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Submitter Mr. Samuel Dent

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Background and context of the study

The presence of unexplained attainment gaps in higher education have been known for over a decade. Controlling for prior attainment (Broecke, & Nicholls, 2006), it is known that a gap of 17.7% nationally exists between Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Students and their peers in achieving a 1st or 2.1 degree classification. Knowing that this is not a representation of a prior gap in attainment, deep questions are increasingly being asked about how this gap develops and exists, and what institutions can do to address this, especially with the growing focus on ‘life-course’ and whole-institution approaches to widening participation being advocated by policy makers (OFFA, 2014; HEFCE, 2015).

The *Causes of Differences in Student Outcomes* research, commissioned by HEFCE, demonstrated that ‘staff are agents of change’, i.e. that it is meaningful connections with higher education staff (both academic and in professional service roles) that are central to addressing gaps in progression, attainment and to fostering feelings of belonging (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015, p99).

This demonstrates a growing pattern in existing research that one-to-one pedagogical relationships are a site within which this change can take place, especially when considering the way in which pedagogies can be deeply laced with classed, gendered and racialized subjectivities (Burke, 2013).

This is further supported by research which suggests that students from non-traditional backgrounds can experience ‘othering’, which can manifest in “a lack of awareness of, and sense of entitlement to, additional support, and [they] struggle to learn the rules of the HE game” (Stuart *et al*, 2011), which their peers may already possess.

To avoid the potential placing of a deficient discourse upon these students, the need emerges to explore these pedagogical relationships further, and consider the ways in which support staff can be conceptualized and fulfill their potential as ‘change agents’. Such work should also look at allowing staff to ‘be empowered to develop relationships built on sharing of power/responsibility’ (Stevenson, 2012), and thereby establish ‘quality relationships’ central to alleviating the attainment gap (Cousin & Coureton, 2012).

In this context, the large-scale national project, from which this paper is drawn, seeks to further explore the application of this research in the context of personal tutoring, and consider the ways in which cultures and principles can be developed which support the aims of the research.

Methodology

This paper presents the initial findings of a series of surveys and focus groups, at three distinctive institutions and disciplines, during the before phase of research and evaluation as part of a 2-year HEFCE-funded project, which ends in 2019. During this phase of data collection, I coordinated a series of online surveys and follow-up focus groups of staff and students, including those who had recently graduated from their institution. Conducted in the Summer and early autumn of 2017, this work sought to produce a baseline of the current experience students had of personal tutoring at these institutions, and was used to understand the different ways in which personal tutoring was conceptualised by different groups of students. Exploring this data through a Fraserian lens of ‘recognition’ (Fraser, 1995, 2001), this data was coded according to the different relationships students had with the concept of personal tutoring, and explored the way in which Fraser’s conceptual tools of the ‘status model’ and ‘participatory parity’ could be mobilised to understand how better to respond to the needs of different groups of students.

Conceptual arguments and implications of the study

This paper represents the first presentation of the findings, and possible applications, of an approach to personal tutoring which supports greater social justice. It also seeks to further the conceptual usage of Fraserian theories and analysis to understand and remedy social inequalities in higher education, building on growing scholarship which aims to do this in a diverse range of applications, including issues of access, pedagogy, post-entry participatory

experiences and progression (Burke, 2013; Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek, 2016; Burke & McManus, 2011; Dent, 2016a, 2016b, Forthcoming; Morrison 2012).

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