

# Enhancing student engagement, 'sense of belonging' and inclusivity in closing the BME Attainment Gap

NEON Addressing Differential Outcomes for BME Learners Working Group

---

Sarah-Louise Collins

Director of Widening Participation - University of Winchester



UNIVERSITY OF  
**WINCHESTER**

# Paper outline

- An introduction to the role of student engagement and 'sense of belonging' in addressing the BME 'attainment gap'
- **Consider...**
  - misconceptions of black (or BME) student engagement
  - the notion of an 'invisible tax'
  - whether BME student engagement is seen as a necessity or burden
- **Explore...**
  - how universities are actively engaging BME students
- **Reflect...**
  - on whether institutions are ready to challenge their own concepts of inclusivity and student engagement to address the attainment gap



FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF UK-DOMICILED QUALIFIERS AT UK HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS WHO RECEIVED A FIRST- OR UPPER-SECOND-CLASS DEGREE BY ETHNICITY, 2017–18

<b>TOTAL WHITE</b>	<b>80.9%</b>
<b>TOTAL BAME</b>	<b>67.7%</b>
<b>TOTAL BLACK</b>	<b>57.5%</b>
Black or Black British – Caribbean	59.2%
Black or Black British – African	57.0%
Other Black background	56.3%
<b>TOTAL ASIAN</b>	<b>70.5%</b>
Asian or Asian British – Indian	75.7%
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani	66.6%
Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi	67.5%
Chinese	76.6%
Other Asian background	67.3%
<b>TOTAL MIXED</b>	<b>77.2%</b>
<b>TOTAL OTHER</b>	<b>67.8%</b>

Source: HESA Student record, 2017–18

# The BME ‘Attainment’ Gap

*eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students by 2024–25, and to eliminate the absolute gap (the gap caused by both structural and unexplained factors) by 2030–31.*

OfS, 2018b, p.4

#closingthegap (UUK and NUS, 2019)



UNIVERSITY OF  
**WINCHESTER**

# Student engagement

*“the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” Kuh (2009, p. 683).*

- Student engagement has been inextricable linked to student success outcome in the UK and overseas (Mountfort, et al., 2015).
- Student engagement measurable outcomes includes the accrual of social capital, racial identity formation and positive images of self (Harper and Quaye, 2008)



## *Is sense of belonging the missing link?*

Thomas (2012) UK

- Social and academic engagement
- Linked to success and retention



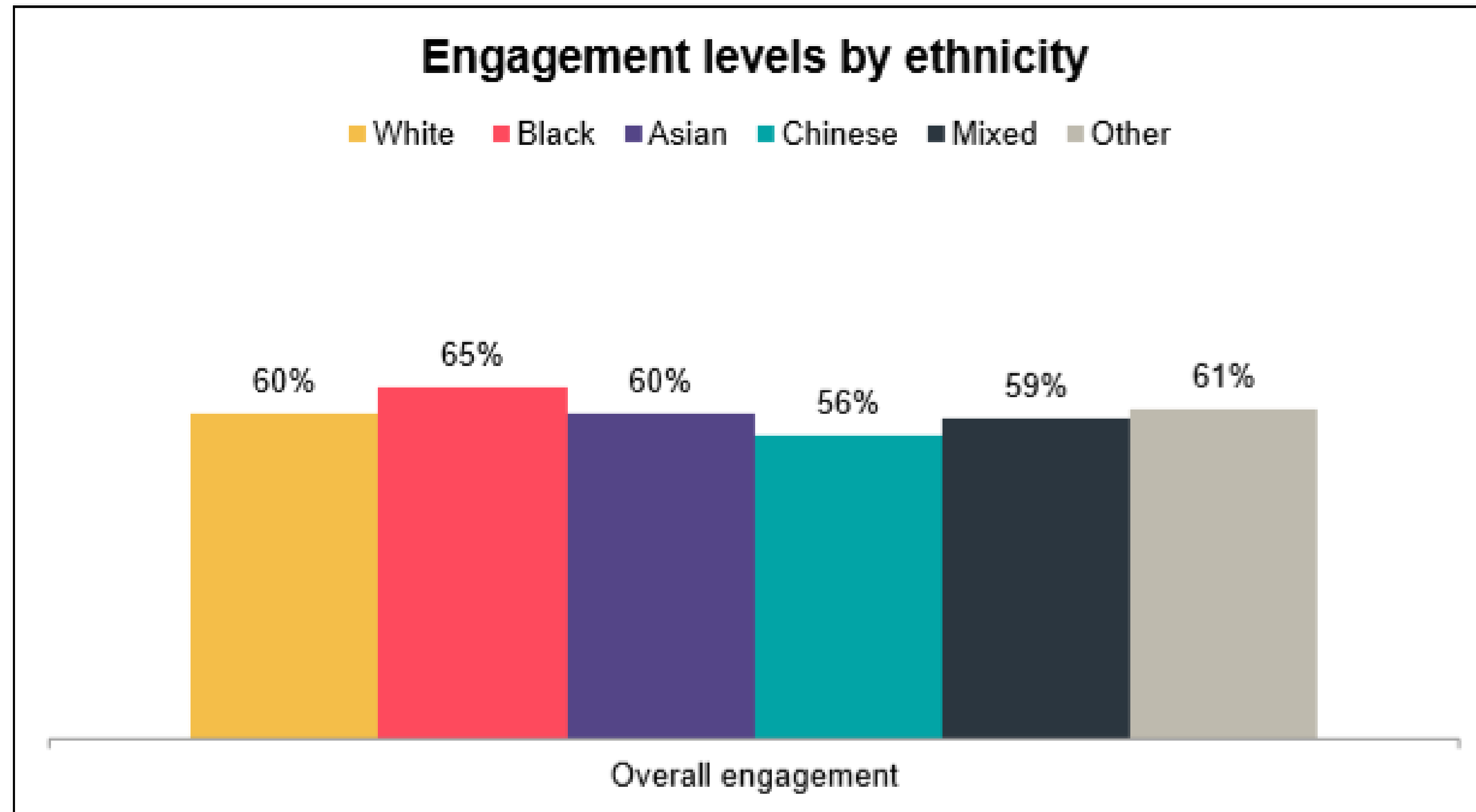
Policy makers advocating for HEIs to become more inclusive and foster a sense of belonging to address BME attainment gaps

Limited research on ethnic-based differential outcomes of belonging (Cureton and Gravestock, 2019)



UNIVERSITY OF  
**WINCHESTER**

# Misconceptions of BME student engagement



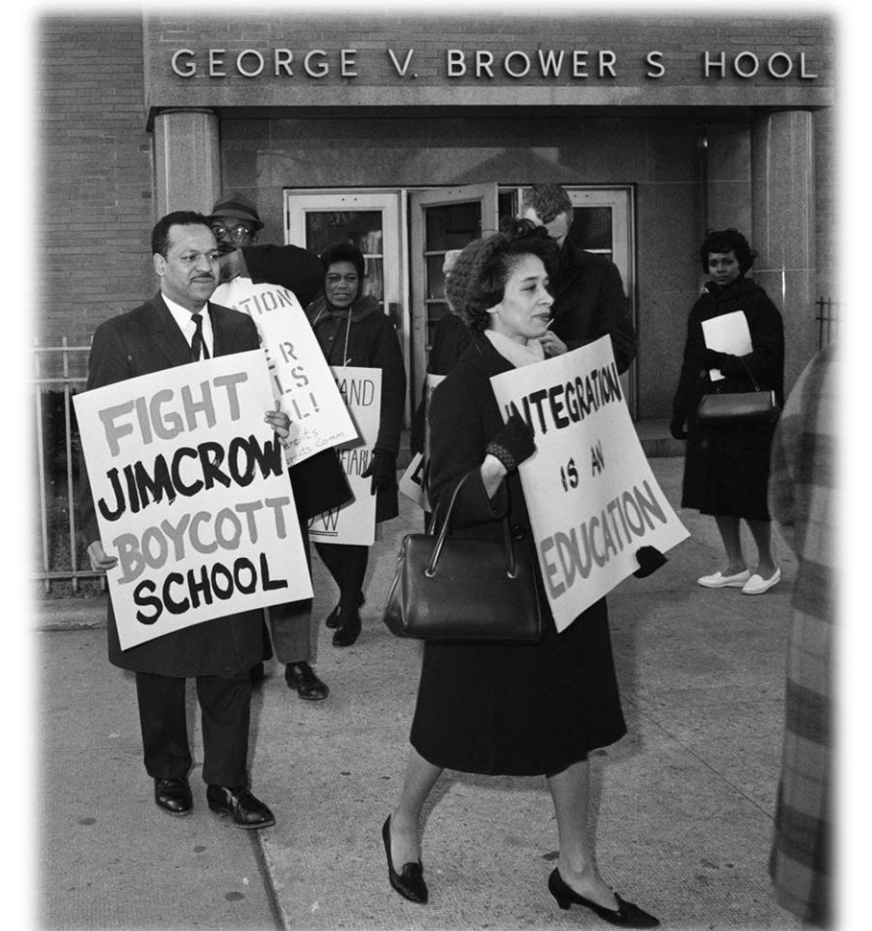
Base: UK domiciled students<sup>3</sup> identifying as White (19,488); Black (2,129); Asian (2,464); Chinese (165); Mixed (984); Other (465)

- ‘less engaged’ or ‘hard to reach’ (Dunne, et al., 2017).
- ‘yet to be reached’ students (Goddard, 2017).
- *‘the untapped potential’* (Neeves, 2019)
- *BUT concerns over measures of student engagement (e.g. Buckley, nd; Naik and Warzynski, 2018)*



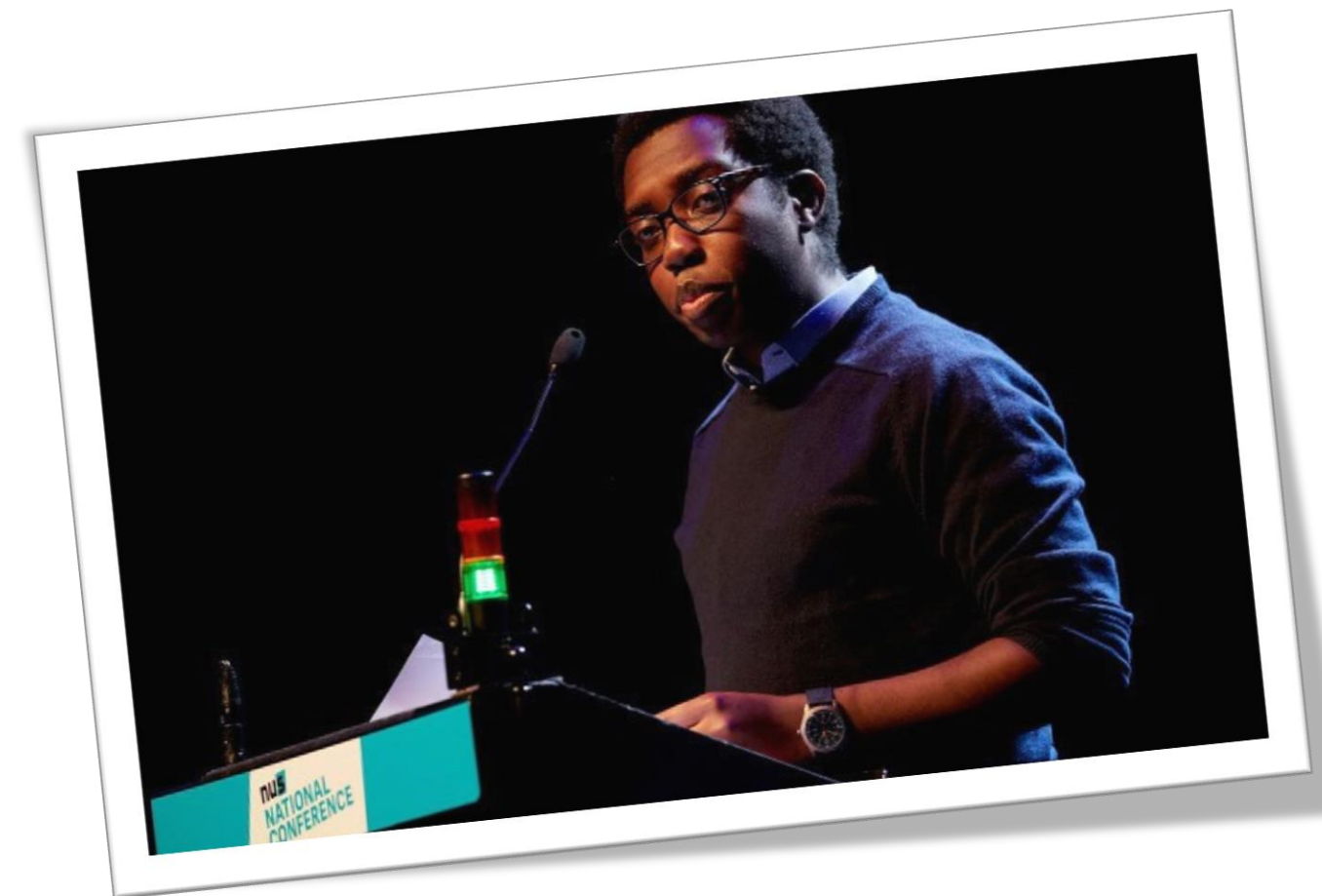
# Belonging, engagement and the invisible tax

- Current debate on inclusivity, engagement and belonging neglects implications of race (Currants, 2015).
- USA (Johnson et al., 2007; Stephenson and Whelan, 2013)
  - black students at predominantly white HEIs have less sense of community
  - struggle to adapt and navigate institutional norms
- An 'invisible tax' and 'survival' (Givens, 2016)
  - coping mechanisms inc. creating counter-spaces and sub-cultures
  - 1960s black students started holding institutions to account



# BME student engagement as a necessity or burden...

- ‘transactionally engaged learners’ (Kelly et al., 2017)  
where ‘good’ students are expected to act as both ‘partners’ and ‘agents of change’
- Amatey Doku:  
‘burden’ and ‘unrecognised labour’
- Examples in the UK:
  - ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ (UCL) and ‘Rhodes must fall’ (Goldsmiths)
- Student engagement not in-keeping with “desired outcomes of the college” (Kuh, 2009)





# The UK Black Student Experience...

- Alterline Research (unpublished) – Black Student Experience Project  
University of East Anglia, Leeds Beckett University and University of Winchester

Many black students often...

- heavily-relied on counter-spaces (e.g. ACAS)
  - felt responsible to act as a representative (e.g. class discussions)
  - expressed a sense of ‘imposters syndrome’
- ‘Sense of belonging’ not a constant state across the lifecycle (Humphrey and Lowe, 2017; and Cureton and Gravestock, 2019).
- Value of mapping out the student journey (McDuff, et al., 2018).



# Challenging institutions to be more inclusive



- **#closing the gap** (UUK & NUS, 2019) recommendations inc.
  - inviting students to engage in conversations about race
  - develop racially diverse and inclusive environments to foster a ‘sense of belonging’
  - enhance ethnic-diversity in academia and take steps to review curricula
- Case studies...
  - ‘intercultural awareness workshops’ (Glasgow Caledonian)
  - BAME Alumni guest speakers (UWE)
  - BAME/BME Ambassadors (University of Birmingham, Manchester Metropolitan and University of Manchester)
  - Micro-aggressions video (University of Wolverhampton)



# Challenging institutions to be more inclusive (cont.)



Inclusive curriculum...

- Inclusive curriculum health check (UCL), Inclusive Curriculum Framework (Kingston) and 'decolonising the curriculum' toolkit (SOAS)

BUT... is it a tokenistic gesture.

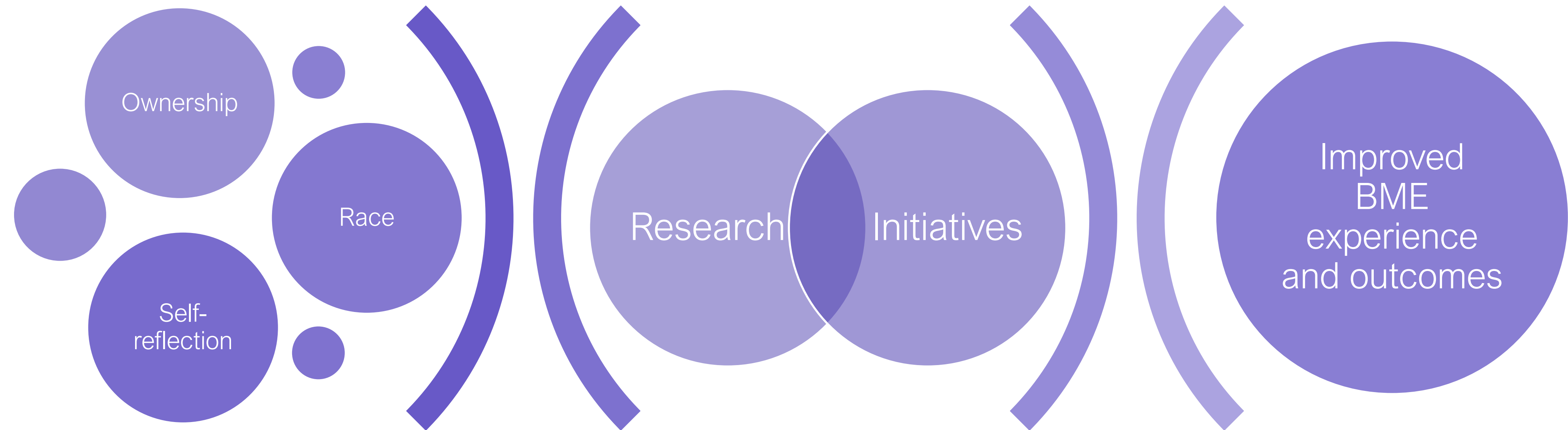
- a new 'type' of deficit model or even stirring up racial stereotypes (Williams, 2019)  
e.g. Kingston University criticised for its revised geography course

OR... are institutions 'just' not institutionally ready

- e.g. Sheffield Hallam REACT project (Austin et al., 2017)



# Reflections...



# @ University of Winchester

## Our vision: **Flourishing Students**

We recognise that there are large gaps in student outcomes for students from backgrounds traditionally under-represented in higher education, *particularly those from areas of deprivation; Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students; students with mental health difficulties*. We have a collective responsibility to address this social (in)justice issue for our own students and for the benefit of wider society.

### Our Commitments:

Take a student-centred approach to enable all our students to flourish and celebrate their achievements

Ensure we have an inclusive learning environment where all students have a sense of 'belonging'

Develop our knowledge and understanding of 'explained' and 'unexplained' gaps in student outcomes



# References:

- Austen, L., Heaton, C., Jones-Devitt, S. and Pickerin, N. (2017) Why is the BME attainment gap such a wicked problem? *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 3(1), 147-158.
- Buckley, A. (nd) *The varieties of engagement*, HE Academy Blog. Available at: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/varieties-engagement> (Accessed 21 January 2019).
- Cureton, D. and Gravestock, P. (2019) 'We belong': differential sense of belonging and its meaning for different ethnic groups in higher education, *Compass: Journal of Learning and teaching*, 12(1), Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v12i1.942> (accessed 29 November 2019)
- Currant, N. (2015) Belonging for BME students at a predominantly white university, 20 March 2015 SRHE Black & Minority Ethnic Student Experience and Attainment Seminar, London, 20 March 2015. Available at: [https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=2ahUKewiX3ZaZj4DgAhUZTxUIHU6D0sQFjAAegQICRAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.srhe.ac.uk%2Fdownloads%2Fevents%2F172\\_Neil\\_Currant\\_presentation.pptx&usg=AOvVaw38uYSbUwbLE39PohBf\\_crw](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=2ahUKewiX3ZaZj4DgAhUZTxUIHU6D0sQFjAAegQICRAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.srhe.ac.uk%2Fdownloads%2Fevents%2F172_Neil_Currant_presentation.pptx&usg=AOvVaw38uYSbUwbLE39PohBf_crw) (Accessed 19 January 2019).
- Dunne, E., Lowe, T., Sims, S. Shaw, C., Luebsen, W., Guggiari-Peel, C., and Humphrey, O. (2017) REACT special issue: Reacting to the 'hard to reach' through student engagement initiatives – Editorial, *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 5(1), 6-13.
- Doku, A. (2019) Putting the burden of closing attainment gaps off BME staff and students. In Dale-Rivas, H. (Ed.) *The white elephant in the room: ideas for reducing racial inequalities in higher education*. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI).
- Givens, J.R. (2016) The invisible tax: Exploring black student engagement at historically white institutions, *Berkeley Review of Education*, 6 (1), 55-78.
- Goddard, H. (2017) Reframing 'hard to reach' student engagement, *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 5(1), 68-70.
- Harper, S.R. and Quaye, S.J. (2008) *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Humphrey, O. and Lowe, T. (2017) Exploring how a 'sense of belonging' is facilitated at different stages of the student journey in higher education, *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 5(1), 172-188.
- Johnson, D. R., Soldner, M., Leonard, J. B., Alvarez, P., Inkelas, K.K. Rowan-Kenyon, H.T., and Longerbeam, S.D. (2007) Examining sense of belonging among first-year undergraduates from different racial/ethnic groups. *Journal of college student development*, 48, 525-542.
- Kelly, P., Fair, N. & Evans, C. (2017) The Engaged student ideal in UK higher education policy, *Higher Education Policy* 30(1), 105-122. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41307-016-0033-5> (Accessed 30 November 2019)
- Kuh G .D . (2009) What Student Affairs Professionals Need to Know about Student Engagement, *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), 683–706.
- Mountford-Zimdars, A., Sabri, D., Moore, J., Sanders, J., Jones, S., and Hingham, L. (2015) *Causes of differences in student outcomes*. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England, HEFCE, Available at: [https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/23653/1/HEFCE2015\\_diffout.pdf](https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/23653/1/HEFCE2015_diffout.pdf) (Accessed 20 November 2019)
- McDuff, N., Tatam, J.C., Beacock, O. & Ross, F.M. (2018). Closing the attainment gap for students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds through institutional change. *Journal of Widening Participation and Life Long Learning* 20(1), 79-101.
- Naik, S., & Wawrzynski, M. R. (2018) Gender, Race, Finance, and Student Engagement in Cocurricular Activities in a South African University. *Journal of College Student Development*, 59 (5), 598-613.
- Neeves, J. (2019) UKES 2019 highlights the untapped potential of black students. Available at <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/ukes-2019-highlights-untapped-potential-black-students> (Accessed 28 November 2019)
- 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: The Higher Education Academy.– Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/synthesis-us-literature-relating-retention-progressioncompletion-and-attainment-black> (Accessed 1 December 2019)
- Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. Available at: [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/what\\_works\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/what_works_final_report.pdf)
- Universities UK and the National Union of Students (2019) *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: #closingthegap*, May 2019, London: Woburn House
- Williams, J. (2019) The rebirth of racial stereotypes, *Spiked*, 15th February. Available at: <https://www.spiked-online.com/2019/02/15/the-rebirth-of-racial-stereotypes/amp/> (Accessed 29 November 2019)



Thank you for listening ....

A blackboard with white chalk writing that says "ANY QUESTIONS?". The text is written in a casual, hand-drawn style. The word "ANY" is on the top line, "QUESTIONS" is on the second line, and a question mark is on the third line. There is a small dot below the question mark.



UNIVERSITY OF  
WINCHESTER