinks that they'll all drop out. [. . .] At one point, because we kept talking and things like that, [he said], oh, I don't know why I bother because you are gonna drop out anyway.

JONINA: I already didn't like her anyway because she wasn't very good at teaching. She was always contradicting herself because she would say one thing and then a student would question it and then when she is answering the question she is contradicting what the student was questioning in the beginning.

These narratives illustrate that some research participants struggled when lecturers had a *'steady voice'*, when students *'could not hear'*, when lecturers did not *'seem to bother'* with first-year students and when lecturers were *'contradicting'* themselves with different statements. Other students were more concerned with how little they learned:

ZOFIA: Especially in the scenario of having so many slides because in the end it was just literally reading the slides. So I thought, well, I can do that at home, I don't have to be here.

STEVE: I like a challenge. This is I suppose where the waters get murkier. Some students just like to be spoon-fed, [. . .] I want to feel like I'm having a university experience not a junior school experience.

JASON: I don't really like seminars. I can't like put my finger on it. The thing about it [. . .] they make the PowerPoints available a week

before. So, it's, like, if I was to read a PowerPoint on 'attachment' and I see like the seminar notes too of what you are going to do in the seminar, I'll do it as well. And I'll do it in the space of like five minutes. [. . .] When it came to doing it in the seminar it was too protracted. It was, like, I've done it in the space of five minutes but in the classroom it was done in 35 minutes, just asking, going through. It was just like so boring but that was just one seminar. [. . .] The last seminar I had was on Friday and that was more interesting because she actually was like a counselling psychologist. So she gave her interpretation of what we were discussing about.

JOHURA: The whole syllabus of the whole [subject] programme, it wasn't very challenging to me.

JOHURA: I suppose, to an extent, it depends with your capacity or your level of understanding things, academically as well I suppose. Because in my first year I never used to come to class and people were surprised, how do you do your assignment? And you think, well, the things are on blackboard and all I need to do is a, b, c.

ILIANA: We are all adults here. You've got the lecture notes. Like, if I've read the lecture notes the night before, I understand what I've read and when I go into the lecture I want to discuss the things that I don't understand, right?

STEVE: Very much the situation where the lecturers talked down to you or lectured at you and don't really give you any opportunity to interact. There is no passing on of ideas.

These comments illustrate that the students want to be intellectually challenged and engage with ideas through discussion and debate.

PowerPoint presentations without discussion and debates create dissatisfaction among students. The '*passing on of ideas*' is important, or else there is little incentive for students to attend lectures:

PAUL: Well, I just think I want to get out of here, literally. I just think, get through the lecture. You've got the PowerPoint slides. When you get an assignment you've got your text books, you do a bit of reading and you just literally answer the question. But in terms of engaging with the subject it's nil impossible.

ZOFIA: I kind of felt jealous that they had the courage to walk out when I sort of felt [. . .] I don't wanna be here either and it makes the lecturer even more of a bore. Some people left and I'm still here.

ZOFIA: You think in advance whether you are going to come at all. But that's the effect that essentially it's going to have. You think, okay, am I going to bother to turn up next week? And you literally only bother to turn up because you want the attendance to be good.

JOHURA: I felt very coerced into, you've got to do this, and you've got to

this. If you don't do this then we gonna fail you. It wasn't [pause] it wasn't [pause] welcoming and it just wasn't [pause] I don't know. And some of the lecturers you just had to go to the lectures because if you don't go you suffered the consequences.

Although all of the students quoted here had positive as well as negative experiences of teaching, what appears to be missing is intellectually challenging teaching. This can be detected in the accounts that express dissatisfaction with the teaching approach because there is, as Steve expressed it, no '*passing on of ideas*' and that makes it '*very dull*':

STEVE: If there isn't the opportunity for ideas to bounce back and forth then you know it's just like you are painting a wall. You know it's very dull work.

Two more interesting issues that were raised by Steve and Jonina during the interviews relate to learning styles and learning outcomes:

STEVE: Aren't these lecturers aware of learning styles. I mean surely that would be something as a lecturer you probably try and find out a bit more, just so you would improve your own capabilities unless lecturers don't care to improve themselves.

JONINA: One of the lecturers she was really good. What she'd done was, when it comes to assignments, she had like the learning outcomes, what she wanted in the assignment. And then she had another piece of paper which she wrote down the learning outcomes. So, it's like, when you came to the lecture she keeps referring to the piece of paper. So, you kind of knew where you stood and what she wanted for the assignment. [. . .] So that's one I could understand, like, where I knew what was going on with the learning. She kept referring back what she meant. She would do a lecture and then she'd say this is what I mean by and then the sentence. [. . .] And she always gave hand-outs as well. And she said, well, this is what I want, with that sentence with that learning outcome.

While Steve's narrative illustrates that the learning style myth has become part of popular knowledge, Jonina's description of learning outcome directed teaching illustrates how, in this particular module, students are indoctrinated with predetermined learning outcomes instead of receiving a university education in the liberal education tradition outlined in the chapter on 'Equality and education'.

The research participants reported both positive and negative experiences with teaching. There were issues with being demotivated by monotonous lecturer voices and the inability to hear; however, it seems that what the research participants appreciate most is an intellectual challenge as well as the '*passing on of ideas*' through discussion and debate. In fact, it seems that the higher education sector in general could benefit from more discussion and debate so that mistaken beliefs, such as the belief in the importance of 'learning styles' which was raised by Steve, and as we have seen, was disproved by Coffield and colleagues (2004), and the indoctrinating practice of using learning outcome directed teaching, would no longer be part of the popular conceptions of learning in the minds of students.

Issue for discussion: The nature of academic study

Summary

Studying at university is not as straightforward as students might wish it to be. It is both personally and intellectually challenging, but once students finish their studies, they are proud to have overcome the challenge. The question the recounting of experiences about demanding workloads and personal struggles raises is whether university education is too demanding and needs to be made easier to expose students to fewer personal and intellectual challenges, or whether the demands placed on students are a normal part of a university education. The view taken here is that any demand for making university education easier for students indicates that the resilience and agency of students is underrated. This is expressed through university initiatives that aim at improving the student experience and through calls from students for lecturers to take into account the pressure to which students are exposed. Underrating students' resilience and capacity for action minoritises students because it assumes that students are neither capable of taking charge of their own learning nor

able to cope academically unless allowances are made to ease demands on them.

The academic apathy some research participants noted among fellow students further underscores the importance of recognising resilience and human agency in students. Teaching styles and the lack of intellectual challenge some students experienced are likely to play a role in academic apathy, but students are not simply passive receivers of information but autonomous individuals who can take charge of their own learning. Universities can, of course, work on improving educational standards but, if they are to provide students with a university education, efforts must concentrate on subject-based teaching. A learning process that focuses on personal rather than intellectual development underrates students as human beings because it fails to recognise that students are rational, resilient agents.

11 Beyond experience: why discussion and debate are important

'Judges of certainty'

ZAFAR: It was 110% reality, okay? This might seem a bit over-far-fetched or something.

ANDREW: Where do you start? I mean, it could be nothing. It could, maybe there is nothing going on and he was having a bad day. Maybe it's anything. I mean men and woman interact differently. So men by nature usually are competitive and I mean, it really depends. I mean some of us say, was he being racist? Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't, you know. Did he not like you for some motive, you know. Maybe I look like a childhood bully he had. There are so many things that could go into it. Maybe he was just having a bad day and he woke up late and he hadn't had his coffee in the morning. I mean to make any kind of sweeping statement would be ignorant without any further information, you know.

One of the tensions that arose from the narratives collected in this study, as illustrated in these accounts, relates to the interpretation and reporting of experiences. Although Zafar asserted that the experience '*was 110% reality*', reading Zafar's narrative in conjunction with Andrew's account that '*any kind of sweeping statement would be ignorant without any further information*', raises the questions whether students should be what Mill called the '*judges of certainty*' (Mill [1859] 2005: 27) or whether there must be discussion and debate to interpret experiences, as Andrew's account suggests. The student narratives indicate that interpreting experiences is not as straightforward as relativist theoretical approaches to ethnic attainment research, which refer to experiences as '*truths*' and '*lived realities*', appear to suggest. It is difficult to interpret experiences when

terminology is used inconsistently, and it is challenging for research participants to identify whether and, if so, which social factors determined their experiences, and whether experiences in a wider sense are of major, minor or no importance. It is also difficult to say for students what impact experiences may or may not have had on educational attainment.

The need for discussion and debate to interpret experiences emerged from the narratives collected in this study through statements such as the one made by Andrew that *'it could be nothing', 'maybe it's anything'* and that *'any sweeping statement would be ignorant without any further information'*. Another indication that discussion plays a vital role when it comes to interpreting experiences is the fact that experiences were interpreted very differently by various research participants. When this is the case, discussion can help to further understanding.

Interpreting experiences

RONUKA: If you are of a different race, the first thing that comes to your mind is, maybe it's because of my skin colour.

JOHURA: I think, talking as a black student who was at [this university], I can safely say, I don't know if I am completely out of line here, but I can safely say, every black student that I have come across, that I have spoken to, about the way perhaps the marking of the paper was delivered, you just always felt, like, hmm is this my correct mark?

MERWIN: When it had happened, because of my previous experience, when that isolation happened, a part of me deep down expected it, to be honest.

SAM: At home everyone wants to know if the British are racist. Everyone keeps asking me; have you ever had this experience? Have you ever had this? I've never, to be honest, I've never been at a point where I felt, like, [pause]. God knows what I would do, if I get to a point like that.

These narratives illustrate that interpreting experiences can be subjective and influenced by attitudes and prior experiences. If *'the first thing that comes to your mind'* is *'maybe it's because of my skin colour'* and if students because of *'previous experience'* *'deep down expected it'*, then discussion and debate to interpret experiences are important to protect against subjective interpretations. Such discussion is further discouraged by race legislation

which defines a racist incident as any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person, allowing people's perceptions to be all that is needed to identify a racist incident. Given, however, the range of interpretations that emerged from the student narratives collected in this study, there is a clear need for discussion and debate, especially considering that Ronuka, with hindsight, interpreted his experiences differently:

RONUKA: And sometimes the way you look at things is different. You might look at things on the surface. You don't understand why maybe your tutors are telling or they are advising you to do something. I remember, I used to have problems with my writing and even on placement, you know, there is another placement that I had to do because of the problems with that. But I never thought it was a problem until it got to the [pause] to a crisis. It took me longer to understand.

RONUKA: They did pick it up [that I had problems with academic writing] but for me to be able to understand it, to see it as a positive criticism; it was something else. I did not take it as positive criticism.

RONUKA: I thought they were kind of prejudiced against me. That's what I thought.

Ronuka at first thought that the lecturers '*were kind of prejudiced against*' him, and he did not see the feedback he got '*as a positive criticism*'. But Ronuka then described how he came to see things differently. It took him '*longer to understand*' what the lecturers were '*telling*' or '*advising*' him to do and that the feedback he received on his academic writing was '*positive criticism*' rather than lecturers being '*kind of prejudiced against*' him. One reason why Ronuka thought lecturers '*were kind of prejudiced against*' him when they criticised his academic writing was that '*English*' was his '*best subject*' at '*high school*' and as he '*achieved the highest grade*' in his '*O-levels*', '*he couldn't take*' the criticism '*serious*'. Another reason that made it challenging for Ronuka to interpret his experiences is the impression he got that '*there would be some who have issues because you are not [pause], you are not white*'. What Ronuka's case illustrates is that experiences alone are not sufficient to make any claims to knowledge, there is, therefore, a need for

interpreting experiences through discussion and debate.

This equally applies to cases where research participants described experiences as patently '*racist*' or as '*institutional racism*':

MERWIN: Not seeing how racism works, being in denial of the effects. I think, if you don't understand, you have never been in that position. It's quite hard to understand. Therefore, it's something that's easily dismissed.

MERWIN: I think, in dealing with this there has to be, people have to understand, be capable of understanding how it operates. [. . .] Racism is, people tend to think, oh, you are called a name. [. . .] But in terms of how it then operates and manifests itself, let's say in a classroom [. . .], it's very hard. [. . .] Did race play a part to get where we are, though, I wasn't called a name? But this is what has happened and you can see it. And I think the hard thing is, the majority can't see it, they can't see it. It's the minority who can see it. [. . .] But you can actually see that, oh, this is typical. This is what has happened. And through experience you can say, oh, this is what's happened.

MERWIN: That makes it hard, that you are dealing with another party that doesn't understand. That doesn't know or acknowledge that is what is happening.

ILIANA: Some of the African students and people that had already been to university in Africa and have degrees already, you see. So it's like, nobody has bothered to find out what's that about? People that are highly educated already. And I think that's the qualms [. . .] I already have a degree. I've been a teacher all this while. And somebody is telling me that your assignment is zero.

JOHURA: I don't know, you know. It sounds a bit [pause]. First of all, I'm a foreign student. Second of all, I don't wanna sound a little bit corks, but I am black and sometimes you think, if this was happening to white students, would they be in the same situation as me? Or would they understand maybe their problem or their anxiety better? Or if I went and did, said something in a different way. I don't know, I don't know. So those are the questions I would ask and of course, nobody is ever gonna come to me and say, yes, if it was part of the problem.

JOHURA: I don't think, I'm the only one who felt [pause]. To an extent sometimes you ask yourself, you are black, you've got to do better than the average standard because if you don't, you're not gonna, you are not gonna succeed, simple.

The fact that Merwin, for example, has interpreted an experience in no uncertain terms does not give the interpretation any more credibility than if students, like Andrew, are in two minds about how to interpret their

experiences. Even when interpretations of experiences are communicated as confidently as Merwin's was, claims to knowledge cannot be made on the basis of experiences only. Moreover, the differences in interpretations of experiences that emerged in this study are too stark. Experiences, interpretations and opinions must be exposed to robust discussion and debate if any assertions to be made. Without discussion and debate, it would be hard to explain, for example, the sharp difference in the interpretation of experiences that emerged between Merwin's and Nasrin's narratives:

NASRIN: I mean, if you yourself aren't confident and you don't have that self-confidence, anything anyone else says will affect you.

Whereas if you are self-confident, someone can even be racist to you and you take it positively. I mean, touch wood, I've never had any issue, being in such a diverse country, I never had a racist occasion whereas I have heard people say, oh, such and such, it's racism. But I've never come across anything like that.

NASRIN: We had a, we do Christmas parties where you have an entire afternoon of celebrating. A lot of fun activities are settled and you could play so you might have to spot where so and so is or play a Nintendo or play a game of blowing and see who wins and that kind of thing. And I took pride in whatever I could. And I came third. [. . .] Now, I'm the only Muslim again that works in this open office, but again it's fine. And it was so sweet that the winning prizes were bottles of wine. I don't drink wine. So as soon as my name got announced, I was very cheerful. I stood up and I started celebrating and I'm loud and everybody in the office knows who I am. And I struggled to walk up because I didn't know what to do. So I said to my team, I go, what do you lot drink and I bring that and you lot can have it. So I picked up whatever they drunk. But the SMTs, which are senior management, they are not my management, they are managers, managers, managers. So there are four teams of workers. And one by one, each one, came up to me and said, we know you don't drink, we can get you another gift, if you want, and we can compensate for that. So, you feel included just on that. And I mean every, like I said, everybody in the office knows who I am. I might not know who they are but they know who I am. So why complain? I mean the fact that senior management came to me and offered that, when I am just a student placement, is really sweet.

Nasrin's and also Sam's experiences, described earlier, stand in stark contrast with Iliana's and Merwin's experiences. Such sharply contrasting experiences are bound to raise questions. How is it, for example, that both Merwin and Iliana experienced racial prejudice and even racism while Nasrin and Sam did not? Is it justifiable to speak about 'institutional racism', as Merwin does? 'Institutional racism' is defined by Macpherson as 'the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin' (Macpherson 1999: 369). Some students experience racial prejudice and racist behaviour while others do not, but should it be left to students and their perceptions to decide what racial incidents are, as is currently the case? The subjective approach to identifying 'racism' as a result of Macpherson makes discussion almost impossible and we need it more than ever if we are to make sense of student experiences.

For example, Nasrin's interpretation of events cannot be simply dismissed as a case of not '*understanding*' what 'racism' is or '*how it operates*', given that she described, as part of her interview, two incidents that took place outside university which she said could be seen as racist, but she did not think they were. Comparing the different experiences described by students indicates that interpretations of what is seen to be 'racist' varies considerably between the students. Reaching a conclusion about what constitutes 'racism' requires discussion and debate. Knowledge claims made based on experiences and opinions are likely to be arbitrary and meaningless until discussed and debated.

The comment from Ladislav's narrative reinforces the need to interpret experiences through discussion and debate. Instead of talking about ethnic and social factors, Ladislav thought that the mood the lecturer was in when marking the assignment may have, at least partially, affected the mark he was given. Ladislav '*felt that*' the '*lecturer who marked it [the assignment] was a bit biased or something*' in the sense that '*maybe she was tired when she was marking it*' or '*in a bad mood*' and that '*this might have*

affected the way' she marked the course work. Yet another example was provided by Jason. He described how the '*seminar leader*' tended to ask '*the people on the left*' instead of asking '*different people*', but it was not the case that ethnically minoritised students were sitting on the side the seminar leader tended to overlook:

LADISLAV: Well, frustrating a little bit of course because I got a D, D+ for this one and I didn't [pause]. Well, I knew that it would be a low mark because I spent two days on this course work. But I didn't expect D+. So I felt that it was a bit, like, the lecturer who marked it was a bit biased or something. [. . .] Well, no 'biased' is not the quite correct word. I mean maybe she was tired when she was marking it, maybe she was, I don't know, in a bad mood. I don't know. I think this might affect the way you mark the course work.

JASON: I must admit as well that I don't answer the questions too much. [. . .] But I still think that the seminar leader should have, like, asked different people as opposed to the same people. [. . .] He was just asking the people on the left really.

Other students, like Jason, thought that it was not '*a tangible thing where you can say*' what exactly happened. Andrew thought that to interpret experiences '*further information*' was required and along with it discussion and debate:

ANDREW: Where do you start? I mean, it could be nothing. It could, maybe there is nothing going on and he was having a bad day. Maybe it's anything. [. . .] There are so many things that could go into it. Maybe he was just having a bad day and he woke up late and he hadn't had his coffee in the morning. I mean to make any kind of sweeping statement would be ignorant without any further information, you know.

JASON: And it's, like, obviously it ain't, like, a tangible thing where you can say yeah, it is this and that. But it's, for me; it's just, the feeling, the atmosphere is just there, it's looking at you. [. . .] And when I was in the group [. . .] I just noticed that everyone's just looking at the trainers and the sports name and everything like that and all the connotations that go along with that.

JASON: The people that are in my seminar are not the people that I'd mix with. If I was to say to you banter [. . .] it's, like, on a whole different level. It's just not the kind of people that I'd mix with. [. . .] I see them as middle class and I sometimes get the feeling that they are looking

down upon me.

PAUL: I think there is a range of things. But I think some clearly have to be along ethnic lines and some clearly on [pause] inappropriate lines, perhaps. I think there are a range of reasons why. But it's so clear to see within the University.

These examples illustrate how challenging it can be to interpret experiences and Andrew rightly poses the question '*where do you start?*' It is interesting that some of the students gave a factual account of their experiences without interpreting events in terms of ethnic or social factors:

JONINA: You couldn't get extra time. If you needed extra help you couldn't get it. Sometimes you could get it closer to the assignment deadline. They would give out tutorials for assignment highlights. But for a lecture, if you didn't understand a lecture, they didn't really give you help outside lecture time; just saying that they've got other lectures to do and other stuff to do and that we have to do the research and, like, do our own understanding for ourselves.

JONINA: No, they didn't have, like, favourites; if they helped, they helped everybody.

JYOTI: I was really shocked and surprised how they handled it. I don't know, I just expected better. They said that they'd been through the procedures and this is how it goes. And, you know, they were sorry and they didn't want me to leave. They did actually say we want you to carry on, you know, do something in the month in between - what was it, December and next September - take yourself to a school, volunteer. And I thought, you know, why should I? So, I don't know if, it probably wasn't personal, it was just that there are rules. Rules is rules and I broke them [pause]. You know, doesn't matter for what reason. But as I said, I've heard it; I've been talking to a lot of people on [programme], well, say a handful on [programme] that had similar experiences for whatever reason. And I think you just have to be tough. And if you are lucky enough to get a mentor that actually wants to support you and, you know, give their knowledge to you, then that's fine, you sail through. But if you come across something, you have to tough it out, and a lot of people do. I've met a lot of people that have had bad experiences but they rode it through. Unfortunately, I'm just not made like that and I couldn't do it.

STEVE: There are some who talk about the lecturers showing favouritism but I don't think that's the case. I think that there are just some students who probably get on better with some of the lecturers and in such a way they got more from the lecturer because they feel better in that particular style of lecturing. So I don't think there is favouritism and, therefore, on that ground, there is no need for

anonymous marking

The experience Jyoti recounts relates to some of the problems she encountered in one of her placements and the disappointment she felt about how her case, once she brought it to the attention of her mentor, was handled. Jyoti states that *'it probably wasn't personal, it was just that there are rules'* and that *'she broke them'*, but she *'expected better'* in the way it was handled. Jonina states even more clearly that *'they [lecturers] didn't have, like, favourites; if they helped, they helped everybody'*, while Steve thought that it was a case of some students getting *'on better with some of the lecturers'* and that *'they [students] feel better in that particular style of lecturing'* rather than it being a case of favouritism.

These extracts from the narratives show that there is more to interpreting experiences than forming an opinion and making claims to knowledge based on experiences. Students may be drawing from a plethora of experiences upon which they form opinions. However, it is not justifiable to make claims to knowledge based on experiences in the absence of discussion given the widely different interpretations of experiences that emerged from interviewing students in this study. Discussion and debate may lead to the confirmation or refutation of opinions or people may simply agree to disagree but, unless opinions are exposed and tested in robust discussion and debate, claims to knowledge cannot justifiably be made when interpretations differ so widely. The next section will further illustrate the need for discussion and debate that emerged from interviewing students.

Determining ethnic or social factors

RONUKA: And there would be some who have issue because you are not [pause], you are not white, but, by all God, they wouldn't say it.

MERWIN: As an adult student I, I did find it very, initially, difficult to sort of gel in with the other students because most of them are young students. And

culture-wise we didn't really get along 'cos most of them were, I would say, white background.

GAsRAI: I ask myself many questions, then I said maybe because I'm from an ethnic minority, that's why I don't get the same treatment like other people. JASON: It's like the people that are in my seminar are, like, not the people that I'd mix with. [...] I see them as middle class and I sometimes get the feeling that they are looking down upon me.

LENIE: Because last year in [subject], for example, I had, like, the feeling that, oh, the tutor had like preferences, you know. Like, towards certain people. And he didn't like women and especially also then from ethnic, other ethnic backgrounds.

SANDRA: I've never felt [pause]. I've never felt as though I have been treated differently because of my colour, put it that way. But I would say [pause], I would say because people think I'm younger, maybe, that students [pause]. I think students on the whole get treated very much like children - I do. I think they get treated like children. But I can't say I've had an encounter to do with my colour as such. I haven't been treated any differently in terms of colour.

RASHIDA: They treat you like in primary schools because they are, that's where they started off, primary school teaching and they can't get rid of their habits. CHARLENE: We had quite a lot of assessed group work and there were situations where I felt [pause] there were some kind of discrimination against us the international students. [...] I feel, like, in most of the cases we were side-lined as international students.

CHARLENE: I've been in this country for a while as a student and you have to prove yourself because sometimes people will just assume that, oh, you don't know anything. [...] They'll think, oh what do they know? What do they know coming from Africa? What do you know?

ILIANA: It's like somebody, the person who marked it, just didn't like you and just put a zero without even reading or doing anything.

RASHIDA: And I certainly, I'm sure I got marked down because of my attitude towards lecturers, you know, a fact.

STEVE: Now there are some who talk about the lecturers showing favouritism but I don't think that's the case. I think that there are just some students who probably get on better with some of the lecturers and in such a way they got more from the lecturer because they feel better in that particular style of lecturing. So I don't think there is favouritism and therefore, on that ground, there is no need for anonymous marking.

RONUKA: Support was there because obviously there was the tutors, depending with the relationship that you had with the tutor.

These accounts reveal the wide range of factors students mentioned when describing their experiences. Factors mentioned included: colour, age, culture, ethnicity, class, gender and nationality. Some students

thought that there was *'racism'*, while others thought that students *'on the whole get treated very much like children'*. Others thought that being seen as an *'international student'* impacted on how students were treated and that it was the *'name'* that got marked. Rashida, by contrast, states that it was her *'attitude towards lecturers'* which meant being marked down while Steve thought there was *'no favouritism'* but that some students were getting *'on better with some of the lecturers and in such a way they got more from the lecturer because they feel better in that particular style of lecturing'*.

Apart from the fact that students mentioned a wide range of factors in describing their experiences, it was rarely the case that in any particular circumstance just one factor was thought to determine an experience. Instead, it was often the case that students used two or more factors to describe their experience. Lenie, for example, describes how one of her tutors *'didn't like women and especially also then from ethnic, other ethnic backgrounds'*, and Merwin describes that *'as an adult student'* it was *'initially difficult to sort of gel in with the other students because most of them are young students'* and that *'culture-wise'* they *'didn't really get along 'cos most of them were, I would say, white background'*. These examples illustrate just how complex it can be to interpret experiences and that terms like *'race'*, *'ethnicity'* and *'culture'* were often used inconsistently by students. Merwin, for example, talks about *'racism'* yet uses terms like *'age'*, *'culture'* and *'black'* interchangeably to describe his experiences.

It is, no doubt, a challenging task to separate out ethnic and social factors which may or may not have influenced a particular experience, even more so considering that various factors are likely to be mutually at work. Indeed, this poses the question whether it is at all helpful to try to determine ethnic and social factors when interpreting experiences or whether an alternative approach may be more effective. It may be the case that the *'absolute equality'* approach presented in this study as an alternative way of examining at student attainment is more insightful. What is needed, however, is considerable discussion to interpret experiences

as these extracts from the student narratives have indicated.

Difference versus particularity

NASRIN: Maybe, but I mean I'm Muslim. I'm Pakistani and I am proud. I'm British and I'm very proud to be British. So either way, yes, I fit into both categories so it's fine.

NASRIN: I am British because I was born and bred here, it's just my religion makes me different so there we go.

NASRIN: I stand out in the crowd because I'll be the only one with a headscarf. So to me it's not a major issue. [...] It's enjoyable because people take interest in your religion, your culture. They'll ask you lots of questions. They are students that are really passionate to learn. And it's a good learning curve for both. I get to learn about someone else's religion and they get to learn about mine and the same with ethnic groups. In terms of culture because I'm born and brought up here, there is not a major difference. I think the major difference will be the drinking side of things, so attending the pub as such. So if there is a group that's going to the pub to have a couple of drinks and to eat, I sometimes don't join them. But I mean some of the people are very lovely and they sort of take that step back and say, she won't come to the pub so let's go somewhere else. And we sort of meet half way and we might go for a pizza or we go to McDonald's or something like that. So you do have people that understand.

NASRIN: I feel good about it really, honestly. I make a joke out of it like I stand out from the crowd because I wear a headscarf. So I can make a joke out of it and say, if someone was to walk into the lecture theatre, I'd be the first they notice because I'm the only one wearing the headscarf. That's fine by me. It really, it really doesn't affect me at all. I find it funny. I make a joke.

NASRIN: I think that depends person to person though. You do get some people that won't go that extra length to make you feel included, you get some that would. So that's just about the person, being person to person. I sometimes do feel a bit excluded when you get some drinking jokes or pub jokes that go about that I don't understand. But everybody else does so I don't feel bad about it because I can't expect them to always work around me when I'm the one odd person and everybody else will understand it. So that's my take.

ANDREW: One thing I would have thought that perhaps could benefit your research in the future is when talking about an ethnic background [pause]. We discussed, you know, the class environment, the lectures and so on. But I was thinking that my ethnic background and my culture, which I consider to be two different things, you could argue, have a profound effect on my lifestyle and my experiences at the university because I am classed as British Asian. But I'm actually

English, Irish, Welsh, Pakistani, Portuguese and Anglo-Indian. The way I see it, you have got a birthday cake, alright? That cake is British, the icing on top is Asian. That's how I see it, you get what I am saying? [. . .] It's one of those [pause] this kind of mixed, mixed heritage type things.

These opinions and observations stand in real contrast to some of the previous extracts from the narratives discussed in this chapter. Merwin, for example, describes how he did not 'gel' with fellow students, which he attributed partly to age but more emphatically to race as well as racial prejudice and behaviour. Nasrin, by contrast, felt that she fitted 'into both categories', the category 'British' and 'Muslim' and also into the category 'Pakistani'. The difference Nasrin noticed was 'the drinking side of things' while, having been 'born and bred here, it's just' her religion that made her 'different'. These accounts, Nasrin's in particular, raise the question about how important differences between groups of students actually are. Is it appropriate to talk about differences when what we may be referring to is minor particularities? When does a particularity become a difference, and what differences and for that matter particularities are important in relation to student attainment? These questions arose from the student narratives and must be discussed if understanding is to be advanced.

One further point worth noting is that Andrew's comments bring us back to the issues relating to categories and the categorisation of people that was raised as part of the literature review in the chapter 4 'Categories and categorisation'. In the narrative above, Andrew describes the complexity associated with the categories currently in use. Andrew begins by saying that '*my ethnic background and my culture, which I consider to be two different things, you could argue, have a profound effect on my lifestyle and my experience at the university because I am classed as British Asian*'. He then goes on to point out that his heritage is actually a lot more varied. Using the metaphor of a birthday cake, he states that the '*the cake is British*' while '*the icing on top is Asian*'. Andrew's narrative illustrates that the categories in use do not necessarily reflect reality. This throws into

question both the practice of categorising students along ethnic lines as well as the wider talk about difference in relation to student attainment.

Discrimination, exclusion or neither?

MERWIN: I wouldn't say I felt excluded, it was more like the level of understanding were, we didn't gel.

MERWIN: If you are not from the majority group, it's hard to fit in [. . .]. You can talk but in terms of being, feeling equal, I haven't felt that, I can't feel it. I've tried as much as I could to fit in and to interact without losing what I think is my identity, but unless I go another step, which I'm not comfortable to do, that's the only way, I think, I can really get in and do it.

NASRIN: Well, there has never been an issue where I felt outcast, outcast that they had to reassure me, I guess. I think that's the best way I can put it.

NASRIN: You do get the same questions about twenty times, but it's fine, you can answer it. It's fine. There is not a problem with that. If anything, I'm the centre of attention at that point because they are all listening to me, so it's fun.

NASRIN: There'll be a group of them that wanna go out for a few drinks because it's the end of a term and that's fine. It's not that they don't invite me, you know. Anybody that wants to come can come. But then you do get the few that are my friends that are my group, who say, you know what, we are not attending either because we know you won't go. And then they take that extra mile and we go elsewhere. So, yeah, they are still inclusive moments but there yeah, there is excluding moments as well. But that's fine. That's normal. That's with every culture.

SAM: One thing I have realised that makes life hard for international students in university, this particular university, is the fact that people like to stick in their comfort zones [. . .]. Most of my international friends [who] have really been suffering with integration is those who always spend a lot of their time with their own, sort of, you know, sort of people.

AFRA: Getting a better, decent job; having the respect, that kind of thing. If you tell someone you've got a degree they have more respect for you.

RASHIDA: I don't think we were all respected equally. And with [lecturer] I felt valued as a person. I felt what I said was valued, even though sometimes he didn't agree with me, but it was still done in a very nice and appropriate way. [. . .] I think there was a major difference between the [subject] lecturers and the [subject] lecturers. I think it's got to do with personality, to be fair.

CHARLENE: We had quite a lot of assessed group work and there were situations where I felt [pause] there were some kind of discrimination against us the international students. [. . .] It was, like, the more dominant members of the group [. . .] they just gave us tasks. Just telling or ordering that, oh, you are going to do this, you are going to do that. So, obviously, for me it made me feel as an outsider and unable to make my own decisions.

RASHIDA: I don't fit in in either category. I don't fit in their category [British Muslim]. I don't fit in my mates' category either [British white]. You know, I had to build my friendship with them [British Muslim]. It wasn't automatic. I had [pause] to gain their trust and this is talking about a lot of Islamic things. I'm very knowledgeable in that area. And, you know, I introduced them to my family, my children. [. . .] They [British Muslim students] didn't speak to me. They all sat together.

NASRIN: But I think that's where racism is born. I think if you are not taking that step yourself to learn, why are you expecting others to take that step and learn about you? So, and I think that is the difference. I think because I'm taking that step further to learn, I've never seen racism while if you are shutting the doors yourself and say, I am not interested in your religion, why expect someone to be interested in yours?

These remarks illustrate how differently students experienced studying at university and that the students in general appeared to have both good and bad experiences. That there are very different interpretations of experiences by students illustrates the need for discussion and debate. To judge from the student narratives, student experiences are not necessarily best described in terms of 'racism', 'exclusion' or 'discrimination': experiences are more nuanced. Merwin, for example, did not think he 'felt excluded' but that it '*was more like the level of understanding where we didn't gel*', that is, '*in terms of interaction*'. Merwin also thought that '*if you are not from the majority group, it's hard to fit in*' and that '*in terms of being, feeling equal*', he had '*not felt that*'. This stands in stark contrast with Nasrin, who stands '*out from the crowd*' because she is wearing 'a

headscarf but did not think it *'affected'* her *'at all'*.

Another example of the complexity of student experiences is provided by Rashida, who described her experiences differently. She felt that she did not *'fit into either category'*, neither with the British Muslim women students nor with the British white students. But Rashida worked on it *'to gain their [British Muslim women's] trust'*, which was not easy because the British Muslim women students *'didn't speak'* to her at first. During the interview, Rashida did not make much of having to *'gain their [British Muslim women's] trust'*. It was instead, the behaviour of some of the lecturers that she described at great length, comparing negative with positive experiences. Merwin, by contrast, described how he thought he did not *'gel'* with fellow students but encountered no difficulties with his lecturers. These examples illustrate just a few differences in the way students experienced studying at university. Experiences differed so much that relying upon interpretations of experiences by students alone could be grossly misleading. The extracts from the student narratives have shown that there must be discussion and debate, if experiences are to be interpreted in any meaningful way.

Issue for discussion: the nature of student experience

The importance of discussion and debate

Andrew, when asked why he thought one of the lecturers had treated him more harshly when assessing his assignment, replied in this way: *'where to start?'* *'It could be nothing'* or the lecturer *'was having a bad day'* or he was *'being racist'* or *'maybe I look like a childhood bully he had'*. Andrew's response contrasts sharply with Merwin's, which claimed that racial prejudice and behaviour shaped the way students interacted and made friends in learning situations. Andrew's narrative indicates that interpreting experiences requires discussion. One reason for this is that the information Andrew had access to was insufficient to determine the

grounds upon which the behaviour of the lecturer, he thought treated him more harshly, was based. Merwin's narrative, on the other hand, did not immediately suggest a need for discussion and debate since Merwin had formed an opinion based on his experiences and communicated his views quite firmly. Students, however, cannot be judges of certainty, as has been argued here on the basis of the student narratives collected in this study.

It has been argued in this study that opinions based on experience cannot be put on a par with claims to knowledge, irrespective of whether students are certain about how to interpret their experiences or not. To interpret experiences, discussion and debate are needed, as the student narratives collected in this study have shown. One reason why this may be so has already been discussed in the research philosophy section in the 'Introduction', which looked at the difference between experience (perception) and knowledge (objective truth). The conceptual difference between experience and knowledge means that opinions formed from experience are not sufficient to make claims to knowledge, for opinions must be exposed to discussion and debate. Mill, in his book *On Liberty*, argued that 'there must be discussion to show how experience is to be interpreted' and that 'to refuse a hearing to an opinion because they are sure that it is false is to assume that *their* certainty is the same thing as *absolute* certainty' (Mill [1859]: 2005: 21, 25). In other words: 'all silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility' (Mill [1859] 2005: 21-22).

Relativist approaches to ethnic attainment research tend to silence discussion. This happens not only because experiences are talked about as 'lived realities' and 'truths', which implies that opinions formed from experiences do not require further evidencing or validation, but also because relativist approaches suggest that opinions, especially those held by minoritised groups, need protection from public attack if they are to be heard. From that standpoint, discussions and debates where opinions are opposed as part of a process of argumentation that seeks to find truth

are likely to be seen as a public attack on opinions. But, as Andrew has argued, debate is important because 'truth emerges from the clash of opposites' (Andrew 2009: 3).

Skillen has pointed out that, 'to be silenced, to have one's view prevented from expression, is different from having them criticised, even severely' (Skillen 1982: 145). The same applies to discussing experiences and opinions. Having experiences and opinions criticised is not the same as being prevented from expressing opinions. On the contrary, discussions and debates provide a platform for people to express and test opinions even if the clashing with opposites can be hard at times as Skillen has pointed out:

One's beliefs are close to the centre of 'who one is' and criticism of them can cut deep and meet protective resistance. But it is of the essence of human rationality that beliefs are held as valid, as justified by their correspondence to what is the case. The mind expresses itself and thus exposes itself to change through criticism. Criticism and discussion respect these dimensions of rationality, whereas silencing smashes at them, practically denying the capacity, not only to have reached views through some process of experience and reflection, but to go beyond them through further formative activity.

(Skillen 1982: 145)

Arguing, therefore, for more discussion and debate is not to silence voices or to maintain the established social and institutional structures as critical race theorists or multiculturalists may argue. Discussion serves to find truth, as the student narratives discussed in this chapter have indicated, and is important if progress is to be made on the issue of ethnic attainment differences in British higher education. The claim that there is a need for debate about issues in higher education does not ignore the existence of the literature on higher education discussed in the chapter on 'Equality and education'. Despite some loud dissenting voices (Readings 1996; Graham 2002; Evans 2004) and some writers whose works have gained popular success (Bloom 1987; Collini 2012), this is largely a professional literature for lecturers and professors of higher education and pedagogy. At conferences, they talk to themselves. Some debate takes place in the

pages of the *Times Higher Education* magazine, but this is balanced by an overwhelming concern with league tables and awards. Every national and many local newspapers have education columnists and writers. There are national festivals offering some forums for discussion, such as the annual *Sunday Times Festival of Education*. Where there is little that could be said to be a debate, although there is 'consultation', is in universities themselves amongst managers, support staff, academics and students. This is where the debate about the issues raised here is most needed, not merely to avoid the unthinking minoritisation of some higher education students, but for all students and for the sake of the university itself.

Many other advantages come from discussion and debate. As we have seen, measures have been designed to address ethnic attainment differences from being implemented without having been discussed and debated and implemented with speed by British universities. Furthermore, discussion and debate strengthen any argument because a 'range of views can be expressed, arrayed, clarified' and ultimately 'form the basis of a decisions' based on the best available evidence' (Andrew 2009: 4). It helps to discover ideas, clarify issues, expand the boundaries of understanding, grasp points of view of another, understand differences, identify points of tensions and refine a proposition (Andrew 2009). It helps to understand the grounds of one's own opinion, refute reasons proposed on the opposite side, and it can be a means of resolving differences (Mill [1859] 2005; Andrew 2009).

By 'drilling down at the point of dispute', 'elements and dimensions of the tension and dispute are laid bare', 'sets of values, theories, ideologies underlying their very characterisation made transparent and the possibilities of reconciliation and moving forward are laid out' (Andrew 2009: 22). It is the 'first stage to solving a problem', and the outcome is by no means predetermined. Discussions and debates can end in a consensus, in deciding on differences or in agreeing to disagree, but the clash of

opposites is essential for truth to emerge (Andrew 2009; Mill [1859] 2005). To make claims to knowledge based upon experience is, to use Skillen's words, like saying, 'this is my belief and I have a right to it whatever the truth may be, or whatever objections there may be' (Skillen 1982: 149). It is relativist approaches to ethnic attainment research that deny 'the role of rational criticism, confrontation with the facts and objective reflection' in educational research and end up undermining the interpretation of experiences through discussion and debate which has been shown in this chapter to be so important (Skillen 1982: 149).

Furthermore, the silencing of the expression and discussion of opinions is, according to Mill:

robbing the human race, posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error.

(Mill [1859] 2005: 21)

Summary

The need for discussion and debate has emerged both from the student narratives discussed in this chapter as well as from reviewing current theoretical approaches to ethnic attainment research, which too easily led researchers to make claims to knowledge based upon experiences and opinions collected from research participants. The conceptual differences between experiences (people's perceptions) and knowledge (objective truth) draw attention to the fact that experiences and opinions are not sufficient to make claims to knowledge. For that, experiences and opinions must be exposed to discussion and debate, as truth emerges from clashes of opposites (Andrew 2009).

The student narratives collected in this study indicate that interpreting experiences is not a straightforward task. There are students, Andrew, for example, who did not know where to start when asked why, in his

view, a particular incident happened. The narratives from students such as Merwin and Johura, who described how they thought institutional racism and racial prejudice and behaviour were operating at the university, tended to use terms inconsistently. In contrast, Nasrin's and Sam's narratives claimed that neither of them experienced racist incidents at the university, while Ronuka's narrative explained how he needed hindsight to interpret his experiences differently. The sheer range of experiences and interpretations of them clearly indicates the need for discussion and debate. It will help to clarify issues, establish viewpoints, strengthen arguments and to articulate tensions, all of which are needed if the understanding of student attainment is to be advanced.

12 Summary and conclusion

Realism and absolute equality are the way forward

This study was conducted to encourage an unbiased and better-informed debate about ethnic attainment differences in British higher education. Current ethnic attainment research, alongside the university policies and practices that are derived from it, depict ethnically and socially minoritised higher education students as disadvantaged, marginalised, discriminated against and excluded. Framed within a relativist philosophical perspective, research, policy and practice readily embrace group-based social differentiation and by doing so foster the idea that ethnic and social attributes of students matter. The consequence is that ethnic and social factors are inadvertently essentialised because various groups are discussed as 'homogenous, clearly bounded and mutually exclusive' (Barry 2001: 11). Once the idea that group-based social differences matter at an essential level takes hold, differences are seen as more important than what is common to all people. This inevitably minoritises students because it suggests that educational attainment is determined by ethnic and social attributes and, as a result, underrates students' common resilience and human agency, the choices that are open to students through their ability to act deliberately in pursuit of conscious goals. The idea that ethnic and social differences matter in an important way has been revived, when there was a possibility to renew our understanding and respect for what is common to all people in terms of our shared humanity. While in the past personal and social deficiencies were thought to account for ethnic differences in educational attainment, today it is students' resilience and human agency

that is being called into question. This is a new type of deficit thinking that affects some students disproportionately because they are depicted as lacking resilience and agency because of their ethnic and social background. Students are seen to be at the mercy of social and cultural factors and vulnerable to hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases.

Current approaches to ethnic attainment research often pursue implicit political objectives which are linked to the relativist theoretical perspectives being adopted. This has been shown to be case in Britain, but there are parallels with the USA and Australia, and readers from other countries may also find similarities. Critical race theorists, multiculturalists and researchers in Britain, the USA and Australia who adopt an identity perspective try, for example, to understand and ultimately address – and even redress – hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases that are thought to disadvantage ethnically and socially minoritised students. By adopting either of these theories, researchers tend to position themselves and their studies politically. This means research is no longer a ‘process of investigation leading to new insights’ as defined by the *Research Excellence Framework 2014*, but a process of investigation that tends to seek proof in support of the theoretical ideas that have been adopted (REF 2011: 26). As a consequence, research is exploited for political ends.

To retain objectivity, this study approached the ethnic attainment question from a realist philosophical position. This entails a commitment to the concept of objective truth. Objectivity in this context means seeing students as individuals rather than merely as members of an ethnic and social group, so that issues can be discussed without holding prior assumptions about group differences. It also means recognising the possibility of resilience and agency in students and that these traits may influence attainment rather than it being the case that students are vulnerable to hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases. The search for objectivity, furthermore, is supported by making the

conceptual distinction between experiences (people's perceptions) and knowledge (objective truth) and between the subject (person) that relates an experience and the object (item) that is being examined.

The importance of distinguishing between experience and knowledge allows research findings to be properly reported as perceptions without making any claims to knowledge and policies cannot be based on perceptions alone. This distinction also means that conclusions drawn from experiences are understood as opinions. The expression of opinion can give rise to discussions that may well be relevant to the British higher education sector as a whole rather than only to the institution where the study was conducted, as is often the case in small studies such as the one conducted here. The subject-object distinction, in turn, is important in educational research because it allows ideas and opinions to be examined objectively and either advanced or rejected irrespective of the ethnic or social background of the person who advances the ideas or opinions. Essentially, advancing the understanding of the world depends upon the pursuit of truth through discussion and debate and upon the consideration and objective presentation of all relevant evidence (Pring 2004; Andrew 2009).

An additional feature that distinguishes this study from much previous work is the recognition that the understanding of the concept of equality has changed over recent decades, leading to the conscious adoption of the older notion of equality, referred to here as 'absolute equality'. Unlike the current notion of equality, which refers to the particular and focuses on the recognition of difference, the older notion refers to the universal, shared humanity, and defends the right to be the same. The shift from the universal to the particular, it was argued in the chapter on 'Equality and education', is often supported by cultural relativism and, in the university, by cultural and epistemological relativism. It also means that current ethnic attainment research makes relational comparisons of student attainment and so examines how the education or attainment of one group compares to another. An absolute approach to equality and

inequality focuses, instead, on standards of universal higher education. Student attainment is examined by looking at the student population as a whole and within the holistic context of contemporary higher education.

Talk of an 'ethnic' attainment gap without conclusive evidence minoritises students

To explore ethnic attainment differences in British higher education, this study took a fresh look at the statistical research data on student attainment, that is, the way in which statistical data on attainment is researched and reported. The annual statistical reports published by the Equality Challenge Unit are at the heart of the ethnic attainment concerns. These reports have, over recent years, been used to report an overall gap in attainment between black and minority ethnic students and their white counterparts graduating with a high degree classification of 17.2 to 18.4 percentage points (ECU 2012; ECU 2013). This has prompted a widespread concern in British higher education about ethnic attainment differences. The statistical reports gained increasing importance in the wake of the Broecke and Nicholls (2007) study which reported that 'after controlling for the majority of factors which we would expect to have an impact on attainment, being from a minority ethnic community (except the "Other Black", "Mixed" and "Other" groups) is still statistically significant in explaining final attainment, although the gap has been significantly reduced' (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 3).

The examination of the statistical research data in this study has shown that these reports, if taken at face value, are misleading. The analysis prompted the question of whether the ethnic gap is indeed an 'ethnic' gap or whether current research and reporting practices exaggerate the importance of ethnicity as an explanatory factor and as a result inflate ethnic differences. The research and reporting practices may, in fact, even create differences where none exist. First, reporting attainment in relation to one variable only – ethnicity – as is the case in the annual reports by the Equality

Challenge Unit, inflates the ethnic attainment gap. The inflation occurs because the gap in attainment has been shown by Broecke and Nicholls (2007) to be significantly reduced when other factors known to impact on attainment are taken into account, and to disappear completely for the categories 'Other Black', 'Mixed' and 'Other' groups (Broecke and Nicholls 2007).

Second, the use of broad ethnic categories, such as 'Black', 'Asian', 'Chinese', 'Mixed', 'White' and 'Other', has been shown by the *Mayor's Education Inquiry* (2012), which researched the schooling sector in London, to mask significant intra-group variations. The Inquiry has shown that pupils in the 'Black African' category, if divided by nationality, are both among the highest and the lowest performing groups. The intra-group variations that are masked by the application of broad ethnic categories in the schooling sector can be expected to hide similar intra-group variation that may occur in the higher education sector. This suggests that the use of broad ethnic categories in the reporting of attainment differences in British higher education leads to inaccurate reporting. If this is the case, ethnically minoritised students who do equally well or outperform the white students in educational attainment are being stigmatised and minoritised.

Furthermore, Broecke and Nicholls concluded that it was reasonable to assume that the gap in attainment 'would have been further reduced' or maybe even have been 'eliminated entirely' had the study been able to take into account all factors that might impact on attainment or if the quality of the variables included could have been improved (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19). This raises the question of whether ethnicity is at all an explanatory factor in attainment and therefore whether the ethnic gap is indeed an 'ethnic' gap or a creation of the current research and reporting practice. Without conclusive statistical research evidence which proves that there is an 'ethnic' attainment gap in British higher education, any claim to the contrary minoritises higher education students because it perpetuates the idea that ethnically minoritised students are underachieving.

Current methods of researching and reporting statistical data on student attainment are flawed to such an extent that neither researchers, academics nor university policy makers can legitimately talk of an 'ethnic' attainment gap in British higher education. The situation calls, instead, for more accurate statistical research on and reporting of student attainment. Accurate statistical reporting would not only help to preclude starting from a false statistical premise when designing university policies and practices, but also to interrupt the process of minoritisation that is perpetuated through the idea that at least a proportion of ethnically minoritised students in British higher education are underperforming.

Social interventions: indoctrination but not education

One theme that emerged from exploring the teaching and learning experiences of undergraduate students at a post-1992 British university is 'student grouping'. This term refers to the way students group when interacting and making friends in learning situations. This phenomenon provoked different reactions among the research participants who talked about social interactions in learning situations and student grouping. While some described student grouping as a normal occurrence and continued interacting with people regardless, others perceived it as deeply problematic, especially when students were thought to group along racial, ethnic and national lines.

Student grouping is not simply a case of the '*majority*', the '*white*' or the 'British' grouping together and excluding other students in the process. It happened, according to some research participants, in all groups of students, as people from ethnically minoritised backgrounds were just as likely to form groups among themselves as the other students. Research participants, nevertheless, tended to talk about student grouping in terms of the '*others*' grouping together and less so about their own role in the process. As regards the rationale behind student

grouping, Merwin and Ronuka thought that student grouping along racial, national and ethnic lines happens partly because some people had an issue *'because you are not white'*, but *'by all God, they wouldn't say it'*, and partly because some *'don't realise'* how student grouping happens or known what *'exclusion'* is and *'how it operates'*. Part of the problem for Merwin was that he had *'previous experience'* with *'isolation'* and *'deep down expected'* it to happen again when he attended university, yet was still *'shocked'* when *'it did happen'*.

The impact student grouping was perceived to have on attainment was difficult to elicit from participants. Merwin, who perceived student grouping as problematic, thought that it did not really affect him *'education-wise'* or *'his performance'*, except that it *'limited'* him *'to a specific number of students'*, students who he thought were more *'comfortable to have [him] in their group'*. This, in turn, Merwin believed, limited his educational experience and might have impacted on attainment. Ladislav shared Merwin's opinion. He said that *'when you have friends from your course you can always talk about some tasks, some course work and it's easier to write a coursework together'* by, for example, sharing *'your experience with different people'*. Ladislav made, however, a *'few friends'* in his second year so that it became *'easier'* for him.

It is unclear from the narratives how much of an issue student grouping is. Not all research participants spoke about student grouping, while those who did they did not necessarily perceive it as problematic. The discussion of *'student grouping'* gave rise to some interesting questions. One such question arose from Merwin's description of how he addressed the issue of student grouping directly with his classmates during class time, after having talked to his lecturer about it, and the lecturer encouraging him to do so. For Merwin, addressing student grouping in class was good because after raising the issue twice with his classmates, *'the blanket was taken away'* and *'people were openly able to discuss and understand'*. Merwin's case supports the literature on student engagement that draws on Tinto's (1993), Astin's (1984) and Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theories of

social and academic integration which advocate intervention in university education as a means of addressing social inequalities in university education.

Implementing interventions in university education designed to address ethnic and social inequalities is problematic. From a pedagogic perspective, addressing personal issues during class time is potentially demotivating students who enrolled on the degree course to study about their subject and yet find that the class time is taken up by discussions about a fellow student's personal issues. This use of class time is especially questionable when considering that some research participants in this study expressed disappointment about the lack of intellectual challenge they were presented with in their academic studies (see the chapter 8 'Participatory versus intellectual engagement' and chapter '10 'Academic study').

Interventions to address ethnic and social inequalities are also problematic because attempts to modify people's behaviour, even if well intentioned, amount to soft social engineering in higher education, which is controversial and challengeable. It is not only unclear whether interventions effectively change behaviour but also disputable whether deeply seated social ills can or should be solved through education. Education must, of course, provide the intellectual resources and develop the critical minds that can bring about social change. However, when interventions are implemented with the aim of bringing about a predetermined change in behaviour or a specific social improvement, education takes the shape of indoctrination. That means abandoning educational ideals which have been defined in this study as liberal educationalist in that the critical-rational principle is upheld as well as the education's role in developing critical rather than indoctrinated minds.

It is quite clearly in the interest of both students and universities to question the well-intentioned but educationally regressive advocacy of interventions in university education that come across in the literature. This is not simply because interventions resort to indoctrination rather than

the development of critical minds but also because they politicise university education the moment attempts are made to indoctrinate students, especially considering the political nature of current approaches to ethnic attainment research discussed in the chapter on 'Discussions and debates emerging from the literature'. An interventionist approach to university education minoritises higher education students. It denies students the best possible university education and it underrates the students' capacity to deliberately act in pursuit of conscious goals, especially the capacity of minoritised students on whose account and for whose benefit social interventions are being implemented. The way forward is, therefore, not a more but a *less* interventionist university education. Such a non-interventionist education would respect the students' capacity to act in pursuit of their conscious goals, grant students the human capacity for rationality and offer the best possible education that provides intellectual resources and permits the development of the students' critical minds.

Social attributes are thought to determine attainment rather than human agency

In the chapter on 'Participatory versus intellectual engagement', a distinction emerged from the student narratives between what has been called in this study 'participatory engagement', defined as engagement in the learning process, and 'intellectual engagement', defined as engagement with the subject content. Jason, for example, used phrases like '*critical evaluation*', having to '*think about it*' and having to '*interpret it*' when describing his intellectual engagement with the subject content, while Sandra described engagement as participating in the learning process and used expressions such as '*listening*' and '*applying what I've been taught to exactly what [the lecturer] wants in the assignment*'. The distinction between participatory and intellectual engagement is not always clear cut, but the questions it raises are, nevertheless, worthwhile considering.

The existing literature concerning engagement positions students at the centre of the learning process. It draws together considerations about student learning, the institutional environment, learning resources and teachers and is concerned about the extent to which students are engaging in educational activities (Kuh *et al.* 2008; Coates 2005). Student-centred engagement assumes that learning depends on 'institutions and staff providing students with the conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved' (Coates 2005: 26). The differences in how engagement is understood that have emerged from the narratives in this study suggest that for some students, intellectual or subject-centred engagement takes precedence over the kind of participatory or student-centred engagement that is discussed and advocated in the literature. This raises the question of whether it is students, as is currently the case, who should take centre stage when talking about engagement or whether engagement should be subject-centred.

There are two important reasons that support a focus on subject-centred engagement. First, subject-centred engagement has the potential to raise educational standards without giving a platform to the divisive subtext of student-centred group-based approaches. This is because subject-centred engagement reinstates knowledge through subject-based teaching in university education, which is essential if, as has been argued in this study, student attainment is to be improved. Second, subject-centred engagement respects students as rational human beings, capable of taking charge of their own learning as well as the lecturers' academic power to impart the ability to pursue learning by following their daily academic activities. By doing so, subject-centred engagement eliminates the minoritisation of higher education students that results from student-centred approaches which underrate the students' capacity to act as rational human agents. Student-centred approaches underrate human potential for agency by suggesting that students need to be provided with the conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved.

An equally interesting question arises from the assumed relationship the

student-centred engagement literature posits between social attributes and engagement. Trowler and Trowler's (2010) review of the literature showed that there is only a very weak relationship between the social characteristics of a student and the extent to which students engage in higher education. Student-centred engagement, however, assumes that there is a strong, if not necessarily causal, link between social attributes and engagement and spreads the unintended message that social attributes matter at an essential level. This reifies differences along ethnic and social lines for which, according to Trowler and Trowler, there is no research evidence (Trowler and Trowler 2010). Suggesting that there is a link between social attributes and engagement, when the evidence is not there, inevitably perpetuates the minority status of many higher education students because it encourages lecturers to judge students by their social or ethnic background.

The third question raised in the chapter on 'Participatory versus intellectual engagement' is related to the search for differences in learning to then allocate these differences to various ethnic and social groups of students. It is questionable whether learning differences are sufficiently distinct to deserve differentiation and if so, whether these differences are specific to particular ethnic and social groups. This study has found no evidence to support such a claim and questions instead whether learning differences, in fact, refer to nothing more than minor particularities or features which are used by current student and learning process-oriented approaches in universities for self-serving purposes. The extract from Jason's interview and the discussion it gave rise to about the rote/deep learning divide in chapter 8 'Participatory versus intellectual engagement' supports this argument.

Jason described in his interview how he preferred traditional lectures over more interactive teaching methods because, in his experience, they were more intellectually demanding. He liked the *'added pressure of writing down key information'* and having to be *'more attentive to the information'* because that was how he started to engage more with the

subject content. The problem with Jason's statement is that, if analysed from a standpoint that associates deep learning with interactive teaching methods and rote learning with traditional methods, he could be seen as a weaker learner. First, as the discussion in the chapter on 'Participatory versus intellectual engagement' has shown, the rote/deep learning divide is a false dichotomy because it ignores the fact that memorising principles, propositions, concepts and facts precedes the development of analytical skills and the mind (Furedi 2013). Therefore, any splitting of students into deep and rote learners is misconceived and results in the stigmatisation of some students.

Second, the association of deep learning with interactive teaching methods and rote learning with traditional methods is equally misconceived. This is because it relies on the assumption that students understand rather than just memorise information when taught through interactive methods, as they are actively performing tasks and in this way are thought to demonstrate understanding. This argument only applies when students are being expected to learn skills. A university education, however, that is concerned with the pursuit of knowledge and the resulting development of the mind, recognises that understanding involves ideas and thinking, discussing and debating of those ideas. A university education that upholds these ideals relies on the teaching of knowledge rather than preoccupying itself with teaching methods. In fact, a university education that values the pursuit of knowledge is likely to disapprove of interactive teaching methods, if the methods hinder the pursuit of knowledge which may be the case if, as described by Jason, it diverts time, mind space and effort from engaging with ideas. Jason described the time that was lost by saying '*sometimes he'll deviate of the subject and he told, like, anecdotes and everything like that*', '*he will just crack jokes all through the lecture*' and then went on to say that others like this '*type of character that's more, like, more entertaining in a sort of way*' but '*I prefer the PowerPoints*'.

Leniency and unprofessional behaviour foster feelings of unequal treatment

The experiences described in the chapter on '(Un)equal treatment' relate instances that some research participants recounted about inconsistent feedback, favouritism, assessment, resubmissions, (un)interest and institutional procedures. These experiences illustrate how the behaviour of lecturers and support staff can foster feelings of unequal treatment, but it is important to recognise that the experiences recounted in this study do not provide evidence for discrimination. The experiences recounted do not provide evidence for any claim of discrimination or unequal treatment because for this, all the evidence would have to be taken into account and presented objectively. Retaining objectivity is important because some of the experiences that research participants thought were indicating that some students were treated unequally appeared to have resulted from unprofessional behaviour rather than discrimination, such as the examples given by Andrew and Johura. Andrew thought he was treated '*more harshly*' on an assessed assignment he resubmitted and Johura recounted an incident involving a fellow classmate who, according to Johura, received a lower mark than she should have after a resubmission. In both instances the students received 40%, a pass mark, for the resubmitted essay which the students thought was far below what they deserved for the essay, apparently not knowing that university regulations on resubmissions state that 'referrals are capped at 40%, a pass mark'. It may be disputable whether it is the students' or lecturers' responsibility to familiarise themselves or, in the lecturers' case, the students with the university regulations, but either way it is a case of unprofessional behaviour rather than of discrimination.

Equally concerning is the tendency that comes out in the narratives for some lecturers to 'cushion' students. This occurs when lecturers avoid giving real criticism to students either for lack of criticality or for fear of the negative impact real criticism might have on the students' academic confidence. Given, however, that cushioning students fosters feelings of unequal treatment and can be perceived as '*insincere*', as in Paul's case, or as being '*treated like children*', as in Sandra's case, cushioning students by

avoiding real criticism not only denies students the opportunity to develop intellectually but also underrates their resilience and agency.

An additional problem that arises from the narratives is that students appear to have internalised the idea that there are cultural differences in learning. Such an assumption is as misconceived as the assumed link between social attributes and attainment, discussed earlier, has shown. As long as the misconception about cultural differences in learning circulates, group labels will be attached to students. The misconception also downplays or even ignores the students' capacity to adapt to new learning situations. Misconceptions about cultural differences in learning can, therefore, stigmatise students because they essentialise learning traits along ethnic lines and reify the very stereotypes that these approaches claim to address. Ronuka's narrative discussed in the chapter on '(Un)equal treatment' illustrated that educational differences are too readily asserted as cultural learning differences and end up stigmatising and consequently minoritising many higher education students.

The new type of deficit talk underrates resilience and human agency

Studying at university is not always as straightforward as students might expect it to be, as described in the chapter on 'Academic study'.

Demanding workloads and personal struggles challenged some of the research participants. But the students who struggled, like Ronuka, when they approached the end of their studies they were proud having learned to be '*patient*', to '*persevere*' and felt they could '*do anything now*'. One question, raised in the extracts from narratives which describe the demands of academic work, is whether university education is too demanding and whether it should be made easier to reduce the personal and intellectual challenges to students while studying at university.

Demands for what is effectively a process of making university education easier for students often come in the shape of interventions designed to

improve the 'student experience' which exhibit a fundamental failure to recognise that students can only develop their full academic potential if presented with the best university education possible. Any attempt to make university education easier shows great disrespect for students. It suggests that students lack resilience, are unable to cope with the demands put on them and inevitably depicts students as vulnerable. This affects ethnically or socially minoritised students disproportionately because interventions are designed for and occasionally targeted at minoritised student groups because minoritised students are thought to be vulnerable. There is, however, something fundamentally wrong with the assumption that some students are vulnerable. Assumed vulnerability denies some students the opportunity to develop academically to their potential, especially if assumed vulnerability leads to the abandonment of educational ideals, which it does because the assumption that some students are vulnerable focuses university education ever more on the students and inevitably draws attention away from the subject content. It is no surprise then that some research participants who took part in this study, and others who participated in other research projects at other universities, lamented the lack of intellectual challenge they were presented with. It was Johura, who participated in this study, who said, *'the whole syllabus [. . .] wasn't very challenging'* and Valerie who mentioned that *'people don't really have that high standards here'*. And there was Paul who said that they had to do *'a little PowerPoint presentation and just present it to ten people, but didn't really, didn't really learn anything from it'*; we *'just learned'* what *'is on Google Scholar'*. When students talk about low standards, a lack of challenge and describe the university education they are receiving as *'Google Scholar teaching'*, it is an indication that university education has lost its focus on knowledge. Alternatively, if the purpose of a university education is to pursue knowledge and universities took pride in providing the best possible knowledge, students would be provided with the intellectual challenge they associate with studying at university.

Assuming that students are vulnerable perpetuates and even reinvents

the minority status of many higher education students. It introduces a new type of deficit talk into higher education which underrates human agency and with it, the students' capacity to act in pursuit of conscious goals. This affects ethnically or socially minoritised students disproportionately because it is minoritised students who are represented as exposed to the hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases which are thought to exclude some students while privileging others. The new deficit talk creates doubts about the ability of ethnically minoritised students. It questions their ability to take charge of their own learning and, as students are no longer thought of as capable of achieving, it accommodates them to failure.

The extract from Ronuka's narrative referred to in the section on academic support describes how important it was for him *'to be treated the same'*. Ronuka relates that *'there was some positives about them [lecturers]'*, *'what they didn't want is to make it an issue, in a way that [. . .] it will knock our confidence and to make us feel that we are inadequate'*, they *'looked at us, you know, as if we can do it and we needed to be treated the same'*. Then Ronuka goes on to say, *'it was positive because if they didn't do that it would have caused a lot of, you know, friction and people thinking that they are different and stuff'*. This message of wanting to be *'treated the same'* is important because it came out very strongly in the narratives collected for this study. It deserves serious consideration because as long as students are depicted as vulnerable and group-based social differentiation approaches dominate ethnic attainment research as well as policies and practices, the ideal of being *'treated the same'*, which students articulated, seems beyond reach.

Experiences tell us little unless discussed and debated

The ways in which students interpreted their experiences are described in chapter 11 *'Beyond experience: why discussion and debate are important'*. The confidence with which research participants interpreted

their experiences varied considerably to the extent that Zafar stated that the experience '*was 110% reality*' and although it '*might seem a bit over-far-fetched or something*', it '*was so obvious*'. This contrasted sharply with Andrew's account of his experiences and the remark that '*any kind of sweeping statement would be ignorant without any further information*'. Whether or not students are confident in interpreting their experiences is of little consequence to the search for truth because either way experiences are perceptions and as such do not provide a ground upon which claims to knowledge can be made. Experiences provide, however, a rich source upon which ideas for discussion and debate can be generated.

The need for discussion and debate emerged in various ways from the narratives. First, some of the research participants, such as Andrew, stated themselves that '*without any further information*', '*any sweeping statement would be ignorant*'. This gives an indication that students cannot be 'judges of certainty' simply by relating their interpretation of their experiences and that, as Mill argued, interpreting experiences requires discussion and debate (Mill [1859] 2005). Otherwise, it would result in assuming that the students' certainty is the same as absolute certainty and that experiences and opinions derived from it are taken to represent 'a truth' and as such cannot be challenged because all expressions of 'truths' from relativist standpoint are considered equally valid (Mill [1859] 2005; Bailey 2004).

A second indication of the need for discussion and debate emerged from the inconsistent use of terminology, which made it hard to identify at times what exactly the students were talking about. Merwin, for example, talked about '*institutional racism*' and how being '*black*' prevented students from integrating while at the same time noting that that '*age*' and '*culture-wise*' he '*didn't gel*' with fellow students. Johura, in turn, seemed at first to distinguish between '*being black*' and '*a foreign student*' but then tended to use the terms interchangeably. The same emerged in Charlene's narrative but she tended to use the term '*international student*' while occasionally referring to '*coming from Africa*'. Garai, in

contrast, talked about being an '*ethnic minority*' and '*white people born here*' while Rashida talked about being treated like in '*primary school*' and about fitting in neither the '*British white*' nor the '*British Muslim*' category. The diverse use of terminology throughout the interviews illustrates that it was hard for the research participants to identify just what was the case, partly because various factors might have been at work simultaneously and partly because interpreting experiences in terms of ethnic or social factors is subjective and might even change with hindsight as was the case with Ronuka.

A third indication of the need for discussion and debate emerged from the widely different ways in which experiences were interpreted and the widely different experiences this resulted in. The experiences described by the research participants differed to such an extent that some like Merwin, Johura and Paul '*didn't gel*' and felt '*treated unequally*' because they were '*black*' and '*foreign students*', while others such as Nasrin and Sam said they have never experienced any '*racist incident*' at the university. Yet, there are others like Jyoti and Jonina who related experiences without any reference to ethnic or social factors, even after having been prompted during the interview, but described experiences instead in terms of professionalism or the lack of it. With such a wide range of experiences and views related to them, it would be arbitrary to use any narrative to make claims be it in favour of, or against, institutional racism and inbuilt institutional and social biases, that may or may not disadvantage ethnically and socially minoritised students.

It is equally difficult to determine from the narratives what the students who took part in this study were in fact describing when they related their experiences. Did the research participants feel treated unequally, discriminated against, excluded, outcast, bullied and misunderstood or perhaps none of these, and if they used any of these terms what exactly was meant by them? Rashida, for example, felt that students were treated by some lecturers like they were in '*primary school*', while at a more advanced stage in the interview she talked about having felt '*bullied*'. Merwin, in

turn, said he did not feel 'excluded' but thought that it was the 'level of understanding where he didn't get' and that he was sitting on his 'own' but he 'was fine with it'. This illustrates that, if the British higher education sector is to make any progress on the question of ethnic attainment differences in British higher education, experiences and opinions derived from experiences must be discussed and debated. Only then will the British higher education sector be able to make decisions based on the best available evidence and to address the perpetual minoritisation of higher education students in Britain.

The minoritisation of higher education students

The process of minoritisation identified in this study results from the continued use of group-based social differentiation. The divisive subtext it creates, along with a new type of deficit talk, underrates the resilience and human agency of students. It affects ethnically and socially minoritised students disproportionately because it is exactly these minoritised students who are depicted as disadvantaged, marginalised, excluded and discriminated against and who are, therefore, seen as vulnerable to hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases. This in turn implies that educational attainment is first and foremost determined by ethnic and social attributes rather than by students acting deliberately in pursuit of conscious goals.

How did this happen? How did ethnic attainment research, and university policies and practice derived from it, regress into treating ethnic and social attributes as if they were the essential determining factors affecting education? We have no doubt moved beyond pseudo-genetic notions of race. Ethnic attainment researchers have argued, however, that because we are not post-racial *per se* and racial discrimination is still a 'lived experience', it is necessary to continue 'working both with and against conceptual tools that have yet to be effectively replaced' (Warmington 2009: 295). Such opinions gain legitimacy from the general drift in academic

thinking, race legislation, higher education and wider politics towards adopting relativist ideas of truth and the group-based social differentiation which is an integral part of relativist thinking.

The point made at the beginning of this study was that the measures implemented to address ethnic attainment differences in British higher education and the ideas they represent perpetuate the minoritisation of higher education students. The student narratives collected and discussed in this study show that some research participants felt treated unequally at times, a finding which is all too often taken in the literature to prove that ethnically minoritised students are disadvantaged and discriminated against. But there is little discussion as to why some students might feel they are treated unequally and others do not feel this. The standard answer that can be found in the literature, especially that from critical race theory, is that ethnically minoritised students who do not report feeling treated unequally are unaware of the subtle nature of contemporary exclusion and discrimination and must be educated about it.

It is important neither to use experiences to make claims to knowledge from which policies can be derived, nor to be complacent about the experiences students relate. Experiences can provide a rich source from which ideas for discussion and debate can be generated that are relevant to the British higher education sector. Interpreting experiences in depth produces the kind of discussion and debate which are urgently needed to transcend the process of minoritisation. Because it is framed within a broader critical discussion, this study is an example of the process of transcending experiences. We should begin to consider students primarily as individuals rather than merely as members of an ethnic and social group and that absolute non-comparative standards in education embodied in subject-based teaching is best suited to improve student attainment in British higher education. This approach will require lecturers to challenge students academically. This is the only way of ensuring that all students develop their full academic potential. Suggesting, instead, that educational attainment is first and foremost determined by ethnic and social attributes

and that students are vulnerable to hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases, minoritises students because it underrates both students' resilience and their capacity to act deliberately in pursuit of conscious goals.

Final thoughts

The process of minoritisation of higher education students that has been identified in this study has important implications for the future of ethnic attainment research as well as university policies and practice designed to address issues of attainment. The case has been made in this study for a realist philosophical approach to ethnic attainment research in order to encourage an unbiased and better informed debate about ethnic attainment differences in British higher education and elsewhere. Realism is important in educational research because the advancement of understanding requires a research philosophy where truth is sought and realist philosophies, unlike relativist ones, encourage opinions and truth claims to be challenged, through discussion and debate. Realism also enables researchers to draw a conceptual distinction between knowledge and experiences. It is a distinction that ensures experiences are reported as people's perceptions of the social world without making any claims to knowledge from which policies can be derived. Being able to challenge reported experiences as perceptions encourages unbiased and better informed debate.

Strong support also emerged from this study for treating students as individuals rather than merely as members of ethnic and social groups so as not to reinforce the divisive focus on difference which is innate to approaches that apply group-based social differentiation in ethnic attainment research. The review of the literature showed that categories and the categorisation of people that occurs when group-based social differentiation is applied to ethnic attainment research minoritises students. The reason is that the broad ethnic categories used to report attainment

differences in British higher education are arbitrary and bureaucratic, and the mere use of categories imposes fixed identities upon higher education students. As a consequence, the possibility of having a common experience rather than essentially distinct experiences from people in different categories is ignored. The categorisation of people itself is divisive. It tends to refer to particularities or certain features as major differences and reduce important in-group difference to the point of non-recognition. It also reinforces the view that ethnicity matters and so inadvertently nurtures the very differences approaches that apply group-based social differentiation intend to dispel.

Abandoning the use of group-based social differentiation requires the British higher education sector to focus on raising absolute standards in education irrespective of what happens between ethnic and social groups of students. While this might be seen as complacent to some, it has emerged from this study that raising absolute non-comparative standards in education can have a greater effect on outcome equality than any relational conceptions of equality with the added advantage of avoiding the divisive talk about differences that appears in group-based approaches. To raise universal standards in university education, subject-based teaching has to find its way back into British higher education. The current focus on student-centred learning process-oriented teaching that was formally introduced into the British higher education sector with the Dearing Report (1997), fails to teach 'the best that is known and thought in the world' for the simple reason that the student experience takes priority over the subject content. Focusing on raising absolute rather than relational standards in higher education is especially important because the available statistical research data is inconclusive as to whether the ethnic gap is indeed an 'ethnic' gap.

Understanding the process of minoritisation of higher education students has consequences for the current view of what constitutes human nature and the need for researchers, lecturers, university support services and university managers to recognise students' human potential

in order to begin to counteract the new type of deficit talk that has emerged from the literature on student attainment. Recognising potential means recognising resilience and human agency in higher education students. Contemporary doubts about the ability of ethnically and socially minoritised students to take charge of their learning and their educational attainment accommodates failure because students are not thought capable of achieving without interventions. The student narratives collected in this study have shown that not all students relate their experiences to ethnic and social attributes. Others simply did not recount any negative experiences. Students who did have negative experiences frequently talked about achieving irrespective of them and showed resilience and agency with regard to their studies. Therefore, instead of starting from a position of assumed vulnerability, where educational attainment is first and foremost thought to be determined by ethnic and social attributes, recognising human potential allows for the possibility of resilience and human agency in students.

This study has argued for the centrality of subject-based teaching in British higher education in order to counteract attempts at modifying people's attitudes and behaviour which essentially amounts to social indoctrination. Social indoctrination designed to address social ills politicises education. It suggests that it is education which should address deeply seated social ills and instrumentalises university education for social and political purposes with devastating effects on educational ideals which hold to the critical, objective and rational principles. The assignment of an instrumental purpose to university education and the resulting social indoctrination or inculcation of students with prescribed beliefs shows, according to Peters, 'a lack of respect for students' because it is 'intended to produce a state of mind' in which 'an individual has either no grasp of the rationale underlying his beliefs or a type of foundation which encourages no criticism or evaluation' of the beliefs (Peters 1966: 42). Subject-based teaching inspired by liberal universalism, by contrast, respects students as rational human beings capable of acting in pursuit of

conscious goals. It aims at educating rather than indoctrinating students and by doing so counteracts the new type of deficit talk that minoritises higher education students by downplaying human potential in students. A return to liberal higher education will stop students feeling, as some students felt in this study, that they were '*treated very much like children*' and not intellectually challenged.

Above all else, what has come out of this study is the need for discussion and debate. Discussion and debate are essential if we are to interpret experiences, clarify issues, understand the grounds upon which opinions are based, identify points of tension, expand the boundaries of understanding and ultimately make decisions about policy and practice. This is the first step in identifying and solving any problems and, consequently, is the first step towards halting the process of minoritisation that currently exists in the British higher education sector.

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Appendix 1: Research participants

PARTICIPANT	SUBJECT	YEAR OF STUDY (at the time of the interview)
Afra	Business/Accounting	Graduated
Alice	Creative Writing	Fourth
Andrew	Social Studies	Second
Charlene	Social Studies	Second
Christine	Media studies	Second
Emily	Media studies	Third
Garai	Social Studies	Graduated
Iliana	Social Studies	Graduated
Jake	Law	Second
Jason	Psychology	First
Johura	Social Studies	Graduated
Jonina	Social Studies	Graduated
Jyoti	Education	Third
Kate	Social Studies	Second
Ladislav	Law	Second
Lenie	Social Studies	First
Marta	Law	Second
Merwin	Social Studies	First
Nasrin	Education	Fourth
Olaf	Business	Second
Paul	Criminology	Second
Rashida	Sociology/Education	Graduated
Ronuka	Social Studies	Graduated
Sam	Technology	Second
Sandra	Business	Second
Steve	Languages	Second
Valerie	Social Studies	Second
Ying	Business	Second
Zafar	Criminology/Law	Graduated
Zofia	Computer Sciences	Third

Note: The research participants who took part in this study were all full-time students and graduated in or after 2008.

Appendix 2: Interview questions

The aim of the research project is to explore the teaching and learning experiences of undergraduate students as well as the students' understanding of how these experiences impact on their attainment.

Interview questions

1. Can you describe an experience you had in a learning situation when you felt engaged with what was happening?
 2. Do you remember an example in a learning situation when you felt distanced from what was happening?
 3. Can you tell me about an action that anyone (teacher or student) took in a learning situation which you found reassuring and helpful?
 4. Can you think of an action that anyone (teacher or student) took in a learning situation which you found puzzling and confusing?
 5. Can you describe an occasion in a learning situation when you were surprised?
- (Adapted from Brookfield 1995: 115)

Round up

6. Is there anything you would like to add about anything which has been mentioned or about anything that has not been mentioned perhaps?
7. Is there anything you would like to ask in relation to this research project?

Prompts to elicit teaching and learning experiences

You might like to consider the following areas:

Teaching	Feedback
Academic support	Curriculum
Learning support	Interactions between teachers and students
Lectures, seminars, tutorials	Interactions between students
Assessment	Equality and diversity

Appendix 3: Qualitative interview criteria

Qualification interview criteria

- *Knowledgeable*: is thoroughly familiar with the focus of the interview; pilot interviews of the kind used in survey interviewing can be useful here.
- *Structuring*: give purpose for interview; rounds it off; asks whether interviewee has questions.
- *Clear*: ask simple, easy, short questions; no jargon.
- *Gentle*: let's people finish; gives them time to think; tolerates pauses.
- *Sensitive*: listens attentively to what is said and how it is said; is empathetic in dealing with the interviewee.
- *Open*: responds to what is important to interviewee and is flexible.
- *Steering*: knows what he or she wants to find out
- *Critical*: is prepared to challenge what is said, for example, dealing with inconsistencies in interviewees' replies.
- *Remembering*: relates what is said to what has previously been said.
- *Interpreting*: clarifies and extends meanings of interviewees' statements, but without imposing meaning on them.
- *Balanced*: does not talk too much, which may make the interviewee passive, and does not talk too little, which may result in the interviewee feeling he or she is not talking along the right lines.
- *Ethically sensitive*: is sensitive to the ethical dimension of interviewing, ensuring the interviewee appreciates what the research is about, its purpose, and that his or her answers will be treated confidentially.
- *Cultural awareness and sensitivity*: is aware and sensitive to cultural aspects related to the interviewees.

(Adapted from Kvale 1996 and Bryman 2004: 325)

Appendix 4: Framework for critical incident analysis

Framework for critical incident analysis

Kind of judgement	Information required	Interpretation
Diagnostic	Descriptive	What happened?
	Causal	What happened? Trigger point and exacerbating circumstances
	Effectual	What does it do? What does it feel like?
	Semantic	What does it mean?
	Explanatory	Why did/does it occur?
Critical	Classificatory	What is it an example of? Whose classification?
	Social	Is it just?
	Institutional	What role do institutional structures play in this?
Reflective	Personal	Do I like it? What are my reactions to it?
	Evaluative	Is it a good/bad thing? For whom?
	Justificatory	Why? Whose justification?
Practical	Procedural	What should be done? How? When? Where? For and with whom?

(Adapted from Tripp 1993: 27)

Appendix 5: Consent form

Research Project

You have been invited to take part in a research project that to explores learning and teaching experiences of students from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds to establish how these experiences impact on the development of the learner and his or her academic achievement. This project is part of a doctoral research project at the University of [town].

Participation & Confidentiality

Your participation in this research project involves a 1-1½ hour interview with xxx, the researcher on the project. The interview will be audio-taped and transcribed after the interview. The transcript of the interview will be sent to you to review so that you have the opportunity to add or remove things as you think appropriate. You also have the right to review the research results once the data has been analysed.

The interview will be kept strictly confidential and fully anonymised. This means that personal information such as your name will not be used in any work that results from this research. The confidential and anonymised interviews will be reviewed by the researcher, the supervisory team and perhaps the examiner.

The data will be used for strategic actions in learning and teaching at the University of [town] and written up as a doctoral thesis. Besides, the results may be published in an academic journal or discussed at conferences.

You have the right to refuse the answer to any question or stop the interview at any time. You also have the right to ask the researcher for the audiotape at the end of the interview if you do not want the researcher to have it.

Consent

I understand the purpose of this research project and all my questions have been answered. I understand that my interview will be audio-taped, kept strictly confidential and fully anonymised. I understand that I have the right to refuse the answer to any question or to withdraw from the interview at any time.

I give my consent to be interviewed.

Yes No

I give my consent to be contacted to review the research results.

Yes No

Participant's signature & date

Participant's printed name

Researcher: xxx - Research Student

University of Derby, Faculty of Business Computing and Law, Kedleston Road, Derby

E: xxx, T: xxx, O: xxx