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## **Introduction**

1. This is very much a policy research project that was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to review the evidence on the causes of differential outcomes from higher education (HE) for different student groups and the steps institutions are taking to address them. The project is due to report in early July 2015, with the project report estimated to be around 50,000 words providing a comprehensive overview of the context of differential progression in England, policy initiatives, evaluations, and recommendations and an extensive bibliography.

## **Methodology**

2. The research included: an extensive literature review (covering 'grey' and unpublished material as well as published literature); interviews with a range of stakeholders in higher education and other sectors (including employer representatives); a series of international comparative studies; and in-depth case study research into the approaches and interventions to address differential outcomes in nine English higher education providers. The full research report includes an extensive bibliography and signposting to resources and networks relevant to the differential outcomes agenda.

## **Context**

3. The 2014 national strategy for access and student success in HE emphasises not only access into higher education but also how students progress through the curriculum and onto further study or into employment. Findings on differences in outcomes and experiences for different groups of students have been reported in previous HEFCE reports<sup>1</sup> and the results and trends of the first nine years of data from the National Student Survey (NSS). The modelling techniques used by HEFCE make allowance for differences in the performance of students in different institutions (thus controlling for institutional effects). Overall the analyses of national level student datasets suggest that the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups of students do the least well compared to those with similar entry grades to higher education. There are consistent patterns by POLAR categories (a measure of the level of HE participation in a student's home neighbourhood) – the higher participation within the home neighbourhood, the higher the likelihood of the student achieving success on each higher education outcome measure. However, data suggest that some disadvantages can be mitigated (for example through the receipt of financial support by disabled students). No ethnic group holds the highest percentage attainment and progression on all outcome measures and the inter-action of ethnic background sub-category and socio-economic status has been highlighted as a key consideration tempering results for different ethnic groups. However, White students report the highest levels of student satisfaction, and gaps remain by ethnicity with

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1 HE and Beyond, Differences in Degree Outcomes and Student Ethnicity reports

regards to students satisfaction with advice and support received, assessment, engagement and course content.

4. The complexity of the data presents challenges to understanding the causal factors of differential outcomes. A difficulty in identifying causes can impact on institutions' willingness to act to close the gaps in HE outcomes. Some institutions have moved away from a purely data-driven approach towards different types of research, often taking an 'action-research' approach to investigating the differences between students in context at the level of course and subject cohorts.

#### **Causes of differential outcomes**

5. Assessing the evidence on causation is complex; there is an interaction with inequalities outside HE and factors may be highly personalised and individual. Broadly the outcomes that different student groups achieve from participation in HE are underpinned by influences at three levels:

- The **macro-level**. This provides the context including the structure of the English higher education system and the socio-historical and cultural structures such as those of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, social background that are embedded in the global environment in which universities employers and students operate.
- The **meso-level**. This covers the individual higher education providers and related structures which form the social contexts within which student outcomes arise.
- The **micro-level**. This is the level of interaction of individual students and staff and among students in the higher education environment, and the micro-interactions that take place on a day-to-day level.

6. Four types of explanatory factors were identified in the research:

- The curricula, learning teaching and assessment practices: Different student groups indicate varying degrees of satisfaction with the higher education curricula, and are more or less affected by issues to do with the 'hidden curriculum' and accessibility of assessment practices.
- Relationships between staff and students and amongst students: Students' sense of 'belonging' emerged an important cause of differential progression.
- Social, cultural and economic capital: Differences in how students experience higher education, how they network and how they get external support were noted. Students' financial situation may also affect their student experience and engagement with learning.
- Psychosocial and identity factors: It matters whether students feel supported and encouraged or feel alienated in their daily interactions within their institutions and staff members. These interactions may impose limitations to learning and attainment.

#### **Evaluation of interventions**

13. So far, many institutions have concentrated their resources on an exploratory phase of analysis of differential outcomes within their own context, and in the main the impact of interventions to address differentials on students' outcomes has yet to be seen. Ideally, future frameworks for evaluation should be developed to support comparative analysis of the effectiveness of different approaches, and should be an integral part of intervention planning. Institutions are moving from a narrow focus on student outcome indicators to a broader conceptualisation of impact

(including impact on organisational cultures and the attitudes of staff). Thorough longitudinal evaluations of initiatives are still the exception and a gold-standard many wished to see more of.

### **Recommendations**

14. A full set of recommendations are set out in the main report, addressed to HE institutions, the Funding Council and individual higher education institutions.