



# Increasing Diversity

**Tackling underrepresentation of protected student groups in higher education**

End of programme report – January 2020

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# 1 Executive summary

Higher education in the UK now has a long history of ‘widening participation’. The sector and individual institutions have explored different approaches to understanding and tackling underrepresentation of different student groups, whether that be through more inclusive policies and procedures or more targeted action.

However, institutions appear to have been more cautious when considering targeted recruitment or outreach **directly relating to protected characteristics** (Stevenson et al, 2019). While this uncertainty is in line with wider national trends (Davies and Robinson, 2016), Advance HE (then Equality Challenge Unit, “ECU”) wished to build confidence and awareness in the sector of this potentially useful tool in tackling underrepresentation.

In 2016 Advance HE invited institutions in England, Wales or Northern Ireland to express interest in a collaborative programme – “Increasing Diversity” – to explore more ambitious approaches to tackling underrepresentation of specific protected groups. While specific aims, approaches and resourcing varied, institutions identified a need to explore:

- + the limitations or opportunities around use of ‘positive action’ in student recruitment and outreach. This might include ‘targeting’ or ring-fencing outreach and recruitment activities by reference to a protected characteristic, such as ‘sex’ or ‘race’
- + how and when targeted initiatives – rather than an ‘inclusive’ approach – might be useful to support access and participation in higher education
- + how to hold institutional conversations about protected groups, particularly around ethnicity, without falling into a ‘deficit’ discourse
- + how to align ‘access’ work with wider strategies and approaches to student success and inclusion (“getting on not just getting in”).

From 2016-2018, Advance HE supported a group of institutions to explore a range of new conversations, practices and initiatives relating to their identified underrepresented groups. Equity in higher education is undoubtedly about more than ‘representation’ and indeed many of the participants also engaged in exploration of ‘belonging’, on-course support and staff-student partnerships. However, underrepresentation remains a key area of concern in EDI, particularly at the level of specific disciplines, or in postgraduate progression.

**This end of project report aims to share the learnings of this work – many of them practical, and related to operationalising strategy – with the wider sector.** This is particularly relevant at a time when – certainly in the English context – there is a renewed called for “a radical increase in ambition” (Office for Students, 2018; Millward, 2018) in approaching structural and cultural change and tackling differential access and success for different groups, and stronger calls for positive action as a tool for increasing the pace of change (NUS UUK, 2019).

Advance HE hopes that this work will help many institutions – particularly those with challenging new targets, or with less operational resource – to anticipate key challenges and increase the pace of change. As many of these approaches included a specific disciplinary focus (for example, teaching, arts and humanities) it is also hoped that the report will be of interest to professional or regulatory bodies and disciplinary-specific outreach activities.

## Recommendations

Practical recommendations for policymakers, institutions, and those leading future projects within their organisations are summarised below. These were informed by:

- + reflections on the overall project (authors)
- + feedback and case studies from participants
- + a co-production exercise at the end of programme meeting (participants).

### Recommendations for policymakers and sector agencies:

Recommendation	Relevant section
1. Develop skills and capacity for <b>institutional research</b> on issues of student equity, specifically around access and participation (both quantitative data analysis and qualitative understanding of student and staff experience). This might include funding streams for internal research relating to access and success; training on conducting research for ‘non-researchers’; increasing transparency and usability of national datasets.	<a href="#">3.3</a>
2. Provide clarity and a public <b>statement of support</b> for undertaking positive action measures where appropriate and clear consensus on moving beyond ‘deficit’ models.	<a href="#">3.2</a>
3. Provide a ‘buddying’ or networking scheme for institutions with similar challenges to <b>work together and share approaches</b> . Link in with professional, statutory or regulatory bodies (PSRBs) or learned societies where appropriate for disciplinary-specific work.	<a href="#">3.1</a> ; <a href="#">3.2</a>

### Recommendations for institutions:

Recommendation	Relevant section
1. Support internal projects to work with other relevant <b>equality change programmes</b> wherever possible, and establish a senior 'champion' for the work.	<a href="#">3.1</a>
2. Provide a ' <b>research and evidence sponsor</b> ' to connect internal research expertise (skills and subject specialism) and institutional data analysis units together with professional services actors and stakeholders. This can take ownership of providing (for example): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ a clear route for internal researchers on the student experience to access relevant datasets from the student record, learning analytics, admissions and recruitment (with appropriate precautions)</li> <li>+ guidance on ethical approval for primary research within the institution</li> <li>+ funding streams and training support for staff upskilling or buy-out of researcher time</li> </ul>	<a href="#">3.3</a>
3. Consider how institutional EDI and widening participation/access strategies can be structured in such a way as to support <b>intersectional approaches</b> .	<a href="#">3.2</a>
4. Make space for ' <b>difficult</b> ' conversations about equity and access.	<a href="#">3.2</a>

### Recommendations for project leads:

Recommendation	Relevant section
1. Identify a senior sponsor to ' <b>open doors</b> ', help reach out early to allies and be prepared to take on a 'persuasive' role.	<a href="#">3.1</a>
2. Conduct a team self-assessment to <b>identify gaps</b> in subject matter expertise (for example, discipline, approach, target group, lived experience) or skills (data analysis; project planning; communications). Plan how to fill identified gaps with use of networks, co-option of internal or external expertise, or engaging in community or representative groups.	<a href="#">3.1</a> , <a href="#">3.3</a>
3. Develop and regularly return to a ' <b>Theory of Change</b> ' or baseline assumptions and theory. Avoid 'project creep' with clearly identifiable, manageable goals.	<a href="#">3.2</a>
4. <b>Amplify the voices</b> of intended 'beneficiaries' from the target groups, and ensure that students from the target groups are consulted and enabled to participate in project work or design.	<a href="#">3.1</a>
5. Ensure project work discussions, decisions and actions are captured in writing, and ' <b>future-proofed</b> ' as far as possible against staff changeover and budget reprioritisation.	<a href="#">3.1</a>
6. Make space for regular <b>reflection on discourse and approaches</b> (potentially with a critical friend): challenge 'deficit model' discourse, intersectional analysis and disaggregation of data and experiences; valuing and response to student voice.	<a href="#">3.2</a>

## 2 Programme overview and outcomes

### 2.1 Objectives and background

This programme was a collaboration between Advance HE and a limited number of higher education providers in England, Wales or Northern Ireland. The aim was to support institutions to research, develop and test alternative approaches to improving the participation of students with specific protected characteristics in higher education (HE).

This work was conceived as a roll-out of learning from “Attracting Diversity”, a pilot study – and subsequent project – with colleges and universities in Scotland, funded by the Scottish Funding Council (Steven and Thomas, 2019). The programme required institutions to identify their own underrepresented group(s) to focus on, and to conduct their own research to inform their plans to tackle underrepresentation (targeted where appropriate).

There are, of course, a range of drivers for tackling underrepresentation of particular groups, from regulation (see eg the work of the Director for Fair Access<sup>1</sup>), to personal and institutional commitments to social justice and gender and race equity (including through Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charter marks). However, this project was conducted with the primary lens of supporting institutions in duties under equality legislation, which for England and Wales include those of the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010 s.149): eliminating discrimination, harassment, and victimisation; advancing equality of opportunity; and fostering good relations between different groups.

More specifically, institutions applying to join the Increasing Diversity programme were first asked to:

- + identify their main aims and outcomes to increase the participation of protected groups
- + describe any existing work of the institution to achieve these goals
- + indicate how this project would focus on particular aspects of this issue (eg groups and disciplines) to develop this work further
- + nominate a cross-institutional team of at least four people from across the university’s functions, and involving student representation and a senior manager, to work on the project over two-year duration.

The ‘target groups’ of the different institutions did vary (see [Table 1](#)) but notably focused in the majority on the protected characteristics of ‘race’ (and specifically on ethnicity), with a small number of projects focusing on sex, disability, or intersections of these. Conversely the majority of the Attracting Diversity Scotland project participants focused on underrepresentation by sex, most likely as a response to a specific Scotland Gender Action Plan policy focus (discussed in the End of Project Report, Steven and Thomas, 2019).

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1 Note that in England, the role and powers of the Director for Fair Access changed towards the final stages of this project as the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 was enacted.



The Increasing Diversity programme did not involve direct funding of institutional work. The programme of support from Advance HE, working with Professor Liz Thomas, included:

- + **institutional visits** by external advisers, designed to support the cross-institutional team to understand the project methodology (discussed below), develop their thinking, and make progress with planning, implementing and evaluating their work
- + **webinars** sharing the experiences, outcomes and challenges of others participating in the Increasing Diversity programme
- + face-to-face **collaborative events** bringing together representatives from institutions participating in the team
- + **opportunities** to attend and contribute to in events organised in Scotland as part of the Attracting Diversity project.

Institutions were required to:

- + facilitate institutional meetings and participate in webinars and/or face-to-face events
- + undertake their own analysis of institutional data and qualitative research and use this to plan interventions
- + report on activity, experiences and learning during the project and at the end.

This report draws upon institutional applications, updates and final reports, and the final event where institutions shared progress, challenges, learning and lessons for the sector.

## 2.2 Summary of projects

Following a selection process considering expressions of interest, Increasing Diversity began with 13 projects across 12 institutions in England and Wales (no applications were received from Northern Ireland). One institution formally withdrew in the early stages of the work due to changes in staffing and resource, and several others had to finish or pause earlier than planned for similar reasons.

A summary of institutional priorities with regards to protected characteristics, target groups, subjects and courses, and level of study (undergraduate, postgraduate), is presented in [Table 1](#) below, with expanded case studies in [Appendix A](#).

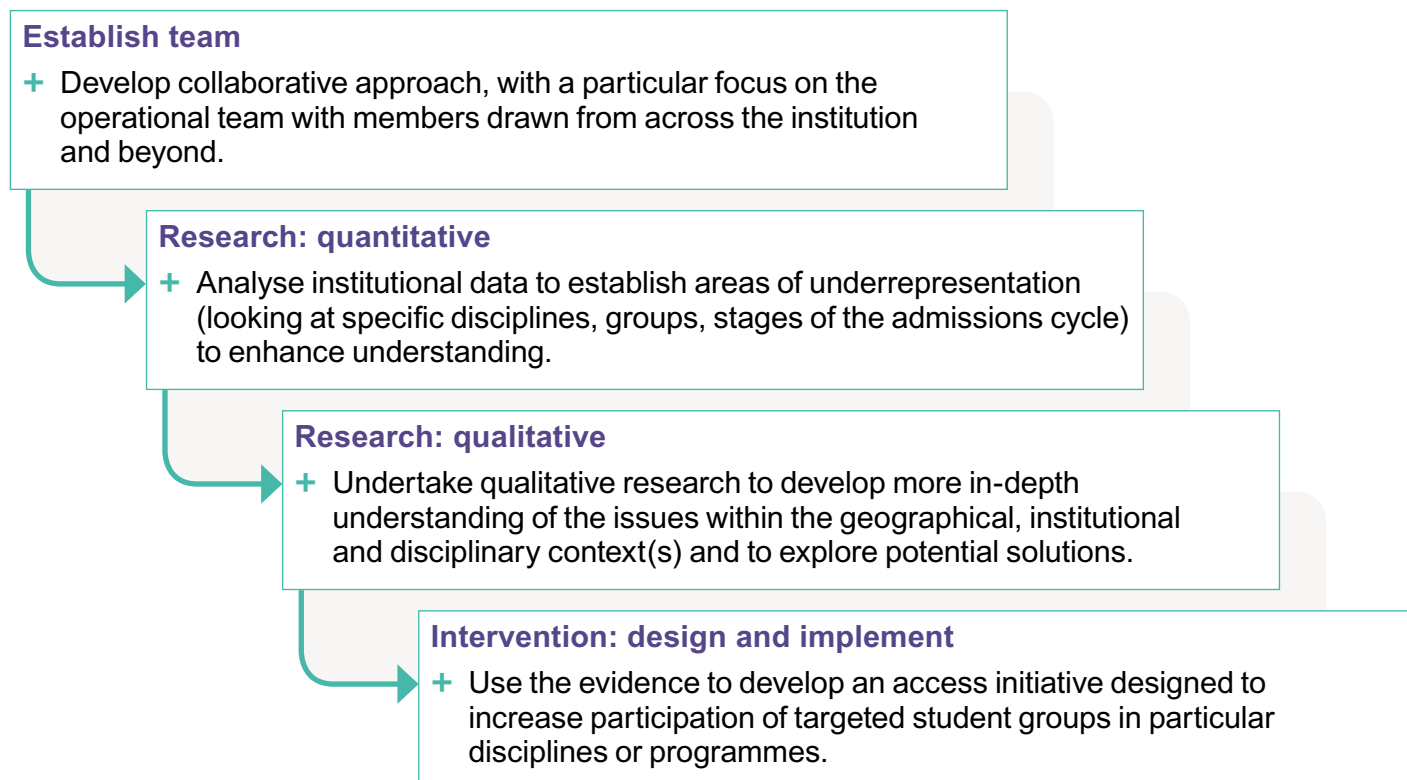
Some institutions have opted to remain anonymous at this stage as their work develops, though they are thanked for their contributions to the overall learning. However, some universities are pleased to be recognised, and thus particular successes are attributed to these institutions where appropriate, and in the final case studies.

**Table 1: Summary of projects**

Institution	Target beneficiary group	Initial focus
Cardiff University	Men	UG: Healthcare
University A	Women and/or BAME students	UG: Engineering
University of Chester	BAME students	UG: Selected disciplines
University of Gloucestershire	To increase and stabilise number of UK domiciled BAME students participating in undergraduate courses in the School of Education and the School of Media.	UG: Schools of (Education, Media)
University of Leicester	To attract more UK BAME students on the postgraduate taught programmes in the School of Museum Studies, and support them to develop their careers and thrive in the cultural sector.	PGT: School of Museum Studies
University B (project 1)	BAME students	UG: Arts and Humanities disciplines
University B (project 2)	Students with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs), mental health and/or autism spectrum conditions	UG: All
Liverpool John Moores University	BAME students	UG: Teaching
Liverpool Hope University	BAME students	UG: Teaching
UCLAN	Local South Asian communities, Eastern European communities and young, white British men from low participation backgrounds in Pennines	UG: All
Oxford Brookes University	Women	UG: Mechanical Engineering

## 2.3 Programme methodology

The Increasing Diversity programme sought to largely replicate the initial methodology developed in Scotland as part of Attracting Diversity, but some variations were introduced to reflect the larger geographical area of the participants. The model was initially premised on four phases:



## 2.4 Approach: positive action

A key focus of the programme was to prompt consideration of the use of 'positive action': a tool provided by the Equality Act 2010 to address systemic barriers impeding access to further and higher education as related to specific protected characteristics.

As an overview, s.158 of the Act permits an institution to treat a group differently (ie provide either preferential treatment, or provide access to specific opportunities or experience) with reference to a protected characteristic, where the aim is to tackle inequality of opportunity (some scholars suggest 'outcomes'<sup>2</sup>) stemming from past or present discrimination.

2 See discussion of O'Connell (2009) and Noon (2011) in Davies (2019).

However, two key tests must be met:

Test one is to provide **reasonable evidence of need**. Case law<sup>3</sup> suggests that evidence needs to be more than anecdotes or supposition, but it can include analysis of institutional data that there is a difference by projected characteristics and qualitative evidence about why. The aim is to show that a person 'reasonably thinks' that persons sharing a protected characteristic:

- + suffer a disadvantage connected to it, or
- + have needs that are different from the needs of persons not sharing it, or
- + have a disproportionately low participation rate in the activity.

Test two is that the **intervention is proportionate to need** (legitimate, effective and necessary). The measure must aim at eliminating and correcting the causes of reduced opportunities. Institutions should consider whether there are alternative ways to achieve this outcome and if there are any adverse effects on other groups (which will need to be mitigated).

To help with this 'balance' of tests, Advance HE advised participating institutions to ensure separation of (i) steps helping them to research to identify and understand key barriers and then (ii) steps to design and implement an appropriate intervention (using positive action if felt appropriate).

Examples of positive action relating to student recruitment or outreach which might be explored include (indicative only):

- + an **open day**
- + a **bursary or travel voucher scheme**<sup>4</sup>
- + a prospective student/alumni **mentoring** scheme for LGBTQ+ or trans students entering a professional training course (where there is evidence that LGBTQ+ or trans students may have specific needs in relation to safe and inclusive networks and career guidance, and the scheme is a proportionate response to this)
- + an **entry pathway** to physics for women (where there is evidence that women students are both underrepresented and disadvantaged by the standard entry pathways which fail to account for structural underrepresentation in science pathways throughout secondary education).

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3 Case law on positive action in the UK context is limited, and these interpretations include consideration of European law. For more detailed discussion, see Davies (2019).

4 For a group underrepresented in a programme where this is evidence that this group is less likely to attend auditions or accept offers to the programme in part due to financial concerns. (ECU 2012).

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Case law also suggests that institutions should build in a timeframe to review the intervention to see if it is still required (a 'sunset clause') and identify when the intervention will no longer be used (eg when participation reflects the population). A 'savings clause' (to plan for providing a similar but not identical benefit to those outside of the group who identified similar needs) was also discussed.

The University of Leicester case study ([Appendix A](#) and [enhanced version online](#)) will be of particular interest: in considering a new positive action scheme its research included evidence gathering on the success of a previously used – then discontinued – scheme.

Further discussion of positive action is included in the Attracting Diversity end of project report and in [Appendix B](#).

## 2.5 Approach: Theory of Change

A Theory of Change approach (Thomas et al, 2017) was adopted to both improve the planning of the initiative and to help institutions consider their evaluation of impact.

The Theory of Change requires a 'prediction' of how activities will contribute to longer-term impact, and maps out incremental progression towards these goals. It assumes a causal relationship between interventions and impact, by identifying a series of logical 'if...then...' statements, leading from activities to short-term, medium-term and longer-term outcomes. This can be used to identify not just longer-term impact indicators, (such as recruiting more students with specific protected characteristics on to particular courses) but also intermediate indicators, which help to demonstrate progress towards long-term goals. Intermediate examples might include more enquiries, open-day visits or applications from students with particular characteristics.

Such models are also intended to help institutions avoid 'creep' of scope and provide a pathway through changing internal or external priorities. The importance of clear logic models here has been noted in similar change work in the access and participation area, such as in funded catalyst projects (WECD, 2018).

In supporting institutions to consider their logic models more closely, a workshop exercise on 'effort vs impact' also provided an opportunity for discussion and challenge of assumptions on the impact of different initiatives. The diversity of any one team in this exercise (in terms of professional roles, disciplinary area, or lived experience) prompted wide variation in discussion and assumptions of both 'what works', but also 'what's needed' for any one intervention to be rolled out. As an exercise this also aimed to highlight the importance of considering diversity of decision-makers in institutional project planning.

## 2.6 Outcomes

Although, in general, some projects did not make as much progress as intended within the time frame (see [key learning](#)), a range of achievements were recorded. These can be grouped into a number of categories:

### **(1) Enhanced institutional engagement in tackling underrepresentation**

“For us the project acted as a catalyst to have conversations about equality, diversity and inclusion across the university. It engaged a wide range of colleagues in the topic, which was incredibly useful – others led on pieces of work, and continue to do so – and I was able to identify allies.”

*University of Gloucestershire, project lead*

Some institutions reported that the programme raised the profile of diversity across the institution, resulting in wider staff engagement and a catalyst for other diversity activities (eg Gloucestershire, Leicester).

Other staff also reflected on their own increased awareness and knowledge, particularly some recruitment ‘practitioner’ staff who may not previously have had the opportunity to spend much time reflecting and engaging in diversity work.

For some projects, what may have felt initially like a ‘quantitative’ focus on underrepresentation in access led to new and challenging conversations about current student experience and ‘belonging’ (Yuval-Davis, 2016). These iterative pathways reflect the need for holistic engagement in equity issues within higher education and, specifically, engagement with targeted and inclusive actions across the student lifecycle (Stevenson, 2019).

### **(2) Improved understanding and evidence**

“[the work] ...will assist us in shaping the content of outreach sessions we deliver, the nature of the programmes we hope to design, and the way we seek to work collaboratively on this challenge with others in the sector.”

*University of Chester, Access and Participation Plan 2019-20*

Institutional-level research – usually complemented by national or disciplinary datasets and literature supported projects to identify specific patterns of access in relation to certain protected characteristics. Teams also explored new or enhanced research design processes.

Outcomes included:

- + enhanced understanding of current higher education participation of specific student groups, including subject preferences (UCLAN)
- + development of new research methodologies and tools, such as action and participatory action research (eg UCLAN, University B), alumni research (Leicester), equality-related questionnaires and focus groups (Chester, University B, LJMU)
- + in-depth (and often challenging) findings to inform institutional approaches to equality, for example:
  - a ‘gap’ in awareness and understanding among the target group of the breadth of engineering as a discipline, and the diverse range of skills and jobs that can follow a degree in this subject (Oxford Brookes)
  - the role and influence of family on financial support and perception of the ‘value’ of higher education (UCLAN)
  - a lack of ‘belonging’ among current BAME students in arts and humanities disciplines (University B)
  - a need for greater consistency in how students’ learning support plans are implemented, and guidance provided on leave of absence/switching modes of study
  - prevalence of mental health issues among the postgraduate community
  - differing opinions from previous beneficiaries of positive action on the impact and implications of such schemes (Leicester).

### (3) Indications of positive impact on student applications

The time frame of the programme and the fact that many institutions did not reach implementation stage for their key findings and recommendations meant that long-term statistical improvements in applications, offers or acceptances of underrepresented groups (let alone clear causal links) became increasingly unlikely as some of the projects progressed.

However, there is some evidence from [Leicester](#) to indicate that its historical and extended approaches (including a positive action scholarship) have contributed to an increase in applications from their target group (BAME students studying postgraduate courses in museum studies). [Chester](#) also reports some early indications of a slight increase in offer rates for BAME applicants, though again, causation is unclear at this stage.

### (4) Changes to the institutional ‘offering’ and ways of working:

“We have learned that tackling the barriers to participation is almost certain to require **multiple, intersecting efforts** rather than single track solutions (for example, the use of positive action scholarships is a powerful way to address underrepresentation but must also be accompanied by fundamental changes in the way courses are **designed, delivered and promoted** in order to create an environment in which BME students can thrive and flourish)”

*University of Leicester (emphasis added)*

The programme proved particularly useful for institutions to reflect on what substantive changes could be made to the institution itself (for example, what applicants can expect from the course, support packages, community). This is a valuable outcome as it moves away from a traditional 'deficit' model relating to 'changing' the applicants or students themselves (in line with recommendations from UUK-NUS, 2019).

Actions arising out of these reflections included:

- + changes to the curriculum to improve the relevance, experience and opportunities for students from underrepresented backgrounds (eg media at Gloucestershire, English at University B, museum studies at Leicester): hopefully with benefits for all students through greater diversity of perspectives, content and speakers
- + changes to institutional processes including enhanced recording and understanding of ethnicity at time of exit (Chester), new mentoring schemes and communication platforms (Gloucestershire)
- + secured sustainability of funding for diversity scholarships (Leicester).

Further details and context can be found in [Appendix A case studies](#).

It should be noted that the majority of institutions planned to make more progress over the programme lifetime than was ultimately achieved. An underestimation of the time, skillsets and resources and structural support needed to undertake the primary institutional research was a key contributing factor: this itself is a key learning outcome which informs our recommendations (below) and will be crucial for institutions seeking to undertake radical and more effective interventions at faster pace.

Institutions that completed the research phase have therefore had some impact on the culture of the academic department and the institution – and hence the student experience – as well as on issues of recruitment and access.



## 3 Implementing change: key learning

As seen in [Table 1](#) (above) the projects were diverse in terms of the protected characteristics, target groups, subjects and courses being addressed. Although they broadly followed the same approach, they were also diverse in term of implementation: each institution determined its own team, priorities, activities and intended outcomes.

Advance HE is committed to supporting institutions to put strategy into practice. As such, the following key learnings from across the programme are discussed in detail in order to understand what factors enable enhancement and to consider the practical and conceptual barriers. These are presented under three key themes which emerged from consideration at the programme end. They relate to:

- + practical implementation and design of the ‘projects’
- + approach taken to tackling underrepresentation
- + undertaking primary research.

Key recommendations are embedded throughout in order to address these barriers in future or to replicate some of the successful elements of the projects.

### 3.1 Practical implementation: ownership, leadership and student representation

The projects were led by staff in a range of roles and located in different parts of the institution. Teams were led by and located in:

- + professional services, including equality, diversity and inclusion, widening participation, and student recruitment
- + academic departments to which students were to be recruited
- + specialist research/community engagement and research units.

The majority of the original projects were located in a professional services team, including equality, diversity and inclusion, widening participation and outreach, recruitment and partnerships. Three were located in academic units initially, and one was to be led by a senior institutional manager, but was then re-located to a specialist community engagement and action research unit.

Several other projects shifted ownership location, eg from a particular professional service to specialist research unit; or from an academic department to a professional service. Some projects were also ‘handed down’ to more junior-level colleagues who were required to take a leading role, or ‘across’ to other staff when personnel changed, or the project work was re-prioritised.

Interestingly, a couple of teams used action research methodologies to consciously redistribute at least part of the location and ownership to students, potential students and communities.

The 'business' location (as well as physical location) and ownership of the project created different challenges and opportunities. It could be difficult for centrally located projects (eg in professional services and specialist units) to secure active participation by academic teams. While some projects received strong input from academic colleagues, others faced theoretically engaged staff who unfortunately faced restrictions in their time commitments due to inflexible workload allocation models.

Conversely, projects that were located primarily in an academic school were able to implement and evaluate change locally, but found it more difficult to use this learning to influence the wider institution, despite having representatives from across the institution involved in their project team, and having evidence of a positive impact.

The three projects led by specialist units each generated useful insights into the issues related to their target groups. However, they faced an 'implementation gap' of how to translate these findings and recommendations into actions, as these usually need to be adopted and prioritised by others within each institution.

Projects located within professional teams also experienced challenges with research access and capacity. In particular, some of these teams experienced difficulties as they did not have qualitative research experience or the ethics process was a challenging experience (see 3.3). For example, one centrally located team experienced severe delays through a prolonged engagement with the institutional ethics process, and others felt ill-equipped to undertake research in academic schools.

Multi-campus sites, or physical separation of professional services and academic spaces also presented barriers to engaging colleagues and joining up work with other strategies.

### **3.1.1 Leadership and institutional 'reach'**

Each institution was asked to include a senior leader in their institutional team, and people in various roles were named. However, sustained engagement and visibility varied across the projects, at times acting as a barrier for other team members in issues of prioritisation or 'opening doors'. This operational (not just strategic) importance of a senior champion was strongly noted at the end of programme reflections. However, this also raises a wider question of how institutional engagement can be championed in a way which is, and is perceived to be, authentic and committed to long-term change (Rollock, 2018).

Some of the most effective work was undertaken within an academic school where the 'senior leader' was the programme director and thus able to implement changes (Leicester). In another case the senior staff member kept a close eye on the project and kept them on track, while also facilitating wider institutional engagement. Interestingly, one institution (Gloucestershire) enabled the senior leadership team to become direct participants in a positive action measure (through a reciprocal mentoring programme), prompting longer-term understanding and commitment to the wider aims of the project.

In other institutions, particularly where projects were led by staff in non-managerial roles, difficulties were experienced in engaging colleagues across professional services/academic staff boundaries, and in sharing findings with others in the institution who have the power to implement change. Several projects spoke of frustration that they were unable to complete the 'implementation' stages of their work not only due to time but also as they were not necessarily positioned to authorise change. Others noted a need for more efficient routes to innovation and change, and 'ways in or around' termly (or longer) committee structures.

On an individual level there were indications that delegation to 'practitioner' level provided key development opportunities to inform and influence strategic change. This suggests that there needs to be a careful balance between individual staff empowerment, oversight and influence, and long-term project effectiveness and sustainability.

### **3.1.2 Student representation**

Each university was asked to involve at least one student representative in the institutional team. Only seven teams identified a student representative, all of whom were from the students' union. This perhaps points to the difficulty of involving student representatives who are elected for one academic year, when a project spans two or more academic years. Thus, in general, the contribution of students to the direction or management of the projects was small – although the majority undertook research with or of students, prospective students and alumni (see [3.3](#)).

A couple of institutions did seek to involve students and other community members in alternative ways by using action research (UCLAN and University B). Although this was more time consuming, and at times more difficult, it was felt to be worthwhile by both institutions which took this approach. From a project planning perspective, it can be more challenging. If power is genuinely to be handed over, then the action researchers need to determine the agenda – particularly challenging in the structures of a university setting (Miller, 2018).

Advance HE worked with some of the projects to prompt more creative thinking about engaging with key student groups or conducting research. This included reaching out to student societies more likely to have members of their target beneficiary group, and looking through specific identity lenses at 'decliner' surveys (students who'd applied but then declined offers made). In addition to the importance of centring knowledge on the lived experience and input of the target beneficiary groups, this also speaks to a wider challenge of diversity in who represents 'the student' in student engagement activities (Mercer Mapstone, Islam and Reid, 2019).

A number of institutions noted their regret that they had not been able to engage more effectively with student groups or students' unions, either at research stage, or to make a case for action and implementation.

### **3.1.3 Discipline and level**

The majority of teams focused on access to specific disciplines or groups of subjects, for example arts and humanities, engineering and maths (etc), having identified these as key areas of underrepresentation for a particular group. Three teams did not have a specific course of subject-group focus, usually citing small numbers of students – or the minority group – in their institutions overall.

Most teams also focused on undergraduate rather than postgraduate provision which aligns with the traditional focus (in regulation, practice and research) on this level of study in ‘widening participation’ efforts (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2016; Wakeling and Kyriacou, 2010).

Several of these did, however, also overlap with professional qualifications (teaching). One project (Leicester) focused specifically on postgraduate taught programmes in the School of Museum Studies, noting their role in furthering professional entry into that sector.

This overlap with professional accreditation was, at times, felt to restrict the scope of inquiry or actions which individual courses or institutions could pursue. For example, when reflecting on changes to structural barriers such as entry requirements there was hesitancy as to what change was fully in an institution’s control (but may be within their influence).

The majority of the institutions did not seek to, or did not feel able to, engage directly with relevant professional, statutory or regulatory bodies (PSRBs) as part of this programme. Some of this may reflect challenges around how the project was situated within the institutions in terms of seniority or centralisation (see 3.1), or reflect more widely on the routes for dialogue between professional services staff (in particular) and individual PSRBs in relation to issues of structural barriers to equitable entry. Advance HE can also reflect on future opportunities to bring together different disciplinary stakeholders.

However, it is encouraging to note that there are signs of increasingly vocal support for positive action measures from certain professional bodies and learned societies (eg Institute for Mechanical Engineering, 2017; Royal Historical Society, 2018), as well as reflections specifically on the role of external postgraduate funding (Williams et al, 2019).

Recommendation	Stakeholder(s)
Identify a senior sponsor to 'open doors', help reach out early to allies and be prepared to take on a 'persuasive' role.	Institutions
Conduct a team self-assessment to identify gaps in subject matter expertise (for example, discipline, approach, target group, lived experience) or skills (data analysis; project planning; communications). Plan how to fill identified gaps with use of networks, co-option of internal or external expertise, or engaging in community or representative groups.	Project teams
Amplify the voices of intended 'beneficiaries' from the target groups, and ensure that students from the target groups are consulted and enabled to participate in project work or design.	Project teams
Support internal projects to work with other relevant equality change programmes wherever possible, and establish a senior 'champion' for the work.	Institutions
Consider how institutional and sector EDI and widening participation/access strategies can be structured in such a way as to support intersectional approaches.	Policymakers and sector agencies Institutions Project teams
Ensure project work discussions, decisions and actions are captured in writing, and 'future-proofed' as far as possible against staff changeover and budget reprioritisation.	Project teams
Provide a 'buddying' or networking scheme for institutions with similar challenges to work together and share approaches. Link in with PSRBs or learned societies where appropriate for disciplinary-specific work.	Policymakers and sector agencies

## 3.2 Institutional approaches

Although the project originally aimed to focus specifically on student intake, some projects shifted or widened their focus to on-course student experience or support. Reasons given for this change included:

- + making the course experience more attractive and supportive would itself impact on recruitment through materials and student feedback
- + increasing the level of awareness of differential experiences among staff and students was felt to be necessary to future work (or sustainability)
- + one project's research revealed such challenging issues for its target group on the course that it considered it inappropriate to prioritise recruitment efforts until it could guarantee a better experience for the target beneficiaries once on the course.

These reflections demonstrate the challenges of taking an approach to inclusivity that focuses on a particular 'stage' of the student lifecycle in isolation (or, equally, one operational function of the institution). They also raise the ethical considerations around targeted recruitment efforts taken in isolation from experiential improvements, and the authenticity of 'messaging' in recruitment and outreach.

### 3.2.1 Collaboration

The programme raised interesting questions as to if and how institutions were willing to 'show their working' to each other when it came to exploring the substantive challenges around protected groups. Many project teams were keen to share and learn from their peers at other institutions, but a small number faced challenging internal discussions about what they could communicate externally while still in exploratory phases (either to each other or publicly). Advance HE and Professor Liz Thomas were available for one-to-one conversations in a third party 'critical friend' role.

There were some positive collaborative discussions, however. Some projects noted similar aims and objectives to each other (as can be seen in Table 1), and three of the institutions were geographically close as well as having some common challenges (Liverpool Hope, Chester, LJMU). There were early discussions among these as to whether more formal collaborative approaches would be suitable. Indeed, a strong case can be made, given some of the challenges relating to capacity and accessing research participants in schools and the community. While the projects ultimately did not enter into a structured collaboration in the end, there were a small number of examples of 'paired' connections and networking, both within Increasing Diversity and across to the Attracting Diversity project in Scotland.

There were stronger examples of collaboration in the original and overlapping Attracting Diversity project. In one case the collaboration was on a regional basis, involving universities and colleges addressing shared challenges in one geographical area. This was particularly valuable as research could be undertaken collaboratively in schools, avoided duplication of effort and facilitated access. In a second case, institutions from across Scotland collaborated to address gendered participation in a specific discipline area. They formed a network, in which local research findings and learning about particular interventions could be shared, to inform interventions in other local areas. In the longer term the network is hoping to undertake collaborative action across Scotland to challenge gender stereotypes and promote alternative careers to men.

### 3.2.2 Intersectionality

Where possible Advance HE encouraged consideration of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989;1990) both in research methods (Christoffersen, 2017) and potentially in interventions (Advance HE, 2018). However, it should be noted that an intersectional approach was not a specific requirement of the project (a learning point for Advance HE). Intersectional quantitative data analysis also proved challenging for many ([see below](#)).

The projects tended to focus on a single protected characteristic, or two characteristics somewhat separately (usually sex and ethnicity) rather than a true intersectional analysis (the UCLAN project may be an exception). However, some intersectional understanding did surface in institutional research at times (for example, reflections on the specific experiences of mature BAME applicants, or mature male students in teacher training or healthcare).

This lack of intentional or meaningful consideration of intersectionality in targeted approaches speaks to wider challenges within the sector's access and participation work (Stevenson et al, 2019) as well as research within higher education in general (Nichols and Stahl, 2019; Harris and Patton, 2019), and particularly the challenges arising out of conscious choices to 'prioritise' certain protected characteristics in isolation from others (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019).

### 3.2.3 Understanding 'groups'

With some exceptions, most projects conceptualised aims in terms of highly aggregated groups at the point of project design (tackling underrepresentation of 'women', 'BAME students' etc.) While some started to explore further disaggregated experiences and identities as the projects moved forward, teams reported particular challenges directly related to the small populations they were facing. For example, staff noted the challenges of data protection and analysis, as well as levels of engagement and risks of 'representation fatigue' when relying on repeated or additional labour from small absolute numbers of a specific group (ECU, 2016).

The project focusing on disability did intentionally choose a sub-set category of impairments and conditions – namely specific learning difficulties/differences (SpLDs), mental health conditions, and autistic spectrum conditions – as sub-sets of a so-called 'unseen disability' grouping. However, feedback from student-researchers indicated the desire to look at each of these groupings separately (University B).

Going forward it will be necessary to further develop staff capacity, and find ways to overcome the challenge of small numbers within institutions, faculties and departments, in order to interrogate data about protected characteristics at a greater level of granularity (see [Resources](#)).

The programme prompted some teams to consider their own reflexivity and positionality when discussing their findings and plans relating to target groups, particularly where members of such groups were not well represented within the main project team themselves. Most teams indicated an awareness of the danger of 'deficit model thinking', and some actively engaged with more participatory approaches in their research approaches. However, some earlier foundational work around concepts such as white privilege (Bhopal, 2018), counter-narrative (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002), and community cultural wealth (Stevenson et al, 2019 on Yosso) may be advantageous at the outset of similar projects in future. This could also be accompanied by forming a set of principles underpinning how each project was to be conducted (for example, commitment to call out deficit model thinking, to value lived experience, etc).

Recommendations	Stakeholder(s)
Provide clarity and a public statement of support for undertaking positive action measures where appropriate, and clear consensus on moving beyond deficit models.	Policymakers and sector agencies
Provide a ‘buddying’ or networking scheme for institutions with similar challenges to work together and share approaches. Link in with PSRBs or learned societies where appropriate for disciplinary-specific work.	Policymakers and sector agencies
Make space for ‘difficult’ conversations about equity and access.	Institutions
Develop and regularly return to a Theory of Change or baseline assumptions and theory. Avoid ‘project creep’ with clearly identifiable, manageable goals.	Project teams
Make space for regular reflection on discourse and approaches (potentially with a critical friend): challenge ‘deficit model’ discourse, intersectional analysis and disaggregation of data and experiences; valuing and response to student voice.	Project teams

### 3.3 Gathering evidence: ethics, process, and data

As noted above, the majority of projects planned to achieve more than they did in the time available. While this was in part due to practical issues (the majority of projects experienced re-structures and staff changes and, as unfunded projects, this work tended to receive low priority, especially in smaller institutions with very limited capacity to undertake additional work), the primary research stage proved particularly time-consuming and challenging. The learnings here have real implications for a sector being encouraged to enhance its ‘evidence based’ approach by bodies such as the Office for Students (Office for Students, 2019).

Each institutional team has sought to undertake qualitative research with students and/or potential students, often focusing on participants with particular protected characteristics. This work is essential to understand the issues and ensure that subsequent interventions are evidence informed and likely to be successful – and, indeed, this evidence base is essential for positive action interventions.

#### 3.3.1 Qualitative research: challenges

Undertaking primary qualitative research, especially in relation to equality and diversity, is often time consuming. A number of institutional teams felt hampered by a protracted process to get ethical approval. They flagged that, within their institutions, it is unusual for professional service teams to undertake research so there is a lack of capacity here, and institutional processes may not facilitate staff located outside of academic departments undertaking research. In addition, institutions have been cautious as researching equality, diversity and inclusion in relation to protected characteristics feels risky.



In the feedback at the end of the project the majority of challenges centred around the process of undertaking qualitative research. These are summarised here, as well as being listed in the summaries of each project.

### **+ Ethics**

Most projects found that ethical approval for institutional research was far more complex and time-consuming than expected. In some cases, this caused significant delays in timetables (eg Chester and Oxford Brookes).

Practically, many staff in central or professional services units lacked a clear route to ethics approval processes, sometimes 'piggybacking' on another academic department's access or relying on an academic colleague to 'guide' them. The timescales involved in ethics approval board scheduling also had to be balanced alongside sometimes extremely narrow windows for either student participation (considering term dates and exam periods) or for enacting change (the admissions cycle, for example, has notoriously long lead-in times for publication of prospectuses, CMA compliance etc).

### **+ Research methods**

Selecting appropriate research methods was difficult for staff without prior qualitative research experience, although a number of institutions did develop or explore new approaches and tools (see [outcomes](#)). Regrettably, while Advance HE was able to offer some limited guidance in this area at times, we were unable to add additional capacity.

### **+ Research participants**

Deciding who to involve in a study is a crucial decision, and if the focus is narrow (eg on students or potential students with a particular protected characteristic or combination of particular characteristics who are already underrepresented in a population) recruiting sufficient numbers of participants can be challenging.

Some institutions used innovative approaches, such as the emancipatory action research organised by UCLAN working with local community groups, or the participatory action research involving students from one of the target disability groups (specific learning differences, mental ill health or conditions, autistic spectrum) to engage with people from the target groups.

Other institutions targeted secondary schools with larger numbers of pupils from the target group (Oxford Brookes, Gloucestershire), while others worked with their students' union as appropriate. Some institutions (eg Chester) opted to work with the whole student body to explore diversity in a wider sense.

Encouraging and enabling students to complete surveys or participate in focus groups is often challenging. One institution negotiated access to lectures, so that students could complete the questionnaire during teaching time, but this added to the time taken to complete the research. Also, it can be difficult to fit research into the academic calendar, avoiding assessment periods, reading weeks and holidays etc. We recommend continued exploration of alternative and innovative ways to enable student voices – particularly already marginalised or underrepresented voices – to inform qualitative research into student experience, for example, through digital storytelling (Austen, Jones, and Wawera, 2018).

### + **Gaining access to schools**

In the initial programme applications, a number of institutions planned to work with local schools and intended to build on their positive relations. However, gaining access to schools for research purposes proved more difficult than expected, even when universities offered activities and events in exchange (Oxford Brookes). Again, the time involved in negotiating access, and fitting in with availability within the school calendar should not be underestimated.

### + **Capacity and expertise**

As noted above, staff based in professional services often felt they lacked research capacity and expertise – and sometimes ‘credibility’. Building evaluation and research skills (or access) among a wide range of staff to help them contribute to and work with evidence-based approaches will be increasingly important within the ‘evaluative turn’ of access and participation.

## **3.3.2 Quantitative research: challenges**

Additionally, challenges were presented in quantitative analysis of student and applicant datasets. These included:

### + **Gaining access to institutional datasets (application, current students, outreach)**

Many project teams struggled to identify key ‘gatekeepers’ and negotiate access to usable, anonymised datasets internally, or to cross-reference these easily. As this programme took place before the enactment of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (s.9) transparency clause, many institutions particularly struggled to audit their admissions ‘funnel’ (ie key decision-making points such as admissions, offer, acceptance, enrolment, progression) through the lens of a particular characteristics. Ongoing improvements in sector understandings of evaluation of outreach activities may also help here.

**+ Understanding and tracking down ‘gaps’ in incomplete datasets**

Where teams were provided with datasets, they often lacked the data ‘fluency’ skills within the team to actively engage with data providers to understand and interpret gaps, mis-codings, aggregations and large ‘null’ values. This ultimately meant that some research was considered with key caveats, or ‘known unknowns’.

**+ Skills and experience in dataset analysis (trends, characteristics, low absolute numbers, comparison with national datasets).**

Often this involved levels of analysis which were either outside of the skillsets of key team members, or out of scope for resource. Improved access of a range of staff to data analysis software and relevant EDI dashboards may aid similar work.

Recommendations	Stakeholder(s)
<p>Provide a ‘research and evidence champion’ to connect internal research expertise (skills and subject specialism) and institutional data analysis units together with professional services actors and stakeholders. This can take ownership of providing (for example):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ a clear route for internal researchers on the student experience to access relevant datasets from the student record, learning analytics, admissions and recruitment (with appropriate precautions for anonymity and GDPR considerations)</li> <li>+ guidance on ethical approval for primary research within the institution</li> <li>+ funding streams and training support for staff upskilling or buy-out of researcher time.</li> </ul>	<p>Policymakers and sector agencies Institutions</p>
<p>Conduct a team self-assessment to identify gaps in subject matter expertise (for example, discipline, approach, target group, lived experience) or skills (data analysis; project planning; communications). Plan how to fill identified gaps with use of networks, co-option of internal or external expertise, or engaging in community or representative groups.</p>	<p>Project teams</p>

## Appendix A: Case studies

A selection of the projects are presented in further detail below and contain the institutions' own reflections on successes and key learning. These summaries are primarily collated from both mid-stage and end-project reports, as well as any presentations or summaries at collaborative meetings. Terminology generally reflects that used by the project teams.

### University of Gloucestershire

**Relevant protected characteristic(s):** Race

**Target beneficiary group(s):** Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students

**Subject(s) and courses:** Undergraduate programmes in media and education.

**Project led by:** Equality and Diversity

**Aim:** To increase and stabilise number of UK domiciled BME students participating in undergraduate courses in the School of Education and the School of Media.

**Goal:** By the end of the academic year 2019-20 our aspiration is to increase the proportion of UK domicile BME students enrolled on courses in the School of Media to 10% and Initial Teacher Training in the School of Education to 5.5%, reflecting our 2019-20 access agreement target for education. These targets are reflective of the university's current, respective BME profile and take account of the geographic profile of our existing students.

#### **Key activities:**

- + analysis of institutional data to assess underrepresentation
- + focus groups with current students and school pupils.

#### **Achievements:**

- + the Reciprocal Mentoring positive action programme pilot of five students received such positive feedback from partners it expanded to 10 students (including the vice-chancellor) and then nine in following years. The vice-chancellor now leads our race equality work, and there are much more frequent conversations around race equity
- + the project has acted as a catalyst for a number of other significant pieces of work across the university (such as tackling the ethnicity attainment gap, and supporting Access and Participation plans), as well as engagement by staff in equality and diversity more broadly. This includes more staff engaging in and taking ownership of EDI related activities eg the university celebrated Women's History Month for the first time, and from 2017 support was given for the introduction of a diversity award as part of our annual staff awards ceremony. A celebration of diversity competition for students has been sponsored by the head of the School of Media. Staff involved in the IDP project won the 2019 staff diversity award

- + after the School of Media selected diversity as a key business priority both in the delivery of the curriculum and in its workforce, greater attention is being paid to increase the diversity of external speakers at student-facing events. As an institution, we have continued and mainstreamed all of our interventions: colleagues in the Future Plan Team actively invite more ethnically diverse role models and speakers. Student feedback from these events indicate that they are some of our most popular speakers.

### Next steps:

- + the next steps are to develop an action plan with short and intermediate outcomes, using the Theory of Change model. The intention is to align actions with the timescales for the university's access and participation plan and the university's equality and diversity action plan to assist in the monitoring and review of the activities, and alignment with the university's strategic priorities
- + the project also continues to communicate the work it is doing internally and externally: initially we set up a Twitter account and blog – our students regularly write pieces for the blog – and in the last academic year (2018/19) introduced a podcast, delivered a paper at the 2018 Advance HE Conference, spoke at an Open University symposium, and are working with another IDP project team to share learnings of our reciprocal mentoring scheme
- + we have also just established a BME Staff/Student Network to provide a voice for, and enable the university to learn from, our BME staff and students.

### Process issues and lessons learnt:

- + **staying focused.** The challenge for the project team was to stay focused on our original research priorities, as exploration of the data revealed interesting issues that could have been pursued. This was addressed by revisiting the vision, and the senior leader in the institution providing timely reminders to remain within project boundaries
- + **research quality.** Concern about the validity of the research as the team did not include a researcher. This was overcome by reassurance from ECU (Advance HE), and drawing on some published research to validate institutional findings
- + **student participation in focus groups.** Within the university it was difficult to persuade students to participate in focus groups despite involving the students' union in organising them; in future they will try to offer incentives to students to participate. The team were dependent on schools to run focus groups with pupils, and despite offering activities and support in exchange for access, it took much longer to organise and to undertake the focus groups than planned.

## University of Leicester

**Relevant protected characteristic(s):** Race

**Target beneficiary group(s):** Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) students

**Subject(s) and courses:** Postgraduate taught programmes in Museum Studies

**Project led by:** Department of Museum Studies

**Aim:** To attract more UK BAME students on the postgraduate taught programmes in the School of Museum Studies, and support them to develop their careers and thrive in the cultural sector.

**Goal:** To attract and support a student body that better reflects the demographics of the UK and can better support the needs of museums to employ a more diverse workforce.

### **Key activities:**

- + analysis of current admissions data to understand the profile of Museum Studies courses; how they compare to other professional-facing postgraduate taught programmes within the university; whether underrepresentation changes at different stages in the admissions process and, if so, why
- + qualitative research to exploring graduate experiences, in particular how BAME graduates found their experience of studying with the School of Museum Studies; how the course supported their career ambitions; and their views on increasing access for future BAME students
- + reviewed and extended a scholarship scheme drawing on positive action. The Open and Diversity scholarships provide four partial scholarships valued at £3,000 each for students from a range of underrepresented groups including those from BAME backgrounds, those with a disability and those from lower socio-economic groups. These are available across all of taught postgraduate programmes in Museum Studies and both distance learning and campus-based students are eligible
- + fundamental review of curricula to increase and enhance the representation of underrepresented groups and perspectives. This resulted in increasing the number of teachers from non-white backgrounds, creating new teaching resources and videos profiling decolonising initiatives and debates in the museum sector, adding subtitled and BSL signed resources, and designing new assignments to ensure students engage with scholarship from people with a range of lived experiences
- + reviewed external communications to ensure these reflected the school's commitment to nurturing a diverse student body
- + presented findings to colleagues to embed learning and build institution-wide support
- + applied learning from this project to inform other equality developments, for example, a newly launched Disability Action and Awareness Group (DAAG) which takes an active and anticipatory approach to developing inclusive assessments, timetabling and student support.

**Achievements:**

- + there has been an increase in BME student numbers, from around 4% to 10% of the total UK/ Home fees cohort from 2015 to 2017
- + diversity Scholarship applicants who are unsuccessful in being awarded a scholarship typically continue to register with the school despite this, suggesting a strong commitment to studying here
- + the positive action Diversity Scholarships received external funding support, enabling them to be continued for a significant number of additional years.

**Next steps:**

- + carry out a thorough analysis of the impact of this project and the measures taken, using data to explore BAME student representation across courses; BAME attainment; and the effects of scholarships on different eligible groups
- + continue to review external communications to ensure they reflect commitments to supporting a more diverse sector
- + explore opportunities to build understanding and support for positive action across the museum sector
- + explore how the school's graduate network (MS Connect) can support diversity, by considering opportunities for mentoring support and support from wider networks.

**Process issues and lessons learnt:**

- + the school itself and the colleagues who participated in the project are highly committed to equality and diversity, and this has been a strong driver for the work
- + rigorous data and evidence have been vital to develop understanding of the issues and develop initiatives that overcome the barriers to participation
- + tackling the barriers to participation usually requires multiple, intersecting efforts rather than single track solutions (for example, the use of positive action scholarships is a powerful way to address underrepresentation but must also be accompanied by fundamental changes in the way courses are designed, delivered and promoted in order to create an environment in which BAME students can thrive and flourish)
- + although a local project, it has been valuable to have a cross-institutional working group, and senior management support, both within the school and the university
- + the team have better understood the importance of identifying and embedding measures in ways that are visible and sustainable in the longer term and across the institution.

An [extended University of Leicester case study](#) is available online.

## University B (Project 1)

**Relevant protected characteristic(s):** Race

**Target beneficiary group(s):** BAME students

**Subject(s) and courses:** Undergraduate courses in arts and humanities

**Project led by:** Central research unit

**Aim:** The initial aim was to understand what factors inform degree subject choice for BAME students, what they perceive as barriers and enablers in arts and humanities, and to develop and test resources that help students to consider arts and humanities as potential options.

Researching the experiences of BAME students in arts and humanities departments demonstrated that more work is required to make students feel that they belong. Thus, the primary aim now is to improve the experiences of BAME students in these departments increasing the numbers of BAME students in the faculty has now become a secondary aim.

**Goal:** The initial goal was to increase the proportion of students identifying as black and minority ethnic choosing to progress into degree-level studies in the arts and humanities. The primary goal now is to develop institutional knowledge of the concept of decolonising the curriculum, to improve the experiences of BAME students across the whole institution.

### **Key activities:**

- + qualitative research with current BAME students in the arts and humanities
- + developing an inclusive curriculum toolkit
- + expanding understanding and knowledge at the institutional level of the concept of decolonising the curriculum by organising events for staff with an interest in this issue
- + sharing learning within the institution.

### **Achievements:**

- + undertaking candid research with BAME students about their experiences
- + a project group of very committed colleagues who took the findings from the initial research on board and are working on addressing larger institutional issues
- + identifying where we can potentially do BAME recruitment and outreach work in the future, by matching data from the Higher Education Access Tracker to our internal lists of target schools for recruitment
- + developing a further subject-specific project plan activity around improving BAME students' experiences.



**Next steps:**

- + developing the inclusive learning toolkit
- + organising a conference for staff around addressing some of the experiences BAME students face
- + delivering a series of special interest group sessions for widening participation colleagues on the experiences of BAME students/outcomes for BAME students/decolonising the curriculum.

**Process issues and lessons learnt:**

- + recruiting participants for the research was challenging. We tried to use inclusive wording, recognising that not all students identify with the label “BAME”, and worked with the students’ union BAME committee, but still the response rate was low in a discipline with already low numbers of BAME students
- + if the work is to be evidence-informed the approach needs to be flexible: the research highlighted a key issue around students’ feelings of belonging that was not the focus of the research, so the focus of the project shifted
- + it was recognised that we needed to engage more with critical race theory, understanding whiteness within an institution, and decolonising the curriculum
- + developing an informal network of staff interested in anti-racist work across the university has been very successful, resulting in collaboratively organised events on the theme of liberating / decolonising the curriculum.

## University of Chester

**Relevant protected characteristic(s):** Race**Target beneficiary group(s):** BAME students**Subject(s) and courses:** Undergraduates in Primary Teaching QTS; History; Fine Art**Project led by:** Outreach Team**Aim:**

- + increase BAME admissions across the institution
- + gain an understanding of why BAME students choose University of Chester
- + gain an understanding of what could be done to promote and sustain admissions from BAME applicants.

**Goal:** To implement evidence-informed initiatives, for example in relation to marketing and pre-enrolment outreach events to engage BAME students, and to improve students’ sense of belonging in HE.

### **Key activities:**

- + analysis of admissions data by course in relation to BAME student admissions. These were used to identify three subject areas for further focus in Initial Teacher Training, Fine Art and History
- + conducted a survey with students studying the target courses in two parts: 'University decision-making process' focusing on the admissions process, and 'Sense of belonging at University'. The aim of the questionnaire was to understand whether identity representation was important in the decision-making process of choosing universities, as well as how they feel part of the University of Chester
- + arranged focus groups with students from the target courses, informed by the questionnaire responses
- + implemented evidence-informed initiatives.

### **Achievements:**

- + achieving ethical approval, designing a questionnaire and arranging focus groups. Dates were agreed with programme leaders to attend lectures and invite students to complete the survey during lecture time
- + the recording of ethnicity on the existing withdrawal data and exit interviews has been re-introduced. By including this information at the time of the exit interview, the BAME-status of students who withdraw is more readily visible, and can even be discussed during the interview in some cases
- + some indication that BAME student offer rates may have increased slightly
- + plans to recruit regional cohorts for a recently launched programme focusing on BAME students in Years 10 and 11.

### **Next steps:**

- + conduct focus groups with students (particularly engaging with student societies via the students' union) about their experiences
- + following positive uptake of the questionnaire in the specific disciplines, the decision was taken by members of our Access and Participation Plan committee to roll out across all undergraduates to give a fuller institutional perspective. Further ethical approval was sought and granted, and the questionnaire conducted in summer 2019. Data is being analysed in partnership with the market research team, and evidence will be used to inform marketing strategies, outreach activities and campus experience, to improve engagement and sense of belonging.

**Process issues and lessons learnt:**

- + **ethical approval.** This process took longer than expected as the team had no prior experience in this area. It was addressed by support from the chair of the ethics committee, but it significantly delayed the time when the qualitative research with students could be undertaken
- + **questionnaire wording.** This took time to get right as the team felt they lacked experience and needed to get the wording right in relation to student characteristics to avoid bias and offence. The survey was revised by a variety of staff, and there was much discussion about the use of certain phrases and language. This lengthened the process but resulted in a robust and effective questionnaire
- + **staffing issues.** Staff changes have resulted in delays as the project has had to be presented again, but more challenging has been workload. This project has been an addition to the existing workload of staff, and sometimes it cannot be prioritised and this can be problematic when finding suitable meeting times.

## Liverpool John Moores University

**Protected characteristic(s):** Race

**Target group(s):** Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) students

**Subject(s) and courses:** Initial Teacher Training (ITT)

**Project led by:** Equality and Diversity

**Aim:** Identify the key issues of the BAME recruitment gap.

**Goal:** Increase the recruitment of BAME Students into specific schools within our Faculty of Education

**Key activities:**

- + team established comprising Equality and Diversity and colleagues from Widening Access, lecturers on the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Programme, colleagues from Academic Planning and from Student Recruitment and Admissions to devise workable strategies and action plan for the increase of BAME students on the ITT course and their retention
- + analysis of ethnicity data relating to ITT subject areas were analysed, confirming statistical underrepresentation of BAME ethnicity students applying to and enrolling onto some ITT streams
- + a focus group was also conducted with current BAME students on three ITT programmes. (English, Science and French) to explore application journeys, motivations to join teaching profession (including discussion of academic flight), and suggestions to increase recruitment.

## **Achievements:**

The project developed some **key internal recommendations** of further areas for exploration:

- + **role model programmes:** BAME role model involvement in career days
- + **recruitment events:** work in partnership with Liverpool schools and colleagues so as to raise awareness of the teaching profession among BAME pupils. Due to the lack of BAME applicants a key approach for positive action would be to increase promotional methods and highlight further areas of engagement, as information from the focus group suggests that applicant days did not reach the engagement that was needed. The need for some community engagement activities to assist with the application/interview techniques within the BAME community as our data analysis reflected that BAME applicants are not progressing through to interview stage
- + **parent communication:** communication with parents at events such as parents' evenings to help them to understand how rewarding a teaching career is. Parents can also be invited to schools to be part of a day in the life of a teacher
- + **respect campaign:** use equality theme dates such as anti-bullying week to highlight the level of bullying and disrespect most teachers encounter on a daily basis and how this can be changed to encourage students into teaching
- + **collaborative work:** the need work in partnership with other projects in the city to progress this agenda to make the response a city-wide one.

## **University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN)**

**Relevant protected characteristic(s):** Race, Sex

**Target beneficiary group(s):** Local South Asian communities, Eastern European communities and White British young men from low participation backgrounds in Pennine Lancashire and peripheral areas.

**Subject(s) and courses:** N/A

**Project led by:** Centre for Volunteering and Community Leadership

**Aim:** The original aim was to work with Muslim students, families and communities, and university staff and students to understand views of the benefits of higher education and barriers to participation, the choice of subjects, and interventions that will improve participation by Muslim students from the local community. Also, to develop a methodology that can be transferred to other groups.

The revised aim is to use emancipatory action research with South Asian communities, Eastern Europeans and White British young men from low participation backgrounds in Pennine Lancashire and peripheral areas to develop understanding of the barriers to participation in further and higher education to inform interventions to improve participation.

**Goal:** To develop awareness among community members of the construction of barriers, to share these stories and to develop community-led or owned solutions that 'change the story'.

### Key activities:

- + **emancipatory action research** was used in a number of community contexts to engage participating communities in problematising barriers to education and creating a theory of change. For example, 'Barrier Football' used football coaching techniques to engage young people in problematising the barriers they faced in accessing both further and higher education. The following stages are being implemented:
  - **being.** The point of initial action where problems are identified: looking at the problem around barriers to accessing higher education for culturally and socially marginalised or objective communities
  - **problematising.** The peer researchers or 'animateurs' worked in a dialectical manner with groups of people, sharing stories around experiences of education and how these relate to their aspirations for themselves or their families/communities
  - **conscientisation.** This takes place throughout the process through the storytelling and conversations, but it refers to politicising the issues raised and starting to think of ways they can change the narrative
  - **action.** Groups engage in action with the wider community or, in this case, the education policy community. For example, it could be a group that plans for change or steers policy
  - **review.** The research is reviewed in terms of process, method, dialectical trajectory, sustainability, relevance and legitimacy
  - **communication.** Communicating or disseminating the 'story' in an empowering manner, whereby the storytellers have ownership of the narrative and the way it is disseminated and how it informs policy and practice.
- + **institutional data analysis** supplemented this work, looking at which subjects are attractive to which of the target groups.

### Achievements:

- + 397 people participated in the projects (although not all were from the target geographical area)
- + the research demonstrated the importance of three key issues: financial issues (particularly the contribution of income from employment to the family); negative views of parents about the value of higher education; and low self-esteem and confidence
- + analysis of institutional data showed subject preferences for particular communities and although these vary, they are all vocational, emphasising the importance of employment.

### Next steps:

- + produce a short book on Changing the Story and a film for screening

- + invite a wider audience that is both political and community-focused to hear groups and individuals telling their stories at a national conference in Burnley.

**Process issues and lessons learnt:**

- + involving community members in activities is an effective way of developing understanding of the issues from their perspective, and helping to generate deeper understanding of the issues for participants, communities and the education sector.

## Oxford Brookes University

**Relevant protected characteristic(s):** Sex

**Target beneficiary group(s):** Women students

**Subject(s) and courses:** Undergraduate mechanical engineering courses

**Project led by:** UK Recruitment and Partnerships

**Aim:** To develop understanding about the progression of female students into mechanical engineering and how it differs to male students' experiences, and use this knowledge to improve the pipeline of students studying on programmes in mechanical engineering.

**Goal:** To develop creative evidence-informed ways to increase the number of applications from women, initially focusing on UK undergraduate students, to study mechanical engineering programmes.

**Key activities:**

- + **research with prospective students:** to understand Level 3 female students and understand their awareness and understanding of engineering courses and their career choices post 16
- + **understanding female engineering degree students' journeys** and their understanding of women in engineering
- + **understanding gendered differences:** investigated male engineering degree students' journeys and the differences between this and their female counterparts.

**Achievements:**

- + successful and insightful focus groups with students from a diverse range of schools and current male and female engineers
- + identified a stark knowledge gap in understanding engineering and the diverse range of skills and jobs that can follow a degree in this subject, which the intervention will aim to mitigate.

**Next steps:**

- + plans to develop a successful intervention to assist in mitigating any challenges or barriers highlighted in the research.

**Process issues and lessons learnt:**

- + change doesn't happen overnight. While there was a lot of initial enthusiasm about the project, maintaining momentum over a significant period of time was challenging, especially in the context of managing expectations about the outcomes
- + ethics: start the ethics process as early as possible, as this can hold up projects substantially
- + recruiting participants for the focus groups was difficult, particularly the internal focus groups with current female students on engineering courses. The number of eligible students is small, so getting a large enough sample was challenging.

## University B (Project 2)

**Protected characteristic(s):** Disability

**Target group(s):** Students with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs), mental health and/or autism spectrum conditions.

**Subject(s) and courses:** Across the institution, no specific courses.

**Project led by:** Disability and Dyslexia support team originally, then relocated to central team supporting student participatory action research methodology.

**Aim:** To investigate what influenced current students' thinking about progression to HE, their current student experience – including academic factors and their understanding and perspective on the financial and support changes.

**Goal:** To develop new resources (interventions, information advice and guidance, activity outlines) to support potential students with the same conditions into HE (and possibly through HE), test and refine new measures to share with the sector.

**Key activities:**

- + developed a participatory action research (PAR) approach, working with students who identified with one or more of these conditions (SpLD, mental health, autistic spectrum) as co-researchers. Students were recruited to participate in this project, paid for three hours per week, with no work during exams, reading weeks and holidays
- + student researchers, supported by a project facilitator, designed, disseminated and analysed their own research questionnaire, and presented this to staff and students at a variety of presentations

- + key findings from the student researchers' project:
  - 1 Inconsistency of the implementation of students' learning support plans.
  - 2 Prevalence of mental health issues among the postgraduate community.
  - 3 Inaccessibility and poor advice and guidance on leave of absence options/procedures and options for part-time study.
- + evaluation has also been undertaken of the experience of the PAR students
- + papers have been presented at student services and education conferences about the process of using PAR in an HE context.

### **Next steps:**

- + recommendations have been put forward to develop new resources to support access and success
- + continue to communicate findings back to relevant departments in order to enhance and improve institutional processes and practices
- + write case studies of good practice in the institution to share with all staff through training sessions for Disability Support Officers
- + write up a full report of the students' findings
- + present at future conferences
- + develop guidance for staff on planning and designing a PAR project.

### **Process issues and lessons learnt:**

- + PAR approach has been time consuming, but the students have valued the experience and the results are informative
- + PAR is intended to be undertaken by practitioners who are able to make changes, but students are comparatively powerless in this process. They have been able to influence the research focus and process, but work is required to influence others to translate their findings into change within the institution
- + ensuring accessibility and genuine participation due to various individual constraints, especially timetabling and time away from the university.



## Appendix B: Positive action (s.158) checklist

First published in the [Attracting Diversity End of Project Report](#)

In collaboration with Professor Chantal Davies at University of Chester, Advance HE (formally Equality Challenge Unit) compiled a checklist of questions in relation to positive action (as understood under s.158 of the Equality Act 2010) to support institutions in the design, development and implementation of special measures for protected groups.

This list is not exhaustive or proof against legal challenge, but is intended as a starting point, to highlight key questions or considerations which institutions should be able to answer. For any enquiries in relation to this checklist please contact Advance HE and see the detailed guidance within the Attracting Diversity: End of Project Report (section 4.6).

### Step 1. Evidencing and understanding a disadvantage: the ‘reasonably think’ test

- + is there a particular **need, underrepresentation or disadvantage** among a group that the institution wishes to address?
- + what is the **evidence** of that need, underrepresentation or disadvantage (ie how is it that you ‘reasonably’ think it exists)?
- + what is the **cause** of that need, underrepresentation or disadvantage?

### Step 2. Designing and balancing an initiative: considering ‘proportionality’

- + how will a particular measure **address** the need, underrepresentation or disadvantage?
- + might any other groups be disadvantaged by the introduction of the measure (conduct an equality impact analysis)? If so, what plans are in place to **alleviate** or **mitigate** negative impacts?
- + is there another, more effective (or less adverse to other groups), way for the HEI/college to address that need, disadvantage or underrepresentation (ie **proportionality**)?
- + does the measure rely on **objective** and **transparent** criteria? How will you ensure decisions in relation to the measure are taken on an individual basis (ie a ‘**savings clause**’)?

### Step 3: Rollout and evaluation: sustaining ‘proportionality’

- + for what period of time will the measure be in place? What arrangements are in place to **review** the impact of the measure? How will you **embed** review mechanisms to consider when aims may have been achieved, or the measure is no longer needed or appropriate (a ‘**sunset clause**’)?
- + **consult, communicate** and **publish** rationale, details of measure and mechanisms for review.

## Resources

A small sample of resources which may be useful to institutions considering similar projects.

All URLs correct on 1 November 2019.

### **Working with equality data: Advance HE research and data briefings:**

- + working with data [www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/using-data-and-evidence/working-with-data/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/using-data-and-evidence/working-with-data/)
- + intersectional approaches to equality research and data [www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/intersectional-approaches-to-equality-research-and-data/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/intersectional-approaches-to-equality-research-and-data/)
- + intersectional approaches to equality and diversity (case studies) [www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/intersectional-approaches-equality-diversity/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/intersectional-approaches-equality-diversity/)
- + ethics in primary research [www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/ethics-in-primary-research-focus-groups-interviews-and-surveys/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/ethics-in-primary-research-focus-groups-interviews-and-surveys/)
- + reflexivity, positioning yourself in equality and diversity research [www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/reflexivity-positioning-yourself-in-equality-and-diversity-research/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/reflexivity-positioning-yourself-in-equality-and-diversity-research/)
- + monitoring and evaluating impact [www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/monitoring-evaluating-impact/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/monitoring-evaluating-impact/)
- + analysing qualitative data [www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/analysing-qualitative-data/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/analysing-qualitative-data/)

### **Exploring EDI in the curriculum:**

- + Advance HE (2019) Embedding EDI in the curriculum: a programme standard [www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/embedding-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-curriculum-programme-standard](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/embedding-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-curriculum-programme-standard)
- + Advance HE (2019) The intercultural curriculum Thematic Series – Advance HE [www.advance-he.ac.uk/scotland/intercultural-curriculum-overview](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/scotland/intercultural-curriculum-overview)

### **Admissions, recruitment and participation:**

- + EHRC Higher Education Admissions [www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/higher-education-admissions](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/higher-education-admissions)
- + Office for Students Insight Briefs [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/insight-briefs/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/insight-briefs/)
- + Office for Students Standards of evidence and evaluation self-assessment tool [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/)
- + TASO (Transforming Access and Student outcomes in Higher Education) [www.taso-he.org/](http://www.taso-he.org/)
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## Glossary of terms

Advance HE acknowledges that terminology around personal and group characteristics, identities and categorisations is ever changing, and is historically, culturally and contextually situated. This can result in limitations, as well as inconsistencies in understandings, in work to tackle systemic and historic inequity. For transparency, we set out below our understandings and use of terms in the specific context of this report. Note that, as discussed in the project overview, this work primarily used the lens of the UK Equality Act 2010, and so terminology used is more likely to reflect how the legislation defines and categories protected characteristics.

- + **BAME/BME:** An acronym for 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic'. 'BAME' is often used in policy discourses and statistical categorisation with the UK higher education sector as a grouping distinct from 'White' (including minority white ethnicities). However, the term will be challenged by some and limiting in certain conversations both in its configuration and in its use (which can homogenise a wide range of experiences and identities). In UK higher education statistical information, unless otherwise specified, BAME/BME is usually used in reference to 'Home (UK)' fee status students rather than international students. However, all ethnicities and nationalities have protections under the Equality Act 2010 under 'race' (see below).
- + **Belonging:** a sense of inclusion, welcome: feeling "at home", and "feeling safe" (Yuval-Davis, 2006)
- + **Disability/Disabled:** 'Disability' is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 (s6), referencing a range of long-term health conditions, impairments, or physical or mental illness, which impact on day to day life. 'Disabled' is often used to acknowledge the social model of disability (that posits that societal structures disable individuals).
- + **EDI:** acronym of equality (or equity), diversity and inclusion. These concepts have different meanings and interpretations, often encompassing issues of representation, equity of access and opportunity as well as outcomes. EDI as an 'aim' or business priority usually refers to taking active steps to ensure these, beyond legal compliance.
- + **Ethnicity:** used in its UK context of a common ancestry, which may refer to elements of culture, identity, religion, language and physical appearance (ONS).
- + **Gender:** (see 'Sex').
- + **Intervention:** used here to refer to any new, stopped or changed activity (programme, funding, training, policy, practice or way of working).

- + **Intersectionality:** developed by Prof Kimberlé Crenshaw, a theory or approach that acknowledges the specific and compounding effects of oppression relating to multiple identities. Originally conceived as a 'lens' to analyse the effect of structural sexism and racism on the lives of black women, the approach has (not without challenge) been used to examine a range of different structures of discrimination.
- + **LGBQ+:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer and/or any sexual orientation other than 'heterosexual'.
- + **Positive or targeted action:** refers to actions which are focused on or limited to a specific beneficiary group, with the aim of redressing the effects of past discrimination, underrepresentation and meeting specific needs. Legal definitions of these will vary: see discussion in section 2.4.
- + **Protected characteristics:** identity or group characteristics which have specific legal protections against discrimination, harassment and victimisation. There are nine identity characteristics covered under the UK's Equality Act 2010 (applicable to England, Wales and Scotland), named as: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race; religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
- + **'Race':** As a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 (s. 9) this refers to a range of characteristics including colour, nationality, and ethnic or national origins. Advance HE approaches 'race' equality from the position that 'race' is a social construct. For further notes on Advance HE's current use of terminology on 'race' see [www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/using-data-and-evidence/use-language-race-ethnicity/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/using-data-and-evidence/use-language-race-ethnicity/).
- + **Sex:** although 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably we understand these to have different meanings (with gender as a primarily social rather than biological construct). Generally, Advance HE prefers to use 'gender equality' in our work, with a view to including a range of identities and experiences, including non-binary understandings of gender. However, as this report focuses on issues of legal protections and the specific context of the Equality Act 2010 (s. 11), there are more frequent references to the protected characteristic of 'sex'
- + **Trans:** used here to reference anyone protected by the Equality Act 2010 (s.7) protected characteristic of 'gender reassignment' (which includes social as well as legal or medical transition). Some organisations use 'trans' to also consider non-binary and other diverse gender identities.

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