

Why is there still an attainment gap? Findings from research and practice

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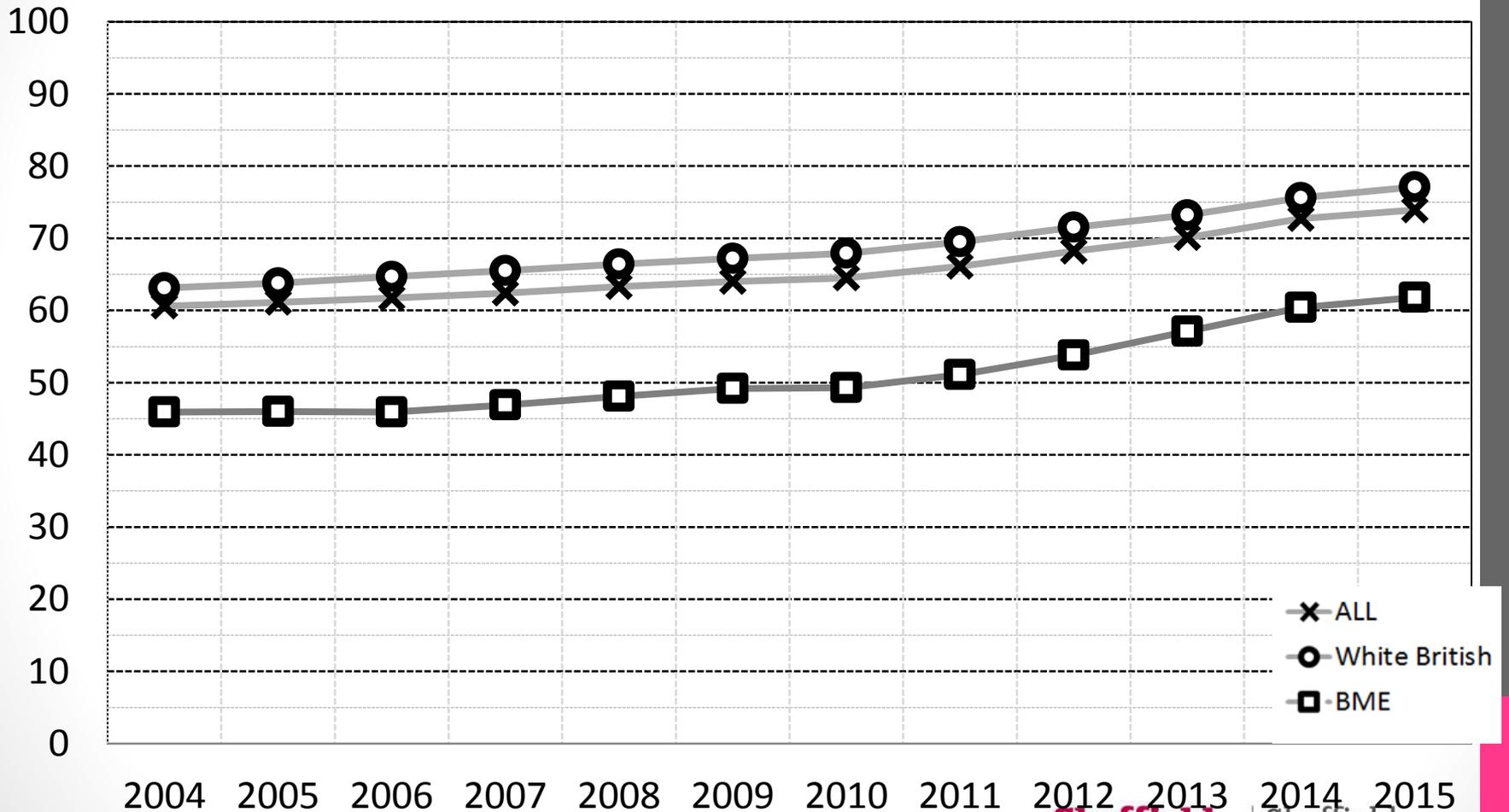
A bit about me

- Interest in the power of story telling
- Research with minoritised ethnic students, religious students, international students, refugees and asylum seekers, & social class, gender
- Practice in relation to access and attainment; plus inclusive pedagogies esp. in relation to religion and ethnicity
- Also interested in discourses of widening participation and success
- Research relating to belonging and othering in higher education

Overview of session

- What is the attainment gap
- Why do we have a gap
 - Ethnic penalty
 - Bias and racism in the system
 - The blame game
 - Homogenisation of approaches
 - Institutional self-delusion
- What might make a difference
 - Positive action approaches
 - Participatory Action Research
 - Community Cultural Wealth
 - Decolonisation of the curriculum

% with 2.i or 1st Class Degree by ethnicity 2004 to 2015



Ethnic penalty: school performance

- A White British vulnerability to school underperformance
 - Lowest performing groups at school; socio-economic attainment gap is largest amongst White British pupils at all Key Stages
 - Disadvantaged young people from White British backgrounds = least likely to access HE
- A Black penalty in secondary school
 - Despite starting school ahead with performance largely in line with national averages, at Key Stage 5, Black pupils = ethnic group with lowest outcomes
- Bangladeshi and Pakistani gains at school
 - Performance has improved at a more rapid rate than other ethnic groups at almost every key stage of education
 - Almost half of Bangladeshi and over a third of Pakistani young people from the poorest quintile go to university.

Shaw, B., Menzies, L. et al (2016) Ethnicity, Gender and Social Mobility; London: Social Mobility Commission

The ethnic penalty

- DfES (2007) controlled for the majority of contributory factors; Being from a minority ethnic group still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment
- Subsequent analyses show the same patterns
 - The attainment gap is greater in Black students than in Asian students.
 - It is greater in Asian students than in students of Chinese, Mixed or other ethnicity.
- The trend for Asian and Black students to be less likely to obtain good degrees than White students
 - is greater in older students than in younger students;
 - is greater in women than in men; and
 - is greater in some subjects than others.

Ethnic penalty cont.

- A persistent White advantage in degree attainment
- This attainment pattern is not seen anywhere else in the education system in England.
- Statistics are inevitably blunt (BME is a simplification)
- Universities have VERY different student compositions.
- BUT - a (sector-wide) problem is clearly seen to exist.

Bias/racism starts early

Application investigations: Independent 23rd April

- Black applicants to UK universities are disproportionately likely to see their applications investigated
- Black students seeking a place at university are 21 times more likely to have their applications investigated for suspected false or missing information than their white counterparts
- Samuel Babarinde “I have been very emotionally distressed by this whole process. I felt I had been singled out...It felt like I was already guilty before being found guilty. It was intimidating and frustrating.”

Bias/racism in admissions

- UCAS: *“a difference simply means that the offer rate is higher or lower than it is for all applicants who are similar in terms of the subject applied for and a summary measure of their predicted grades”*.
- Bolliver (2013, 2016)
 - only 36% of BME applicants to Russell Group universities offered places compared to 55% of White applicants between 2010 and 2012
- Noden et al (2014):
 - Using statistical modelling and controlling for range of variables - Pakistani students would receive 7 additional rejections per 100 compared with white applicants
 - No evidence apparent biases are stronger in higher status than lower status institutions

Nina, a Black working class young woman from a poor inner city area, applying for a Fashion Design BA, was asked at the beginning of her interview about the influences on her work:

Interviewer: What influences your work?

Nina: I'm influenced by hip-hop.

Interviewer: Hip-hop or the history of hip-hop?

Nina: The history of hip-hop

In response to Nina's answer, the body language of the interviewers visibly changed. They leaned back in their chairs and appeared to go through the motions of interviewing Nina....After Nina left the interview room, the interviewers immediately decided to reject her. They discussed how they would record this on the form they were required to complete about all applicants:

Interviewer one: Why should we say we're rejecting her?

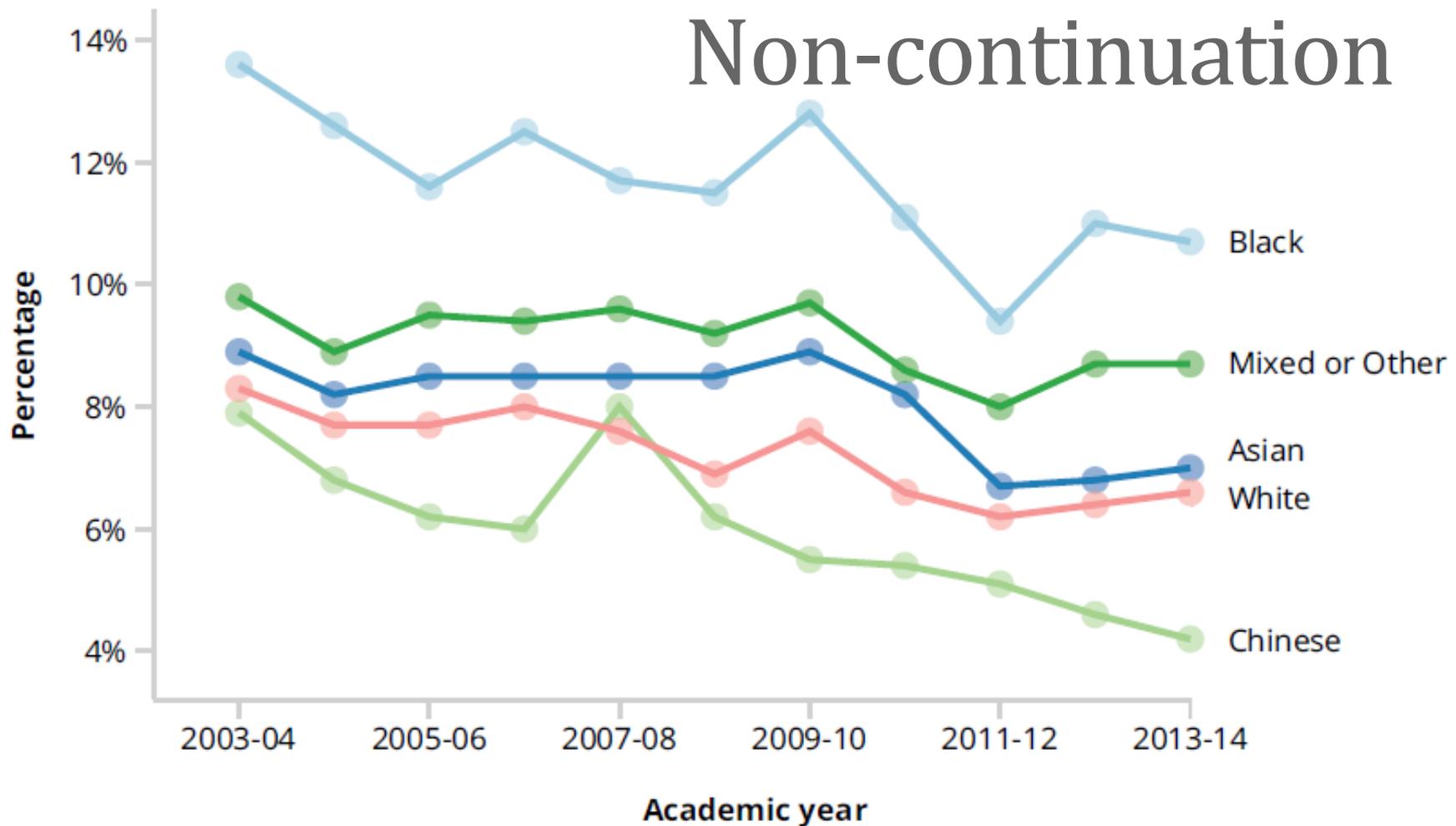
Interviewer two: Well she's all hip-hop and sport tops

Interviewer one: We'll say that her portfolio was weak.

Yet, when the interviewers reviewed her portfolio before the interview took place, they had not deemed it weak. Following her interview, the two interviewers recorded on their form that Nina's portfolio was below average, noting also that the clothes she wore to the interview were not fashionable and that she lacked confidence.

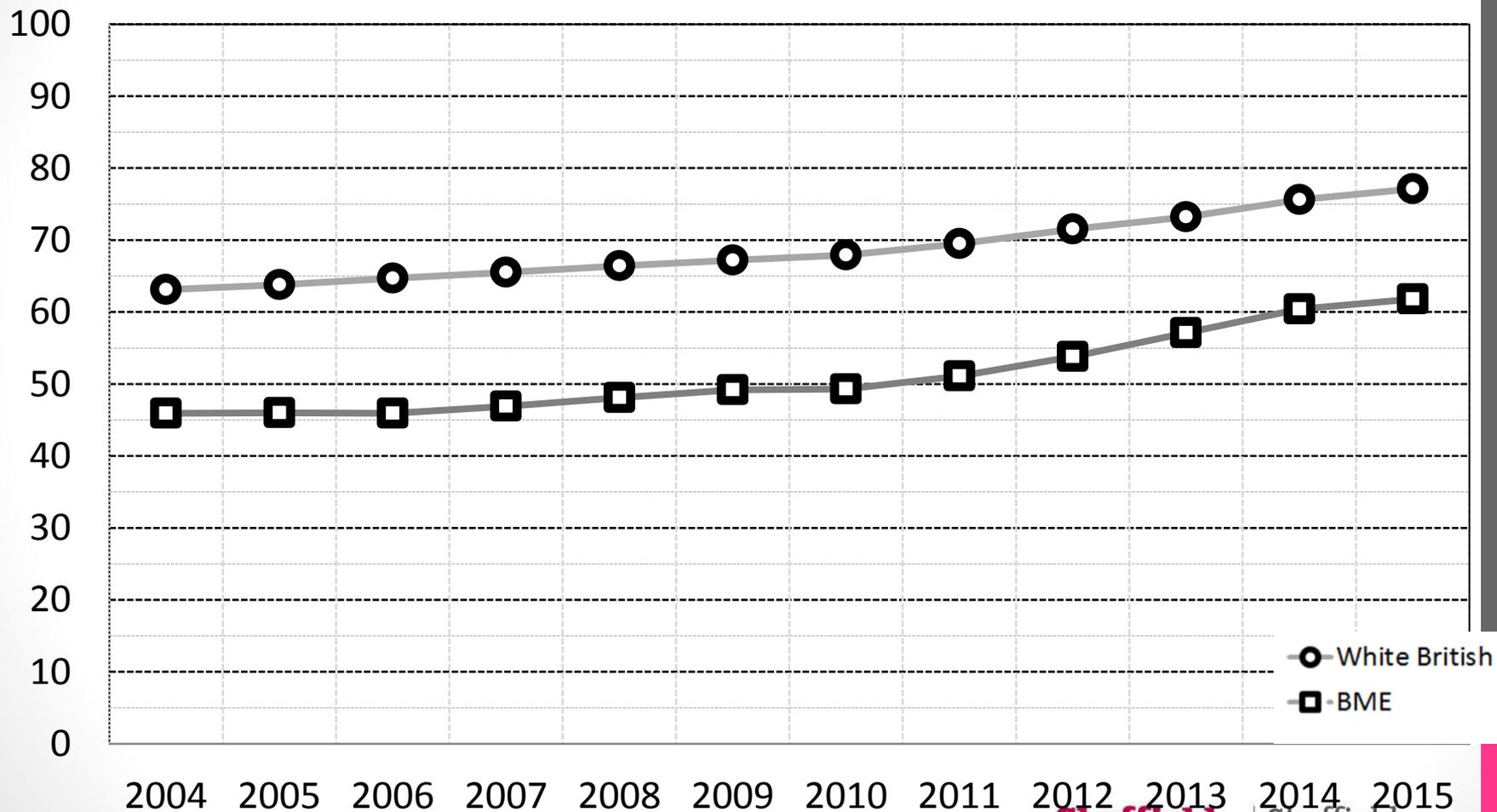
(Burke and McManus, Art for All, 2009)

Figure 8 **Non-continuation by ethnicity**



Source: HESA Student Record. Note: Full-time UK-domiciled first degree entrants at HEFCE-funded HEIs only.

...the "BME attainment gap" 2004 to 2015



Not comparing like for like...

- Differential profiles of successful students
 - BME students less likely to get in
 - And to leave early
 - So....
 - May have already screened out some (lower performing?) students from BME backgrounds
 - Plus others (lower performing?) will have left early
 - So outcome data is based on those who managed to get in and have stayed the course

The 'blame game'

- Data from 38 interviews with senior leaders in HEIs
 - Conceptualisation of the degree attainment gap
 - How they mis/recognise the causes of the gap
 - Where they allocate blame or responsibility for addressing the gap
 - The strategies they consider have the potential to redress the balance.

The blame game cont.

- Lack of recognition of gap - what, who, why
 - renders gap invisible
 - no action
- Confusion as to who gap relates to
 - explaining away of data
 - no action or 'wrong' action
- Lack of acknowledgement for why gap exists
 - shifting of focus; locates blame and responsibility elsewhere
 - no action or 'wrong' action

I think the problem is that they just don't have the right language and literacy skills; they also come in with much weaker qualifications from school, BTECs and so on, where they really haven't had the grounding in the subject or learnt the right academic language. And often they are coming from communities where English isn't the first language or where there are real cultural barriers to education and so on and you find they drop out more easily because they just can't cope; so we have to face all of these issues and it is a real problem, a huge barrier to overcome.... and we offer all these different services but often they just don't take them up and there is nothing much we can do about that.

Int: Are you aware of the attainment gap?

Resp: Yes, we know our students don't do so well and we are absolutely committed to change.

Int: Do you know what the gap is?

Resp: We know there is a gap

Int: What do you think is the cause of the gap?

Resp: We have lots of different activities going on across the university; there is a strong commitment to blind marking, I think Law are trialling that, and maybe Accountancy; and we are looking at focussed study skills support.... mentoring....peer mentoring....modules focussed on issues of diversity.....

Int: And what results are you having?

Int: Oh I think good

Blame, deficit and delusion

- Deficit approaches/ blame making: towards staff and students
 - problematizes the 'other'; avoids accepting institutional responsibilities
 - no action or 'wrong' action
- Institutional self-delusion
 - action is being taken to reduce the gap; but actions are based on flawed or insufficient evidence of efficacy

Location of 'the problem'

Staff

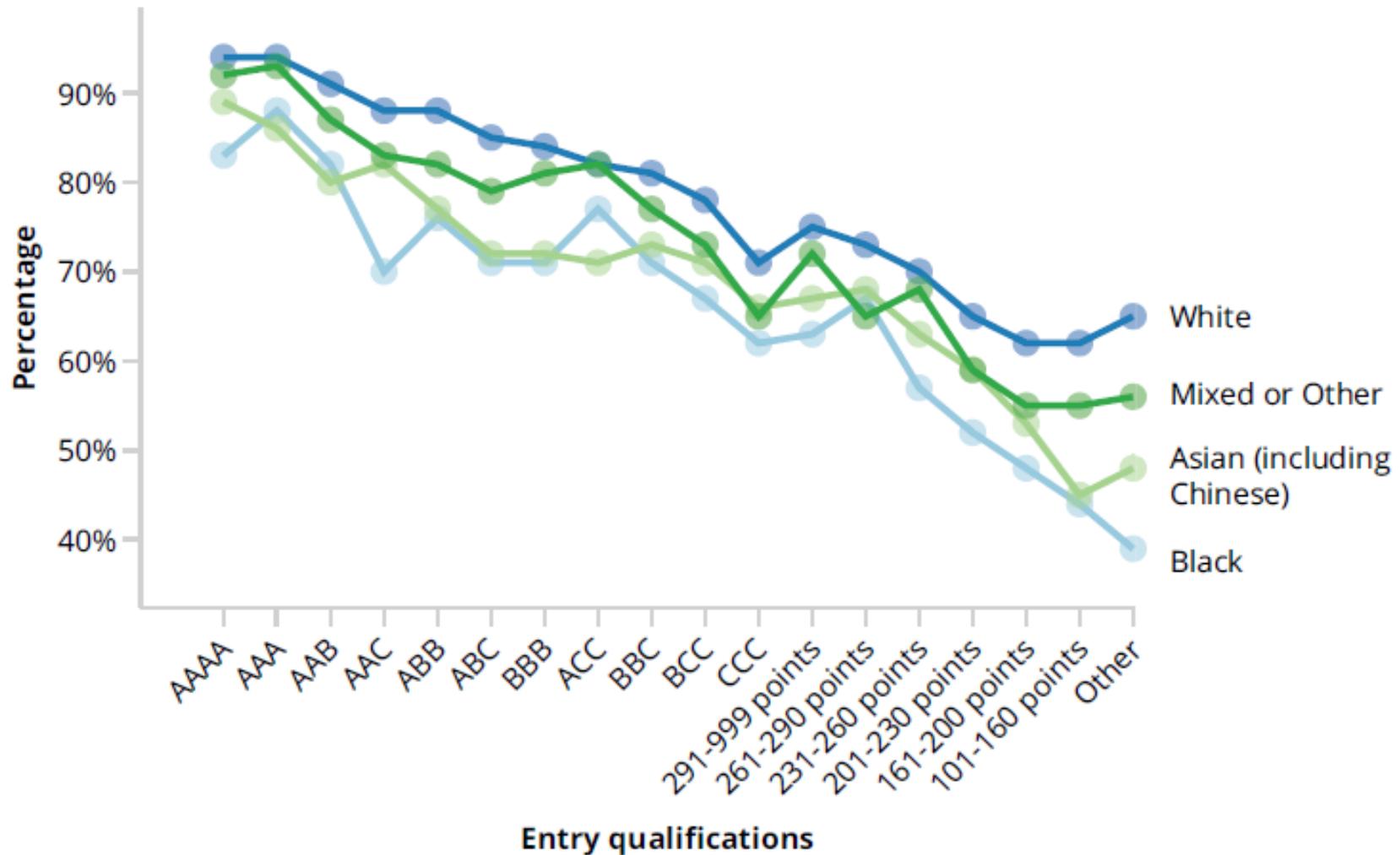
- Student based
 - Academic background/Mode of Access
 - Lack of aspiration
 - English language deficits
- Societal/institutional/staff based
 - Socioeconomic barriers
 - Systemic racism
 - Rhetoric and political correctness
 - Devaluation of teaching and learning

Students

- Academic
 - Preparedness for learning
 - 'Appropriate' academic behaviours
 - Student Support
 - Inter-ethnic relationships/Integration
 - Role models
- Non-academic
 - Intersectionality
 - Families/cultural differences

Stevenson (2012)

Figure 9 Percentage of first and upper seconds by ethnicity



Source: HESA Student Record 2013-14. Note: UK-domiciled first degree students at HEFCE-funded HEIs only.

HEFCE 2106 Higher education in England 2016: Key facts

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2016/201620/HEFCE2016_20.pdf

Causes and institutional responses

Causes of the gap?

- Information, advice, guidance
- Student satisfaction
- Disciplinary differences
- Where students live
- Lack of role models
- Sense of belonging
- Issues relating to racism, discrimination and a lack of integration on campus
- Contribution of the 'curriculum'

Contribution of the 'curriculum'?

- **YES:** EGDA Project (2008) + HEA 'What works?' - engagement in the academic sphere vital to high levels of student retention/success
- **BUT:** We do not know what aspects of teaching and assessment practices are responsible for variations in the attainment gap
- Though we have some ideas....decolonisation, forms of assessment, staff marking practices

Actions being taken: disconnect and delusion

- Student focussed activities: invariably deficit-fixing
 - Academic competency-building activities: language and literacy provision; study skills activities
 - Resilience building approaches: focused on deficits
 - Eradication of 'bias'
 - Images of diversity
 - 'Blind' marking
 - Compulsory 'unconscious bias training'

Compare the following two work situations: jokes and banter being made towards a short man, vs. the similar kind of joking towards a woman because she is African and has a strong accent. Are either of these illegal? Are either of these acceptable?

► **Select the option you think is correct and then click Submit.**

- The 'short' jokes are acceptable, but the racist joke is covered by legislation
- Both jokes are acceptable so long as they are taken in good humour
- The racist joke is covered by legislation and the 'short' jokes are not acceptable either



Institutional self-delusion

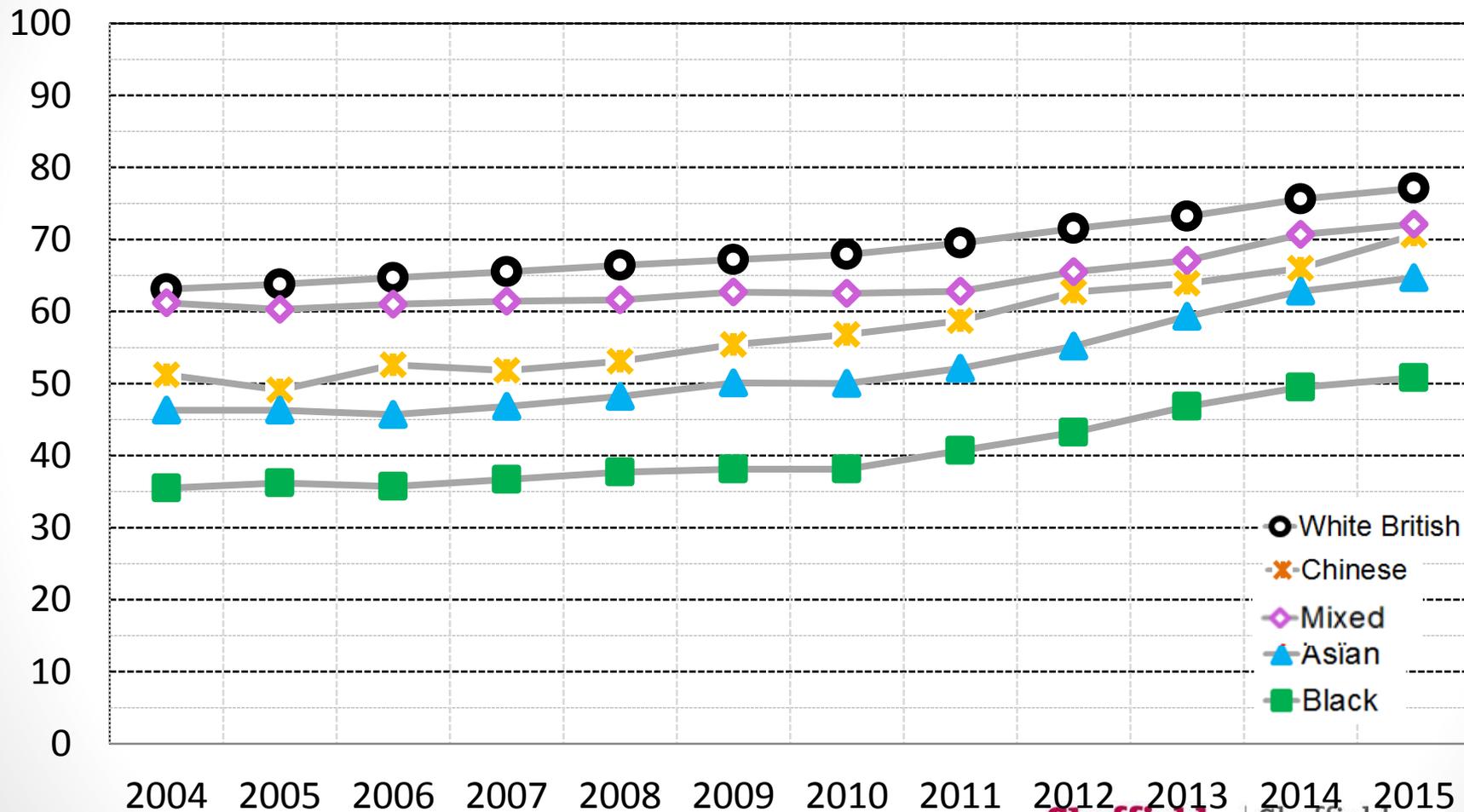
- Institutions may be misplacing their trust in the possibilities afforded by equality initiatives.
- May allow a level of institutional self-delusion to persist - that change is taking place - and so prevent wider and much needed action from being either conceived or implemented.
- Can avoid deep consideration of racialised subjectivities; avoid challenge and/or creation of environments within which trust and openness can be built
- Avoids institutional wide commitment to change
- Real implications for social justice; change will be slow and weak; will continue to deny access to societies conversations for whole sections of society

Ways forward?

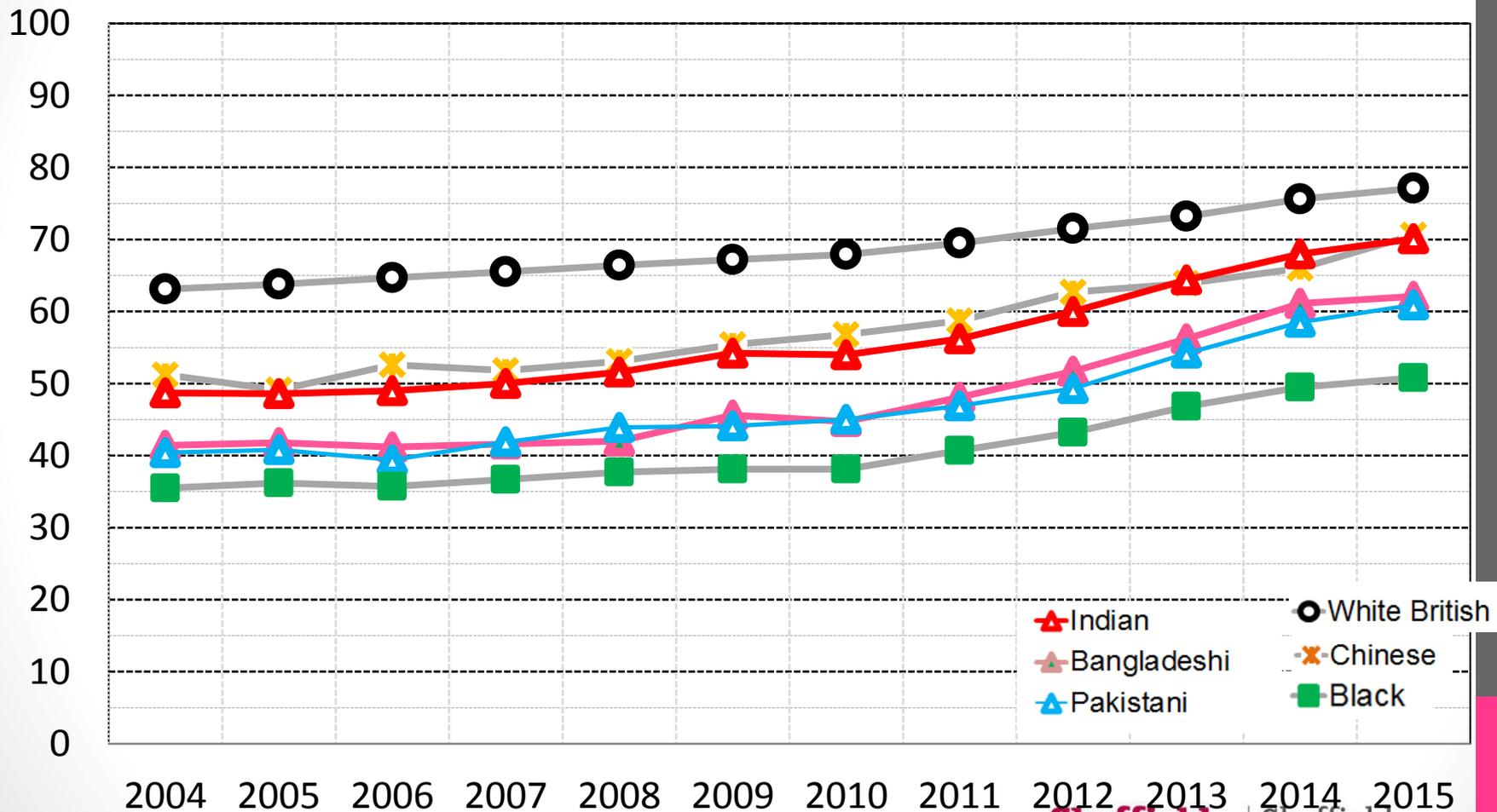
Disaggregation

- Need to look at disaggregated ethnicity e.g. (all ECU, 2018)
 - Access ('Black' = 7.9% of total UGs; African = 5.7%; Caribbean = 1.8%; but still masks sub-groups e.g. Somali, Yemeni)
 - Degree attainment ('Asian' 1st/2:1 = 66%; Indian = 70.7%; Pakistani 61.8%; but masks intersectionality)
 - Progression: research PG: BME = 16.9%; 'Asian' = 3.6%, 'Black' = 6.5%; no further disaggregation)

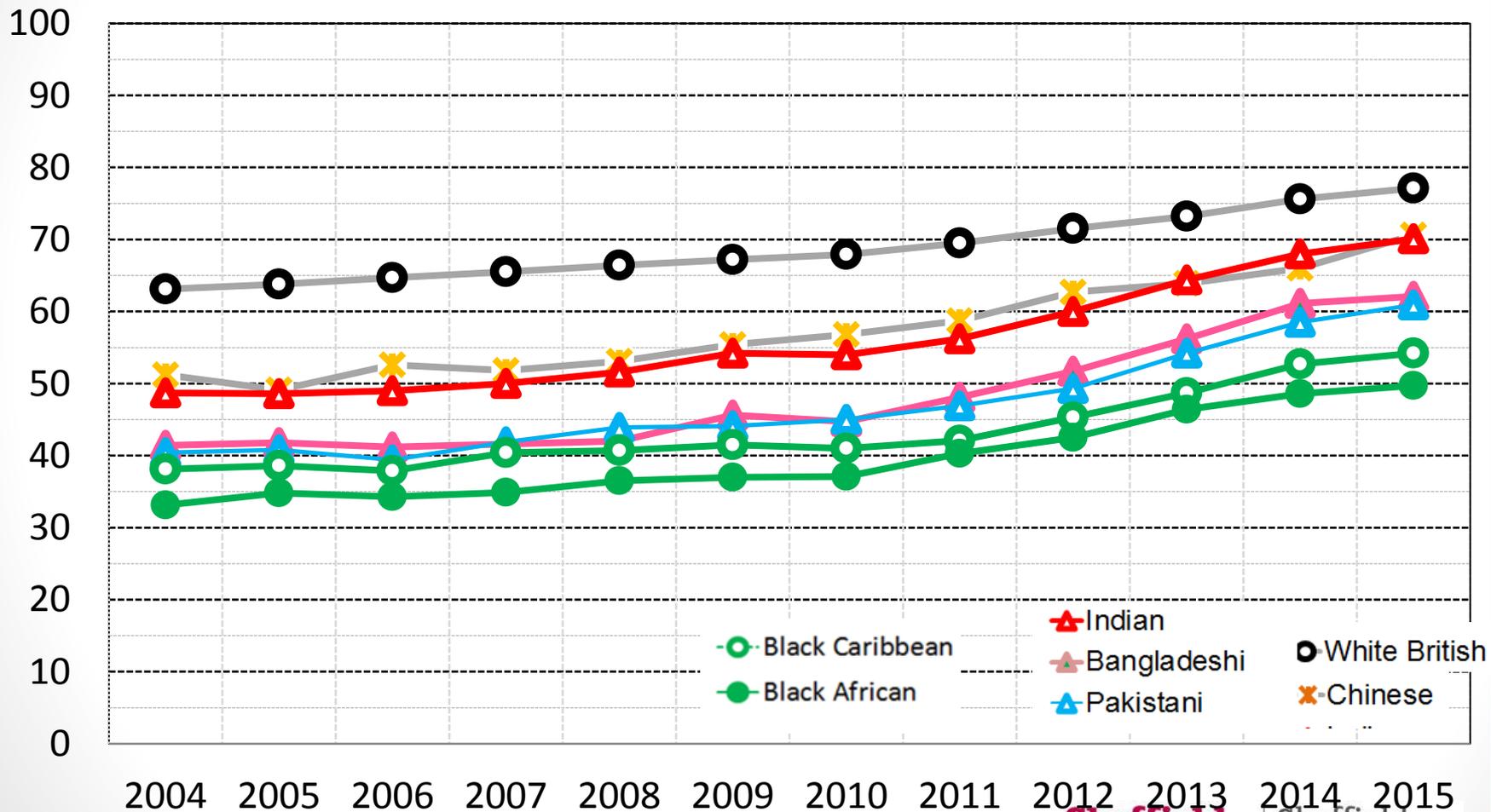
..replacing BME with Chinese / Asian / Black / Mixed groups



...replacing 'Asian' with Indian, Bangladeshi & Pakistani groups



...replacing 'Black' with Black Caribbean and Black African groups



Why institutions not targeting?

- Inequalities are not enough of an institutional or departmental priority
- Difficulty of addressing inequalities
- Tendency to see students' lack of success as their responsibility
- Lack of staff awareness
- Lack of staff training/support
- Lack of ownership of the issues.
- Data
- Geographic location
- Lack of BAME staff
- Lack of departmental or unit collaboration

Positive action (ECU)

- Refers to steps HEIs/FECs can take to encourage people from different groups in order to overcome historic disadvantage, or low participation education, training and welfare.
- These voluntary positive action measures must aim to:
 - **alleviate disadvantage** experienced by people who share a protected characteristics; or
 - **reduce underrepresentation** in relation to particular activities; or
 - or **meet particular needs**.
- Such measures must be **proportionate** to achieving the aim.
- Examples of positive action measures might include:
 - taking steps to remove barriers in student outreach or admissions for groups of students underrepresented in particular subjects
 - providing alternative processes to meet different needs in accessing services

- ECU (2018) <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/equality-legislation/positive-action/>

Participatory Action Research

- Collaborative research, education and action used to gather information to use for social change
- Involves people who are concerned affected by an issue taking a leading role in producing and using knowledge about it
 - Driven by participants
 - Democratic beliefs about knowledge
 - Collaborative at every stage
 - Results in action
 - Benefits come to the people directly affected
 - Cycle: Planning, Action, Reflection, Evaluation

Community Cultural Wealth

- Students bring to, and draw on, forms of community cultural wealth - the assets that many students acquire from ... "a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (Yosso 2005:79)
 1. aspirational
 2. linguistic
 3. familial
 4. social
 5. navigational
 6. resistance

Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), pp. 69–91.

So in short

- Focus on institutional change
 - Avoid deficit approaches
 - Target where really needed
-
- Questions?