

## **Why is the BME attainment gap such a wicked problem?**

AUSTEN, Liz <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2837-8297>>, HEATON, Caroline <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8373-9916>>, JONES-DEVITT, Stella and PICKERING, Nathaniel

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/16212/>

---

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

### **Published version**

AUSTEN, Liz, HEATON, Caroline, JONES-DEVITT, Stella and PICKERING, Nathaniel (2017). Why is the BME attainment gap such a wicked problem? The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change, 3 (1).

---

### **Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

### Why is the BME attainment gap such a wicked problem?

Liz Austen, Caroline Heaton, Stella Jones-Devitt and Nathaniel Pickering, Sheffield Hallam University

#### Introduction

Differential outcomes in the experience and success of UK-domiciled White and Black and Ethnic Minority (BME<sup>i</sup>) students are high on the agenda of UK higher education institutions. Although extensive research and literature reviews have been conducted (Mountford-Zimdars *et al*, 2015), the sector is continuing to fund large-scale intervention projects (HEFCE, 2017/18: *Addressing barriers to student success*) in order to advance this evidence base. There has been some reported progress at an institutional level (e.g. the University of Wolverhampton; see Cureton, 2016) and evidence of the impact of inclusive pedagogy across departments (e.g. the University of Hertfordshire; see Gilbert, 2016) whilst other institutions are struggling to find tangible solutions to this complex phenomenon.

This paper exemplifies the struggle of one UK higher education institution as it attempted to contextualise, research, and then evaluate small-scale interventions to improve confidence and belonging of BME students in order to address the apparent attainment gap<sup>ii</sup>. The primary purpose of the paper is to provide a reflection on the nature, and potential causes, of this struggle, using the concept of a 'wicked problem' as a theoretical framework (Rittel, 1972; see Conklin, 2005). A more detailed examination of the original research intentions, and the steps taken towards implementation and analysis, is supplied in an accompanying Case Study, entitled *Creation and Confidence: BME students as academic partners... but where are the staff?* in this journal issue.

The methodology details the proposed interventions (co-design and peer-learning approaches) which were attempted, in order to examine whether they might make a positive difference to the confidence-levels of BME students and - by inference - enhance a sense of belonging and have impact upon the attainment gap. The paper also briefly reflects on the challenges faced by the research team during implementation of the research and attempts to address the possible causes of the difficulties experienced. The paper goes on to challenge the assumption that 'failure' is the antithesis of 'success' (Dawson and Dawson, 2016), and considers the reflexive research process as a credible methodology which sees misjudgment as functional. The paper therefore includes a critique of the proposed research process and its intended and unintended outcomes, using the concept of a 'wicked problem' as a theoretical framework (Rittel, 1972, see Conklin, 2005). The conclusion summarises why the BME attainment gap is such a 'wicked problem', by highlighting difficulties associated with the research team's approach, perspectives and assumptions and, consequently, the (mis)judgment of institutional readiness.

#### Literature review

Over a decade ago the research of Connor *et al* into BME students in Higher Education showed that 'all minority ethnic groups are less successful than White students in obtaining a first or upper second class of degree, and the least successful group of all are Black students' (2003: 74). There was a limitation to these findings, as they did not control for such other factors with impact on attainment as prior attainment, gender, school characteristics, subject studied and class (Purcell *et al*, 2005). In fact, Connor *et al* (2004) proposed that a more technical analysis should be undertaken that controlled for these factors, so the 'pure' effect of ethnicity on attainment could be established. Broecke and Nicholls (2007) undertook a very robust analysis of the attainment gap, using the 2004/05 HESA dataset. They controlled for a number of factors with impact on attainment, such as gender, prior

## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

attainment, disability, deprivation, subject of study, type of Higher Education Institution (HEI), term-time accommodation and age. They found that:

*Ethnicity is still statistically significant in explaining attainment in HE: all students from minority ethnic communities (except Other White, Other Black, Mixed and Other) are found to be less likely to achieve a better degree relative to White UK & Irish students – and this result holds at all levels of attainment (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007: 16)*

The issue of attainment is much more complex, because, once the 2004/5 BME dataset is broken down into ethnicity categories, the data shows that the gap also differs significantly when the minority ethnic category is taken into account:

- 64.4% of Indian students were awarded a top degree (a degree attainment gap of 8.8%)
- 63.9% of Chinese students (a gap of 9.3%)
- 54.2% of Pakistani students (a gap of 19.0%)
- 43.8% of Black Other students (a gap of 29.4%)

Since this time, the differences within the categories of ethnic background have received very little attention, with the focus being predominately on BME students as a cohesive group. For some, the term 'BME' is problematic and has come under criticism as it is seen to over-simplify the complexity and impact of ethnicity on attainment (Stevenson and Whelan, 2013).

The last decade has produced a lot of evidence of the BME attainment gap, but little progress has been made in reducing it 'as the degree attainment gap has remained nearly static', at 57.1% of UK-domiciled BME students receiving a top degree, compared with 73.2% of White British students – a gap of 16.1%' (Equality Challenge Unit, 2012/13 data). Some individual institutions have successfully implemented interventions that have closed the gap in attainment between BME and White students, which suggest that differentials in attainment by ethnicity can be mitigated for, but significant progress is still to be made at a national level (Mountford-Zimdars *et al*, 2015).

Stevenson and Whelan (2013) confirm that the analysis of BME factors in student achievement is often over-simplified. Perhaps this is why the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) (2015) found that HEIs embed effective equality and diversity practices with varying levels of success, as they failed to grasp the complexity of the issue. Perhaps more worryingly, though, is their finding of institutional resistance at all levels to addressing equality and diversity.

## Methodology

### Context

This research project, *Creation and confidence: BME students as academic partners*, was developed in partnership with the REACT<sup>iii</sup> initiative, after evidence indicated that Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) had a larger than sector-average, and consistent, BME attainment gap. The research team sought to work in partnership with others to examine which aspects of teaching, learning and assessment might be responsible for variations in the attainment gap of this group.

Thomas (2012) notes that instilling confidence is one of the key indicators of successful engagement and success of all students in higher education and that this is enhanced by a

## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

strong sense of belonging, which is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in. SHU had already used co-design processes when working with in-work, part-time students and introduced some peer-learning initiatives as techniques for building student confidence and self-esteem. This project sought to examine whether these two pedagogical approaches could influence positively the confidence of BME students and, by inference, enhance longer-term belonging, leading ultimately to better attainment levels.

### Methods

The aim was to undertake a comparative analysis of case studies (Yin, 2009) which would examine the extent to which co-design and peer-learning approaches enhance confidence in BME students at Sheffield Hallam University. The overarching research question comprised: Do co-design and peer learning approaches make any positive differences to the confidence-levels of BME students and - by inference - enhance longer-term belonging?

To achieve this, the research team designed the following project outcomes and resultant impacts:

1. Evidence-based insights into the use of co-design processes and peer-assisted learning as possible conduits of confidence-building for, and belonging of BME students

The project hoped the short- to medium-term impact emerging from realising this outcome would recognise of the impact of specific interventions on 'hard to reach' students and would assist planning for further development/implementation. In the longer term, the team also anticipated embedding of relevant approaches within courses and co-curricular development.

2. Development of a scalable approach to building confidence and fostering belonging of all students

The anticipated short- to mid-term impacts were developing increased confidence levels and sense of belonging by BME participants; a longer-term impact related to spread of adoption across the University. Relevant literature would be drawn upon to construct a means of measuring baseline confidence and belonging, prior to introduction of the peer-learning and co-design interventions.

3. Raised awareness of the need to think differently about explanations of BME underachievement

The anticipated short- to mid-term impact projected for this outcome was the achievement of a reconceptualisation, in the light of project findings and greater cultural awareness, of the host institution's own 'Retention and Student Success Framework', whilst the envisaged longer-term impact was the bringing about of changes in pedagogic practice.

The project was intended to be part of a wider portfolio of strategic responses that acted as catalysts for change. The project also employed student researchers in order to work directly with participants.

The proposed methods of evaluation for the interventions comprised:

- baseline information for the co-design and peer learning processes to establish pre-engagement levels;

## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

- considering existing cohort achievement profiles recorded from Level 4 data;
- mid-term and project end-point survey measurements concerned with perceived confidence levels of all participants and cohort achievement profiles at Levels 5 and 6;
- holding focus groups with participating staff and students from each route.

The majority of the data was to be collected by Student Researchers, supported by Directorate staff.

This article provides a reflective critique of this methodology, in acknowledgement of the fact that these interventions were not implemented and therefore not evaluated. In contrast to a traditional research article, no data will be presented. Instead, what follows is an overview of the difficulties faced, which meant that this methodology was not fully actioned. The alternative findings of this research suggest that the BME attainment gap is a wicked problem. The research team contends that this theoretical appraisal of the complexity of the issue had not been fully considered when the research was designed; this is why it became impossible to fulfil. It is hoped that this critique will provide guidance for subsequent researchers working to address this problem.

### Challenges

This project encountered a number of challenges, causing the research team to redefine the success criteria and the outcomes of this work. These challenges included difficulties in securing a sample of students within courses, owing to the anxiety of academic staff and barriers created by them. Possible samples were selected, based on an analysis of course level data which highlighted significant attainment gaps in some areas of the institution. Though academic contacts were approached sensitively, the project was unable to secure the necessary commitment and aligned thinking to undertake the proposed interventions: the members of the research team had immersed themselves in the evidence and wider literature concerning BME experiences, thus unconsciously going through an awareness-raising stage not experienced by the wider staff group at that time. The team therefore concluded that it had misjudged the 'institutional readiness' of the University.

In addition, although the project endeavoured to recruit student researchers from BME backgrounds, in order to provide a context and level of subjectivity for the course-level interventions, it failed to do so. The team felt constrained by the restrictions placed on the language of the advertisement for the role and by its own inability to invoke positive action for BME candidates.

In acknowledgement of this situation, the project was redefined to focus on staff awareness-raising and confidence-building across all levels of the institution and this has clearly emerged as a positive, if unintended, outcome. Furthermore, this project has now focused attention on such wider organisational aspects that must be addressed as: creating a more inclusive culture; developing an inclusive curriculum; building organisational capacity for BME student success; generating and sustaining impact. This has led to the production of a more wide-ranging BME Development Plan and consideration of supporting a submission for the Race Equality Charter award as offered via the Equality Challenge Unit.

### Possible causes of dissonance

The experience of this project caused the research team members to question their original assumptions as reflexive researchers in the light of both the misjudgment of institutional readiness and of the positive, if unanticipated, outcomes. Reflexivity is an important element

of qualitative research, as it recognises that research design and interpretation of evidence will be based within the socio-cultural and political expectations and constructions of the researcher. Finlay (2002) indicates that reflexivity is all about the researcher's recognition that s/he is an integral part of the research process being conducted and that what gets reported is always a representation and co-construction of the interactive processes between the researcher and the researched. Hence, the reflexive researcher is neither detached from the subject of the research, nor seeks to claim objectivity. S/he recognises that s/he plays an integral part in the research situation in which s/he is participating. In this case, the research team felt some dissonance between underpinning expectations and assumptions of the process and how the project unfolded. A helpful explanation for this dissonance is offered by Ritchie *et al* (2013), who explain that the researcher and the social world impact on each other, and those findings are influenced by the researcher's perspectives and values.

A key factor in this reflection on potential bias was the acknowledgment of the White ethnicity of members of the core research team. In addition, the Equality Challenge Unit notes that the very use of the term BME implies the risk that individuals from a range of ethnic backgrounds might be regarded as a homogeneous group and that singling out people from specific ethnic groups 'can be divisive and exclusionary' (ECU website, 2017). Terms such as 'BME' can be interpreted as 'convenient labels that are placed on minority ethnic groups of people, rather than identities with which people have chosen to identify' (*ibid*). Perhaps the use of 'convenient labels' presented additional barriers to the successful application of the intended research methods.

Whilst there is no complete explanation for the disjuncture between the research intentions and the challenges which transpired, the reflections are presented here as an authentic, transparent account, taken from the researchers' perspectives and mindful of the work of Dawson and Dawson (2016), which indicates that reporting bias can often prevail within this type of institutional research. The complex nature of the BME attainment gap and the challenges encountered in this research led the research team to seek out robust rationales rather than, owing to discomfort, to conflate findings; hence, the research team offers reflection through the application of the theoretical framework of the 'wicked problem' (Rittel, 1972, see Conklin, 2005).

## Findings

### Wicked problems

Some problems are not just difficult, they are wicked. Spanning an array of subject areas, wicked problems have distinct characteristics relating to an uncertain scope and scale. Once identified, these problems may vary in their degree of wickedness. Whilst difficult problems may seek linear, time-bound solutions, wicked problems lack predictability and control. Solutions are inherently social, which reframe the outcome of 'problem solving' into 'a shared understanding of possible solutions' (Conklin, 2009:18):

*“Shared understanding means that the stakeholders understand each other's positions well enough to have intelligent dialogue about their different interpretations of the problem, and to exercise collective intelligence about how to solve it.”*

Such 'problems' are entrenched in social complexity, which increase in line with the diversity of the associated stakeholders tasked with developing a shared understanding of the issue. Through collaborative processes, these problems will divide opinion, provide limited solutions and lay blame for a lack of results. In this section, the BME attainment gap will be critiqued using this notion of a 'wicked problem', noting that, without recognition, this issue

## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

has the potential to become ubiquitous and almost unsolvable. This provides an alternative research finding to the proposed outcomes outlined below.

Wicked problems should be addressed by firstly looking at the surrounding infrastructure. At a macro level, this could be the social, economic and political structures actioned to address poverty or inequality; at a meso level, this applies to the infrastructure of an organisation or community. Within higher education, the use of problematising language should therefore focus on the institution and be distinct from explanations which espouse the deficit model to explain underachievement by BME students.

### **The characteristics of wicked problems**

The ten characteristics of wicked problems outlined initially by Rittel (1973) have been revised into six defining characteristics by Conklin (2005). These latter characteristics are discussed and applied to the problem of the BME attainment gap in higher education, and specifically to Sheffield Hallam University.

### **You don't understand the problem until you have developed a solution**

Wicked problems have no definitive definition – different stakeholders have different views about the problem and how to solve it – and possible solutions produce only more questions, rather than tangible outcomes. In order to address the underachievement of BME students within higher education, researchers, developers and practitioners need a detailed understanding of the context in which the problem sits. In the light of this point, this paper asks: Do institutions really understand the problem?

The complexity of definition resonates in both the grouping of students into a generic BME category and local (disciplinary or course-based) interpretations of the attainment data. The grouping of ethnicities assumes there is one solution, applicable to all students in this group. A more detailed analysis of the attainment data at this case institution shows that, for example, the outcomes for Black male students are significantly worse than for other BME student groups. The complexities of intersectionality also need to be considered further in recognition that 'no person has a single, simplistic unitary identity' (Rollock and Gillborn, 2011: 4). Moreover, the BME category conflates having an ethnicity with how students experience race.

Furthermore, in discussions with staff across the institution during this research it became clear that interpretations of the attainment gap data differed greatly. Some interpretations followed a deficit model of explanation and suggested that a skills gap existed between White and BME students. For others, the data itself presented an issue and more granularity and statistical testing was requested. Both these examples were considered by the research team to evidence the need for a deeper level of understanding about the problem and, in both cases, this issue created a barrier to making progress to address it.

These barriers tend to foster the 'it's too difficult' response and cement the use of the wicked problem as a conceptual framework. This research assumed that the discipline-level attainment gap data would be enough to motivate activity and enable workable solutions to be tested. It became clear that this was not the case.

### **Wicked problems have no stopping rule**

Conklin (2009) suggests that wicked problems are solved only when you run out of resources, not because the definitive solution has been found. It follows that, if there is no definitive problem, there is no definite solution. Therefore wicked problems are 'solved' only

when a suitable end point is reached, or when an outcome is 'good enough'.

BME attainment gap data is held institutionally and by HESA and will be reported as part of the 'Teaching Excellence Framework' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). This data is benchmarked against sector performance, prompting some institutions, including SHU, to frame the solution as a comparison. But, given that the overall sector attainment gap for UK-domicile qualifiers currently sits at 13.8% (HESA, 2015/6), is better than sector average *good enough*? This paper suggests that any evidence of disadvantage towards students should not be tolerated and institutional priorities should reflect this.

Furthermore, any interventions designed to address identified problems may be bound by the allocation of resources, for example, in staff time. Therefore, the response to a wicked problem may stop when resources have been exhausted, but this may not deliver a solution. The REACT initiative, of which this project was a part, was funded by the HEFCE catalyst fund; however, support for the resulting interventions carried out by participation of the partner institutions was unfunded. This meant that resource costs were consumed by the host institution and the offered incentive for action by departments and course teams took the form of support and encouragement from the governing Directorate, rather than in time and money. This is noted as a possible barrier to engagement with suggested solutions. Discussions often centred on the re-interpretation of activity which already existed, with the research team providing support for more systematic methodologies and evaluations. Given these considerations, this paper would continue to question why dedicated resource allocation is not provided by all institutions which are looking to address the BME attainment gap, in order to avoid a resulting non-solution.

### **Solutions to wicked problems are not right or wrong**

The third facet of a wicked problem relates to the conceptualisation of the solution to the problem, bound by the ontological premise that there is no objective measure of a solution's quality. Therefore, whilst the institutional data can be used to outline the problem (differential attainment outcomes), both the explanations and understanding of the problem and the possible solutions are more fluid and dependent on the judgements of key stakeholders. Who are the key stakeholders in this context, and how would measures of success be determined?

It could be argued that the construction of a suitable solution will be variable for different stakeholders. For the institution, the 'right' solution may be the previous suggestion that a 'better than sector' attainment gap is good enough. Whilst this implies a cautious approach, this can be supplemented by conclusions which surmise that an assessment of 'institutional readiness' is necessary when considering a solution to this wicked problem.

For students, applying an argument favouring a 'return on investment', the 'right' solution could focus on the responsibility of the institution to understand the context of BME student experiences. During the REACT project, the research team assumed that belonging and confidence were amongst the necessary conduits to address BME attainment. This was based on significant evidence from the sector (Thomas, 2012), but was this relevant to this institution? The failure to recruit student researchers from BME groups - in order to run the co-design and peer-learning sessions with the sampled cohorts and develop notions of belonging - added evidence to the notion of wickedness, as we were unable to address the prevalence of White perspectives within the research team.

### **Every wicked problem is essentially unique and novel**

The fourth feature recognises that wicked problems exist within a dynamic social context and



## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

that potential solutions must be customised to respond to individual circumstances. In considering institutional data on student attainment and experience, extensive efforts were made to identify the prevalence of specific factors which may account, at least in part, for the gap in undergraduate degree attainment between students of White ethnicity and those from BME groups. These attempts failed to identify any significant commonalities, since factors impacting on student attainment are multi-dimensional and cannot easily be disaggregated. These findings reinforced the hypothesis that the issue is further complicated by the diversity of the undergraduate learning experience across a large metropolitan higher education institution, which employs a wide range of teaching, assessment and academic support methods across a broad spectrum of academic disciplines. Identifying practices in areas of provision where the attainment gap is at its *lowest* can perhaps provide a stimulus to reflect on conventions within other subject areas with greater divergence between results. However, the internal and external factors which influence decisions about how a curriculum is designed and delivered contribute to the challenge of attempting to replicate practice which may be better suited to some student groups / disciplines than others. Given that it can also be challenging to identify which of the influencing factors are having the greatest impact on student attainment, or whether that impact is greater on students with particular protected characteristics, the complex nature of the problem means that solutions will always need to be tailored to the particular requirements of each cohort. This has led the research team to reflect on the decision to attempt to apply interventions which have been proven to increase confidence and belonging amongst *all* students (peer-learning and curriculum co-design), and to question whether a more targeted approach might be more effective, despite the resource implications of this standpoint and the intention to be mindful of the risk of 'othering' students with a BME identity.

### **Every solution to a wicked problem is a one-shot operation**

If we accept that every instance of a wicked problem is unique, and that solutions cannot be replicated, the fifth characteristic is particularly daunting. This suggests that, for any given student cohort, there is only one opportunity to attempt a solution. In a Higher Education landscape which relies quite heavily on predictors of student success and satisfaction, based on an evidence-informed consensus on 'what works' (Thomas, 2012), the risk of failure when trialling a new solution can have significant consequences, for students, staff and the reputation and position of the institution. Against this risk must be weighed: the implications of neglecting the imperative to address a problem which is proving detrimental to the success, and learning experience, of our students; the University's need to meet its obligations, as detailed in the Equality Act (2010), which requires the demonstration of a commitment to the recruitment, progression and success of BME students<sup>iv</sup>. Since this institution's undergraduate UK-domiciled BME student population is quite small (14%), and is not concentrated in particular subject areas, when attempting to identify suitable course cohorts with whom to work on the introduction of peer-learning and co-design approaches, this project chose to focus on curriculum areas in which the attainment gap was significantly higher than the institutional average. It was hoped that the positive impact on student confidence and wellbeing might prove to be visible amongst target groups, even within relatively small cohorts. However, given the challenges faced in establishing buy-in from colleagues within those subject areas, the team began to question whether the 'one-shot' attempt at a solution would have been better targeted at those courses where colleagues are willing, enthusiastic participants, especially given that the interventions might have both anticipated and unforeseen consequences.

### **Wicked problems have no given alternative solutions**

The final characteristic of a wicked problem concerns the uncertainty of whether 'there may be no solutions, or there may be a host of potential solutions that are devised and another

host that are never even thought of' (Conklin, 2009: 8). It therefore requires creativity to devise a potential solution, and judgement to determine whether or not that solution should be pursued.

In conversations with colleagues about the proposed approach, the team openly acknowledged that the intended interventions were not 'guaranteed' to have a direct impact on BME student attainment. However, this project was attempting to employ a creative approach to a problem which appears to have no obvious, definitive solution. The inability to assure success compounded the challenges faced in obtaining support from colleagues. As outlined earlier in this paper, much time was spent raising awareness of the problem and providing detailed, additional evidence of specific instances of gaps in attainment, as well as discussing colleagues' perspectives on potential causes. However, despite highlighting the prominence of issues relating to the BME student attainment gap within the sector, the support received through our collaborative relationship with the REACT project team and the backing of senior leaders within the institution for our methodology, the lack of progress towards the implementation of our proposed interventions at an operational level led to significant delays. The research team therefore decided to refocus efforts on raising awareness and understanding, so as to improve institutional readiness for change. In November 2016, the research team held a one-day institutional conference with invited guest speakers and instigated a University BME Development Plan which outlines an intention to explore the University's commitment to working to meet the principles of the Race Equality Charter<sup>v,vi</sup>. It is hoped that this will galvanise dedication to tackling this wicked problem, even in situations where improvement cannot be absolutely assured.

### Researcher Reflections

This paper has transformed from reporting the outcomes of an evaluation into an awareness-raising piece on the importance of assessing institutional readiness when attempting large-scale organisational change in response to a wicked problem. This is only possible given the emphasis on reflexivity as a transparent methodological approach used to question dissonance. In the light of this, the paper recommends the following for future research addressing the BME attainment gap in higher education:

1. Small-scale, course, or modular level research must consider the potential wickedness of the problem at an institutional level. Without such, any research attempts may be thwarted by governing resistance.
2. Wicked problems demand sufficient resource allocation in order to avoid a perceived 'good enough' solution.
3. Measures of success should be acknowledged as fluid, especially when researching wicked problems.
4. The intended beneficiaries of the research should be carefully considered, and targeted interventions, in line with legislation addressing positive actions, should be considered as a viable option.
5. Recruiting participants for research addressing a wicked problem should consider convenience, and a use of known allies, in order to pilot and then scale research objectives successfully.

### Conclusions

This project, supported by the REACT initiative, attempted to examine whether co-design and peer learning approaches make any positive differences to the confidence-levels of BME students and - by inference - enhance longer-term belonging.

Whilst the research team has been unable to report successes in achieving the project

### Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

outcomes, this research has highlighted the numerous ways in which the BME attainment gap is a wicked problem, focusing on identity, complexity, subjectivity, resourcing, readiness, restrictions, othering, commitment and privilege. These findings outline the possible explanations for the level of challenge faced by an institutional research team actively seeking to improve BME student experiences. This paper challenges other institutions to adopt a similar authentic, transparent approach.

It is important to note that several positive outcomes have arisen. Close to one hundred representatives from across the host institution attended the institutional conference, which clearly articulated the intention to explore and respond to this problem. Additionally, follow-up workshops have been delivered which asked academic and support staff to consider their response to the problem at a local level. Institutional networks for dialogue have strengthened, and opportunities for research and evaluation have gained traction. The research team has continued to strengthen its expertise via national conferences and training events. It firmly believes that, given the current visibility of the problem, this project would now be more successful in both the assessment of the wicked problem and the opportunities to explore solutions. The research team would also look to develop a deeper, more critical understanding of the 'Whiteness' of the group and how (and if) the team is best positioned to address structural inequality.

The drive to respond to Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) metrics, split by protected characteristics, could encourage institutions to focus on quick wins or knee-jerk responses to the data. This external pressure will add another layer of social complexity for the invested stakeholders tasked with responding to such a problem. In the light of this discussion, this paper suggests that the immediate risk for any institution is to consider simply 'taming' rather than solving the problem, the latter requiring significant commitment to change.

*Taming a wicked problem is a very natural and common way of coping with it. Instead of dealing with the full wickedness of the problem, people simplify it in various ways to make it more manageable and solvable ... While it may seem appealing in the short run, attempting to tame a wicked problem will always fail in the long run. The problem will simply reassert itself, perhaps in a different guise, as if nothing had been done; or worse, the tame solution will exacerbate the problem.*

(Conklin, 2009: 20)

Taming also becomes much more likely when the 'tamers' apply a normalising lens, creating distance between themselves and 'the problem'. In this research article, the problem has been the attainment gap between UK-domiciled White students and BME students in higher education. The normalising lens is that of White myopia and further research should look to focus on a structural (including institutional) analysis of critical Whiteness in order to understand fully the aforementioned resistance to this specific wicked problem.

#### Reference list

Broecke, S. and Nicholls, T. (2007) *Ethnicity and Degree Attainment*. DfES Research Report RW92. London: DfES.

Conklin, J. (2005) *Dialogue mapping: Building shared understanding of wicked problems*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Conklin, J. (2009) 'Building Shared Understanding of Wicked Problems.' *Rotman Magazine*. Rotman School of Management (Winter). Available at: <http://www.cognexus.org/> (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

### Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

Connor, H., Tyers, C., Davis, S. and Tackey, N. (2003) 'Minority ethnic students in higher education: interim report.' *Institute for Employment Studies, DfES Research Report 448*. Available at: [http://212.159.59.108/pdf/minority\\_ethnic\\_students\\_in\\_higher\\_education\\_rr448.pdf](http://212.159.59.108/pdf/minority_ethnic_students_in_higher_education_rr448.pdf) (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

Connor, H., Tyers, C., Modood, T. and Hillage, J. (2004) 'Why the difference? A closer look at higher education minority ethnic students and graduates.' *Institute for Employment Studies research report, 552*. Available at: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/ethnicity/migrated/documents/educationreport.pdf> (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

Cureton, D. (2016) 'Bridging the BME gap.' *University of Wolverhampton Academic Blog* (28 April 2016). Available at: <https://www.wlv.ac.uk/about-us/news-and-events/academic-blog/2016/april-2016/bridging-the-bme-gap/> (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

Dawson, P. and Dawson, S. L. (2016) 'Sharing successes and hiding failures: reporting bias in learning and teaching research.' *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-12.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2015) *Fulfilling our potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Equality Act (2010) London: Government Equalities Office, Equality and Human Rights Commission. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance> (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

Equality Challenge Unit (2015) *Equality in higher education: statistical report 2015*, London: Equality Challenge Unit. Available at: <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Equality-in-HE-statistical-report-2015-part-2-students.pdf> (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

Finlay, L. (2002) 'Outing the Researcher: The Provenance, Principles and Practice of Reflexivity.' *Qualitative Health Research* 12(4): 531-545. Available at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/146879410200200205> (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

Gilbert, T. (2016) 'Assess compassion in Higher Education? Why and how would we do that?' *LINK Journal*, 2(1). Available at: <http://www.herts.ac.uk/link/volume-2,-issue-1/assess-compassion-in-higher-education-how-and-why-would-we-do-that> (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

Mountford-Zimdars, A., Sabri, D., Moore, J., Sanders, J., Jones, S. and Higham, L. (2015) *Causes of differences in student outcomes*. Report to HEFCE by King's College London, ARC Network and The University of Manchester. Bristol: HEFCE.

Purcell, K., Elias, P., Davies, R. and Wilton, N. (2005) *The Class of '99: A study of the early labour market experience of recent graduates*. DfES Research Report RR691 RTP01-03. London: DfES.

Richardson, T. E. (2015) 'The under-attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education: what we know and what we don't know.' *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 39(2): 278-291.

### Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, C. M. and Ormston, R. (2013) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage.

Rollock, N. and Gillborn, D. (2011) *Critical Race Theory (CRT)*, *British Educational Research Association online resource*. Available at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/critical-race-theory-crt> (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

Stevenson, J. and Whelan, P. (2013) *Synthesis of US literature relating to the retention, progression, completion and attainment of black and minority ethnic (BME) students in HE*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change*. Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 100. Available at: [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/what-works-student-retention/What\\_Works\\_Summary\\_Report](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/what-works-student-retention/What_Works_Summary_Report) (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

Yin, R. K. (2009) *Case study research: Design and methods*, (4<sup>th</sup> Ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

---

<sup>i</sup> BME is a term widely used in the UK to refer to people from black and minority ethnic groups:

<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/using-data-and-evidence/use-language-race-ethnicity/>

<sup>ii</sup> The degree attainment gap refers to the difference in the proportion of UK domiciled White students receiving a first/2:1 compared with UK domiciled BME students (Equality Challenge Unit 2015)

<sup>iii</sup> Realising Engagement Through Active Culture Transformation (REACT):

<http://www.studentengagement.ac.uk/>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter/about-race-equality-charter/>