

# What Works? Student Retention & Success



## Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change

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What Works? Student Retention & Success is a Paul Hamlyn Foundation initiative working with the Higher Education Academy, Action on Access and 13 UK universities. The second phase (What Works?2) builds on the first phase of the initiative (What Works?1). What Works?1 culminated in the report: Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change (Thomas 2012).

## Summary Report

For widening access students and those from non-traditional backgrounds, the transition into and through level 4 is a complex and important process (Nicholls, 2007, Briggs, 2012). One of the major areas of concern for students in their first year of higher education is successfully negotiating points of assessment (Tinto, 2006) which is known to generate a critical point for the retention of students. As writing academic assignments remains one of the most prolific forms of assessment in HE and the critical thinking this requires is core to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century curriculum (Barnett, 2014), it is important to eliminate barriers to student success that result from students' negative perception of assignments and the accompanying assignment brief. The *WhatWorks?* initiative implemented at the University of Wolverhampton builds on the research above as well as that of McGinty (2011), who proposes that assignment feedback is crucial to level 4 students' sense of developing belonging in higher education as it provides confirmation that they are on the right course and have the potential to be successful. The initiative implemented at the University of Wolverhampton uses the criteria derived from the DiSA project (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) to provide a framework for accessible and comprehensible assignment briefs. It is also mindful of Dhillon & Oldham's (2012) findings that students circulate misunderstandings of assignment requirements amongst themselves when they do not understand the assignment requirements and Howell-Richardson's (2012) warning that students perceive that assignment briefs contain a hidden golden key or 'correct answer' that they need to provide within their assignment. Therefore, the University of Wolverhampton's initiative advocates a set of principles that encourages students to work in groups, take the lead in unpacking the requirements of the assignment brief and to discuss these with their lecturers. This aims to develop students' confidence in interpreting the assignment brief whilst challenging the golden key concept and also promoting the transparency of the assignment brief to students.

This work is of further importance in reducing the institutional attainment gap. The disparity between the percentage of students from minority backgrounds and their white counterparts who are awarded 1st and 2:1 degree classifications is a nationally recognised issue and the national attainment gap is currently 15.2% (ECU, 2015). The attainment gap at the University of Wolverhampton is problematic. In 2010/11 the disparity was 28% and, at that time, 10% points above the national average. As a consequence, there is now focused attention on this issue. The *WhatWorks?* Programme intended to also respond to this issue and focus on embedding the inclusive assessment approach, which aims to increase the number of students achieving module grades of 50% or more, enhance student retention and increase students' sense of belonging – their level of social connectedness with their Faculty and the University. In doing so, the programme also aims to narrow the attainment gap.

### Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

The *WhatWorks?* programme at the University of Wolverhampton has focused on implementing and evaluating a two staged inclusive assessment intervention. The first stage involved reviewing the quality of assignment briefs against a set of evidence based criteria (Cousin and Cureton, 2012), these guidelines include ensuring that the assignment brief is:

- concise (one side of A4), provides a single location for all assignment information, uses appropriate to level and student focused language.
- provides information on the product as well as process of the assessment.
- refers to the learning outcomes, the marking criteria and where marks can be lost or gained.

The second stage involved the implementation of student led assignment unpacking sessions. These were structured around three principles<sup>1</sup>:

- Students discuss in groups their understanding of the assignment requirements and feed these back to the group and the lecturer;
- Students are enabled to anonymously ask questions about what they do not understand, for example by putting the question on a Post-it Note and placing it on the wall.
- Lecturers respond to the questions raised in the class and address any misconceptions in student understanding. This information should then be included in a Frequently Asked Questions thread in the VLE.

The approach adopted by the University of Wolverhampton aimed to provide clear guidelines that provided lecturers with a structure which they could employ in their classes in their own way, thereby providing a consistency in style. A number of delivery approaches were developed and observed including the use of voting systems, the implementation of Socratic, role play, peer groups marking/feedback and 'mocked up work' to name but a few examples.

### Evidence of impact

Taking a centralised approach to evaluation, the University of Wolverhampton assessed its contribution to the *WhatWorks?* through both quantitative and qualitative means. The Evaluation Strategy drew on the Logic Chain Model thereby considering the activities delivered, the attitude and behavioural changes that were observed as a result, the impact of this on students' sense of belonging and how this related to improved retention and success. The differences in staff attitudes and behaviours were captured through interviews with the staff involved in the *WhatWorks?* programme. The student engagement data was captured in Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012) sessions with students, while the impact of this on student belonging was captured via a cohort belongingness study led by Mantz Yorke. The improvements in retention and success were captured in the quantitative analysis of module outcomes.

Quantitative Analysis: The evaluation of the inclusive assessment initiative utilised the attainment figures for the modules involved in the '*WhatWorks?*' programme. This analysis included a comparison of current module performance to the performance in previous years. Where possible a

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<sup>1</sup> How this was applied to Arts based subjects is discussed in the case study provided in Appendix v.

comparison to comparative modules of the same cohort, where students have not experienced the intervention, was included. This revealed that there was a significant increase in performance compared to previous years in the numbers of students who gain 50% or more, with a marked difference for those students who gained 70% and above. There was also a significant reduction in the number of students who did not submit. Where it was possible to find comparator modules, these changes were not observed. Of particular interest is that this approach impacted more significantly on students from minority backgrounds who demonstrated enhanced improvement in their grades in comparison to their white counterparts (see figures 1, 2 and 3).

Figure 1: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in 'WhatWorks?' The initiative commenced 2013/14

50% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	37%	72%	74%	+37%
White	53%	61%	70%	+17%

Figure 2: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in 'WhatWorks?' The initiative commenced 2013/14

60% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	18%	51%	55%	+37%
White	27%	34%	40%	+13%

Figure 3: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in 'WhatWorks?' The initiative commenced 2013/14

70% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	14%	30%	35%	+21%
White	14%	19%	27%	+13%

This suggests that this initiative is a useful technique within the wider work the University is undertaking to significantly reduce its ethnicity based attainment gap.

Qualitative Evaluation: Qualitative evaluations were carried out with both students who studied the modules where the inclusive assessment initiative was implemented and with the lecturing staff who implemented the initiative. The students' data was collected utilising the Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012) which educates and engages students with the issues being research and empowers them to provide information about the issue and to make solution based recommendations. In this case, the latter stage of the process allowed the *WhatWorks?* team to work with students as co-creators in the development of the inclusive assessment curricula. The data collected from students indicates that students liked the inclusive assessment approach, especially the assessment unpacking. They felt it encouraged their autonomy as learners, enhanced their confidence in themselves and their ability to be successful, and provided a pathway for productive discussion about assignment requirements. The latter opened the door to more productive learning relationships between students and lecturers.

The data gathered from lecturers was collected through an open ended questionnaire and interviews. This evaluation indicated that staff who have implemented this initiative were surprised at the increased engagement of students when this method is used to discuss assignments. Lecturers were also surprised at the apparent mismatch of expectations surrounding the accessibility and comprehensibility of the briefs that they produce. Lecturers also noted a marked decrease in the students who requested one-to-one tutorials to discuss what an assignment brief was asking them to do; some lecturers comment on the increase in discussions about assignment content within tutorials.

**Belongingness Data:** To capture aspects of students' belonging to their department and/or University, the students who were involved in the *WhatWorks?* initiative also took part in a cohort belongingness study. The *WhatWorks?* team administered Mantz Yorke's Belongingness Questionnaire twice a year, over a two year period, to the students who were involved in the pilot discipline areas (Sport Sciences, Bio-Medical Sciences and Art and Design). The questionnaires were administered in November 2013, March 2014, November 2014, March 2015, November, 2015<sup>2</sup> and April 2016, therefore capturing changes in the belongingness of 2 discrete groups of students as they transitioned into the University and through level 4 and level 5. The main themes in the data suggests that there is an increase in UW students' self-reported engagement over the period of the initiative which was greater than that of seen in the average responses of students from all the *WhatWorks?* HEIs<sup>3</sup>. Also, a decline in self-reported belonging at a course level and self-reported academic self confidence was observed between the start of the *WhatWorks?* initiative (first semester of level 4) to the end of the programme (second semester of the level 5) which was not observed in the average responses of all *WhatWorks?* HEI, where both aspects of belongingness remained stable over the period of the programme.

Of further interest, the University's average self-reported levels of engagement within the pilot discipline cohort study differs to that of the findings of the University-Wide Belongingness Study (see below for details). The findings of the latter piece of work indicated that all subscales of belongingness (engagement, belonging at a course level and self-confidence) dipped to some extent in level 5 from the level 4 score and then picking up in level 6 to exceed the level 4 point. This provides some evidence that the *WhatWorks?* inclusive assessment approach positively impacted on levels of student engagement and protected students from the level 5 slump observed in the Wolverhampton-Wide Belongingness Study. However, the initiative did not seem to protect students' sense of belonging or academic confidence which followed the pattern observed in the Wolverhampton larger scale study.

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<sup>2</sup> The data reported in this report refers only to the belongingness data reported during the first two years of the study due to the timing of report writing, but little differences are found between the first and second cohorts of students

<sup>3</sup> Although caution should be taken when making comparisons to the average of the *WhatWorks?* Institutions due to the diversity of institutions involved in the programme the difference between them that could impact on students' sense of belonging.

## Additional Research

In addition to the piloting and roll out of the inclusive assessment approach and the administration of the related belongingness cohort study, the University of Wolverhampton's WhatWorks team executed two further pieces of research. The first piece of research arose as a result of the finding from the belongingness cohort study, which indicates that students from BAME backgrounds consistently reported a different sense of belonging to that expressed by their white counterparts. This piece of research took both a quantitative and qualitative approach and explored whether these findings were generalizable to the University of Wolverhampton population and if so, aimed to identify the underlying factors for the differences. The second piece of research explored what pre-expectations of higher education were held by the students as they arrive at the University and compared these beliefs to those of the teaching staff. Both these pieces of research identified information that is relevant to the understanding of student success.

**Belongingness Study:** A strong sense of belonging is linked to academic success (Thomas, 2012). The belongingness cohort study at the University of Wolverhampton noted that students from minority backgrounds have a more negative view of their sense of belonging at the University than their white counterparts. As a consequence, a more extensive, cross University study of belongingness was conducted. The Yorke Belongingness Questionnaire was completed by 941 Level 4, 5 and 6 students from all four Faculties and from City, Walsall and Telford Campuses. A number of interesting results were found. Of upmost importance it was found that minority students at all levels, on all campuses, have a lower sense of belonging than their white counterparts. Of particular interest is that Black males have a lower sense of belonging than other groups and, as a group, are less likely to gain 'good degrees' (ECU, 2015). An interaction between ethnicity and age was also observed where older students (36 and above) from minority backgrounds had a significantly lower sense of belonging than their white counterparts and younger counterparts from the same ethnicity categorisation. Again, there is a distinct difference in student attainment as a factor of age and ethnicity, with the attainment gap being much wider between older BAME students and their white counterparts than the gap observed between younger BAME and white students (ECU, 2014). In addition students' sense of belonging appeared to increase with age; that is the older that the student was at the point of survey, the stronger their self-reported belonging was. Belongingness is also affected by level of study and a dip in students' sense of belonging is observed at level 5, but returns at a higher point in level 6. This may be associated with the second year blues, however there is an interaction between age and level of study, where student under 25 who are studying at level 5 have a significantly lower sense of belonging than other students. This is particularly important to recognise as it could relate to student mental health and suicide risk (see UUK Reducing the Risk of Student Suicide, 2002 and UUK's Student Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education, 2014). Moreover, as level 5 students aged under 25 are a group of students who are most at risk of mental health difficulties leading to suicide; this finding should be given serious consideration.

The qualitative aspect of the belongingness study was conducted through three focus groups and were held with thirteen students from diverse backgrounds. This indicated that belongingness is multifaceted. Both students who felt they belonged, and those who did not, discussed the cognitive and affective aspects of belongingness that influence academic and social engagement. As a result, significant overlaps were found between the areas proposed by Cousin and Cureton's (2012) to impact on student success and the areas that this research proposed to affect student belongingness. This

research proposed that a sense of belonging is linked to the quality and the type of learning relationships that students develop with their peers and lecturers or have within their department and the University at which they study. Belongingness is also integral to students' ability to engage with and master the pedagogical aspects of the HE learning environment and helps them negotiate the transition from their secondary and further education learning experiences to the demands of HE. Belongingness is also found to relate to the psycho-social elements of the learning experiences as it supports students in developing psychological resilience, self-confidence and with their evolving academic identity. Furthermore, belongingness supports students' growing social and cultural capital as it facilitates students' developing understanding of habitus and evolving agency. In addition to this, student belongingness opens the door to students for the opportunity to experience a transformative learning experience in HE. Those students who reported that they have a sense of belonging discussed their learning relationship with the organisation in terms of it providing the opportunity of transformative learning experiences. Students were aware that the University provides an arena where multiple learning relationships can be developed, and multi-level emotional and academic support is on offer. They also recognised that this led to the opportunity to be more successful in HE. However, students who do not feel they belonged within their higher education environment discuss their learning experience in transactional terms; one in which minimal engagement is traded for an academic qualification at any level. Therefore, the development of a sense of belongingness is crucial to student success. Activities to encourage student belongingness at all stages of the learning lifecycle should be considered. Particular attention should be paid to times when students' belongingness may wane and to the student groups who may have a different sense of belonging for stronger belongingness to be encouraged<sup>4</sup>.

Students' Pre-expectations of HE: The DiSA programme (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) suggested that students' pre-expectations of Higher Education may be disruptive to their psychological contract (their unspoken rules of engagement) with the University, which can negatively impact on their engagement, productivity, satisfaction and, in severe cases can lead to withdrawal. As a consequence, a Students' University Expectation Questionnaire was developed and completed by 346 new University of Wolverhampton starters, prior to attending a University pre-induction session. The outcomes were compared with the findings of 25 questionnaires completed by University of Wolverhampton lecturing staff. The analysis of this data indicates that students and lecturers have different expectations of some aspects of the higher education journey. The study reveals that students understand that higher education will be different to further education, but are unable to articulate how these differences will manifest. Students also use the language of higher education, such as 'independent learning' and 'mass education' but do not understand the behaviours and attitudes associated with these. As a consequence, students are not fully prepared for higher education. Although there are lots of areas where lectures and students have similar expectations; it is evident that there were expectation gaps between the two groups which relate to expectations about the higher education journey, process and outcomes. These gaps outlined in the bullet points below:

1. Students come to university to get a good job, whereas lectures expect that students come to university to learn more about their chosen subject.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see the case study provided in appendix i.

2. Students are end focused at the beginning of their undergraduate degrees and are focused on gaining employment. Their higher education is viewed as their route to gaining a good job. However lecturers think that students are focused on gaining a good understanding their chosen discipline and gaining a good degree to provide them with the future opportunities.
  - a. To this end, it may be that students expect the knowledge and skills they require to be explicit and the main focus of their degrees, however, lectures suggest that students' employability skills should be an integrated part of education the educational experience and students are given in the opportunity to develop transferable skills for employment from within materials delivered in lectures and seminars.
3. Students seem to expect that higher education to be a passive process, which it is something that is done to them, while lecturers expect students to be proactive in their learning experience. This could be explained in the terms of locus of control, where students demonstrate an external locus of control in their learning experience. However lecturers expect students to be proactive and therefore to have an internal locus of control.
4. Student expect lectures and seminars to provide all the information that is needed to be successful in assessments, however lecturers believe students expect these sessions to provide a steer to help them focus their independent learning.
5. Students appear to not understand the learning activities that are crucial to success in higher education. However, lecturers expect students to understand these activities and be able to demonstrate them. For example:
  - a. Students expect to engage in independent learning but define this in terms of doing set homework, write essays, read their lecture notes, whereas lecturers define independent learning as engaging in research and further reading to gain a deeper understanding of the areas covered in lecturers.
  - b. Students are aware that they will be engaging mass educational activities such as lecturers but still expect lecturers to provide personalised education experience, such as delivering a lecture to meet their learning needs. Lectures however expect to deliver a generalised learning experience in lectures and a personalised learning experience in one to one tutorials.
6. Students appear to expect learning relationships to be one sided relationship and that lecturers provide all the information students will need in order to successfully complete set assessment. Conversely, lecturers believe that higher education is an interactive process where they support students to explore their chosen discipline in more depth. This is very different from the findings of the Disparities in Student Attainment Programme.
7. Students expect that university is a place to learn and a place to have fun, whereas lecturers expect university to a place where student embark on learning journey and develop both academically and personally.
8. Students expect lectures will be fun, however lecturers believe the lectures they provide should be informative and will underpin students' independent learning.
9. Students expect a further education experience in the higher education setting, such as coaching to pass assignments and access to support whenever needed. In comparison lecturers expect students to understand what is required of them in higher education and to be independent and proactive learners.

10. Both students and lecturers expect University to be transformative, however students expect that being at University will change their life. Lecturers however expect that students' engagement within their educational experiences will help them grow and develop as individuals<sup>5</sup>.

### Sustainability

The work that has been part of the *WhatWorks?* programme is been embedded at institutional level through its use to support the enhancement of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2012-17). The *WhatWorks?* programme has also generated heightened awareness that student belongingness plays a role in student success. This has led to belongingness being considered as part of other cross-university initiatives and developments such as the University's on going work to improve personal tutoring. Embedding of the initiative has also occurred to some extent at Faculty level and this work is ongoing. Firstly this has occurred through the *WhatWorks?* initiative being incorporated into cross Faculty initiatives, for example the work has influenced some support approaches offered by the Graduate Teaching Assistant and Graduate Interns. Moreover, it has underpinned initiatives such as 'Assessment Cafes'. Secondly, the inclusive assessment approach is currently being embedded at course level, having been rolled out in different ways in each participating Faculty. A systematic approach has been adopted by the Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing, where the initiative has been rolled out across the Institute of Sport and a two year plan has been developed for rollout across the whole Faculty<sup>6</sup>. This Faculty has engaged Institute Attainment Champions who will be responsible for rolling out and embedding of the *WhatWorks?* initiative in each of its other discipline areas. The Faculty of Science and Engineering has started the embedding of the inclusive assessment process through their peer review process<sup>7</sup>. This method is proving effective in raising awareness of the initiative all Schools within the Faculty. The Faculty of the Arts has embedded the inclusive assessment approach into all levels of education within their Photography courses and their Textiles and Design courses and have provided a two year sustainability plan. The only Faculty not to have a discipline area involved in the *WhatWorks?* programme was the Faculty of Social Sciences. After negotiations, the Faculty will commence the rollout of the initiative from the academic year 2015/16. The future roll out of the *WhatWorks?* initiative has also been considered. The rollout and sustainability of the programme is written into the three year work plan of two of the University of Wolverhampton Learning and Teaching Fellows. Further progress towards the embedding and sustainability of the work involved in the *WhatWorks?* programme is witnessed in the collaborative working relationship between the University of Wolverhampton and its Students' Union. The Students' Union has included student success and the reduction of attainment in their most recent 5 year plan, they have made a commitment to hold an Annual Summit with the University<sup>8</sup>, the reduction of attainment gaps is written into the job descriptions of all SU Officers and the current team of SU Officers are actively awareness raising about the 'ways to be a successful student'. In addition the recommendations of this report will form the foundations of the future work

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<sup>5</sup> For further information see the case study provided in appendix ii.

<sup>6</sup> For further information see the case study provided in appendix vi.

<sup>7</sup> For further information see the case study provided in appendix vii.

<sup>8</sup> For further information see the case study provided in appendix iii.

of the University of Wolverhampton Attainment Champion Group. Finally, the University of Wolverhampton has invested into further strategically supported work to increase student attainment and reduce attainment gaps.

#### Learning and reflection on the process

A very important lesson learnt from this project is that having a single initiative is very powerful. This was not the approach taken by the other 12 Universities in the Change Programme and therefore the University of Wolverhampton's approach provided an interesting perspective to the programme. This approach was found to have benefits, especially in terms of evaluation, embedding and making strategic impact.

The major lessons learnt from this work within the University were that senior management support is crucial. Having support from senior University leaders, who advocate the benefits of the programme provides extra kudos to the work and encourages people to listen. Senior management support within the Faculties is also crucial. Having Associate Deans and Principal Lecturers who acted as champions for the programme was also very important to the success of the project; they not only advocated the benefits of the initiative to support the rollout, they provided the project with a voice within Faculties, as well as instantly troubleshooting problems or barriers to rollout and embedding.

Having discipline level advocates for the programme who were responsible for piloting the initiative and driving the programme rollout was extremely facilitative. The discipline leads provided the programme with credibility in eyes of their colleagues and helped to ensure that the approach was discipline competent. Moreover, the layered implementation approach, which was discipline led and driven but supported by Faculty management and institutional leadership, led to the initiative not being view as a wholly top-down process and being more readily accepted by teaching staff.

Finally, it is crucial for projects such as *WhatWorks?* to be located in an area of the organisation which focuses on academic development and pedagogic research. This not only gives the work perceived legitimacy, it provides access to a community of practice to help support the development of the work and networks to support its rollout and embedding. This also provides the project with the opportunity to feed into the University governance structure and therefore provides the project with a voice.

#### Institutional Recommendations

As a result of the *WhatWorks?* programme the following recommendations were proposed and agreed by the University of Wolverhampton Equality and Diversity Committee:

1. This work stream should continue to report into University Student Experience Committee.
2. Initiatives to raise attainment should be implemented throughout the student lifecycle.
3. An inclusive, non-deficit approach to raising attainment is crucial to enhancing success in groups of students where attainment gaps are apparent.
4. Student led, active learning experiences positively impact on attainment through their aspiration raising properties and their ability to generate students' confidence in their own success. The principles advocated in the '*WhatWorks?*' assessment unpacking should be implemented other learning and teaching activities.

5. Developing a sense of belonging is important to student success, and attention should be paid to encouraging belonging in groups of students with a lower sense of belonging. This includes Black males, older students from minority backgrounds, and all Level 5 students.
6. Students' pre-expectations of higher education suggest that students are not prepared for the higher education learning experience. In particular, students do not understand the activities and behaviours that are necessary for independent learning. Access and induction activities should endeavour to generate realistic expectations of the University and develop greater levels of preparedness for higher education.
7. Attainment data should be available at Faculty and course levels, which highlights where local attainment gaps are evident.
8. Full and part time attainment gap figures should be monitored and reported against.
9. Further research is required to better understand part-time BAME student attainment.
10. Student attainment should not be viewed as a project but should be a resourced stream of work.

The lessons learnt through this project provide areas of advice for other HEIs, especially if they are attempting to implement smaller change programmes in the mist of wider institutional transformation. This advice would be to ensure that the project:

- is 'homed' in an appropriate University department that will allow the work to be disseminated in Faculty and Institutional Committees, as well as through organisational learning and teaching networks.
- has a consistent advocate in each Faculty who is involved the development, rollout embedding and dissemination of the project.
- is supported by Senior Leaders at the University and this champion is involved in the development and steering of the project.
- has a financial backing to allow travel to events, the running of internal events and for the project team to engage in dissemination and profile raising of the work they are doing.
- senior management advocates at Faculty and Institutional level give a consistent message about the importance and value of the work being carried out.
- has a branded identity within the organisation.

## Appendix A

### Full Report

#### 1. External national context

For widening access students and those from non-traditional backgrounds the transition into and through level 4 is a complex and important process (Nicholls, 2007, Briggs, 2012). One of the major areas of concern for students in their first year of higher education is successfully negotiating points of assessment (Tinto, 2006) which is known to generate a critical point for the retention of students. Work carried out by Dhillon and Oldham (2012) and Howell-Richardson (2012) as part of the Disparities in Student Attainment Programme (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) explored the student experience at assessment points. These pieces of work highlighted that students spend more time attempting to understand the assignment brief than writing and researching their assessment. When assessment briefs are unclear, those students who do not have strong learning relationships with their course tutors turn to their peers for advice, which often leads to the circulation of misunderstandings. These students increasingly report assessment related anxiety (Dhillon & Oldham, 2012). Where students have agency and the academic confidence to seek advice from their course tutors, they often asked the same assessment related questions over and over again. This arises as students believe that there is a 'hidden, magic key' in the assignment brief that needs to be uncovered in order to successfully complete an assignment (Howell-Richardson, 2012). Obviously, assignment briefs do not include trick questions, so in students' eyes the lecturers refuse to give them the golden key to successfully completing the assignment and thereby rendering the assessment point a pedagogic battlefield (Howell-Richardson, 2012). A possible consequence of assessment anxiety and the pedagogic battlefield that students may encounter at points of assessment, is a potential corruption of the academic learning relationship which could negatively impact students' sense belonging and student success (Cousin & Cureton, 2012).

As writing academic assignments remains one of the most prolific forms of assessment in HE and the critical thinking this requires is core to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century curriculum (Barnett, 2014), it is important to eliminate barriers to student success that result from students' perception of assignments and the accompanying assignment brief. The *WhatWorks?* initiative implemented at the University of Wolverhampton builds on the research above and that of McGinty (2011), who proposes that assignment feedback is crucial to level 4 students' sense of developing belonging in higher education, as it provides confirmation that they are on the right course and have the potential to be successful. The University of Wolverhampton's inclusive assessment initiative uses criteria derived from the DiSA project (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) to provide a framework for accessible and comprehensible assignment briefs. It is also mindful of Dhillon & Oldham's (2012) findings that students circulate misunderstandings and Howell-Richardson's (2012) warning about the perceived hidden golden key. Therefore, the initiative advocates a set of principles that encourages students to work in groups, take the lead in unpacking the requirements of the assignment brief and to discuss this with their peers and lecturers. This aims to develop students' confidence in interpreting the assignment brief whilst also promoting the transparency of the brief to students.

Additionally, there is a known ethnicity gap in the percentages of students who gain 1<sup>st</sup> and 2:i degree classifications, with 15.2% more white students gaining a 'good degree' than their BAME counterparts (ECU, 2015). The ethnicity attainment gap is has become a key issue for the Higher Education Funding Council who funded King's College London, the ARC Network and the University of Manchester to undertake a critical review of research and practice to understand and address differential outcomes in the continuation, attainment and progression of students. Again, this review highlights the importance of the curricula and in particular the understanding of assessment requirements in student success (Mountford-Zimdars, Sabri, Moore, Sanders, Jones & Higham, 2015). As the University of Wolverhampton is actively engaged in work to reduce its ethnicity based attainment gap, it is also hoped that the inclusive assessment initiative will also make an impact on the success of its minority students. It is hoped that this will be achieved as the initiative aims to encourage the development of academic confidence, bridge gaps in understanding the rules of academic engagement and promotes an understanding of some aspects of social and cultural capital. These areas were proposed by Cousin & Cureton (2012) as some of the reasons why the ethnicity attainment gap may exist.

## 2. Contextual overview

The University of Wolverhampton has a long history of providing students with the opportunities presented by a first class education.

As a major player in the UK higher education sector, the University continues to excel in the areas that have contributed to its excellent reputation: award-winning teaching, state-of-the-art facilities, international partnerships, strong business links and innovative research.

The University's attractive offering to students includes:

- 300+ available courses.
- 95% graduate employability (Destination of Leavers of Higher Education survey 2015).
- partnerships with over 1000 businesses.
- 14 Research Centres with elements rated as world-leading (Research Excellence Framework 2014).
- £45m campus investment over two years.
- outstanding facilities, including the multi-million Rosalind Franklin Science Building and Lord Swraj Paul Business School.

Today's modern University can be traced back to Wolverhampton's Mechanics' Institute and College of Art in the mid-1800s. These institutions, together with teacher training and health colleges that were later incorporated, developed the University's rich heritage and tradition of academic excellence in vocational higher education.

The University continue to be guided by its coat of arms' motto 'Innovation and Opportunity' by widening participation in education and offering an outstanding portfolio of courses that challenge students to realize their potential. The quality of its teaching and learning has been praised recently when it received a commendation, the highest possible accolade, following the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) 2015 review.

The University's contributions to knowledge transfer, economic development, wealth creation and social justice position it as an active, pioneering institution on a local, national and global scale.

The current offering is set to evolve even further as the University aims to generate £250 million of investment by 2020, an ambitious strategy that will enable the introduction of new courses, improved facilities and innovative new ventures – all of which will create only more opportunities at the University of Wolverhampton<sup>9</sup>.

### 2.1 Student profile

The University of Wolverhampton has approximately 22,000 students from a diverse range of backgrounds. The University registers well over the expected benchmarks of widening participation students in particular in relation to mature students, students from minority background and students

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<sup>9</sup> Taken from [www.wlv.ac.uk](http://www.wlv.ac.uk)

from low socio-economic backgrounds. In 2013 a breakdown of the student body indicates that just over half (59.4 %) of the students are female, 60.4% of students are aged 21 or over at their time of entry, 38.1% of students were from a minority background and 6.9% of students had disclosed a disability nearly half of whom (3.5%) were in receipt of DSA. Just over three quarter (78%) of students resided in the Midlands at point of entry to the University and just under 80% resided within a 20 mile radius of the University during the time they studied. Approximately 20% of students reside in Halls of Residence within Wolverhampton.

## 2.2 Rational for engaging in the *WhatWorks?* Retention and Success Change Programme

The University of Wolverhampton has a long history of widening participation and delivering education opportunity to all is central to all its operations. The University is also a highly diverse student community, with 45% of the student body from BAME (Black and Ethnic Minority) backgrounds. The University has level 1 and level 2 key performance indicators which focus on improving student attainment, retention and progression and to reduce differential outcomes, with particular reference to the ethnicity attainment gap. In support of delivering against these key performance indicators, the University invested in an Institutional level change management programme. The *What Works?* Retention and Success Programme was a welcomed initiative to support this work.

## 2.3 Significant internal changes or context to be taken into account when reading this report

The *WhatWorks?* programme took place during a period of institution-wide transformation. This led to multi-level change that included a move from Schools to Faculties and a realignment of administrative support. This also generated changes in the roles of original core team members. In addition to this changing context, there was:

- significant change in the University leadership which included to the appointment of a new Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) in Sept 2014 due to the retirement of the former incumbent of that role. There was also the development of the role of Dean of Academic Development and Enhancement who sits in the Offices of the Vice Chancellor. This highlights the University's increased focus on the enhancement of learning and teaching. The role commenced in January, 2015.
- a very successful QAA review of the University in February 2015 which suggested a review of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2012-17).
- the creation of the College of Learning and Teaching which was launched in September, 2015.
- the introduction of Graduate Teaching Assistants in September, 2014 who became involved in the delivery of the inclusive assessment approach forwarded by this *WhatWorks?* programme.
- the review of Professional and Support Services which ultimately led to the closure of the Institute for Learning Enhancement in June 2013. The Institute had been the original home of the *WhatWorks?* Programme.
- a rebranding of the University as the 'University of Opportunity' which was launched in 2013.

- a University-wide culture change agenda was implemented in 2012 and continued throughout the lifetime of the programme of work.

The changing environment presented hurdles as well as generated facilitators to the work in hand

### 3. The *WhatWorks?* Initiative

This section provides brief details of the *WhatWorks?* Programme, how the programme was evaluated and a presentation of the additional institutional level work that was implemented to supplement to the inclusive assessment approach in order to better understand student success.

#### 3.1 The *WhatWorks?* Programme of Works

The inclusive assessment initiative implemented at the University of Wolverhampton (see section 3.3.1) was implemented in all the three pilot discipline areas (Sports Studies, Bio Medical Science and Arts and Design). Each discipline area utilised the same evaluation strategy (see section 5), which was implemented by the core team in order to allow students the freedom to speak openly about their experience without fear of offending the lecturers who lead their courses. The discipline teams were responsible for the rolling out the initiative across their Faculty and chose a variety of methods to do this. These methods are outlined in the discipline level case study overviews (see appendices v, vi & vii).

The *WhatWorks?* Programme also included a belongingness cohort study, which charted the developing sense of belonging of students through level 4 and 5. The students who were involved in this part of the programme were those from the level 4 modules in each discipline area that the inclusive assessment approach was first implemented within and the cohort of students who followed them. The belongingness cohort study immediately highlighted differences in the sense of belonging demonstrated by students who were categorised as BAME when compared to their white counterparts. This finding led to the employment of a University-Wide Belongingness Study in order to better understanding students' sense of belonging at the University of Wolverhampton.

The qualitative evaluation of the inclusive assessment initiative highlighted, that when reflecting on their ability to successfully negotiate points of assessment, students questioned their preparedness for Higher Education. As this was also the finding of Cousin and Cureton (2012) it led to discussion about students' pre-expectation of Higher Education which again led to further work being conducted to better understand the expectation gap between students as they enter higher education and their teachers.

The inclusive assessment initiative and the belongingness cohort study are outlined below. The more extensive work around belongingness and students' pre-expectations of higher education are detailed in the Institutional Impact section of this report and Institutional Case Studies found in appendices i & ii)

##### 3.1.1 The *WhatWorks?* Initiative

The *WhatWorks?* programme at the University of Wolverhampton has focused on implementing and evaluating an inclusive assessment intervention which included two stages. The first stage involved reviewing the quality of assignment briefs against a set of evidence based criteria derived from the Disparities in Student Attainment (DiSA) Project (Cousin and Cureton, 2012), these guidelines included ensuring that assignment briefs are:

- concise (one side of A4), provides a single location for all assignment information, uses appropriate to level and student focused language.
- provides information on the product as well as process of the assessment.

- refers to the learning outcomes, the marking criteria and where marks can be lost or gained.

The second stage involved the implementation of student led assignment unpacking session which were structured around three principles:

- I. Students discuss in groups their understanding of the assignment requirements and feed these back to the group and the lecturer;
- II. Students are enabled to anonymously ask questions about what they do not understand, for examples by putting the question on a Post-it Note and placing it on the wall.
- III. Lecturers respond to the questions raised in the class and address any misconceptions in student understanding. This information should then be included in a Frequently Asked Questions thread in the VLE.

The approach adopted by the University of Wolverhampton aimed to provide clear guidelines that provided lecturers with a structure which they could employ in their classes in their own way, thereby providing a consistency in style. A number of delivery approaches were developed and observed during the implementation and roll out of the initiative, including using voting systems, the implementation of Socrative, role play, peer groups marking/ giving feedback and 'mocked up work' to name but a few examples. This approach aimed to allow lecturers autonomy and academic freedom in their approach to the implementation of the work. It was also hoped that this approach would encourage a belief that the implementation was not a top down initiative but one in which the lectures were able to be academic designers.

Although the *WhatWorks?* programme only called for the discipline initiative(s) to be implemented at level 4, the University of Wolverhampton team decided to implement the inclusive assessment initiative at levels 4, 5, 6 and 7 to assess where the implementation of the approach would be most effective. Through the qualitative evaluation it was found that the inclusive assessment approach was found to be most useful at Levels 4 and in the first semesters of Level 5 and 7. Students in the second semester of level 5 and at level 6, reported that they had '*gained the skills to effectively interpret the assignment brief and no longer required that approach to be taken.*' Students in the first semester at level 7, however reported that they '*valued the approach as a refresher exercise*' and reported it helped them '*rediscover their academic confidence*'.

### 3.1.3 Belonging cohort study

The University of Wolverhampton was one of 13 Universities to provide the national *WhatWorks?* Programme with data for the belongingness cohort study. The belongingness of students was measured using a belongingness questionnaire developed by Mantz Yorke. This questionnaire was administered to students who were studying an identified yearlong module in each of the discipline areas. Two cohorts of students completed the questionnaire twice in level 4 and twice at level 5 of study; the questionnaires were administered at Christmas and Easter in both years. This provided a picture of how belongingness developed as students progressed through their studies at the University and identified groups of students where belonging is consistently different to others. These groups include students who have disruptive home environments (that do not provide them with quiet spaces to study), those who work as well as study and those who commute 45 minutes or more to

attend university. As mentioned above, a particular area of concern was the differences in belonging between students from minority backgrounds and their white counterparts.

As outlined above the *'WhatWorks?'* programme at the University of Wolverhampton looked at one intervention across three disciplines. The impact of this work is demonstrated in a variety of ways. These included:

- Impact on the pilot courses
- Impact within the Faculties
- Impact at an institutional level
- Impact on other HEIs

The ways in which the *WhatWorks?* programme has made an impacted is outlined in the Impact sections 6.2 and 7.2.1.

### 3.2 Members of the core team.

The University of Wolverhampton's core team were selected from the Institution of Learning Enhancement, the Senior Management Teams of the participating Faculties (then Schools) and the Offices of the Vice Chancellor. The selection of the Core Team from these areas of the University aimed to maximise support for the programme within Faculties and at a University strategic level. It was aimed to create a mirrored culture change within Faculties as well as at a the strategic level, which would ensure that the work was properly reported through the University's governance structure in order to enhance the opportunities for the work to be embedded within Faculties and to strategically influence learning and teaching at the University. However, as the work took place during a time of change at the University, there has been a change in the membership of this group.

The original Core Team members:

- Project Lead: Dr Debra Cureton, Institute for Learning Enhancement
- Strategic Leads:
  - Professor Ann Holmes, DVC Academic Offices of the Vice Chancellor
  - Mr Jon Elsmore, Dean of Students, Offices of the Dean of Students
- Discipline Team Senior Advocates:
  - Dr Kay Biscomb, Associate Dean, School of Sports, Performing Arts and Leisure
  - Dr Patricia Cooper, Associate Dean, School of Art and Design
  - Dr Derek Walton, Associate Dean, School of Applied Sciences
- Student Representation:
  - Ms Zoe Harrison, President of the Students Union

The Core Team at the close of the programme:

- Project Lead: Dr Debra Cureton, Research Policy Unit
- Strategic Leads:
  - Dr Alexandra Hopkins, Dean of Academic Development and Enhancement, Offices of the Vice Chancellor
  - Mr Jon Elsmore, Dean of Students, Offices of the Dean of Students

- Discipline Team Senior Advocates:
  - Dr Kay Biscomb, Head of the Institute of Sport, Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing
  - Dr Crispin Dale, Principal Lecturer for Learning and Teaching, Faculty of the Arts
  - Mr Chris Williams, Principal Lecturer Learning and Teaching, Faculty of Science and Engineering
- Student Representation:
  - Ms Ann Gough, CEO of the University of Wolverhampton Students Union
  - Ms Zoe Harrison, President of the Students Union 2014/15
  - Ms Zoe Harrison, Vice President Academic of the Students Union, 2013/14
  - Ms Marie Cheer, Vice President Academic of the Students Union, 2012/13

### 3.3 Participating disciplines, programmes, members of the discipline teams, *WhatWorks?* theme(s) addressed.

Working within the active learning stream of the *WhatWorks?* programme, the University of Wolverhampton took a cross institutional approach to an inclusive assessment initiative. The decision for all the pilot discipline areas to implement the same intervention was made to generate an evidence base for the assessment approach that spanned all disciplines and assessment types. By doing this it was hoped to enhance the generalisability of the initiative and to maximise the potential for embedding the work across the University. The participating disciplines and team members are listed below:

- Biomedical Science:
  - Dr Martin Khechara – Discipline Lead
  - Dr Sara Smith
  - Aliyna Hamid (Graduate Intern 2012-13)
- Art and Design
  - Dr Peter Day
  - Dr Sharon Watts
  - Alice Jones (Graduate Intern 2012-13)
- Sport Science
  - Dr Mark Groves
  - Dr Julian Smith
  - Simone Stewart (Graduate Intern 2012-13)

## 4. Planning for and implementing change

### 4.1 The Selection of Discipline Areas and Discipline Teams

The discipline areas that have been involved in the *WhatWorks?* Programme at the University of Wolverhampton were selected through an expression of interest made by the relevant Associate Dean Learning and Teaching in response to the original call from the Higher Education Academy and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. This initial interest, coupled with the parties' involvement in the development of the inclusive assessment initiative, was thought to be a strong indication of a commitment to being fully engaging in delivering the programme of work. Therefore, these Associate Dean were included in the project Core Team. Each Associate Dean identified a discipline area where there was:

- a low retention rate,
- low levels of 50% and above module grades,
- high levels of module fails
- high levels of none submission.

The discipline teams were then formed by identifying lecturers in the subject area who were already engaged in pedagogic research and development, were respected by their peers and considered pedagogic leaders within their disciplines. These people were then invited to join the project. Endorsement from Deans of Faculty was sought to secure a financial commitment to project and to gain approval for a workload allocation to be given to the discipline teams in order to deliver the work.

### 4.2 Case studies of particularly effective working

At the University of Wolverhampton it was decided to merge the discipline teams and the core team meetings to ensure that communication between the teams was seamless. Where necessary, this allowed the core team to support the implementation and rollout of the inclusive assessment approach and negotiate barriers as they occurred. The close working relationship between the two groups allowed the core team to support the development of the discipline team, as well as support the evaluation of the initiative and its rollout. A consequence of this approach was that it allowed the core team to be fully aware of the strengths and limitations of the inclusive assessment approach and to work with the discipline teams to maximise strengths and rework the initiative to eliminate limitations.

## 5. Evaluation strategy and outcomes

Taking a centralised approach to evaluation, the University of Wolverhampton evaluated its contribution to the *WhatWorks?* through both quantitative and qualitative means. The Evaluation Strategy drew on the Logic Chain Model and thereby considered the activities delivered, the attitude and behavioural changes that were observed as a result, the impact of this on students' sense of belonging and how this related to improved retention and success. The differences in staff attitudes and behaviours were captured through interviews with the staff involved in the *WhatWorks?* programme and is outlined in the qualitative outcome data below. The student engagement data was captured through Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012) sessions with students and is outlined in the qualitative outcome data below, while the impact of this on student belonging is captured in the cohort belongingness study and outlined the section 5.3 below. The improvements in success are captured in the quantitative outcome analysis of module outcomes and this is outlined in section 5.1.

### 5.1 Quantitative Analysis:

#### 5.1.1 Quantitative Evaluation Strategy

The evaluation of the inclusive assessment initiative utilised the attainment figures for the modules involved in the '*WhatWorks?*' programme. This analysis included a comparison of current module performance to the performance in previous years. Where possible a comparison to comparative modules of the same cohort, where students have not experienced the intervention, was included.

#### 5.1.1 Quantitative Evaluation Outcomes

The analysis of this data revealed that there was a significant increase in performance to previous years in the numbers of students who gain 50% or more, with a marked difference to those students who gained 70% and above. There was also a significant reduction in the number of students who did not submit work for assessment. Where it was possible to find comparator modules, these changes were not observed. Of particular interest is that this approach impacted more significantly on students from minority backgrounds who demonstrated improved grades in comparison to their white counterparts. This suggests that this initiative is a useful technique within the wider work the University is undertaking to significantly reduce its ethnicity based attainment gap.

Figure 5.1: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in '*WhatWorks?*' The initiative commenced 2013/14

50% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	37%	72%	74%	+37%
White	53%	61%	70%	+17%

Figure 5.2: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in '*WhatWorks?*' The initiative commenced 2013/14

60% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	18%	51%	55%	+37%
White	27%	34%	40%	+13%

Figure 5.3: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in ‘WhatWorks?’ The initiative commenced 2013/14

70% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	14%	30%	35%	+21%
White	14%	19%	27%	+13%

## 5.2 Qualitative Evaluation:

### 5.2.1 Qualitative Evaluation Strategy

Qualitative evaluations were carried out with both students who studied the modules where the inclusive assessment initiative was implemented and with the lecturing staff who implemented the initiative. The student data was collected utilising the Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012) which educates and engages students with the issues being research and empowers them to provide information about the issue and make solution based recommendations. In this case, the latter stage of the process allowed the *WhatWorks?* team to work with students as co-creators of inclusive assessment curricula.

### 5.2.2 Qualitative Evaluation Outcomes

The qualitative data collected from students indicates that students like the inclusive assessment approach, especially the assessment unpacking:

*‘I liked it [the assessment unpacking], doing it this way allowed us to unpick the bits of the assignment that we didn’t understand without having to stop the lecture, you know, having to put your hand up and ask questions when you don’t understand what they are saying’* (Female level 4 student)

Students felt it encouraged their autonomy as learners: *‘They [lecturers] keep saying we can’t spoon feed you all the time – we don’t want to be spoon fed, it’s really hurtful when they say that. But when Dr. [name of lecturer] did the session like this it felt like we were in control, we were taking the lead in finding out what we needed to know to do the assignment. I left feeling that I knew what I needed to do to complete the assignment and that I could do it.’* (Female, Level 4 student).

The approach also enhanced students’ confidence in themselves and their ability to be successful:

*‘Yeah, it helps you feel like you know what to do and how to do it. I left feeling confident that I could get good marks in the assignment’* (Female, Level 5 student) and *‘I was going to jack it in but [friend’s name] said come to the session, he’s [the lecture] doing that thing again where we go through the assignment brief. So I came. Afterwards I thought I can do this, so I decided I’d stay and try to do the assignment.’* (Male, Level 4 student)

Students also felt that the approach provided a pathway for productive discussion about assignment requirements:

*‘It’s hard when they [the lectures] do it the other way [deliver a didactic session on what they expect from the assignment] because you don’t want to be the one who is always putting your hand up and asking the questions. But other people won’t ask so sometimes you end up doing it just so that you’re*

*sure what's needed. But this way you don't have to worry, you just put the questions on the post-its, everyone was doing it and when he [the lecturer] read them [the questions] out, you thought, that's a good one, I didn't think about that, so other's questions help you too.'* (Male, Level 5 student)

*'By doing it [discussing the assignment requirements] this way you have discussions about the assignment that feels normal, you know, you're not putting your hand up asking. Everyone is talking about it and it feels okay to discuss what this means and what that is asking you to do.'* (Female, Level 4 student)

It is proposed that the latter may open the door to more productive learning relationships between students and lecturers (c.f. Cousin & Cureton, 2012).

The data gathered from lecturers was collected through an open ended questionnaire and interviews. This evaluation indicated that staff who have implemented this initiative were surprised at the increased engagement of students when this method is used to discuss assignments.

*'I was surprised at the level of engagement in this activity, usually they [the students] will ask one or two questions and that's it. This time there were lots of varied questions. The students seemed to like it and, as I said, very engaged.'* (Male lecturer)

Lecturers were also surprised at the apparent mismatch of expectations surrounding the accessibility and comprehensibility of the briefs that they produce.

*'There were questions that surprised me, I thought they'd know about that by now, but quite a few didn't seem to know. It's been a good exercise and I have reflected on what was asked and what changes I need to make to the assignment brief'* (Female Lecture)

Lecturers also noted a marked decrease in the students who requested one-to-one tutorials to discuss what an assignment brief was asking them to do; some lecturers comment on the increase in discussions about assignment content within tutorials.

*'What I also noticed is that students aren't coming to SAMS [personal appointments and tutorial] asking about what they need to for their assignment. And those who do come are talking about the theoretical and technical aspects of their work.'* (Female lecturer).

## 5.3 Belongingness Data

### 5.3.1 Belongingness Data Evaluation Strategy:

To capture aspects of students' belonging to their department and/or University, the students who were involved in the *WhatWorks?* initiative also took part in a cohort belongingness study. The *WhatWorks?* team administered Mantz Yorke's Belongingness Questionnaire twice a year, over a two year period to the two cohorts of students who were involved in the pilot discipline areas (Sport Sciences, Bio-Medical Sciences and Art and Design). The questionnaires were administered in November 2013, March 2014, November 2014, March 2015, November, 2015 and April, 2016 therefore capturing changes in the belongingness of two discrete groups of students as they transitioned into the University and through level 4 and level 5. The questionnaires measured students' level of self-reported engagement, belonging and academic self-confidence via a 5 point

likert scale, which ranged from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Therefore, higher scores equated to a higher sense of belongingness. The average response rates for the completion of the questionnaire were fairly high in two of the three subjects (Sport = 61.87%; Bio Medical Sciences = 87.3%; Art and Design = 40%).

### 5.3.1 Belongingness Data Evaluation Outcomes:

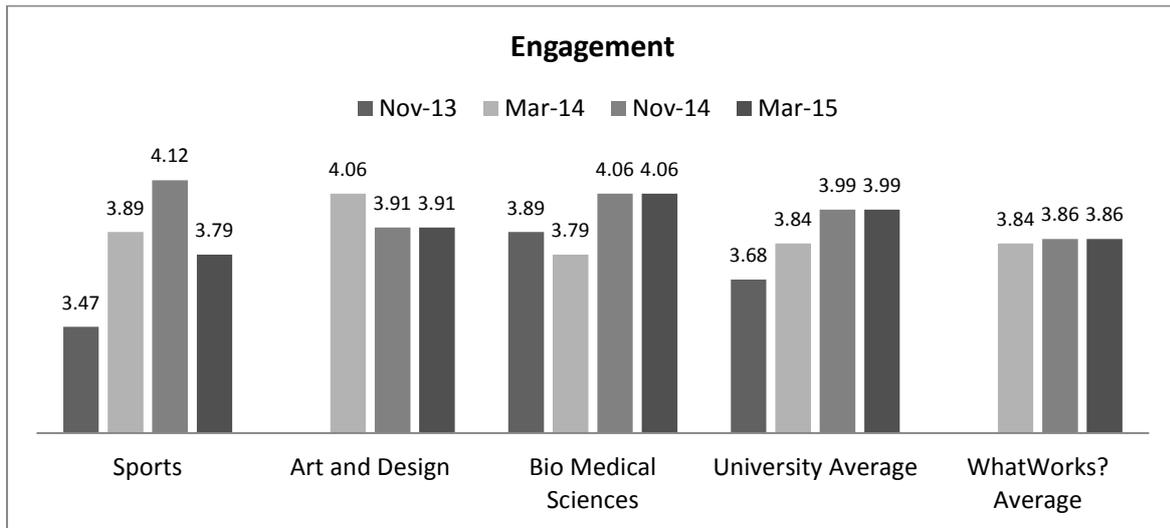
The information below shows the average responses for University of Wolverhampton students by programme, the average for all University of Wolverhampton students and the average for all responses to the survey from the participating HEIs. These are presented for all the components of belongingness (engagement, belonging at course level and self-confidence).

As previously stated, the data from the cohort belongingness study highlighted differences in belongingness between students who are categorised as BAME and their white counterparts, which led to the University of Wolverhampton undertaking a more extensive belongingness study (see appendix i). This study sampled nearly 1000 University of Wolverhampton students from a diversity of backgrounds, at all three levels of study, from all Faculties and all campuses. The results of the University-wide study will be compared the cohort study and where necessary will be used to illustrate trends that may be unique to the University of Wolverhampton.

#### 5.3.1.1 Engagement data

The University average for students' self-reported engagement levels increased from 3.68 to 3.99 over the two years of their involvement in the study (see figure 5.4). There was a progressive increase in engagement within the first year of the initiative (from 3.68 to 3.84) which increased but stabilised in the second year of the initiative (3.99 in Nov 2014 and 3.99 in March 2014). However, different patterns of self-reported engagement are evident within the pilot discipline areas. In both Sport and Bio-Medical Science some increase in self-reported engagement is observed. The opposite however was observed in Art and Design, nevertheless this may be consequence of the small sample size within this group. The University average pattern of increased self-reported engagement differs to the pattern of self-reported engagement identified in the averaged responses of all the HEIs involved in *WhatWorks?* Programme. The *WhatWorks?* average level of engagement appears to remain stable over the two years of the project. Although the University of Wolverhampton average level of engagement started at a lower level than the *WhatWorks?* averaged sense of engagement, by the end of the two year programme the University of Wolverhampton averaged level of engagement was higher than the *WhatWorks?* averaged engagement level.

Figure 5.4: Levels of Student Engagement over the *WhatWorks?* Programme shown by pilot area, University average and *WhatWorks?* Average<sup>10</sup>.



Engagement questions:

1E I am motivated towards my studies.

5E I try to make connections between what I learn from different parts of my programme.

6E I try to do a bit more on the programme than it asks me to.

8E I seek out academic staff in order to discuss topics relevant to my programme.

10E I put a lot of effort into the work I do.

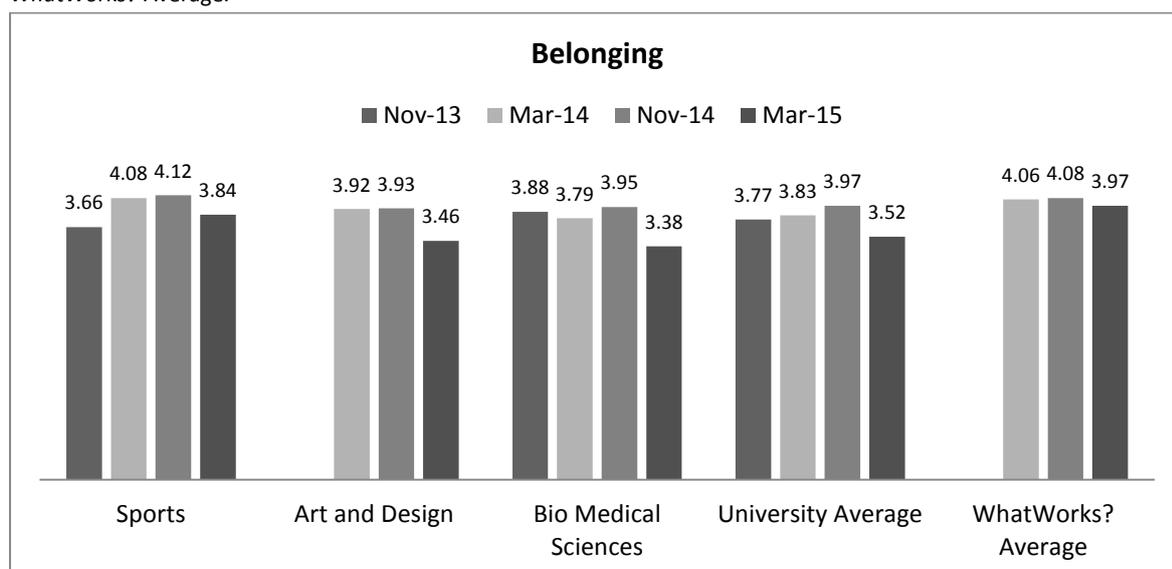
12E I use feedback on my work to help me improve what I do.

### 5.3.1.2 Belonging data

The data on belonging, a student's affective sense of attachment to the department in which they study, indicates that there is an increase in belonging until the end of semester two level 5 after which there is a decline. This pattern is observed (see figure 5.5 below) to varying extents in the average responses of the HEIs involved in the *WhatWorks?* Programme, the University of Wolverhampton's averaged responses and two of the three discipline pilot sites (Sport and Art and Design). Interestingly, a dip in the second semester of both levels 4 and 5 is witnessed in Bio-Medical Sciences.

<sup>10</sup> Although caution should be taken when comparing institutional figures to those averaged from 'All *WhatWorks?* Institutions' because of the variations across the sample.

Figure 5.5: Levels of Student Belonging over the *WhatWorks?* Programme shown by pilot area, University average and *WhatWorks?* Average.



Belongingness questions:

2B I feel at home in this university.

4B Being at this university is an enriching experience.

7B I wish I'd gone to a different university. [R]

11B I have found this department to be welcoming.

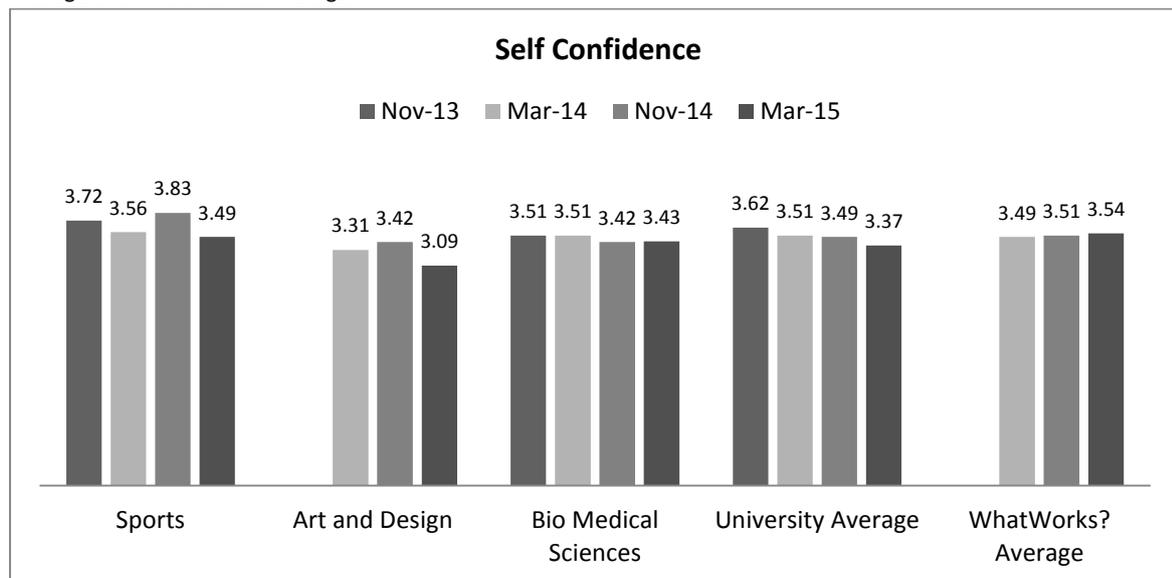
14B I am shown respect by members of staff in this department.

15B Sometimes I feel I don't belong in this university. [R]

### 5.3.1.3 Self Confidence

The data relating to student self-reported levels of academic self-confidence shows a mixed picture. The University of Wolverhampton's average responses suggest that there is slight decline in academic self-confidence over time, with academic self-confidence declining slightly from 3.62 in level 4 to 3.37 within the second semester of level 5. This pattern is also present in Bio-Medical Science. In Sport a decrease from first semester to second semester for both years is witnessed, this trend is partially witnessed in Art and Design, although it is difficult to analyse as there is no data for Art and Design from the first semester of level 4. The academic related self-confidence data from the University of Wolverhampton is very different to the averaged responses of all the *WhatWorks?* HEIs which shows that academic related self confidence remains steady over the two year period of the study. This highlights an area where further research is required to understand why this happens at the University of Wolverhampton and what can be done to support and enhance students' academic confidence.

Figure 5.6: Levels of Student Academic Self-Confidence over the *WhatWorks?* Programme shown by pilot area, University average and *WhatWorks?* Average.



Self Confidence Questions

3S I expect to do well on my programme.

9S I worry about the difficulty of my programme. [R]

13S I doubt my ability to study at university level. [R]

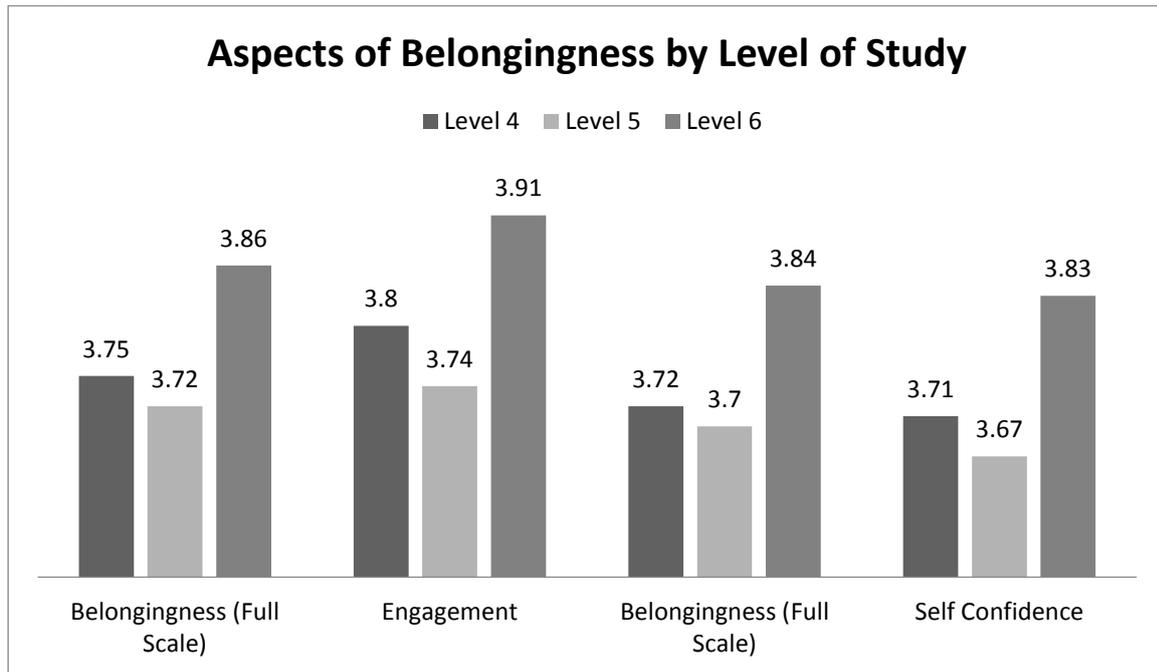
16S I'm confident of completing my programme successfully.

#### 5.3.1.4. Main Themes in the Data

The data suggests that there is an increase in University of Wolverhampton students' self-reported engagement over the period of the initiative which was greater than that of seen in the average responses of students from all the *WhatWorks?* HEIs. Also, a decline in self-reported belonging and self-reported academic self-confidence was observed between the start of the *WhatWorks?* initiative (first semester of level 4) to the end of the programme (second semester of the level 5) which was not observed in the average responses of all *WhatWorks?* HEI where both aspects of belongingness remained stable over the period of the programme. Of further interest the University's average self-reported levels of engagement within the pilot discipline cohort study differs to that of the findings of the University wide belongingness study (see case study in appendix i). The findings of this work indicated that all aspects of belongingness (engagement, belonging<sup>11</sup> and self-confidence) dipped to some extent in level 5 from the level 4 and then picking up in level 6 to exceed the level 4 point (see figure 5.7 below). This provides some evidence that the *WhatWorks?* inclusive assessment approach may have positively impacted on levels of student engagement and protected them from the level 5 slump observed in the Wolverhampton-wide belongingness study. However, the initiative did not seem to protect students' sense of belonging or academic confidence which followed the pattern observed in the Wolverhampton larger scale study.

<sup>11</sup> The dip in belonging between level 4 and 5 is very slight for the whole sample but is more distinct when the data is cut by demographic features.

Figure 5.7: Levels of Student Belongingness, broken down by the subscales of Engagement, Belonging and Self-confidence and by level of study



## 6. Areas of change and impact at an institutional level

Changes that were implemented at an institutional level included championing the inclusive assessment approach and its institutional level roll out and embedding. In addition the *WhatWorks?* Institutional level work focused on expanded the University's understanding and evidence-base around students' sense of belonging and their pre-expectations of higher education. A focus of the project was to support the embedding of this knowledge at the institutional level. As the University of Wolverhampton has a diverse student community, it is committed to reducing the gap in attainment between students categorised as BAME and their white counterparts. The *WhatWorks?* programme also focused its institutional level work on influencing this agenda. As a result of these activities the *WhatWorks?* programme lead to a number of changes at an institutional level and has made impact in a number of areas. This is discussed below.

### 6.1. Change

This section will outline the areas where changes at an institutional level have occurred as a result of the *WhatWorks?* Programme. These areas include changes to strategy, curriculum design and student engagement with the success agenda.

#### 6.1.1 Strategy and curriculum development

At the University level, there is a strategic focuses on a year on year increase in student attainment and reduction in attainment gaps against which institutional levels KPIs have been set. Therefore, the work undertaken as part of the *WhatWorks?* programme had strategic importance and has led to some strategic enhancement, curriculum development and organisational behavioural change. The outcomes of the *WhatWorks?* inclusive assessment initiative and the findings of the institutional level work have been used as an evidence-base to underpin the update of the University of Wolverhampton Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2012–17). The most important aspect of this development is that attainment and belongingness are now major considerations in the development and outputs of the strategy. In terms of related Faculty level changes, each Faculty has Attainment Plans and KPIs against which they operate to increase student success and to reduce gaps in attainment which has resulted in an improved focus on curriculum enhancement to support students within the assessment process. As a direct result of the *WhatWorks?* programme, the Graduate Teaching Assistants have utilised the assessment initiative in their work with students, Faculties have utilised 'Fit to Submit' checklists, the assignment brief checklist utilised in *WhatWorks?* has been operationalised in peer review processes and one Faculty has implemented the principles of the *WhatWorks?* into assessment cafes to support students with understanding assessment requirements.

#### 6.1.2 Curriculum related development

The inclusive assessment initiative has been embedded within the curriculum at the University in two ways. Firstly, the work has been integrated into the PgCert in Academic Practice undertaken by all new lecturing staff. Secondly, the work has been disseminated to staff via a number of internal conferences and Learning and Teaching Away Days; the latter also includes the SU and *WhatWorks?* Student Attainment Summits<sup>12</sup>. The Attainment Summits have led to the *WhatWorks?* institutional

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<sup>12</sup> See appendix iii.

and discipline level work being integrated into academic practice at individual, course and Faculty levels.

### 6.1.3 Student engagement

Students have been engaged with the *WhatWorks?* programme in a number of ways. As previously mentioned students were engaged in the evaluation and the further development of the inclusive assessment initiative. However, the most prolific form of student engagement has been through student and Students’ Union engagement in the Attainment Summits. The summits arose out of a presentation of the *WhatWorks?* programme to the Students’ Union. As a result of this the Students’ Union decided to make student attainment, and disparities in student attainment, a key priority in their 5 year plan (2013-18). Through this the *WhatWorks?* programme and the University of Wolverhampton’s Students’ Union have worked in collaboration to deliver annual Student Attainment Summits which aim to raise awareness of the attainment gap and provide staff with an evidence-base to make positive change in to their practice. The Students’ Union have worked hard to ensure that the student voice has a prominent place in the work around the success agenda and have encouraged students to work as co-creators with staff at the Summits.

## 6.2 Impact

The evidence of impact at an institutional level that has occurred as a result of the *WhatWorks?* programme are demonstrated in a number of ways. These include a positive impact on student attainment and a decrease in the ethnicity attainment gap. The findings of the *WhatWorks?* programme have also lead to further related institutional work, including the University’s involvement other externally funded projects. These are detailed in 6.2.4 and 6.2.5.

### 6.2.1 Institutional Attainment

The University of Wolverhampton has witnessed a year on year increase in its performance against its level one key performance indicator to ‘increase the number of students who gain first and upper second class degrees’. It should be noted that there has been a significant increase in students gaining upper second class degrees between 2012/13 and 2013/14 which is within the lifetime of the project. Although *WhatWorks?* cannot take full credit for this, it is one of the initiatives implemented by the University that has led to this achievement.

Figure 6.1: Institutional Attainment Figures (2010/11 – 2013/14)

Year	University of Wolverhampton	Total England	Total UK
2011/12	48.4	62.7	61.4
2012/13	49.6	65.0	63.6
2013/14	58.6	67.5	65.9

### 6.2.2 Institutional Attainment Gap

Over the course of DiSA, ‘*WhatWorks?*’ and their embedding, the attainment gap for full-time students at the University has significantly decreased and an impact on the evident gap of 40% is observed. The ECU’s sector average is calculated using both full and part-time figures. The inclusion of part-time

figures to our calculations alters the outcomes and an impact on the observed gap of 42% is apparent. The part-time ethnicity attainment gap, however, varies greatly from year to year and requires further attention.

Figure 6.2: Annual Attainment Gap Figures (2010/11 – 2013/14)

Year	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
<b>Mode of study</b>				
<b>Gap at UW (Full-time study)</b>	28.9%	27.9%	21.1%	17.4%
<b>Gap at UW (Part-time study)</b>	29.2%	17.6%	30.7%	11.8%
<b>Gap for both modes at UW</b>	<b>29.2%</b>	<b>26.0%</b>	<b>23.1%</b>	<b>16.9%</b>
<b>National Gap</b>	<b>18.7%</b>	<b>19.0%</b>	<b>18.5%</b>	<b>16.8%</b>

### 6.2.3 Staff development, recognition and reward

Being involved in the *WhatWorks?* Programme has led to two members of the team utilising their work in their successful applications for Senior Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. Additionally, leading the *WhatWorks?* programme has also been used within the Institutional Programme Lead's application for Principal Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. Involvement in the *WhatWorks?* programme has also led to two members of the programme successfully applying to become University of Wolverhampton Learning and Teaching Fellows.

### 6.2.4 Further Related Institutional Work

The institutional work being carried out as part of the *WhatWorks?* programme has fed into the University Student Experience Committee, the Attainment Champions' Group, which has led to the work being used underpin Faculty Attainment Plans, and has been reported to the Governors' Equality and Diversity Committee.

Firstly, a cross University belongingness study was implemented to look at patterns of student belonging across academic level, discipline, campus and a variety of demographic variables. The findings from this work have been reported through the above committee and governance structure, presented at the SU & '*WhatWorks?*' BAME Student Attainment Summit and has been used to underpin the re-working of attainment arm of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2012-2017). Secondly, research into students' pre-expectations of higher education was carried out and compared to research into lecturers' expectations of new undergraduates. Again the findings were disseminated via the above committees and governance routes and were presented as part of the SU & '*WhatWorks?*' Student Attainment Summit. The understanding generated from both these pieces of work has been used in support literature for students and has been used to underpin changes that have been made in the University's Pre-Induction Programme. Thirdly, the University's Conduct and Appeals Unit has identified marked differences in the misconduct and appeals figures of students from minority backgrounds and their white counterparts. Through the dissemination of the *WhatWorks?*

programme, links have been made with Kingston University to share their best practice in this area. This work is ongoing and it is felt that work in this area will impact positively on the attainment gap as well as provide evidence for policy and practice change.

As previously mentioned, a further impact and output of the *WhatWorks?* programme is that the University of Wolverhampton and the University of Wolverhampton Students' Union commitment to holding a joint, annual Student Attainment Summit. Moreover, the Students' Union have committed to tackling the BAME student attainment gap as part of their 5 year work plan.

#### 6.2.5 Related Externally Work and Collaborations

The work that *WhatWorks?* at the University of Wolverhampton has delivered has been extensively disseminated; it has contributed to four external keynote presentations as well as being presented at University of Wolverhampton internal research and learning and teaching events. The research findings from this programme that relate to belongingness have contributed to a chapter in the co-edited book 'Student Attainment: Issues, Controversies and Debates' which is edited by Graham Steventon, Debra Cureton and Lynn Clouder.

The findings from the *WhatWorks?* programme have been fed into successful application to the Higher Education Academy for a Strategic Enhancement Programme (retention and attainment). The Strategic Enhancement Programme extended the belongingness work, in order to understand the relationship between belongingness and place and space. The growing understanding of student belonging, that has resulted from the *WhatWorks?* programme, has led to discussions about a potential collaborative bid between the University of Wolverhampton and 4 other Higher Education Institutions to generated a better understanding of the role that BAME students' perception of belonging plays in the ethnicity attainment gap. The University of Wolverhampton's ongoing work around student success and attainment gaps has led to it being invited to join a further collaborative project led by Kingston University and involving Hertfordshire University and the University of Demontford. This Higher Education Academy funded project aims to identify and disseminate best practice around BAME student attainment to the sector.

### 6.3 Case studies of effective work with in the *WhatWorks?* Programme:

The sections below provide an abstract of full case studies that can be found in appendices I, ii, iii and iv at end of this report.

#### 6.3.1 The University Belongingness study – (Debra Cureton)

A strong sense of belonging is linked to academic success (Thomas, 2012). The belongingness cohort study carried out as part of the *WhatWorks?* programme at the University of Wolverhampton notes that students from minority backgrounds have a more negative view of their sense of belonging than their white counterparts. As a consequence, a more extensive, cross University study of belongingness took place. The Yorke Belongingness Questionnaire was completed by 941 Level 4, 5 and 6 students from all four Faculties and from City, Walsall and Telford Campuses. This highlights a number of interesting results, including increases of belonging with age, students at level 5 display a loss of belonging and younger level 5 student have a pronounced low sense of belonging. Of particular interest is the finding that minority students at all levels, on all campuses, having a lower sense of

belonging than their white counterparts. Worryingly black males have a lower sense of belonging than other groups and as a group are less likely to gain good degrees.

### 6.3.2 Students' Pre-expectations of Higher Education

Both the findings of the DiSA and the *WhatWorks?* programmes have suggested that students' pre-expectations of Higher Education may be disruptive to their psychological contract (their unspoken rules of engagement) with the University, which can negatively impact on their engagement, productivity, satisfaction and, in severe cases, leads to withdrawal. To explore this area further a Students' University Expectation questionnaire was completed by 346 new University of Wolverhampton starters, prior to attending a University pre-induction session. The outcomes are compared with the findings of 25 questionnaires completed by University of Wolverhampton lecturing staff. The analysis of this data indicates that there is an expectation gap between students and lecturers in relation to some aspects of the higher education journey. The study reveals that students understand that higher education will be different to further education, but are unable to articulate how these differences will manifest. Students also use the language of higher education, such as 'independent learning' and 'mass education' but do not understand the behaviours and attitudes associated with these. As a consequence, students are not fully prepared for higher education.

### 6.3.3 The Attainment Summits (Hannah Cooper, Ann Gough and Debra Cureton)

The Student Attainment Summits aims to encourage the university and its students to work together to improve student attainment and reduce the attainment gap. The Students' Union and the *WhatWorks?* Project Lead have worked together to generate a staff and student collaborative forum based on the principles of the Consensus Oriented Research Model (Cureton & Cousin, 2012). The principles of this collaborative workspace are to educate participants about the situation, engage them to share their thoughts, perception and ideas about the situation and then to empower the participants to work together to develop evidence-based solutions to the problem. So far two summits have been held.

The first Summit was held in July, 2014 and aimed to heighten staff and student awareness of the BAME Attainment Gap and encourage the two groups to work collaboratively to generate solutions that could be implemented to reduce the attainment gap. A World Café was implemented to encourage the development and sharing of ideas.

The second Summit occurred in May 2015. This event encouraged staff to pledge to undertake work to reduce the attainment gap. These were pledged at individual, course and faculty levels. All the pledges made included information about the evaluation of activities, their dissemination and how the evidence created would feed into faculty plans. In order to engender a greater commitment to the acting on the pledge, the pledges were verbally presented at the event. The pledges made fell into a number of themes:

- Implementing mentoring.
- Developing pre-inductions for specific course.
- Developing personal new tutoring approaches.
- Review of academic processes.
- Running academic skills workshops throughout the year.

- Providing new students with information about the academic process.
- Better utilising university resources: fit to submit, *WhatWorks?* principles.
- Encourage facebook groups to help develop belonging on another level.
- Use course stats more effectively in period reviews.
- Encourage aspiration raising activities.

#### 6.3.4 The Institutional Intervention and influencing strategy (Dr Debra Cureton)

A case study is also provided about the inclusive assessment approach that has been implemented at the University of Wolverhampton. This will detail the processes utilised, the decisions made about the most appropriate methods of evaluation, the evaluation outcomes and how this information was used to influence the University at a discipline and strategic level. As this case study will synthesis this main body of this report, an overview of the case study will not be presented here.

#### 6.4 Impact of and learning about strategic enablers

Senior leadership support has been crucial to the success of this programme. The support and championing of this project by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) has not only provided kudos for the project, it has given an institutional voice that allowed the work to influence University strategy.

The decision to implement one initiative across the three discipline areas was also facilitative to the project. This allowed the discipline and core team to place a concentrated focus on developing a strong evaluation strategy for the work. The use of one initiative in three areas provided a larger pool of data for the evaluation. It also allowed the core and discipline teams to work together to provide an initiative that was applicable in science, arts and performance based courses and was relevant to the unpacking of a variety of different assessment types. Therefore, this generated a strong evidence base to use in influencing University wide practice via its feed into strategy and policy. Moreover, having one initiative meant that the core team's efforts in rolling out, embedding and influencing change were maximized as they were concentrating on one piece of work and not many.

## 7. Changes implemented at the discipline level and impact

The inclusive assessment initiative was implemented in each of the discipline areas. This initiative and the evidence of impact collected by the University of Wolverhampton are detailed in section 6: Changes implemented at institutional level. However, details of the rollout within Faculties, the impact on the Faculty level attainment figures and the project outcomes at Faculty level are detailed below.

### 7.1 Rollout of the 'What Works?' Programme

The inclusive assessment approach has proved to be effective and has been rolled out across the Institute of Sport in the Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing. The initiative was also rolled out into level 4 and level 5 biomedical sciences modules, some engineering modules and some built environment modules in the Faculty of Science and Engineering. To this end the initiative has been fully embedded in 30 modules within these two Faculties. Further modules in the Faculty of Science and Engineer will implement the initiative as part of their peer review. The initiative was adapted in the Faculty of the Arts and this adapted version of the initiative has been rolled out across level 4 and 5 art modules. A fourth Faculty, the Faculty of Social Sciences will commence rollout of the initiative during the 2015/16 academic year.

### 7.2 Outcomes

The outcomes of the 'WhatWork?' project include an increase in student attainment, and a decrease in students who do not submit their work thus increasing the amounts of students who are eligible to progress. More students from minority backgrounds have demonstrated improved grades than their white counterparts (see Section 5: Evaluation Strategy). The findings of the initiative at an institutional level are mirrored at a Faculty level.

#### 7.2.1 Impact

Increases in student success, especially BAME student success, are noted in the three Faculties where the inclusive assessment initiative has been rolled out, but not in the Faculty where the initiative is yet to be implemented.

The percentage of first and upper second class degree obtained by white students has increased in the academic year 2012/13 and 2013/14 in the Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing (FEHW; Figure 7.1) and the Faculty of the Arts (FOA; Fig 7.2), however the increase in students categorised as BAME gaining first or upper second class degrees has been greater, therefore producing a year on year decrease in the attainment gap.

Figure 7.1: FEHW attainment figures

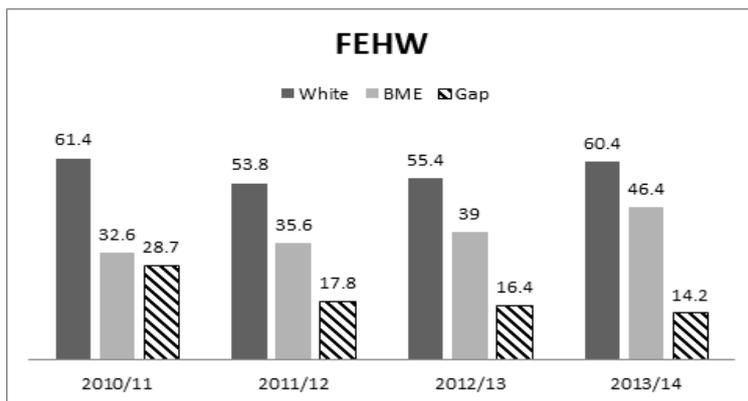
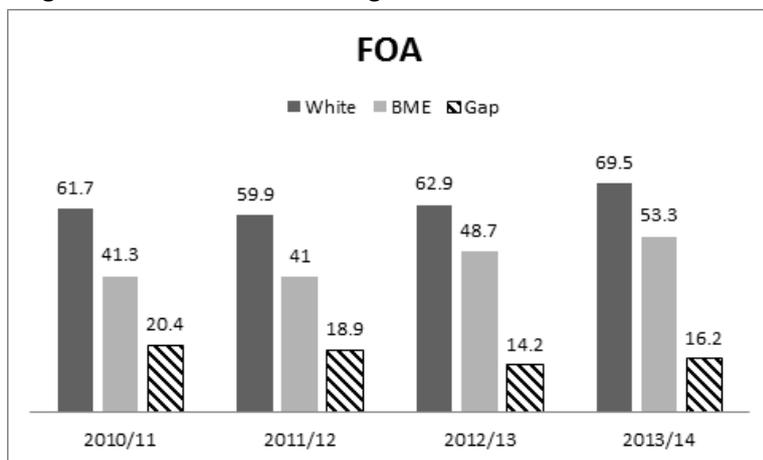
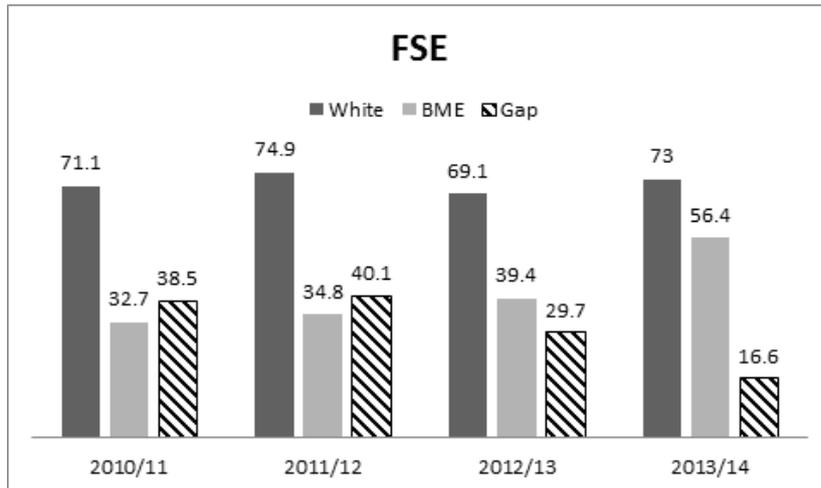


Figure 7.2: FOA attainment figures



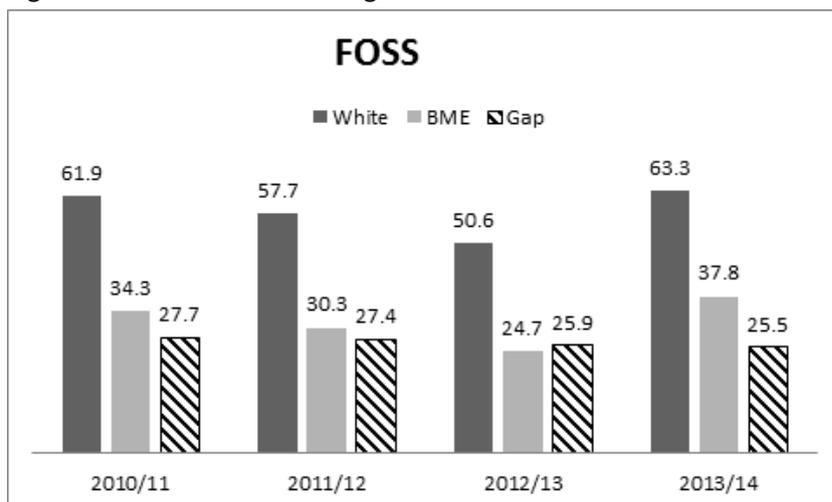
Although the percentage of white students in the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE; Fig 7.3) gaining first or upper second class degrees dipped in 2012/13, the percentage of student categorised as BAME who gained first or upper second class degrees has significantly increased. Again this has significantly reduced the attainment gap.

Figure 7.3: FSE attainment figures



However, it is notable that neither of these trends were not evident in the first and upper second class degrees obtained by student in the Faculty of Social Sciences (FOSS; Fig 7.4) where the initiative is yet to be implemented.

Figure 7.4: FOSS attainment figures



### 7.3 Case studies of particularly effective working

Each participating discipline team have provided a case study relating to their differing approaches to implementing, rolling out and embedding the *WhatWorks?* initiative within their Faculty. An abstract for each case study is provided below and full case studies are available in appendices v, vi, vii)

#### 7.3.1 *WhatWorks?* Plus: Contextualising the inclusive assessment initiative in the Arts (Dr Peter Day)

The 'What Work's activities in Art & Design focused on a discipline competent design and delivery of the assignment briefs in arts based subject. This included a review of the comprehensibility of assignment briefs and a greater focus on unpacking assignment briefs with students.

### Background:

The backdrop to this work is that a significant number of students undertook re-sits in Art and Design during 2014. This problem was not as prominent in 2015 in Level 4 and Level 6, but is still a huge problem in the current Level 5 where the majority of students have a re-sit or retake.

### The activities undertaken were:

- Assignment briefs – the updated and reviewed assignment briefs have been given out to during the year across Level 4, 5 and 6.
- Devoting more time to exploring, explaining and discussing the assignment brief with students. Group discussion encouraged about the brief.
- A further questionnaire to review of the new assignment briefs was undertaken with students.
- Ongoing verbal feedback via student reps and course meetings was encouraged.
- A VLE model was developed to support the Module/Assignments involved in the pilot.
- The timetable has been reviewed and altered to clearly show the day for each assignment activity.

### Change in Behaviour and impacts

- The unpacking sessions gave a space for students to openly talk through what is required, as well as 'translate' the assignment requirements. This seems to work best for the more able students; however there is uplift across the grades at Level 4.
- The question is still current from 2014 statistics raises the questions: i) 'is students' achievement being impacted on by poorly written and designed assignments?' ii) 'Is the poor first-sit statistic a result of this? It would appear that for Level 5 a greater factor for students is their time management, motivation and engagement and the re-design of the assignment brief is difficult to measure due to these other factors.

### Outcomes and Contribution

- Student voice and contextualised learning from student feedback was mapped into the prototype design for assignment briefs.
- The contextualised learning from this suggests that more students want to know what the requirements for an assignment are and for the assignment brief to clearly spell these out. Students wanted to have the journey towards the outcome and the grading system mapped out.
- Students have stressed the need for exemplar material to be made available to inform the assignment task and this has been added to some VLE Modules
- The VLE Model was designed to provide academic support and further information; this went live in 2014-15 and has been an overwhelming success.

### Future work:

- We will continue to monitor, review and compare success and re-sit figures in 2015 and 2016
- In 2015-16 a review of the amount and duplication of tasks in addition to minor design changes will be carried out.

### 7.3.2 A Successful Rollout across a School (Dr Mark Groves)

Initially, we used modules in the BA (Hons) Sports Studies pathway to pilot the 'What Works? at Wolves' principles for the inclusive assessment initiative within the Institute of Sport. Specifically, we used 4SR013 Investigating Sport in Society as one of the pilot modules. This module included two pieces of assessment (a presentation and a piece of interview-based research) and an assessment unpacking session, based on the 'What Works?' principles, was included in the module weekly programme for each of these two assessments. Feedback from students was positive and suggested that these sessions had been useful in helping them to prepare for their assessments. Consequently, this approach to assessment unpacking was rolled out across the five undergraduate degrees within the Institute of Sport. Informal mentoring sessions were arranged with Course Leaders as part of this process and the 'What Works?' principles are now embedded in many of the module delivered within the Institute of Sport.

### 7.3.3 Implementing the *WhatWorks?* Assignment Briefs and Assignment Unpacking in to Peer Review (Dr Chris Williams)

In addition to the general work stream activity the Faculty of Science and Engineering's Learning and Teaching Committee has continued supporting learning and teaching in the Faculty through various initiatives. The Learning and Teaching Committee has been made formed of representatives drawn from each School, six within the Faculty and other staff to bring forward learning and teaching issues for discussion and to disseminate information and other activity through the Faculty with consistency.

The learning and teaching committee has developed and approved plans for the years activity including work streams relating to the development of a community of practice, identification of school champions, undertaking and managing school teaching reviews, research into PG Certificate and FHEA and SFHEA memberships and the development of more systemized internal moderation systems.

The Faculty used both Assessment and Clarification of the Brief together with Fit to Submit initiatives as the subject matter for the Peer Review exercise. All staff in the Faculty that are student facing were asked to participate including lecturers, demonstrators and technicians. The outcomes of these activities will form the basis of work stream developments in the future.

## 7.4 Impact and learning about effective practice in the disciplines area

Several lessons have been learnt at the discipline level. Firstly having discipline leads that helped develop the inclusive assessment initiative, has led to it being viewed positively by Faculty colleagues. As a result, the initiative was view as discipline competent and practice relevant. Selecting members of the discipline teams who were respected by their colleagues as excellent teachers, facilitated the process of influencing and engaging the wider Faculty staff in the rollout and embedding of the work. The rollout process was further enhanced by giving the discipline teams the freedom to choose the methods of rollout within their Faculty. As the discipline teams know their colleagues well, they chose the most appropriate approach for the Faculty culture and thereby generated a diversity of approaches to rollout as seen in case studies in appendices v, vi, vii.

Faculty senior management support was also crucial to the rollout and embedding of the project. The support of a relevant Faculty Associate Dean and Principal Lecturer allowed barriers and issues to be immediately explored and Faculty supported solutions to be implemented. This allowed for a smoother rollout and embedded process. Moreover, the involvement of Faculty Associate Deans and Principal Lecturers in the project core team provided the project with a Faculty level voice. Having a Faculty level voice for the project was, in turn, facilitative to the rollout. This was particularly important as it provided a Faculty level message that was consistent with the institutional message relating to this programme.

The bottom up approach that resulted from the discipline teams driving the piloting and rollout of their initiative, coupled with the top down support and championing provided at both Faculty and institutional level, encouraged a positive view of the project. Most likely, this positive view arose because the project was not perceived as a 'top down' initiative.

## 8. Sustainability

### 8.1 Ways in which the programmes has become more widespread or embedded

As previously outlined, the work that has been part of the *WhatWorks?* programme has been embedded at institutional level through its use to support the enhancement of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2012-17). The *WhatWorks?* programme has also generated a heightened awareness that student belongingness plays a role in student success. This has led to belongingness being considered as part of other cross-university initiatives and developments such as the University's on going work to improve personal tutoring. Embedding of the initiative has also occurred at Faculty level. Firstly this has occurred as a result of the *WhatWorks?* initiative being incorporated into cross faculty initiatives such as influencing some support approaches offered by the Graduate Teaching Assistant and Graduate Interns, as well as underpinning initiative such as 'Assessment Cafes'. Secondly, the inclusive assessment approach has been embedded at course level, having been rolled out in different ways in each participating Faculty. A systematic approach has been adopted by the Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing, where the initiative has been rolled out across the Institute of Sport and a two year plan has been developed for rollout across the whole Faculty. This Faculty has engaged Institute Attainment Champions who will be responsible for rolling out and embedding of the *WhatWorks?* initiative in each of its other discipline areas. The Faculty of Science and Engineering has embedded the inclusive assessment process as part of their peer review process. This method is proving effective in embedding the initiative all Schools within the Faculty. The Faculty of the Arts has embedded the inclusive assessment approach into all levels of education within their Photography courses and their Textiles and Design courses and have provided a two year sustainability plan. The only Faculty not to have a discipline area involved in the *WhatWorks?* programme was the Faculty of Social Sciences. After negotiations, the Faculty will commence the rollout of the initiative from the academic year 2015/16.

### 8.2 Plans and progress towards embedding and future sustainability

As discussed in section 8.1, the inclusive assessment approach is being actively rolled out and embedded at course level. Two Faculties (Faculty of Education Health and Wellbeing & Faculty of the Arts) have developed two year roll-out and embedding plans, a third Faculty is embedding through their peer review process and the fourth Faculty has committed to rollout and embedding. Additionally, the rollout and sustainability of the *WhatWorks?* Programme is written into the three year work plans of two of the University of Wolverhampton Learning and Teaching Fellows. Further progress towards the embedding and sustainability of the work involved in the *WhatWorks?* programme is witnessed in the collaborative working relationship between the University of Wolverhampton and its Students' Union. The Students' Union has included student success and the reduction of attainment in their most recent 5 year plan, they have made a commitment to hold an Annual Summit with the University, the reduction of attainment gaps is written into the job descriptions of all SU Officers and the current team of SU Officers are actively awareness raising about the 'ways to be a successful student' which arose from the *WhatWorks? programme* which includes the use of the *WhatWorks?* videos (found here: <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/study-here/student-life/what-works-for-students/>). In addition the recommendations of this report will form the foundations of the

future work of the University's Attainment Champion Group. Finally, the University of Wolverhampton has invested into further strategically supported work to increase student attainment and reduce attainment gaps.

## 9. Conclusions

A number of summaries have been provided below.

### 9.1 Summary of successes and challenges

Throughout this programme of work the project team have faced a number of challenges but despite this have achieved many successes. The challenges faced have mostly been generated by the University-wide transformative that coincided with the launch of the programme. During the bidding process, attention was paid to engaging the financial and practical support of the relevant Deans of School and the Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching). However, as a result of the restructure the Dean of School and Associate Deans changed. This led to a process of renegotiating the commitment of the Faculty Deans to the programme and a workload allocated for the discipline teams. In addition, two of the Associate Deans involved in the development of the programme changed their role and the new Faculty Associate Deans and Principal Lecturers responsible for learning and teaching or undergraduate study had to be engaged with the work in hand. This led to an hiatus in the support that the discipline teams received in the rollout and embedding of the programme. Although the change in personnel led to some difficulties, this also had a benefit as the incoming staff brought with them a variety of ideas about the development, rollout and embedding of the inclusive assessment approach.

A second challenge related to the redeployment of the Institutional Lead of the programme. Originally the programme of work had been located with the University's Institute for Learning Enhancement which afforded the programme with an identity as an institutionally led and support piece of work. This gave the programme gravitas, a community of practice, a number of networks to disseminate the work through and was part of a work-stream that was reported to a number of University level committees. During the lifetime of the project the Institute for Learning Enhancement was dispended and the Institutional Programme Lead was redeployed into a research management role. This generated a number of issues. Firstly, the coordination of the *WhatWork?* Programme was no longer viewed as a valid part of the Institutional Project Lead's role, so this was subsumed into her out of hours research work. More importantly the change in role led to a loss of Institutional voice for the project and new ways of feeding the project outcomes into the University's governance structure had to be negotiated.

A third challenge related to the engagement of staff in the initiative and its embedding. An unfortunate side effect of the institutional-wide transformation and culture change was the level of fatigue that University staff articulated which resulted from experiences of constant change. This led to a resistance to engage in any activity that engendered further change. The fatigue, however, was short lived and as the staff settled into the new University structure, and interest in and engagement with the initiative grew.

Finally, due to the retirement of the former Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) the project momentarily lost its most senior advocate. Although this was a major loss to the project core team, the new Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) saw merit in the work and championed the project at an institution level. The renewed senior championing of the project further supported the wider staff engagement as staff re-engaged with pedagogic development.

Despite the above difficulties, the project has had some success. The inclusive assessment approach was valued by students who requested that the anonymous questions exercise was integrated into their theoretical lectures. The initiative was also positively received by teaching staff who felt that it promoted student engagement and enhanced understanding of assessment requirements. Moreover, the approach reduced the number of personal tutorials required to address the understanding of the assignment and increased the number of personal tutorial in which academic content of assignments were discussed. Despite initial resistance to further change, the wider University have begun to embrace the inclusive assessment approach and has led to roll out into a substantial number of modules and this roll out and embedding will continue over the next two years.

The success that the project team is most proud of is the impact that the initiative has had on student success, especially the success of students who are categorised as BAME. As seen in the evaluation section of this report, the initiative led to an increase in the number of students who gained 50% and above in their assignments. This was witnessed for all ethnicity groups but the initiative had a more pronounced effect on the success of students from minority backgrounds. Moreover, the increased in success of students from BAME backgrounds was significantly increased for module grades at 60% and above and thereby positively impacting on the ethnicity attainment gap.

## 9.2 Drawing together impact and learning, and reflection on the process

A very important lesson learnt from this project is having a single initiative is very powerful. This was not the approach taken by the other 12 Universities in the Change Programme and therefore the University of Wolverhampton's approach has provided an interesting perspective to the wider programme. This approach was found to have benefits, especially in terms of evaluation, embedding and making strategic impact.

The major lessons learnt from this work are numerous. Firstly, senior management support is crucial. Having support from senior University leaders, who advocate the benefits of the programme provides extra kudos to the work and encourages people to listen. Senior management support within the Faculties is also crucial. Having Associate Deans and Principal Lecturers who acted as champions for the programme was very important to the success of the project; they not only advocated the benefits of the initiative to support the rollout, they provided the project with a voice within Faculties, as well as instantly troubleshooting problems or barriers to rollout and embedding.

Having discipline level advocates for the programme, who were responsible for piloting the initiative and driving the programme rollout, was extremely facilitative. The discipline leads provided the programme with validity in eyes of their colleagues. They also helped to ensure that the approach was discipline competent. Moreover, the layered implementation approach, which was discipline led and driven but supported by Faculty management and institutional leadership, led to the initiative not being view as a wholly top-down process and to it being more readily accepted by teaching staff.

Finally, it is crucial for projects such as *WhatWorks?* to be located in an area of the organisation which focuses on academic development and enhancement and pedagogic research. This not only gives the work perceived legitimacy, but also provides access to a community of practice to help support the development of the work and to networks to support its rollout and embedding. This also provides

the project with the opportunity to feed into the University governance structure and therefore provides the project with a voice.

### 9.3 Conclusions

The initiative has been a success, it is positively received by students, considered useful by academic staff and has been a contributing factor to the University meeting the level one KPI 'increasing the number of students who gain a first or upper second class degree' and the level two KPI 'reducing the ethnicity attainment gap'.

### 9.4 Implications

This work has highlighted the importance of the role of belongingness in the success of students who are categorised as BAME and in particular the role of belonging in the experience and success student who are part-time students and are categorised as BAME.

### 9.5 Recommendations/next steps

As a result of the *WhatWorks?* programme the following recommendations were proposed and agreed by the University of Wolverhampton Equality and Diversity Committee:

11. This work stream should continue to report into University Student Experience Committee.
12. Initiatives to raise attainment should be implemented throughout the student lifecycle.
13. An inclusive, non-deficit approach to raising attainment is crucial to enhancing success in groups of students where attainment gaps are apparent.
14. Student led, active learning experiences positively impact on attainment through their aspiration raising properties and their ability to generate students' confidence in their own success. The principles advocated in the '*WhatWorks?*' assessment unpacking should be implemented other learning and teaching activities.
15. Developing a sense of belonging is important to student success, and attention should be paid to encouraging belonging in groups of students with a lower sense of belonging. This includes Black males, older students from minority backgrounds, and all Level 5 students.
16. Students' pre-expectations of higher education suggest that students are not prepared for the higher education learning experience. In particular, students do not understand the activities and behaviours that are necessary for independent learning. Access and induction activities should endeavour to generate realistic expectations of the University and develop greater levels of preparedness for higher education.
17. Attainment data should be available at Faculty and course levels, which highlights where local attainment gaps are evident.
18. Full and part time attainment gap figures should be monitored and reported against.
19. Further research is required to better understand part-time BAME student attainment.
20. Student attainment should not be viewed as a project but should be a resourced stream of work.

The lessons learnt through this project provide areas of advice for other HEIs, especially if they are attempting to implement smaller change programmes in the mist of wider institutional transformation. This advice would be to ensure that the project:

- is 'homed' in an appropriate University department that will allow the work to be disseminated in Faculty and Institutional Committees, as well as through organisational learning and teaching networks.
- has a consistent advocate in each Faculty who is involved the development, rollout embedding and dissemination of the project.
- is supported by Senior Leaders at the University and this champion is involved in the development and steering of the project.
- has a financial backing to allow travel to events, the running of internal events and for the project team to engage in dissemination and profile raising of the work they are doing.
- senior management advocates at Faculty and Institutional level give a consistent message about the importance and value of the work being carried out.
- has a branded identity within the organisation.

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## Appendix B:

- Appendix i The University Belongingness Study
- Appendix ii Students Pre-expectations of Higher Education
- Appendix iii The Attainment Summits
- Appendix iv The Institutional Intervention and Influencing Strategy
- Appendix v *WhatWorks?* Plus: Contextualising the Inclusive Assessment Initiative in Art and Design
- Appendix vi A Successful Rollout across the Institute of Sport
- Appendix vii Implementing *WhatWorks?* Assignment Briefs, Assignment Unpacking and Fit to Submit via Peer Review

## What Works? Student Retention & Success



### Understanding the role of student belonging in their success

Debra Cureton

#### Rationale for the case study

As part of the *WhatWorks?* programme, the University of Wolverhampton followed a cohort of students to chart the changes that occurred in their sense of belonging as they progressed through their time at the University. The cohort study indicated that there were differences between the perceived sense of belonging of students from minority backgrounds and their white counterparts. As the cohort study only followed approximately 100 students, a larger more comprehensive study was required to assess whether this trend was generalizable to the student population at the University of Wolverhampton. This study was felt to be worthwhile as a strong sense of belonging is linked with academic success (Thomas, 2012); connecting this to the knowledge that there is a national difference in the attainment of BAME students and their white counterparts (ECU, 2015), students sense of belongingness could be one of the many areas that contribute to the attainment gap (Cousin & Cureton, 2012). However, a solid picture of the student belongingness patterns is necessary to provide a basis for this proposition. As a consequence, a more extensive, cross University study of belongingness took place.

#### Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

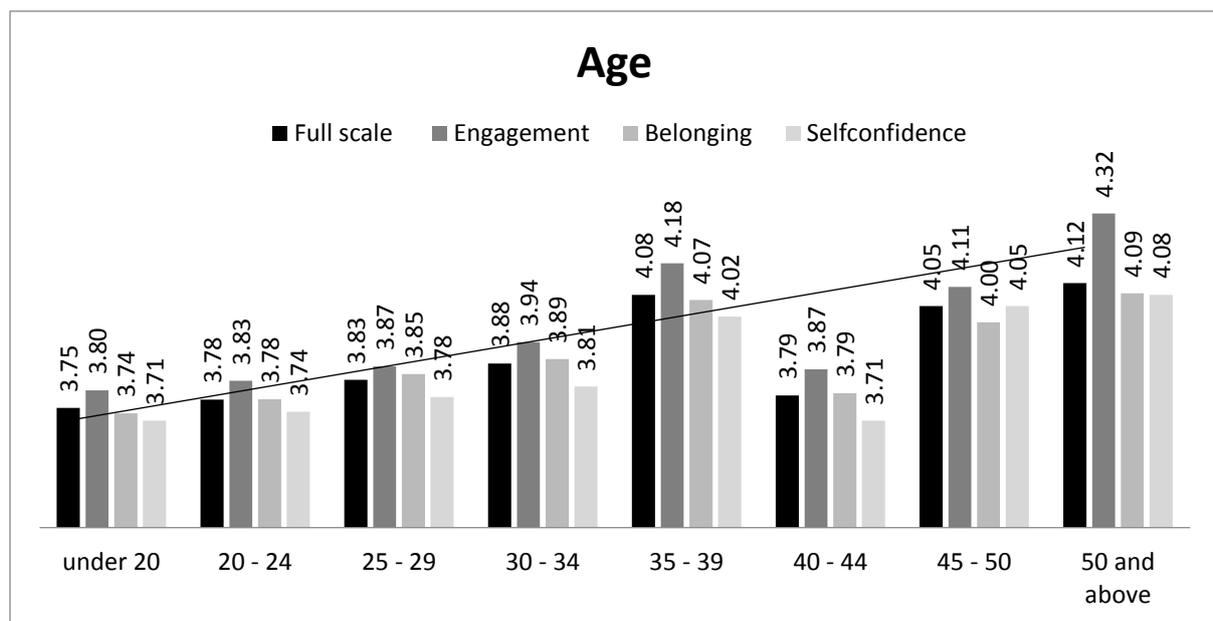
During March 2015 the Yorke Belongingness Questionnaire was disseminated to 941 Level 4, 5 and 6 students at the University of Wolverhampton. The questionnaire measures belongingness via three subscales which are engagement, belonging to Faculty or Department and academic related self-confidence; these are measured via a 5 point likert scale where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree, which mean a higher score equates to a higher sense of belongingness. The questionnaires were administered at the beginning of lectures by Faculty Graduate Interns or by the Students' Union during their visits to the University Campuses. The questionnaires were completed in the presence of the person who distributed the questionnaire.

The sample included representatives from all the University of Wolverhampton Faculties; Telford, City and Walsall campuses; all levels of undergraduate study; full and part time students; males and females; all ethnicity groups within the university; home and international students; students who are first generation; students who have caring responsibilities and those who work and study.

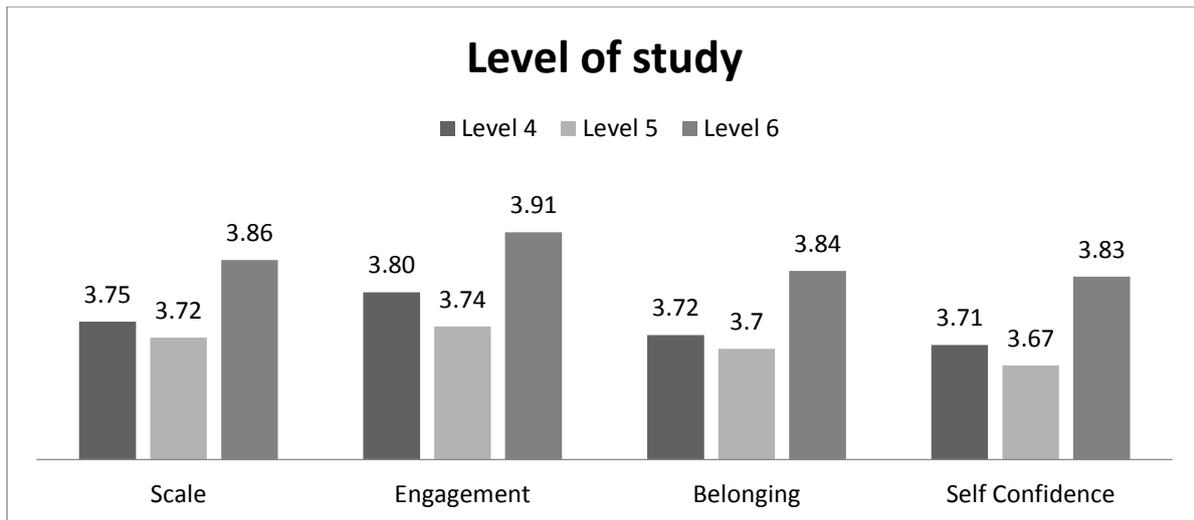
The data analysis has identified the mean scores for the questionnaire, each of the three subscales and the individual questions. The data was cut by a number of demographic variable, including level of study, mode of study, gender, age group, ethnicity, Faculty, campus, whether the student was an international student, disability status, first in family status, whether the student worked as well as studied, whether the student had caring responsibilities and the time student took to travel to University each day.

In addition to completing the questionnaire, students were recruited to three focus groups to discuss the trends of the identified in the questionnaire. This was to provide contextual information about the trends in the questionnaire and a more in-depth understanding of belonging at the University of Wolverhampton. Thirteen students attended 3 focus groups. The students included students categorised as BAME (n=3) and white students (n=10), the later groups included 2 international students who were from the EU. The students included 2 SU Reps/Officers who reflected on their recent experience as SU officers as well as their undergraduate experience. The focus groups were attended by 4 males and 9 females who included representatives from levels 4, 5 & 6 of undergraduate study.

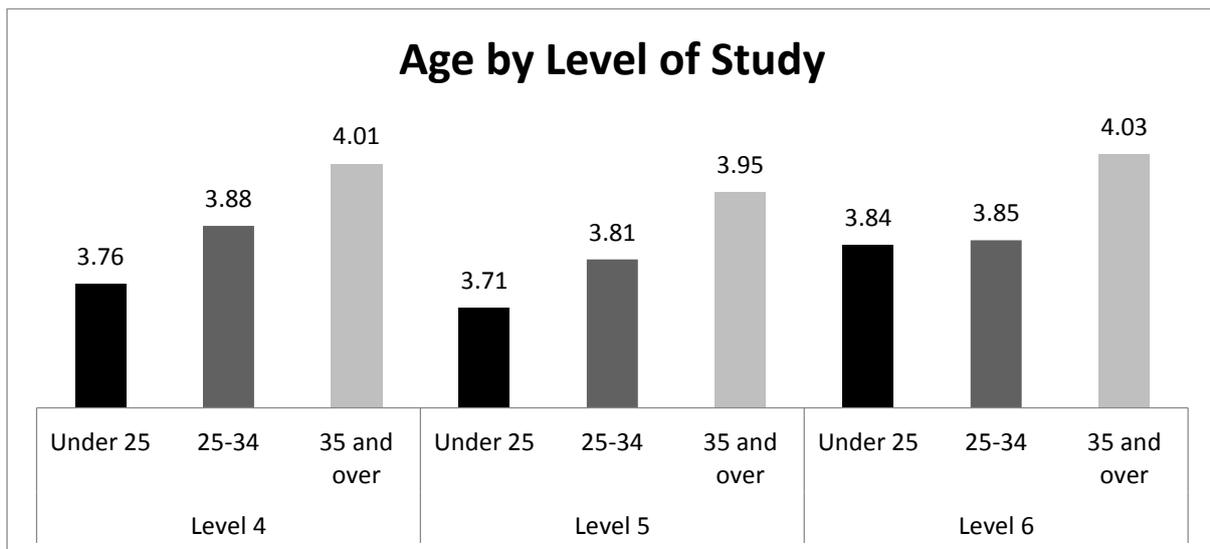
The quantitative findings are based on a calculation of the mean result which are discussed below. Formal comparisons of the mean via ANOVA have not been undertaken at this moment in time, therefore the differences discussed below may not be statistically significant differences. However, the quantitative outcomes of the research provide some interesting information for the University of Wolverhampton. Firstly and reassuringly, on the whole students' sense of belonging appeared to increase with age; that is the older the student that was at the point of survey the stronger their self-reported belonging was. This is encouraging as the University has a large mature student population, which continues to grow despite the national decline in mature students in higher education (ECU, 2015). This suggests that the University of Wolverhampton is a welcoming environment for older students. Belonging does not appear to be affected by gender which suggests that the University is equally as welcoming for female and male students.



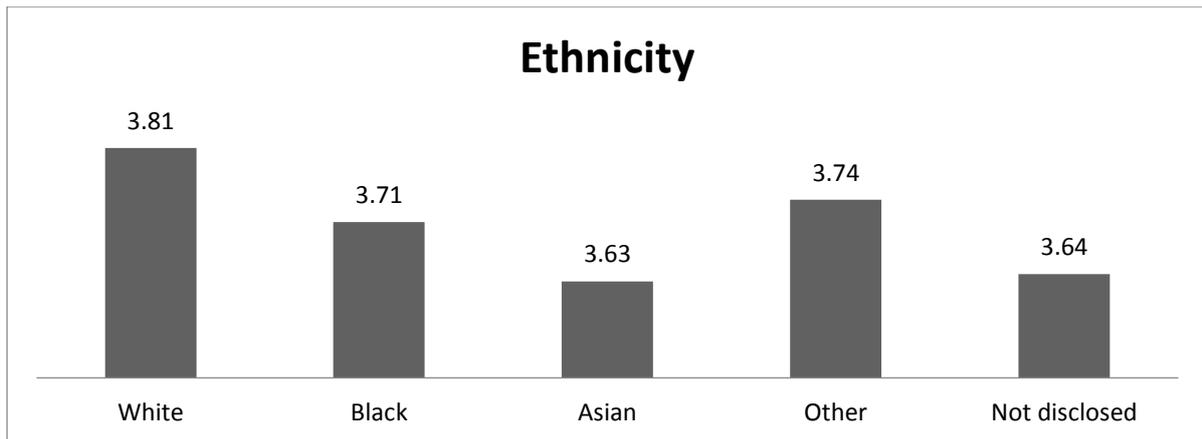
Of interest, it appears that belongingness is affected by level of study and a dip in students' sense of belonging is observed at level 5, but returns at a higher point in level 6. This may be associated with the 'second year blues' but it is particularly important to recognise this with reference to student mental health and suicide risk (see UUK Reducing the Risk of Student Suicide, 2002 and UUK's Student Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education, 2015).



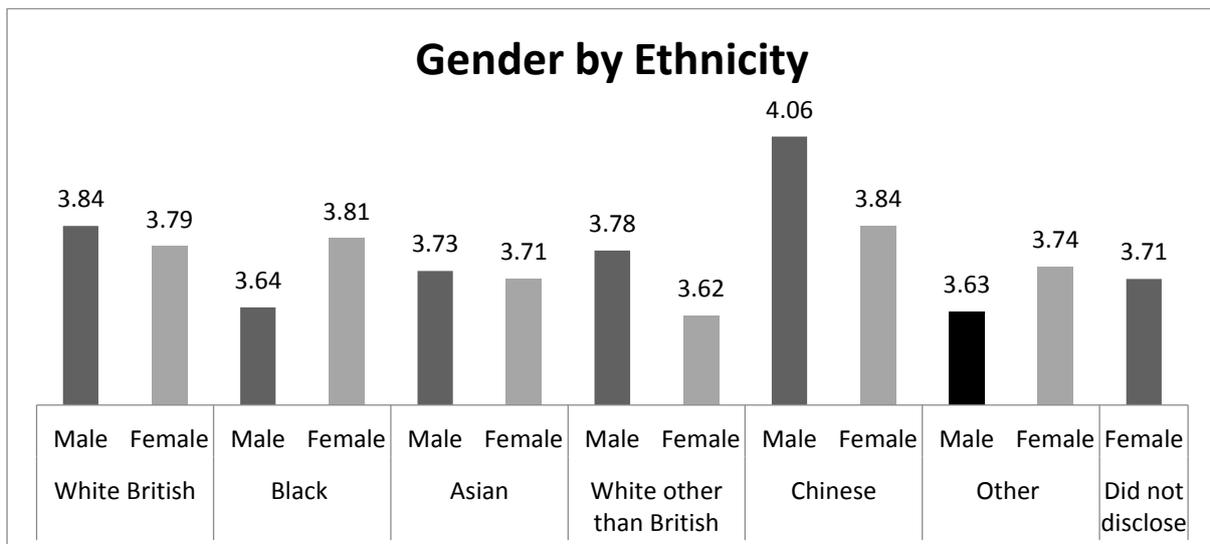
Additionally, there is an interaction between age and level of study, where students aged under 25 and studying at level 5 have a significantly lower sense of belonging than other students. Again, as this group of students are the age group who are most at risk of mental health difficulties leading to suicide, this finding should be given serious consideration.



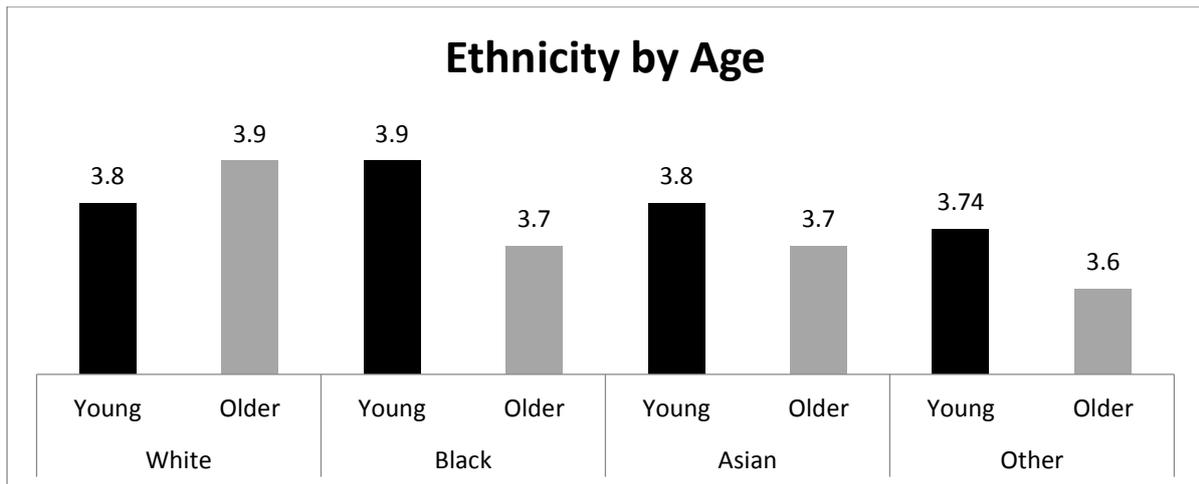
The differences in belonging between BAME students and their white counterparts that was observed in the *WhatWorks?* cohort study, were also found in this study. This work highlights that students who are categorised as Asian or Black have a lower sense of belonging than students from other ethnic backgrounds.



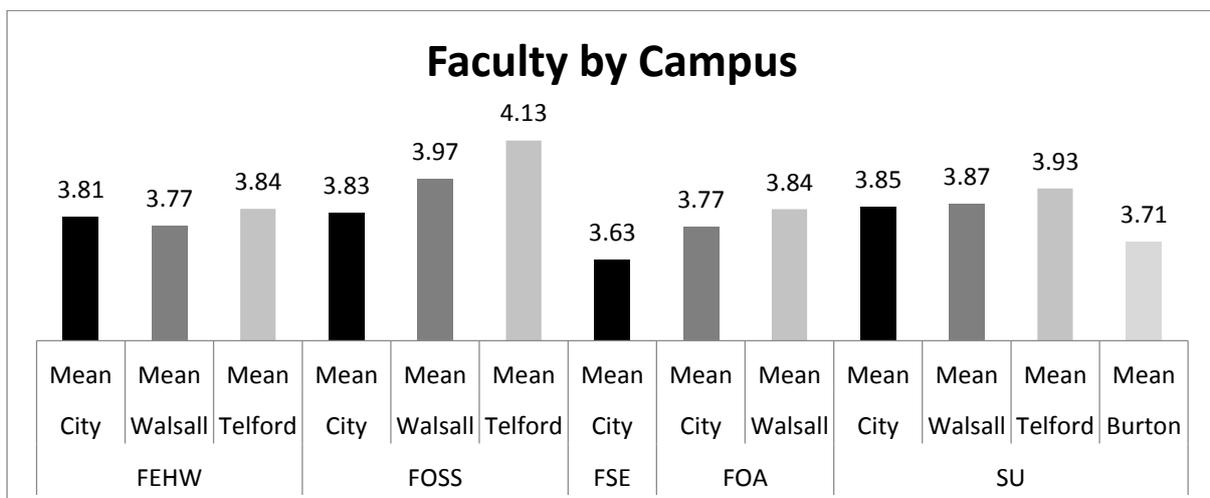
In addition there is an interaction between gender and ethnicity, where black males, males who categorised themselves as ‘other’ and females who categorised themselves as ‘white other’ appear to have a significantly lower sense of belonging than their counterparts. This data analysis utilised all the ethnicity categories and also highlights that Chinese students have the strongest sense of belonging, and particularly male students from this ethnicity category. Again this is interesting as black males students are the group who are least likely to a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2:1 degree classification whilst, Chinese students are the group of students who are most likely to gain a first or 2:1 degree (ECU, 2015).



A further interaction between ethnicity and age was observed where older students (36 and above) from minority backgrounds have a significantly lower sense of belonging than their white counterparts and younger counterparts from the same ethnicity categorisation. Again this belongingness pattern is interesting when comparing them to those that are found in attainment. Within the attainment data there is a distinct difference in student attainment as a factor of age and ethnicity, with the attainment gap being much wider between older BAME students and their white counterparts than the gap observed between younger BAME and white students (ECU, 2014).



The University of Wolverhampton was also interested in the effect of where students study to see if space and place is important to students' belonging. Therefore the data was cut based on the campus where students studied and the Faculties in which they studied. This highlighted that students who mainly study on smaller campuses (i.e. The Telford Campus) have an enhanced sense of belonging compared to those who study on larger campuses. An interaction between campus and Faculty was also found. The patterns found in this analysis suggest that students who have identifiable home building (i.e. the International Academy – FOSS in Telford) have a higher sense of belonging.



The qualitative findings generated by the focus groups have provided some insight into students' beliefs about what belonging is and why it is important. This produced masses of data which cannot be fully covered in this case study, so only the main themes will be covered here. All the students who took part in the focus groups felt that their affective attachments at the University were one of the most important factors to them having a successful experience in higher education. When discussing what belongingness is and how they would describe it, all students referred to belonging as 'being part of the family' and proposed that being part of the family had emotional or affective aspects as well as practical features and as a result provided '*a feeling of being cared about; that you matter*' (Female, International Student, Level 5).

Students believe that belongingness in higher education *'waxes and wanes'* (Female Student, Level 6), which they directly related to their sense of being cared about. This, they explained was measured by *'the amount of attention we [students] receive from lecturers or teachers on the course and the interest the university shows'* (Female Student, Level 5). Students discussed how personalised support at course level differed from the generic support which is offered at an organisational level and how personalised support generated stronger affective bonds than impersonal support.

*'It's good that the university does stuff to help us, but it's, errm, well impersonal, like cold if you know what I mean. When they know your work and can personalise advice to you it feels better, warmer; like they know about you.'* (Female Student, Level 6).

In addition to the waxing and waning of belonging, students felt that belongingness can be *'lost and can also be found'* (Male Student, BAME, Level 6) at any point of their university journey. These discussions considered who generates a sense of belonging; who is responsible for generating belonging and the barriers that can stop a sense of belonging from being generated. The latter aspect of this discussion was extremely emotive; students who felt a sense of belonging were visibly distressed by the idea that some students did not feel accepted and part of the University at any level. Those who did not feel a sense of belonging were a little angry and somewhat defensive during these discussions. In relation to the generation of belonging students felt that members of the university community *'going beyond the call of duty'* (Female SU Officer reflecting on her recent undergraduate experience) helped them feel that they were cared about and therefore belonged at the University. This was particularly powerful when students were questioning whether University was right for them or were experiencing emotional disharmony. One student commented that *'Lecturers can generate belonging when it isn't present by being open to students, by showing respect; it's almost as if they are demonstrating that they see something worthwhile in you and that matters'* (Female, SU Officer). This belief was further explored in relation to students who had lost their feeling of belonging or never felt it in the first place *'Lecturers can lose students by being rude, unapproachable, unavailable, destructive rather than constructive, acting like they can't be bothered, like not answering questions and emails, or by providing generic feedback to students. And stereotyping us'* (Male Student, BAME, Level 6). However, belongingness can be retrieved or even built at any point of the student lifecycle, although this task becomes more difficult as time moves on. Discussing his lack of sense of belonging throughout the majority of his degree, one student talked about how he was *'enticed into being part of the group'* by lecturers who *'reached out [to him] and made an effort to understand [him].'* The lecturer's invitational approach and attempt to see the student as an individual, with potential, were viewed as an example of the lecturer *'going beyond the call of duty'*, which in turn opened a door to developing trust and a facilitative learning relationship to develop. Or as the student described it *'he made an effort and no one did that before. He told me I had to go to lectures, they were important, I didn't know that right, so I started going to lectures. You know, when I went to lecturers I started to feel I fitted in'*. As a sense of belonging is linked to student success (Thomas, 2012) these findings are interesting as they directly overlap with the finding of the Disparities in Student Attainment programme (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) that proposed that student opportunities to be successful are enhanced by invitational lecturers who demonstrate that they view students as individuals and units of potential.

In addition to a lecturers' role in how belongingness can be lost and found at any point of the student lifecycle, it was recognised that students also play a large part in this process. Students themselves can help other students feel a sense of belonging by *'being open, friendly'* (Male Student, Level 6) and by *'just talking to you, not just talking to their friends'* (Female Student, Level 4). Again the concept of *'reaching out'* was returned to *'I suppose being aware is important, being aware that others might be*

*lonely and think they don't fit it'* (Female, Level 5 Student) and *'then you've got to be confident enough and reach out to include other people you don't normally speak to. That's hard sometimes'* (Female student, Level 5). On the reverse side, students were aware that a lack of awareness about the impact of their behaviours, and how other students perceive behaviour, could impact on belonging. *'Other students can alienate some students through being in cliques'* (Female Student, Level 4), or through *'not sharing space'* (Male Student, Level 5), and *'not realising that high action and loud vocals when they're having fun can be viewed as aggressive or confrontational situations by others.'* (Female, SU Officer).

Returning to feelings of not belonging, students were aware that this had affective, academic and student engagement implications. The emotional consequences of not belonging related to feelings of emotional distance that were articulated in comments such as *'the University doesn't care'* (Female Student, Level 5), *'feeling distanced from others'* or *'feeling intimidated by the groups of people who are always together because people are in cliques and that they are not welcoming towards you'* (Female Student, Level 4) and *'feeling that University space is not safe or welcoming or comfortable to be in'* (Female International Student, level 5). Not belonging also impacts of mental health and wellbeing. Students disclosed a belief that not having a sense of belonging negatively impacts on their confidence *'if you don't fit in you just don't feel confident do you?!'* (Female Student, Level 5). Not having a sense of belonging at their University means that students either strengthen existing connections outside of University which can also enhance feeling of isolation *'they [people outside of University] sometimes just don't understand what uni is about'* (Female Student, Level 5) or they make or continue alliances to establish belonging elsewhere, *'I was more linked to with other universities where my friends are than here and spent more time at those Universities than this one'* (Male student, Level 6). This also highlighted a worrying catch 22 situation *'if students don't feel belonging they have no impetus to stay at the University after lectures; they come here do the lecture and then go home.'* (Female Student, Level 6), but *'if students don't stay on campus after lectures they are never going to feel like they fit in.'* (Male Student, Level 5). However, on the whole students agreed that not having a sense of belonging at the University *'leads to the lack of local safety nets when things go wrong and no incentive to remain at the University when things are bad.'* (Male Student, Level 5). This led to discussions about what would encourage students to stay on campus after lectures. The area is discussed below.

Students' discussions about belonging and engagement focused on how not having a sense of belonging can lead students to emotionally and cognitively withdraw from the University. During this discussion students commented on how emotional and cognitive withdrawal manifested. In cognitive terms withdrawal was defined as: *'this leads to student not engaging with academic activities, not attending lectures'* (Female SU Officer), or engaging with the University on a surface level *'students see the university as a means to an end; to get a degree'* (Male Student, Level 6). Discussion of emotional withdrawal included: *'It leads to not mixing with other students and only coming to the University if it is necessary'* (Female Student, Level 4), or *'why stay after lecturers? I have no reason to'* (Male Student, Level 5) and *'not belonging leads to a lack of trust in the people at the University; I wouldn't disclose anything to them.'* (Female Student, Level 4). Therefore, a lack of a sense of belonging can lead to not accessing University space, resources and support.

Students also identified that not having a sense of belonging impacts at an academic level too. This was discussed in terms of *'students don't engage'* (Female SU Rep), *'you do not attend lectures and seminars'* (Male Student, Level 6), or *'why would you bother to use the University resources or support?'* (Female Student, Level 5). As a result, students do not generate learning relationships with academics or other students. *'you're not confident to work with other people, so you don't say much'*

(Female Student, Level 4) and so students do not learn from their peers. Also interactions with academic staff are limited or not existent *'You're not confident to ask questions, or ask for meetings with tutors and ask for support or ask for help'* (Male Student, Level 5).

As the focus groups progressed students reflected on what having a sense of belonging provides them with. Again these fell into cognitive and emotional groupings; however the emotional benefits of a sense of belonging appeared to be most easily accessible to students as these were discussed first. Overwhelmingly, the focus of these discussions was around how having a sense of belonging provided the opportunity for students to 'normalise their university experience' especially when family and friends at home do not understand the demands of higher education: *'here [at University] you can talk to people about things that are going on and they understand and say yeah I know what it is like, it happened to me, but if I said it to my mum she has no idea what I'm talking about.'* (Female Student, Level 6). Through the normalising experience students are able to gain reassurance during times of stress *'you have this huge sense of relief when some says yeah we all feel like this sometime'* (Female Student, Level 5). This also helps to generate a sense of safety that allows students to *'vent when it's all going wrong'* (Female Student, Level 6). Moreover, having a sense of belonging was equated to having a sense of *'camaraderie'* (Female Student, Level 5) in which students are *'sharing a journey, growing together and learning from each other'* (Male Student, Level 5), the 'socialising' aspect of this provides *'a sounding board'* (Female SU Rep) as well as helps student to *'settle in and feel part of the family'* (Female Student, Level 5). From a cognitive perspective having a sense of belonging gave students the opportunity to understand the rules of academic engagement as it helps raise students' awareness of the differences between Further Education and Higher Education *'from talking to other students and lecturers you learn how you have to do things [study] different here'* and feeling that you belong means that *'you are more willing to get practical support from your personal tutors or go to the library and do the skills for learning'* (Female Student, Level 5). When asked why this was, students returned to the concept of safety *'you feel it's ok to ask for help, it's a safe space and you can do it'* (Female Student, Level 4). As a consequence, students associated having a sense of belonging to their developing psychological resilience *'Being part of the family helps students generate their resilience'* (Female SU Rep). They believe that resilience is developed through their growing awareness of the rules of academic engagement and includes an understanding of habitus *'belonging gives students [access to] knowledge about university and how to succeed in your degree'* (Female Student, Level 5), *'because of it [a sense of belonging] you know the process, what to do, where to go, how to fit in, how to get help'* (Female Student, Level 4) which creates or enhances their agency *'if you fit in and you know where to get help, you go and get help and get better grades'* (Male Student, Level 5). Furthermore, resilience also develops because students believe that a sense of belonging provides them with *'emotional and psychological strength'* (Female International Student, Level 6), *'because it [belonging] helps students build their confidence'* (Female Student, Level 6), and it helps them *'understanding of how to cope'* (Female Student, Level 5); through which students *'find themselves; personally and academically'* (Female Student, Level 6) thereby facilitating the development of personal and academic identity.

Therefore, in summary having a sense of belonging impacts on the quality and the type of learning relationship that students have with their department or the University at which they study. Those students who feel that they have a sense of belonging discuss their learning relationship with the organisation in terms of it providing the opportunity of transformative learning experiences. They are aware that the University provides an arena where multi learning relationships can be developed, and multi-level emotional and academic support is on offer. They also recognise this leads to the opportunity to be more successful in HE. However, students who do not feel they belong within their

higher education environment discuss their learning experience in transactional terms; one in which minimal engagement is traded for academic qualification.

According to the students, a sense of belonging can be built through a variety of activities. Induction activities were believed to be very important, *'activities that encourage people to mix, breakdown barriers between students [peers] and students and staff can help too'* (Female Student Level 6) but students recognised that although students are naturally timid during induction, they need to be reminded that *'students are important in this process; they have a responsibility to mix during induction so they get to know people'* (Male student, Level 6). Students also suggested that induction could be restructured *'induction could be made into two days social activities; you know where you get to know people at the university and three days academic induction'* (Female Student, Level 5). At Level 4 students felt that developing belonging mainly resided in the interpersonal domain *'peers are important, mixing with people from your course group'* (Male Student, Level 5), as well as making friends through *'mixing with other courses and people who live in halls with you. Making wider friendship groups'* (Female student, Level 6). Again the concept of cliques was returned to *'It's important that friendship groups aren't cliquey and welcome other people to join them'*. However, pedagogy was also considered as important *'Interactive classroom activities that make people mix and get to know each other are important throughout the year'* (Male Student, Level 5). Whereas at Level 5, students felt that *'communicating with us through the holidays, like a personalised congratulations letters on passing the first year and information on what happens next'* (Female Student, Level 6) was important, but students added this communication should *'not only [include] information on what happens if you haven't passed everything – although this is important – information on what is expected of level 5 students, how to do well at level 5 would be great'* (Male Student, Level 5). Students also suggested that continued contact through the holidays could be achieved through *'paid placement with the University's projects etc.'* (Female International Student, Level 5), which would provide *'another level of belonging'* (Female Student, Level 5). In terms of pedagogy *'a continuation of interactive classroom activities should be maintained through level 5 to continue making students mix'* (Male Student, Level 5) was suggested. In addition, the importance of University events in the development of belongingness was highlighted *'events, University wide events, like the International Festival are important, you meet people and make friends; it helps you mix outside your class'* (Female International Student, Level 5), *'class events, inside the classroom, like Christmas parties, Dragons' Den'* (Female Student, Level 6) and *'things like balls outside the classroom'* (Male Student, Level 6) were also suggested as ways for students to develop their networks.

Through students' discussion it became apparent that there is a hierarchy in where students place the importance in belongingness. The most important sense of belonging was located in students' friendship groups and interpersonal aspects of belonging because these are a *'very important support mechanism'* (Female Student, Level 4), and friendship group based belonging becomes even more important *'when student belonging isn't there at course level'* (Male Student, Level 5). It was felt that peer based belonging was important as it *'allows students to learn from each other's mistakes. Friendships and support helps with confidence in being at Uni and in yourself and encourages you to develop'* (Female Student, Level 6). The second most important level of belonging is located in the academic sphere and focused at course level and acknowledged again the role of peers as *'this provides support in developing knowledge, having confidence in what you know [skills and knowledge acquisition]'* (Male Student Level 6). Students felt that small group seminars and working in groups are important to this process because *'networking with other students gives you a diverse knowledge and experience.'* (Female Student, Level 5). The third level of belonging is seated at a course level and acknowledges the role of academic staff. This level of belonging relates to the role that positive

learning relationships play in the development of belonging and thereby aiding academic success. Students suggest that *'lecturers develop belonging through going the extra mile and showing that they value students.'* (Female Student, Level 5), which is demonstrated by seeing students *'as individuals you know this because they give personalised support and provide support when it's needed and not imposing help when it's not wanted'* (Male Students, Level 6). Though going the extra mile and seeing students as individuals it was felt that lecturers acted as an interlocutor in students success (Cousin and Cureton, 2012) because, in creating a sense of belonging this way, lecturers are able to *'raise students' hopes and belief in themselves [aspirations] and help build our confidence'* (Female Student, Level 6). The next level of belonging is located at University level. This is generated *'through SU, societies, social activities with other students'* (Male Student, Level 6). However, this is viewed as a less personal sense of belonging because it is generated through *'generalised care and support from Uni, such as pastoral care'* (Female Student, Level 5). This was described as a 'weaker' sense of belonging. The fifth level of belonging was focused on buildings and the campus that students were based at. 'Our building' and 'our rooms' were important to students. It appears that students have an affective link to these rooms and feel an ownership and pride about the facilities they hold. *'Our building and rooms are our space'* (Female Student, Level 6), it was felt that 'our space' *'allow students to interact with each other'* (Female Student, Level 5) and encourage students to engage in the aspects of belonging outlined above. Students who did not have an 'our space' did not miss it but made their own 'our space' *'yeah we go to the library and meet there'* (Male Student, Level 6). But all agreed that *'mixing space that are not social learning space are important to meeting people and feeling that you belong – it gives students a reason to stay'* (Male Students, Level 5). The final level of belongingness is also located at a University level. *'The Uni is a place that you need to fit into, understand and get a sense of but nothing else'* (Female Student, Level 6). Belonging created at this level is not as important as other levels, but if an organisational level belonging is created the other levels of belonging must be in place for it to occur *'If you don't have belonging anywhere else you're just not going to have belonging for the University are you?'* (Female Student, Level 5).

To conclude, belongingness is multifaceted. Both students who felt they belonged and those who did not discussed the cognitive and affective aspects of belongingness that influence academic and social engagement. As a result, significant overlaps are found between the areas proposed by Cousin and Cureton's (2012) to impact on student success and the areas that this research proposed relates to student belongingness. This research into belongingness proposes that a sense of belonging is linked to the quality and the type of learning relationships that students develop with their peers and lecturers or have with their department and the University at which they study. Belongingness also plays a part in students' ability to engage with and master the pedagogical aspects of the HE learning environment and helps them negotiate the transition from their secondary and further education learning experiences to meet the demands of HE. Belongingness is also found to relate to the psycho-social elements of the learning experiences as it supports students in developing psychological resilience, self-confidence and evolving academic identity. Furthermore belongingness supports students' developing social and cultural capital as it facilitates students' developing understanding of habitus and evolving agency. In addition to this, student belongingness opens the door to the opportunity of students experiencing a transformative learning experience in HE. Those students who reported that they have a sense of belonging discussed their learning relationship with the organisation in terms of it providing the opportunity of transformative learning experiences. However, students who do not feel they belong within their higher education environment discuss their learning experience in transactional terms; one in which minimal engagement is traded for any

level of academic qualification. Therefore, the development of a sense of belongingness is crucial to student success. Activities to encourage student belongingness at all stages of the learning lifecycle should be considered. Particular attention should be paid to times when students' belongingness may wane and to the student groups who may have a different sense of belonging and a stronger sense of belonging could be encouraged.

#### Evidence of impact

The University Wide Belongingness Study has provided some valuable insights into the student experience at the University of Wolverhampton. This includes the importance of belongingness to the student experience and to students' success. Moreover, this piece of work identified that further work is required to support the development of belonging for some groups of students and provides some student led ideas about how this may be achieved.

The findings from this work has been presented at the University of Wolverhampton Student Attainment Summit (see case study iii). Issues pertaining to belonging are identifiable in approximately 75% of the practice change pledges made at the event. It is hoped this will make further positive impacts on the development and continuation of student belonging at the University of Wolverhampton

#### Sustainability

The University of Wolverhampton's interest in the development of student belonging is part of its part of the *WhatWorks?* project lead's University Learning & Teaching Fellowship. The findings have been fed into and been complemented by a successful application to the HEA for the University of host a Strategic Enhancement Project (Attainment and Success) in 2015. Furthermore, these research findings could potentially form a multi University bid for research funding to further explore the role of belongingness in student success and attainment gaps.

#### Lessons learnt

Differences in student experience at the University of Wolverhampton extend to their sense of belonging.

It appears that the groups of student who report a lower sense belonging are those student groups who, at a national level, are less likely to gain a first or upper second class degree. The data provided in this case study also suggests that students have linked a sense belonging to factors that facilitate academic success.

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## Great Expectations: Gaps in Students' Pre-expectations of Higher Education:

Debra Cureton

### Rationale for the case study

Both the Disparities in Student Attainment programme (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) and the early stages of University of Wolverhampton's contribution to the *WhatWorks?* programme have suggested that students' pre-expectations of higher education may differ from those of the organisation in which they study. This has a number of potentially negative consequences which include a lack of preparedness for higher education (Layer, 2007) and a negative influence on students' wellbeing and their satisfaction (Kreig, 2013). Moreover, if higher education does not meet the expectations of its students, this can have a disruptive effect on their psychological contract (their unspoken rules of engagement) with the University, which can negatively impact on their engagement and productivity, and in severe cases can lead to withdrawal from their study (Cureton, 2012; Clinton 2009). Therefore, as a continuing contribution to the *WhatWorks?* programme the University of Wolverhampton set out to explore the true nature of its new students' expectations of higher education.

### Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

To explore undergraduate students' pre-expectations of higher education at the University of Wolverhampton, a Students' University Expectation Survey (SUES) was developed and completed by 346 new University of Wolverhampton starters, prior to attending a University pre-induction session. The SUES questionnaire was designed around themes collected from an exercise carried out in the previous years' pre-induction, where attendees were asked to write down three things they expected University life to be like. A thematic analysis of the responses to this question highlighted that students expected University to be:

- transformative (educationally and personally).
- challenging to them (personally and educationally).
- a different educational experience to what they had experienced before.
- career enhancing.
- costly (financially, emotionally and in time spent studying).
- a new adventure (educationally and socially).
- a friendly, encouraging and safe place to be.

The SUES aimed to verify that these areas are important and explored these areas further and gain deeper insight into how students expected being at University would help them meet these expectations. Consequently, the SUES comprised of 14 short response questions that took two forms: open questions such as 'What do you anticipate Higher Education to be like?' and half statements that students were expected to complete, for example 'I expect my course to....' Some additional demographic data was also collected.

The outcomes from the students' responses to the SUES have been compared with the findings of 25 questionnaires completed by University of Wolverhampton lecturing staff of varying levels of experience, length of services with the University, seniority and Faculty affiliation. A summary of main findings of this study are detailed below, however as this work generated copious amounts of data, it

not possible to detail all the findings below. Firstly, an overview of the main themes from the students' responses will be outlined, after which the themes from the staff data that differ from students' expectation will be discussed. As the main finding of this work is that there are expectations gaps between new students and the lecturing staff who teach them, these expectation gaps will also be defined.

#### Students' Expectations of Higher Education:

A thematic analysis of the students' responses to SUES revealed that they expect that a University level education to provide a way of meeting their personal aspirations, *'it's been a life-long ambition to go to university and here I am'* (Female Mature Student), *'I will be able to get the job I want to do'* (Male Student) *'It will open the door to my desired career in education'* (Male, Mature Student). This theme was defined in three ways. Firstly, the expectations that students hold in relation to their aspirations related to higher education helping them meet their career goals *'I have worked in the voluntary sector; now I want to use this experience in social work; this course will get me there'* (Female Mature Student), or *'I've always wanted to be a nurse'* (Female Student). A second definition in this area is the expectation that entering higher education will provide students with *'a better life'* (Male and female students from all age groups), *'provide better opportunities'* (Male and female students from all age groups) and will *'change my life'* (Male and female students from all age groups). For a few students their expectations relating to aspirations focused on study goals, which provided a third definition *'I wanted to do an English degree when I was at school'* (Female Student), or *'I love history and now I have the opportunity to study it at a high level'* (Male Student).

Students also disclosed that they entered higher education because they expected it to prepare them for their career goals *'I will be a good chemist'* (Male Student) or *'University will give me the skills I need for the job I want to do'* (Male Student). This expectation was defined in a number of ways. Firstly, a degree level education was required to meet career goals *'I need a degree to be a.....'* (Male and female students from all age groups), *'the course will give me the higher knowledge of engineering I need for the career I want'* (Male student), or *'the course will develop the career skills I need'* (Female Student). A second definition for this expectation is that a degree will enhance students' future career prospects *'it means I will get a better job'* (Male Student), *'it's a stepping stone to graduate job'* (Female Student) or *'I will get a better paid job at the end'* (Male Mature Student). Additionally, students expect that having a degree will lead to enhanced skills and knowledge *'it will give me high level skills'* (Female Student) and *'I will develop skills and more knowledge for my career'* (Female Mature Student).

A further theme to arise from the student expectations data is that they expect higher education to be a life transforming experience *'it's going to change my life'* (Male and female students from all age groups), *'uni will make me more employable'* (Male Mature student), and *'I will be a better person'* (Male Student). This theme was defined as an expectation that University was a pathway to a better life *'I will be able to get a good job and provide a better life for me and my family'* (Female, Mature Student). Students also expected that by going to University it would provide an opportunity to transform themselves *'this is going to change me; turn everything around'* (Female Student), *'this is a chance be a confident person in my future'* (Female Student) or *'because of this I will get me respect'* (Male Student).

There were several other interesting themes that also arose and that should be noted. Firstly a lot of students expect their higher education experience to mirror their secondary or further education experience. This includes the expectation that students will receive personal attention from the lecturers during lectures *'[I expect] lectures to be delivered in a way that meets my learning needs;* (Female Student), and *'lecturer will notice when I am falling behind and tell me what I need to do to get good marks'* (Male Student). There is also an expectation of personal coaching for success *'[I expect] lecturers to read my work and tell me how to improve it before I submit it'* (Female Student). Students believe that they can expect an education that will adapt to meet their needs *'lecturers will provide help when I need it and lectures will meet my learning style'* (Female Student). As in their previous educational experiences, many students expect that their University lecturers will be readily available provide support when it is needed *'if I need help they [lecturers] will be there and will help me'* (Female Student). This is a concept that links to another expectation that students hold about their lecturers being invitational (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) *'[lecturers and tutors] will be friendly, open and willing to help me'* (Female Student) and *'they will be encouraging and supportive'* (Male Student).

Further areas were identified where expectations of higher education linked to students' beliefs about learning and teaching styles. Students reported that they expect that the *'lectures will be well structured so that I can understand them and get the most out of them'* (Male Mature Student). Students also expect lectures to *'provide me with all the information about the topic I need'* (Male Student). Additionally, students expect that *'learning the course materials will be made easy for me so that success is easily achievable'* (Female Student). More importantly students expect higher education to be *'a quality product'* (Male and female students of all ages). The majority of students discussed their expectations of higher education in relation to their future careers. They suggest that being at University will *'help me develop the skills and knowledge to reach my intended career goal.'* (Female Student – but a sentiment shared by male and female students of all ages). Consequently, it appears that students expect higher education to focus on *'the mastery of knowledge and skills to be successful'* (Male Student).

Students' pre-expectations of higher education also focus on its social aspects. Student expect the University to be socially attractive and a place where they expect to *'have fun'* (Male Student), *'make new friends'* (Female Student) and *'be able to relax'* (Female Mature Student). For a lot of younger students this expectation was encapsulated by *'having the real University experience'* (Male and female students). For mature students the social aspect of University concentrates on expectations around having *'support groups'* (Female Mature Student), *'people to bounce ideas off'* (Female Mature Student) and *'widening social networks to meet people from different cultures/countries'* (Female Mature Student).

Students' understanding of higher education leads to expectations relating to the teaching style. There is an expectations that lectures will be *'fun'* (Female Student) *'interactive'* (Male Student), and *'will build on my experience'* (Female Mature Student). Students expect that higher education *'will be different to further or higher education'* (Male and female students of all ages), but they do not know how it will differ and they are unable to articulate the activities, skills, behaviours and attitudes required to be successful. It appears that students know the language of higher education but not its definition. For example they are unable to define independent learning and describe it as *'doing homework set in class'* (Male Student), *'reading the things you're told to read'* (Female Mature

Student), or *'doing the assignments'* (Female Students) only a few students expected to *'be researching and reading around the wider topic area'* (Female Mature Student). Students are also aware of the ramification of mass education; that they will be in large lecture groups, but still expect to receive a personalised education (see quotes above).

As they transition into higher education, students' expectations and focus is centred around their career goals and the skills that they will leave university with. Students enter University with keen eye on their career and see their University education as the means to this end goal *'University will give me the skills and knowledge to get the job I want'* (Female Student) and *'because of coming to University I will get to be psychologist'* (Female Student). Only a few students were focused on the educational journey they were about to embark on *'I'm looking forward to the opportunity to study something I love for the next 3 years'* (Female Student).

Students also seemed to believe that University education is a passive process; that it is something that is done to them. Students discuss lectures and seminars as forums where information is delivered to them *'I will have all the information I need to complete assignment from going to the lectures'* (Male Student), *'my course will give me all I need to pass the assignments'* (Female Student) and *'the lecturers and tutor will support me so I pass'* (Female Student). These quotes suggest that students' expectations are located in an external locus of control and that learning relationships are one sided, where lecturers are responsible for students learning success.

#### Staff expectations of new students

The main themes that arose from the analysis of the lecturers' responses, suggest their expectations focus on the belief that students view higher education as a learning journey. Moreover, this learning journey will provide students with solid knowledge of their chosen subject *'University provides the opportunity to learn and grow; for students to learn more about a specified discipline area and to grow in their confidence in that knowledge'* (Male Lecturer). Other lecturers held expectations about students' growth being both academic and personal *'University is about students' developing their discipline or subject experience and knowledge while they explore who they are and who they are going to be'* (Female Senior Lecturer). Lecturers expect students to leave university as useful and employable individuals. As a result, lecturers discuss how they ensure that their lectures and seminars provide the opportunity for students to gain transferable skills and knowledge for employment *'students will leave University as capable and employable human beings'* (Female Lecturer) and *'lectures and seminars will engage students in the main areas of debate [for the topic] and offer the opportunity to expand their knowledge for future application'* (Female Lecturer). Moreover, lecturers have an expectation that students are motivated by the opportunity to learn more about their chosen subject *'Students come to university and expect to gain an in-depth education in their chosen subject area'* (Male Lecturer), *'although I suspect that some students are here because they don't feel they have other options, most students make the choice because they have an interest in a subject and they want to learn more'* (Male Lecturer) or *'because of their [students'] interest in the area'* (Female Lecturer). As a consequence most lecturers believed students expect to leave university with a good degree *'students expect to do well and to leave with a degree classification that they are pleased with'* (Male Principal Lecturer), or *'they [students] expect to leave having done well in their degrees and with the opportunity to do well in their future lives'* (Female Senior Lecture).

In relation to the learning and teaching experience in higher education, lecturers expect students to understand that there is a 'step up' between further education and University and they will provide

support to help students as they negotiate this transition, *'University is different to previous educational experience – in depth and breadth of study but also in the way they [students] are expected to study'* (Female Senior Lecturer), *'there is a step up [between FE & HE] which students will be aware of from induction if not before'* (Male Lecturer) and *'of course students know HE and FE are different and we help them make that transition. This starts with induction activities and additional support is interwoven into lecture and assignment activities'* (Female Lecturer). Part of the difference between further education and higher education is that learning and teaching approaches are different. Lecturers expect students to understand how learning activities operate, *'lecture and seminars provide a topic overview and the opportunity to discuss the information raised; this also happens in FE but in smaller classes and as an integrative process. Students will know before they come here that there are lectures and seminars that cover this. The FE approach is more personal but personalised educational experiences are available through appointments with lecturers'* (Male Lecture). This further suggests that lecturers expect students to understand rules of academic engagement (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) and know how to be successful at University *'it's simple, student know they should attend lectures, seminars, meetings with personal tutors and meetings they make to discuss work with lecturers; some choose not to do this for a number reasons'* (Female Lecture) or *'outside of University students will expect to independently research and read around the area to gain a deeper understanding of the information delivered in lectures and the topic in general'* (Female Senior Lecture). These expectations highlight that lecturers expect students to know that higher education is a proactive experience in which students are responsible for their learning *'students are in control of their learning, we give them a steer but expect them to be proactive'* (Female Lecturer).

#### Gaps in expectation between students and lecturers

There are lots of areas where lectures and students have similar expectations; however the need for brevity prevents these from including in this case study. When comparing the data about student expectations from students' and lecturers' perspectives, it is evident that there are expectation gaps between the two groups which relate to expectations about the higher education journey, process and outcomes. These gaps outlined in the bullet points below:

1. Students come to university to get a good job, whereas lectures expect that students come to university to learn more about their chosen subject.
2. Students are end focused at the beginning of their undergraduate degrees and are focused on gaining employment. Their higher education is viewed as their route to gaining a good job. However lecturers think that students are focused on gaining a good understanding their chosen discipline and gaining a good degree to provide them with the future opportunities.
  - a. To this end, it may be that students expect the knowledge and skills they require to be explicit and the main focus of their degrees, however, lectures suggest that students' employability skills should be an integrated part of education the educational experience and students are given in the opportunity to develop transferable skills for employment from within materials delivered in lectures and seminars.
3. Students seem to expect that higher education to be a passive process, which it is something that is done to them, while lecturers expect students to be proactive in their learning experience. This could be explained in the terms of locus of control, where students demonstrate an external locus of control in their learning experience. However lecturers expect students to be proactive and therefore to have an internal locus of control.

4. Students expect lectures and seminars to provide all the information that is needed to be successful in assessments, however lecturers believe students expect these sessions to provide a steer to help them focus their independent learning.
5. Students appear to not understand the learning activities that are crucial to success in higher education. However, lecturers expect students to understand these activities and be able to demonstrate them. For example:
  - a. Students expect to engage in independent learning but define this in terms of doing set homework, write essays, read their lecture notes, whereas lecturers define independent learning as engaging in research and further reading to gain a deeper understanding of the areas covered in lectures.
  - b. Students are aware that they will be engaging in mass educational activities such as lectures but still expect lecturers to provide a personalised education experience, such as delivering a lecture to meet their learning needs. Lecturers however expect to deliver a generalised learning experience in lectures and a personalised learning experience in one to one tutorials.
6. Students appear to expect learning relationships to be one sided relationships and that lecturers provide all the information students will need in order to successfully complete set assessments. Conversely, lecturers believe that higher education is an interactive process where they support students to explore their chosen discipline in more depth. This is very different from the findings of the Disparities in Student Attainment Programme.
7. Students expect that university is a place to learn and a place to have fun, whereas lecturers expect university to be a place where students embark on a learning journey and develop both academically and personally.
8. Students expect lectures will be fun, however lecturers believe the lectures they provide should be informative and will underpin students' independent learning.
9. Students expect a further education experience in the higher education setting, such as coaching to pass assignments and access to support whenever needed. In comparison lecturers expect students to understand what is required of them in higher education and to be independent and proactive learners.
10. Both students and lecturers expect University to be transformative, however students expect that being at University will change their life. Lecturers however expect that students' engagement within their educational experiences will help them grow and develop as individuals.

#### Evidence of impact and Sustainability

This research, and the ten areas where expectation gaps are evident, have been disseminated through the What Works? and SU Attainment Summits. Some of these ideas have been included in the pledged work from the Attainment Summits. The expectation gaps have also been discussed with the Head of Student Experience in the Offices of the Dean of Students and the ideas have been integrated into the Pre-Induction Programme for new students.

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## What Works? Student Retention & Success



### Encouraging institutional participation in reducing gaps in attainment through attainment summits

Debra Cureton

#### Rationale for the case study

There is a known ethnicity gap in the percentages of students who gain 1<sup>st</sup> and 2:i degrees, with 15.2% more of white students gaining a 'good degree' than their BAME counterparts (ECU, 2015). The ethnicity attainment gap has become a key issue for the Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE) who funded King's College London, ARC Network and the University of Manchester to undertake a critical review of research and practice to understand and address differential outcomes in the continuation, attainment and progression of undergraduate students (Mountford-Zimdars, Sabri, Moore, Sanders, Jones, & Higham (2015). The attainment gap at the University of Wolverhampton is problematic. In 2010/11 the disparity was 28% and, at the time, 10% points above the national average. As a consequence of this there is now focused attention on this issue. In the first instance this took a research focus which was delivered through the Disparities in Student Attainment (DiSA) programme (Cousin & Cureton, 2012). This work provided an understanding of the determinants of the attainment gap and developed practical classroom initiatives to reduce the gap. More recently the *WhatWorks?* programme has provided a focus for some of this work and through this the idea of attainment summits arose.

The Student Attainment Summits aim raise awareness of the attainment gap, disseminate an evidence-base for making change in practice and to encourage the University and its students to work as co-creators in the improvement of student attainment and reduce the attainment gap. The Students' Union and the *WhatWorks?* Project Lead have worked together to generate a staff and student collaborative work space based on the principles of the Consensus Oriented Research Model (Cureton & Cousin, 2012). The principles of this collaborative workspace are to educate participants about the situation, engage them to share their thoughts, perception and ideas about the situation and then to empower them to work together to develop evidence-based solutions to the problem. So far two summits have been held.

#### Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

An annual, day long summit was organised and was co-hosted by the Students' Union and the University of Wolverhampton. The summit encouraged attendance from both staff and students and was advertised via both staff and student web pages. Attendance was actively encouraged by the Students' Union, the Vice Chancellor and the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic.

The first summit was held in July, 2014 and aimed to heighten staff and student awareness of the BAME attainment gap, as well as encourage staff and students to work collaboratively to generate solutions that could be implemented to reduce the attainment gap. Over 100 attendees took part in the event (50% staff and 50% students). The day included a keynote presentation from the Vice Chancellor about the University's position about student success and attainment gaps. This was followed by a presentation from the *WhatWorks?* Lead about research that has been conducted at the university and the findings of this work. The attendees were encouraged to discuss the issues raised around student success and attainment gaps in a structured, three tiered exercises that utilised a World Café approach to encourage the sharing of ideas. Groups were asked to consider attainment gaps from a number of perspectives and they self-selected the perspective that they worked from. These perspectives included: developing belonging, personal tutoring, within assessment approaches, at Faculty or Department Level, through induction and transition and its impact on employability. In the first exercise the groups discussed and shared their ideas about one of the topic areas, after 45minutes the groups moved to a second topic area and added any additional thoughts or ideas they had to the ideas already presented. The second stage of the process asked the groups to identify 5 areas raised and develop possible solutions to the problems. Each group presented the areas that they identified as most important and the solutions that they had identified. The final stage of this process was for the groups to prioritise one of the solutions that they felt was most important. Although the engagement in the event was pleasing, the continued engagement beyond the day dwindled very quickly and other than the work followed up by the Students' Union and the *WhatWorks?* Team, very little further work was committed to. As a result, it was decided that the second summit would ask for Faculties to make pledges to work on the attainment gap and to detail the work they would undertake.

The second summit occurred in May 2015 and attended by 95 members of staff. This summit was open by the Dean of Students who presented the University's position and continuing work in the areas of student success. This was followed by a presentation of the further work carried out by the Students' Union and the *WhatWorks?* team over the intervening 12 months and a closing plenary was given by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic). The event was attended by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), the Dean of Students, the Dean of Academic Development and Enhancement two Faculty Deans and Associate Dean (Academic) for the remaining two Faculties. Course teams, departments and/or Faculties to work together, along with their relevant senior managers to identify practice and strategic changes that could be made. These changes formed pledges for practice change and were made at individual, course and Faculty levels. All the pledges made included information about the changes that were to be made, the evaluation of the activities, their dissemination and how the evidence created would feed into Faculty Plans. In order to engender a greater commitment to acting on the pledge, the pledges were verbally presented at the event. Copies of the pledges were kept by the *WhatWorks?* Team and the Offices of the Vice Chancellor. In addition copies were sent to the Deans of each Faculty.

The main hurdles faced while trying to organise the Summits was finding an appropriate time of year to hold the event. It was found that a very small window exists in the academic calendar that allows time where students and staff have the availability to attend. This timeframe, however, does not coincide with the planning and workload allocation cycle that would provide the time for staff to carry out the work required and for that work to be included in the current Faculty Plan.

### Evidence of impact

An important measure of impact for the summits is staff and student engagement in addressing the attainment gap. Nearly 200 members of staff (150 unique attendances) attended one of the Summits. At the first summit two major pieces of work were identified as important, these were to better understand the sense of belonging held by students at the University of Wolverhampton (see case study i) and explore what pre-expectations students coming to the University hold as they transition into the University (see case study ii). Both of these pieces of work have been completed and reported to the Governors' Equality and Diversity Committee and the University Student Experience Committee as part of the *WhatWorks?* programme. These pieces of research have also been disseminated to staff via the Attainment Champions' Group, the second student attainment summit and the Rich Exchanges' Seminar Series. At the second summit a number of pledges were made which fell into 10 areas of work, all of which have been included in the relevant Faculty Attainment Plans. These areas of work include:

- Implementing in-Faculty mentoring schemes.
- Developing pre-inductions for specific course.
- Developing new personal tutoring approaches.
- Reviewing academic processes.
- Running academic skills workshops throughout the year.
- Providing new students with information about the academic process.
- Better utilising university resources: such as the fit to submit proforma and the *WhatWorks?* principles.
- Encourage facebook groups to help develop belonging on another level.
- Use course statistics more effectively in period reviews.
- Encourage aspiration raising activities.

As this work is ongoing at this point in time, it is difficult to comment the impact each of the projects will have at Faculty level. However, the projects were designed using the evidence base created by the *WhatWorks?* Programme and are therefore mindful of inclusive approaches to assessment, encouraging student autonomy, inclusive methods for creating a sense of belonging, working with students to understand their expectations of higher education and enhancing students' understanding of the rules of academic engagement.

Additionally, there is evidence of enhanced staff and student engagement with work to reduce the attainment gap which also indicates a changing attitude in staff towards this issue. This has however, has also been facilitated by the changing culture at the University towards increasing student success and reducing gaps in attainment.

### Sustainability

Student success and gaps in student attainment are now a coherent part of the work carried out by the Students' Union at the University of Wolverhampton. The reduction of the ethnicity attainment gap has been written into the Student's Union 5 year plan and has been included as a responsibility in the job description of all of the SU officers. Additionally, the Students' Union have committed to continuing the annual summits beyond the lifetime of the *WhatWorks?* Programme.

There is also some Faculty level sustainability, as the projects identified in the second summit are currently being undertaken within Faculty. The work has been resourced through the provision of time within staff members' workload allocation. Moreover the work has been recognised as

important and included in Faculty Attainment Plans which provides a reporting mechanism for the work and will allow for the sharing of best practice.

### Lessons learnt

The lessons learnt from this work are varied. Firstly, engaging students and staff to work together to find solutions to the attainment gap is a powerful dynamic, however it is difficult to find a time in the academic calendar where students and staff are both available for a full day. This is made even more difficult if it is important to time the event so work can fit into the planning cycle.

Student involvement is valuable; however students have to feel safe and confident in order to contribute to the event. Having Student Union facilitators on each of the tables enabled the students' voice. It is also important to allow students to choose at which tables they wish to sit; some will happily work with staff from their own departments while others may wish to work with staff that do not assess their work. The addition of Charterhouse Rules, as well as ground rules negotiated at the start of the day, may help generate an environment in which students and staff feel comfortable to share experiences.

Having support at all levels of the University helps provide the event with credibility. The support for the event from the University and Faculty senior management is important, both in terms of encouraging participation and in attending the event themselves. This was further enhanced by Dean and senior managers demonstrating that they valued the contributions made by the participants during the day.

As with coherence in support, a consistent message about the importance of engaging with work around the attainment gap from both University and Faculty senior management is important.

The allocation of time within staff workload is also a facilitator to this work. It enables the completion and meeting of deadlines that are set for the work that staff pledge to undertake, as well as promotes the idea that the work is valued.

Making a written pledge also encourages people's engagement with, and enhances people's commitment to, the work they aim to undertake. The pledge paperwork should encourage people to consider what the initiative will be, how it will be implemented, how it will be evaluated, who the findings will be reported to and how the work will be disseminate.

Verbalising the pledged work is also powerful; it enhances commitment to the work, as it is a promise in front of people. Moreover, verbalising promised work also mean that the people wishing to implement change are visible to senior management and can be supported.

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## What Works? Student Retention & Success



### Inclusive assessment approaches: Giving students control in assignment unpacking.

Debra Cureton

#### Rationale for the case study

For widening access students and those from non-traditional backgrounds the transition into and through level 4 is a complex and important process (Nicholls, 2007, Briggs, 2012). One of the major areas of concern for students in their first year of higher education is successfully negotiating points of assessment (Tinto, 2006), which is known to generate a critical point for the retention of students. As writing academic assignments remains one of the most prolific forms of assessment in HE and the critical thinking this requires is core to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century curriculum (Barnett, 2014), it is important to eliminate barriers to student success that result from students negative perception of assignments and the accompanying assignment brief. The *WhatWorks?* initiative implemented at the University of Wolverhampton builds on the research above and that of McGinty (2011), who proposes that assignment feedback is crucial to level 4 students' sense of developing belonging in higher education, as it provides confirmation that they are on the right course and have the potential to be successful. The inclusive assessment initiative uses the criteria derived from the DiSA project (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) to provide a framework for accessible and comprehensible assignment briefs. It is also mindful of Dhillon & Oldham's (2012) findings that students circulate misunderstandings when they do not understand the assignment brief. Furthermore, it heeds Howell-Richardson's (2012) warning that students believe that assignment brief contain a hidden golden key, or trick question, that they need to be able answer correctly to successfully complete the assignment. Therefore, this initiative advocates a set of principles that encourages students to work in groups, take the lead in unpacking the requirements of the assignment brief and to discuss this with their lecturers. This is aimed at developing students' confidence in interpreting the assignment brief whilst also promoting the transparency of the brief to students.

This work is of further importance in relation to reducing the institutional attainment gap. The disparity between the percentage of students from minority backgrounds and their white counterparts who are awarded 1st and 2:i classifications is a nationally recognised issue and is currently at 15.2% (ECU, 2015). The attainment gap at the University of Wolverhampton is problematic. In 2010/11 the disparity was 28% and, at the time, 10% points above the national average. As a consequence of this there is now focused attention on this issue. The inclusive assessment approach aims to increase the number of students achieving module grades of 50% or more, enhance student retention and increase students' sense of belonging – their level of social connectedness with their Faculty and the University. In doing so, the programme also aims to also narrow the attainment gap by further enhancing these activities for students categorised as BAME.

### Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

The *WhatWorks?* programme at the University of Wolverhampton has focused on implementing and evaluating an inclusive assessment intervention which has included two stages. The first stage involved reviewing the quality of assignment briefs against a set of evidence based criteria derived from the Disparities in Student Attainment (DiSA) Project (Cousin and Cureton, 2012), these guidelines include ensuring that the brief is:

- concise (one side of A4), provides a single location for all assignment information, uses appropriate to level and student focused language.
- provides information on the product as well as process of the assessment.
- refers to the learning outcomes, the marking criteria and where marks can be lost or gained.

The second stage involved the implementation of student led assignment unpacking session. These are structured around three principles:

- Students discuss in groups their understanding of the assignment requirements and feed these back to the group and the lecturer;
- Students are enabled to anonymously ask questions about what they do not understand, for examples by putting the question on a Post-it Note and placing it on the wall.
- Lecturers respond to the questions raised in the class and address any misconceptions in student understanding. This information should then be included in a Frequently Asked Questions thread in the VLE.

The approach adopted by the University of Wolverhampton aimed to provide clear guidelines that provided lecturers with a structure which they could employ in their classes in their own way, thereby providing a consistency in style. A number of delivery approaches were developed including the use of voting systems, the implementation of Socrative, role play, peer groups marking/feedback and 'mocked up work' to name but a few examples. .

### Evidence of impact

Taking a centralised approach to evaluation, the University of Wolverhampton assessed its contribution to the *WhatWorks?* through both quantitative and qualitative means. The evaluation strategy drew on the Logic Chain Model thereby considers the activities delivered, the attitude and behavioural changes that were observed as a result, the impact of this on students' sense of belonging and how this related to improved retention and success. The differences in staff attitudes and behaviours were captured through interviews with the staff involved in the *WhatWorks?* programme. The student engagement data was captured in Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012) sessions with students, while the impact of this on student belonging is captured in the cohort belongingness study. The improvements in student success are captured in the quantitative analysis of module outcomes.

### Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative evaluation of the inclusive assessment initiative utilised the attainment figures for the modules involved in the '*WhatWorks?*' programme. This analysis included a comparison of current module performance to the performance in previous years. Where possible a comparison to comparative modules of the same cohort, where students have not experienced the intervention, was included. This revealed that there was a significant increase in performance to previous years in the numbers of students who gain 50% or more, with a marked difference to those students who gained

70% and above. There was also a significant reduction in the number of students who did not submit work for assessment. Where it was possible to find comparator modules, these changes were not observed. Of particular interest is that this approach impacted more significantly on students from minority backgrounds who demonstrated improved grades in comparison to their white counterparts. This suggests that this initiative is a useful technique within the wider work the University is undertaking to significantly reduce its ethnicity based attainment gap.

Figure 1: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in 'WhatWorks?' The initiative commenced 2013/14

50% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	37%	72%	74%	+37%
White	53%	61%	70%	+17%

Figure 2: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in 'WhatWorks?' The initiative commenced 2013/14

60% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	18%	51%	55%	+37%
White	27%	34%	40%	+13%

Figure 3: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in 'WhatWorks?' The initiative commenced 2013/14

70% and Above	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Impact
BAME	14%	30%	35%	+21%
White	14%	19%	27%	+13%

### Qualitative Evaluation:

Qualitative evaluations were carried out with both students who studied the modules where the inclusive assessment initiative was implemented and with the lecturing staff who implemented the initiative. The student data was collected utilising the Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012) which educates and engages students with the issues being research and empowers them to provide information about the issue and make solution based recommendations. In this case, the latter stage of the process allowed the *WhatWorks?* team to work with students as co-creators in the further development the inclusive assessment curricula. The qualitative data collected from students indicates that students like the inclusive assessment approach, especially the assessment unpacking:

*'I liked it [the assessment unpacking], doing it this way allowed us to unpick the bits of the assignment that we didn't understand without having to stop the lecture, you know, having to put your hand up and ask questions when you don't understand what they are saying'* (Female level 4 student)

Students felt it encouraged their autonomy as learners: *'They [lecturers] keep saying we can't spoon feed you all the time – we don't want to be spoon fed, it's really hurtful when they say that. But when*

*Dr. [name of lecturer] did the session like this it felt like we were in control, we were taking the lead in finding out what we needed to know to do the assignment. I left feeling that I knew what I needed to do to complete the assignment and that I could do it.'* (Female, Level 4 student).

The approach also enhanced students' confidence in themselves and their ability to be successful:

*'Yeah, it helps you feel like you know what to do and how to do it. I left feeling confident that I could get good marks in the assignment'* (Female, Level 5 student) and *'I was going to jack it in but [friend's name] said come to the session, he's [the lecturer] doing that thing again where we go through the assignment brief. So I came. Afterwards I thought I can do this, so I decided I'd stay and try to do the assignment.'* (Male, Level 4 student)

Students also felt that the approach provided a pathway for productive discussion about assignment requirements:

*'It's hard when they [the lectures] do it the other way [deliver a didactic session on what they expect from the assignment] because you don't want to be the one who is always putting your hand up and asking the questions. But other people won't ask so sometimes you end up doing it just so that you're sure what's needed. But this way you don't have to worry, you just put the questions on the post-its, everyone was doing it and when he [the lecturer] read them [the questions] out, you thought, that's a good one, I didn't think about that, so other's questions help you too.'* (Male, Level 5 student)

*'By doing it [discussing the assignment requirements] this way you have discussion about the assignment that feels normal, you know, you're not putting your hand up asking. Everyone is talking about it and it feels okay to discuss what this means and what that is asking you to do.'* (Female, Level 4 student)

It is proposed that the latter may open the door to more productive learning relationships between students and lecturers (c.f. Cousin & Cureton, 2012).

The data gathered from lecturers was collected through an open ended questionnaire and interviews. This evaluation indicated that staff who have implemented this initiative were surprised at the increased engagement of students when this method is used to discuss assignments.

*'I was surprised at the level of engagement in this activity, usually they [the students] will ask one or two questions and that's it. This time there were lots of varied questions. The students seemed to like it and, as I said, very engaged.'* (Male lecturer)

Lecturers were also surprised at the apparent mismatch of expectations surrounding the accessibility and comprehensibility of the briefs that they produce.

*'There were questions that surprised me, I thought they'd know what about that by now, but quite a few didn't seem to know. It's been a good exercise and I have reflected on what was asked and what changes I need to make to the assignment brief'* (Female Lecturer)

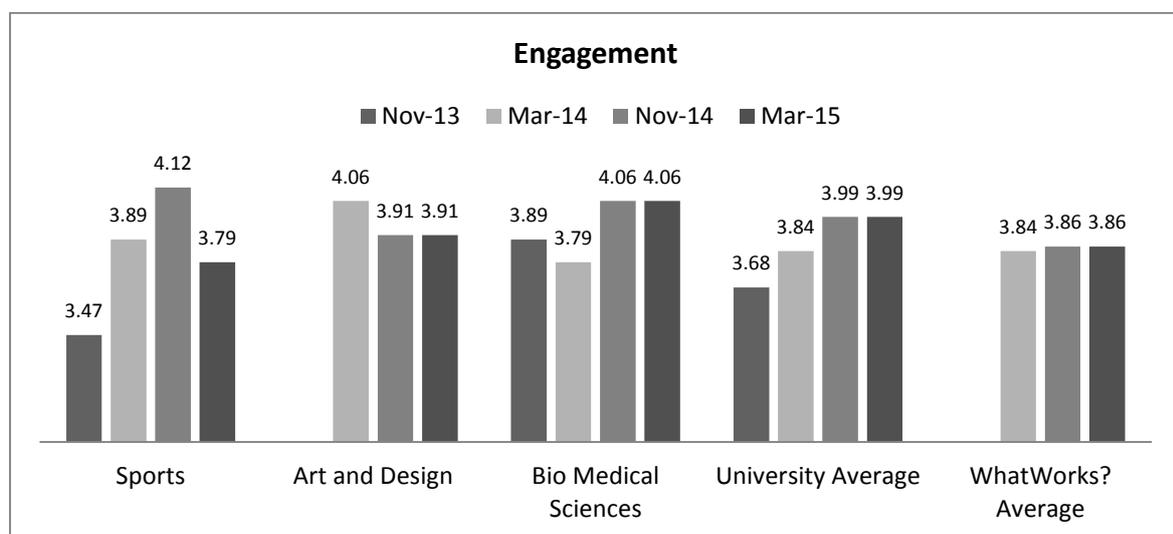
Lecturers also noted a marked decrease in the students who requested one-to-one tutorials to discuss what an assignment brief was asking them to do; some lecturers comment on the increase in discussions about assignment content within tutorials.

*‘What I also noticed is that students aren’t coming to SAMS [personal appointments and tutorial] asking about what they need to for their assignment. And those who do come are talking about the theoretical and technical aspects of their work.’ (Female lecturer).*

### Belongingness Data

To capture aspects of students’ belonging to their department and/or University, the students who were involved in the WhatWorks initiative also took part in a cohort belongingness study. The *WhatWorks?* team administered Mantz Yorke’s Belongingness questionnaire twice a year, over a two year period to the students who were involved in the pilot discipline areas (Sport Sciences, Bio-Medical Sciences and Art and Design). The questionnaires were administered in November 2013, March 2014, November 2014 and March 2015, therefore capturing changes in the belongingness of this discrete group of students over a two year period as they transitioned into the University and through level 4 and level 5. The main themes in the data suggests that there is an increase in UW students’ self-reported engagement over the period of the initiative which was greater than that of seen in the average responses of students from all the *WhatWorks?* HEIs.

Levels of Student Engagement over the *WhatWorks?* Programme shown by pilot area, University average and *WhatWorks?* Average.



Engagement questions:

- 1E I am motivated towards my studies.
- 5E I try to make connections between what I learn from different parts of my programme.
- 6E I try to do a bit more on the programme than it asks me to.
- 8E I seek out academic staff in order to discuss topics relevant to my programme.
- 10E I put a lot of effort into the work I do.
- 12E I use feedback on my work to help me improve what I do.

### Sustainability

The work that has been part of the *WhatWorks?* programme has been embedded at institutional level through its use in to support the enhancement of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy

(2012-17). The *WhatWorks?* programme has also generated heightened awareness that student belongingness plays a role in student success. This has led to belongingness being considered as part of other cross-university initiatives and developments such as the University's on going work to improve personal tutoring. Embedding of the initiative has also occurred at Faculty level. Firstly this has occurred through the *WhatWorks?* initiative being incorporated into cross Faculty initiatives, for example the work has influenced some support approaches offered by the Graduate Teaching Assistants and Graduate Interns. Moreover, it has been incorporated into Faculty initiative such as 'Assessment Cafes'. Secondly, the inclusive assessment approach has been embedded at course level, having been rolled out in different ways in each participating Faculty. A systematic approach has been adopted by the Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing, where the initiative has been rolled out across the Institute of Sport and a two year plan has been developed for rollout across the whole Faculty. This Faculty has engaged Institute Attainment Champions who will be responsible for rolling out and embedding of the *WhatWorks?* initiative in each of its other discipline areas. The Faculty of Science and Engineering has embedded the inclusive assessment process as part of their peer review process. This method is proving effective in raising awareness of the initiative all Schools within the Faculty. The Faculty of the Arts has embedded the inclusive assessment approach into all levels of education within their Photography courses and their Textiles and Design courses and have provided a two year sustainability plan. The only Faculty not to have a discipline area involved in the *WhatWorks?* programme was the Faculty of Social Sciences. After negotiations, the Faculty will commence the rollout of the initiative from the academic year 2015/16. The future roll out of the *WhatWorks?* initiative have been considered. The rollout and sustainability of the programme is written into the three year work plans of two of the University of Wolverhampton's Learning and Teaching Fellows. Further progress towards the embedding and sustainability of the work is witnessed in the collaborative working relationship between the University of Wolverhampton and its Students' Union. The Students' Union has included student success and the reduction of attainment in their most recent 5 year plan, they have made a commitment to hold an Annual Summit with the University, the reduction of attainment gaps is written into the job descriptions of all SU Officers and the current team of SU Officers are actively awareness raising about the 'ways to be a successful student'. In addition, the University of Wolverhampton has invested into further strategically supported work to increase student attainment and reduce attainment gaps.

#### [Learning and reflection on the process](#)

A very important lesson learnt from this project is having a single initiative is very powerful. This was not the approach taken by the other 12 Universities in the Change Programme and therefore the University of Wolverhampton's approach provided an interesting perspective to the programme. This approach was found to have benefits, especially in terms of evaluation, embedding and making strategic impact.

The major lessons learnt from this work within the University are that senior management support is crucial. Having support from senior University leaders, who advocate the benefits of the programme, provides extra kudos to the work and encourages people to listen. Senior management support within the Faculties is also crucial. Having Associate Deans and [Principal Lecturers](#) who acted as champions for the programme was also very important to the success of the project; they not only advocated the benefits of the initiative to support the rollout, they provided the project with a voice within Faculties, as well as instantly troubleshooting problems or barriers to rollout and embedding.

Having discipline level advocates for the programme who were responsible for piloting the initiative and driving the programme rollout was extremely facilitative. The discipline leads provided the

programme with validity in eyes of their colleagues and helped to ensure that the approach was discipline competent. Moreover, the layered implementation approach, which was discipline led and driven but supported by Faculty management and institutional leadership, led to the initiative not being viewed as a wholly top-down process and being more readily accepted by teaching staff.

Finally, it is crucial for projects such as *WhatWorks?* to be located in an area of the organisation which focuses on academic development and pedagogic research. This not only gives the work perceived legitimacy, it provides access to a community of practice to help support the development of the work and networks to support its rollout and embedding. This also provides the project with the opportunity to feed into the University governance structure and therefore provides the project with a voice.

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## Appendix v *What Works? Plus*: Contextualising the Inclusive Assessment Initiative in Art and Design

### The Art of Assignment Brief Writing

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#### **Case Study Rationale**

The Art and Design *What Works?* project (2013-2015) focused on the impacts of the assignment brief in learning and achievement within the subject discipline, art and design. *What Works?* responded to a residual attainment gap in the number of subject students achieving lower (and re-sits) grades, within the School of Art and Design 2013-14 and it primarily focused upon the impact of the assignment brief from the dual perspective of academic and student viewpoints.

The assignment brief (project, live or negotiated brief) is at the center of all art and design learning. The assignment brief communicates the requirements, tasks and expectations that equip and enhance the performance of students. The assignment brief is both formative and core to every element of learning and achievement that provides an implicit learning contract, at every level of art learning, but specifically the Undergraduate Art Programmes at the University of Wolverhampton and other art programmes at HEIs.

In determining the likely reasons for the residual number of lower achieving students (and re-sits) within the School of Art and Design 2013-14, the School identified the assignment brief as a focus for the potential impacts on learning by a misunderstanding or misreading of theme, task and objective by this group. A misunderstood or not 'student friendly' assignment brief has the potential to have long term and critical impacts on learning.

Previous research has shown that there is a disparity in student attainment in their conceptualisations and in their perceived and actual skills in interpreting assignment briefs for assessment purposes (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Singh, 2009). Particular challenges that are identified as being effective in assignment brief content design are: transparent communication; accessibility - creating the space to translate all tasks; problematic terminology - in both academic and subject language and assignment design are all core elementary needs to reduce student uncertainty and anxiety.

Project Description - intervention and successful aspects

The Art and Design *What Works?* study aims to provide a formative dialogue through student views and feedback on assignment efficiency through:

- assignment design
- content theme
- authorship (styles)
- language and terminology
- (clarity of) tasks
- assessment aims and criteria
- percentage weighting

The Art and Design *What Works?* study included a review of the comprehensibility of current assignment briefs (2013), a modally adjusted brief in (2014) and a 'model' assignment (2015). Assignment brief content and design has continually evolved and annually updated on the basis of feedback received and further revised through a greater focused design by regular unpacking of assignment briefs in all student groups. The unpacking sessions gave a space for students to openly talk through what is required, as well as 'translate' the assignment requirements (many elements of the brief were lost in translation – see Evidence of Impact).

The core aims were:

- To improve achievement (lessen the number of re-sits) by more effectively communicated assignment briefs
- To reduce excessive and supplementary information, examining the notion that 'too much' information is potentially problematic as 'too little'
- To examine the use of terminology and language for clarity and transparency in determining a clear set of requirements via an informed congruence of pedagogic principals and practice
- To analyse and review the communication (and the effectiveness) of the assessment requirements and tasks
- To unpack assignment tasks to make them more transparent and relevant
- To create constructive staff and student dialogues about effectively communicated themes

The Art and Design *What Works?* project sought to analyse and review the skills set and skills gap implications of (mis)understanding, (mis)interpreting, and (mis) communicating a Module, Project or Assignment requirements by both task and theme based projects. The need to build academic and contextual skills through practical tasks is essential to understanding the core objectives of an assignment brief. These task based art practices are written (in the assignment) and require the interpretation and personalisation of a (large) set of assignment instructions. Success therefore relies on a pre-learned innate ability to translate the language; terminology and discipline speak that are part of the assignment brief into a practical art project and outcome in some instances thirteen weeks after the original assignment task is given. Misinterpretation or misreading is therefore a very real and likely possibility.

### **Methodology**

The research element of *What Works? Art and Design* consisted of the distribution of a questionnaire and the collation of quantitative and qualitative feedback from 242 first, second and third year students on two undergraduate art and design programmes BA Photography and BA Fashion.

From the specific subjects considered Photography had 194 and Fashion 48 respondents to a survey given. Each survey asked students to comment on their experience of the assignment brief and the effectiveness of the assignment brief by responding to questions about: the terminology; assignment clarity; its theme; what assessment criteria/tasks were present; alongside useful exemplar and reference material and submission requirements (date, type, amount).

The Art and Design *What Works?* survey questions were closed, but had a free response space provided and were designed to allow a personal and open commentary on specific aspects of the assignment brief. The questionnaires were submitted anonymously and were disseminated at project review or hand in dates, one for each level and the survey questions were designed to illuminate the student voice toward assignment writing, ownership and affective practice. Responses also allowed for assignment prototypes to be developed and designed from the comprehensible commentary provided by these students.

Each group and each level reflected a balance of abilities in a widening participation institution. A nominal number of questionnaires were returned blank and about a third wrote little (or no personal) commentary in the qualitative feedback space (but answered the set questions). Each questionnaire was transcribed and these transcripts were lettered according to individual student responses. Common themes were then identified relating to perceptions of the learning experience and its objectives. Each cluster of comments could then be read as themes and high degrees of consistency in responses identified.

### **Evidence of impact**

The Art and Design *What Works?* questionnaire addressed several key areas of the assignment brief in eight key areas:

- theme
- practical task and question
- clarity of the assignment
- language
- assessment tasks
- useful referencing and references
- technical
- outcome

The assignment brief is a combination of information, instruction, task and support and its design can contain 'by way of instruction' a large number of elements. The initial assignment brief design at the University of Wolverhampton included 1. the title 2. hand in date 3. project aims and objectives (practical and contextual) 4. learning objectives and outcomes 5. several key and referenced texts - both books, journals and web sites 6. nominated artists/authors and titled works 7. assessment descriptions and assessment tasks 8. assessment weighting, as well as further sub information and detail. The greater information detailing the pedagogic, instructional, directional and supportive information was seen by academics as rich, textured and informative by students as impenetrable, voluminous and confusing. Assignment briefs that have seven or eight *sections* – are complex and diffused.

The initial review of the assignment briefs asked some simple but strategic questions regarding the language, the design. Was the volume of information impacting upon student achievement and was

this creating lower performing students by poorly described and designed assignment writing? Was the significant re-sit rate a factor in the results of a confused group from the outset? Certainly the tone of the early questionnaires and student responses to the assignment briefs felt like ‘translating’, simplifying and unpacking the elements contained, detailed and often dense details, sections and sub sections of the briefs and not discussing the more in-depth details of theme, contexts and breadth of options. The more academic and prosaic instructional qualities of the task at hand were often at the forefront of any discussion.

These initial findings of the Art and Design *What Works?* survey and questionnaire shared similarities to previous research into assignment briefs and student responses (Gilbert and Maguire, 2011) in that terminology was seen as difficult to understand, written in academic, educational or too complex a language for the meaning to be clearly plain; that the theme was not clear (was being hidden by the language) and that the assignment appeared to be written with other audiences in mind. Early feedback from the Art and Design *What Works?* survey and questionnaire pointed toward a greater need for clarification of the tasks and an illumination of the ‘journey’ from assignment brief towards particular shorter-term successes and grades. An ongoing student requirement was that the ‘how to achieve’ the grade is more clearly articulated and literally defined and described. A more signposted contextualised learning pathway that maps out and supports this journey is seen as essential.

The key findings of the Art and Design *What Works?* survey showed that the assignment design had the potential to create confusion’ and students felt increasingly ‘overwhelmed’ by the many possible interpretations and personalisations assignments allowed. This tension added to the sensation of the students that current examples contained ‘too much’ information and detail simply by the volume of the information provided.

There was a high degree of consistency in the Art and Design *What Works?* survey and questionnaire contained in responses to certain themes, most specifically language and terminology difficulties; the ‘too much’ information and information overload; the theme not being clear (often cleared up after the assignment or at the time when the assignment is given, not on the brief itself); the instruction not being clear and the not being clear was clear. Students are indicating that they are naturally worried and anxious at the start of a project and assignment design does little to allay these fears in regards an illumination of appropriate standards and skills to complete the brief and its tasks within the timescale set.

The tension and anxiety often leading to a ‘finding the answer’ approach where students will immediately begin to talk about what their outcome is – thirteen weeks away, as this opens a bridge from uncertainty to certainty. Therefore many responses were received relating to and describing the assignment tensions and the assignment experience in that these tensions are that the brief sets the scene and assignment expectations in identifying learning goals – are students up to this level; the pressures of time; the sense self-worth, status and esteem tied up with abilities and past educational experiences and perceived ‘failure’ – as low marks may have been achieved in the past.

In conclusion the need for transparency and direction is obvious, because in any project the beginning and start is crucial to success, or at least providing a structure where this can happen and the surveyed students are saying there is an already charged emotional and anxious state and the assignment brief needs to be transparent and direct. A number of respondents noted that the key thing they had noticed on the assignment brief at hand out was the ‘hand in date’, again some thirteen weeks in

advance, as they are already psychologically profiling themselves, preparing for the anxiety of potentially failing by not being able to be 'good enough' to meet this challenge.

The need for clarity extended to the thematic nature of the assignment and the direction and directives toward this. Students want to know what the expectations are and they want these to be 'spelled out'. The need for clear indicators, project management skills toward the outcome and exemplar and reference material that bridges learning goals effectively are seen as important. The dialogue here is important, the time spent with the brief at its hand out creates the tone and students are actually good at identifying

### ***Sustainability Lessons Learnt***

The Art and Design *What Works?* study has already included a review of the comprehensibility of current assignment briefs and produced a 'model' assignment (pilot 2015). This assignment is currently being road tested with students and the dialogue with them is continuing. Assignment briefs have been continually updated and developed on the basis of the dialogue and feedback received from students. The dialogue is additionally creating further revisions through regular unpacking toward less wordy and clearer, fewer sections and subsection, design model.

A partnership approach has been taken in allowing the unpacking, questionnaire and review of the assignment brief. This will be continued on the undergraduate photography programme in determining future assignment and course design. These dialogues have led to some significant changes to the delivery of the assignment and its content. We are overcoming the notion that this is being done to them (the students) and that the learning is a shared experience. Most certainly the mapping of the assignment journey is now much more obvious here and in the VLE support. Greater in-group discussion of assignment task and of the assignment requirements are provided in initial lectures and digitally.

The dialogue of critical engagement with the style, and the requirements of the assignment brief raise further issues across the learning programme. Indeed shines a light onto what students want and indeed what they are doing versus another set of principles that which is what the academics perceive they 'should' be doing in their learning. This dialogue continues and has led to greater student feedback (Student Rep meetings and further informal interactions with staff) and impacts on other aspects of the programme where a VLE model has been put in place to support the Module/Assignments and the timetable has been reviewed and altered to clearly show the assignment brief day for each assignment activity.

### ***Further Planned Activity:***

- assignment briefs – the updated and reviewed assignment briefs have been given out to this years' students across Level 4, 5 and 6 (2015)
- assess the need to further deconstruct the language and design
- continue to monitor and review the 'too much' information - assignment task, learning objectives, module weighting and theme entangle the assignment requirements with pedagogy, curriculum and classification measures as well as what we want students are required to make and do. Illuminate and clarify further
- continue to monitor the impacts of assignment design and student success as a result of **The**

## Art and Design *What Works? study*

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### Title of case-study

‘What Works at Wolves?’ - A successful roll-out?

Dr Mark Groves

University of Wolverhampton

### Rationale for the case study

In the UK 1 in 12 students (about 8%) leave HE during their first year of study. However, surveys undertaken by ‘What Works?’ project teams have found that between 33% (1/3) and 42% (2/5) of students actually consider leaving HE during this period. Improving student belonging should, therefore, be a priority for all programmes (Thomas, 2012). The ‘What Works?’ phase one findings have identified that particularly effective interventions are situated within the academic sphere, such as the intervention, focussed on assessment unpacking, which has been used at the University of Wolverhampton. However, such interventions should, as far as possible, be embedded into mainstream provision to ensure that all students participate and benefit from them (Thomas, 2012).

As such, this case study will outline how I endeavoured to roll out the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ principles across the programmes delivered within the Institute of Sport at the University of Wolverhampton. In undertaking such a roll-out I wanted to consider whether it was possible to change the practice of staff in a way that might develop student confidence and sense of belonging across a wider range of students.

Initially, I had used a module that was a part of the BA (Hons) Sports Studies pathway to pilot the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ principles within the Institute of Sport. Specifically, I used 4SR013 Investigating Sport in Society. This was a year-long module, which included two pieces of assessment (a presentation and a piece of interview-based research). An assessment unpacking session, based on the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ principles was included in the module weekly programme for each of the

two assessments. Feedback from students was positive and suggested that these sessions had been useful in helping them to develop confidence as they prepared for their assessments.

In an attempt to reach a greater number of students this approach to assessment unpacking was subsequently rolled out across the five undergraduate degree courses within the Institute of Sport. Informal mentoring sessions were arranged with Course Leaders as part of this process and the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ principles became embedded in many of the modules delivered within the Institute of Sport.

#### Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects:

As outlined above, the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ principles were initially piloted in a Level Four module within the BA (Hons) Sports Studies degree. The specific module used was 4SR013 Investigating Sport in Society. This was a relatively small module of about 30-35 students, which included two pieces of assessment (a presentation and a piece of interview-based research) and an assessment unpacking session, based on the ‘What Works?’ principles, was included in the module weekly programme for each of these two assessments. Each unpacking session was included within the module weekly programme at the point that I considered to be most appropriate.

An assessment brief was produced for each assignment and this assessment brief was then unpacked in these sessions as follows:

- Students were given a copy of the assessment brief and were given some time to read the brief at the start of the session.
- Using post-it notes they were asked to identify what they thought they needed to do in order to achieve a good grade within the particular piece of assessment. I collated these post-it notes and fed back on the comments that they had provided.
- Again using post-it notes, I asked the students to identify any areas of concern and to write down any questions that they had regarding the assessment and what they had read in the assessment brief. I collated these questions and addressed any areas of concern that they identified.
- The use of post-it notes in this way effectively means that these sessions were student-led. Indeed, the questions that the students asked helped to determine which elements of the assessment were discussed in more detail within the session.

- Finally, based on what they had learnt about the assessment I asked the students to mark an example piece of assessment. The students were required to complete an assessment feedback sheet highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the work and to grade the work against the assessment criteria provided in the assessment brief (this was an additional element to the session that was beyond the scope of the ‘What Works?’ principles).

As a lecturer I was pleased with impact that these sessions appeared to have on the students in terms of their understanding of the two module assessments. Moreover, qualitative comments obtained from the students revealed that they seemed to value these sessions:

- “It was good it made me feel more confident”
- “We don’t want spoon feeding; but from this we know we’re on the right track”
- “I felt that I could do it “

One student in particular stated that the unpacking sessions had changed his views with regard to his future at the University. Indeed, the confidence that the session had given him had persuaded him to persevere with his university studies:

- ‘I was going to jack it all in, but now I’m going to stay’

As module leader I was also able to make some observations with regard to the module results and make comparisons to past cohorts. Of course, any comparisons to previous cohorts should take into account the potentially different nature of these cohorts:

- Only one student who submitted the module assessment did not hit the 40% pass grade.
- One student who hadn’t submitted for any other modules submitted for this module and was able to successfully pass the module.
- The quality of the presentations was pleasing with students showing a good understanding of the relevant concepts.
- The second assessment asks students to undertake a piece of interview research, which is a challenging assessment for a Level Four student. I was particularly pleased with the understanding shown in this particular assessment.
- Grades were notably better than the previous year. Indeed, there were more students achieving grades in the 50% and higher grade boundaries.

As a result of this successful pilot study it was decided that the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ principles would be rolled out across all of the undergraduate degree courses in the Institute of Sport. Through

the use of informal mentoring sessions, the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ principles were outlined to the relevant Course Leaders.

Initially, I had been a little apprehensive in terms of whether I would be able to encourage a range of Course Leaders to embed these principles within their courses. I was encouraged, however, by how receptive these Course Leaders were to the idea of becoming involved. On reflection, I felt that there were a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the nature of the principles means that there is very little additional preparation for any member of staff who wishes to use them within their sessions. Secondly, I tried not to be prescriptive in terms of how staff should embed the principles within their sessions. As long as they used the basic principles to unpack the assessment within their modules they could do this how they wished. For example, it was entirely down to them where they placed the sessions within their module’s programme of study. Thirdly, I had worked with most of these staff for a number of years and I felt that this may have made it easier for me to encourage them to engage with this process.

Following the informal mentoring sessions it was agreed that the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ Principles would be embedded in the courses within the Institute of Sport as follows:

- **BA (Hons) Physical Education** - The ‘What Works?’ principles were used in all modules on this course.
- **BSc (Hons) Sports Coaching** - This is another degree that planned to use the principles across the course as a whole.
- **BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science** - This course has used the sessions in a smaller number of identified modules deemed to be appropriate.
- **BSc (Hons) Physical Activity Exercise and Health** - This course has also used the sessions in a smaller number of identified modules deemed to be appropriate.
- **BA (Hons) Sports Studies** - This is another degree that planned to use the principles across the course as a whole.

Following successful roll-out of the principles across the Institute of Sport it was decided that the next step would be to try and roll-out the principles across the wider Faculty. The Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing is a large faculty which incorporates subject areas relating to Health, Education and Sport.

The starting point for a Faculty wide roll-out was to present the work that had been done within the Institute of Sport at various staff development events across the Faculty. Although some staff identified a desire to be involved this approach was not as successful and this particular roll-out did not proceed in the same way that was seen in the Institute of Sport.

On reflection there may have been a number of reasons for this. For example, as identified above I believe that I found it easier to engage the staff with whom I worked closely on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps any Faculty-wide roll-out should be achieved via the use of departmental Attainment Champions. I would also note that during this process the post of Principal Lecturer for Learning and Teaching was vacant. The support of such a post would be crucial in achieving any successful cross faculty roll-out.

#### Evidence of impact

Firstly, I needed to consider the impact that this roll-out had on the student experience and whether the use of these principles had helped to develop student confidence, engagement and belonging.

Earlier in this case study I have outlined some of the qualitative data that was collected from students who were studying on the module that was used to pilot the ‘What Works?’ principles. This data suggested that the assessment unpacking sessions were able to increase student confidence. Although only a single case, I was particularly taken by the student who said that prior to attending his assessment unpacking session he was going “to jack it all in” but that following the unpacking session he had decided to stay and complete his assessments. This student gained a grade of 55% in his interview research paper and a module grade of 54% overall.

Quantitative data has also indicated that this approach to assessment unpacking might develop student confidence and subsequent success. Quantitative analysis examined the modules involved in the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ programme and included a comparison to module performance in previous years. This analysis showed that there was an increase in performance when compared to previous iterations of these modules. Of particular interest is that this approach impacted more significantly on students

from minority backgrounds who demonstrated improved grades in comparison to their white counterparts. This suggests that this initiative is a useful technique within the wider work the University is undertaking to significantly reduce its ethnicity based attainment gap.

The performance in modules involved in the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ programme and the comparison to previous iterations can be seen in the tables below. This data reveals improvements in the number of students gaining 50%, 60% and 70% in the modules that were involved in the ‘What Work?’ programme. It should be noted that where it was possible to find comparator modules these changes were not observed. In other words, if the “What Works at Wolves?” principles were not used in a module studied by the same cohort of students this increase in attainment was not seen.

**Figure 1: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in ‘WhatWorks?’. The initiative commenced 2013/14**

<b>50% and Above</b>	<b>2012/13</b>	<b>2014/15</b>	<b>Impact</b>
BAME	37%	74%	+37%
White	53%	70%	+17%

**Figure 2: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in ‘WhatWorks?’. The initiative commenced 2013/14**

<b>60% and Above</b>	<b>2012/13</b>	<b>2014/15</b>	<b>Impact</b>
BAME	18%	55%	+37%
White	27%	40%	+13%

**Figure 3: Increased levels of attainment by ethnicity for modules involved in ‘WhatWorks?’. The initiative commenced 2013/14**

<b>70% and Above</b>	<b>2012/13</b>	<b>2014/15</b>	<b>Impact</b>
BAME	14%	35%	+21%
White	14%	27%	+13%

The above findings are important as it has been highlighted that one of the major areas of concern for students making the transition to Higher Education is the successful negotiation of assessment points

(Tinto 2006). Work carried out by Dhillon and Oldham (2012) and Howell-Richardson (2012) has suggested that students can often spend more time attempting to understand assignment briefs than they do actually writing the assessment. The findings in this case study suggest that the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ principles may go some way to addressing the assessment anxiety that these students increasingly experience (Dhillon and Oldham, 2012).

There were some points that should be considered, however, in the continued use of these principles. For example, discussions with staff and students suggested that these principles were perhaps less effective when used in Level Six modules. Some staff using the principles suggested that students were less engaged at Level Six. Some module tutors speculated that Level Six students were more familiar with assessment processes and saw less need for these sessions. This point was reiterated following discussions with Level Six students from the BSc (Hons) Sports Coaching pathway. Further comments from staff involved with the unpacking sessions suggested that students might also become ‘fatigued’ by the same kind of session. It was noted that they engaged less in the process when they had already had a number of similar unpacking sessions in different modules.

Although the impact of this roll-out on students is obviously of paramount importance I also wanted to consider how this initiative might have changed the behaviour of the staff involved. I wondered whether this initiative might change the behaviour of staff in a way that might subsequently have an impact on student engagement, confidence and success.

As I have outlined earlier I was pleasantly surprised by the staff engagement in the Institute of Sport. All five courses agreed to use the principles within their modules, with some outlining that they were keen to continue using these unpacking sessions in the future. Some Course Leaders had also included the use of the ‘What Works?’ principles within the Action Plans that they had developed following publication of National Student Survey results for their course. The comments made by one lecturer on the Sport and Exercise Science course reflected the way that staff embraced the initiative:

“I now use these principles regularly to develop student understanding of all assessments in the modules on which I teach, which span Level Four to Level Seven. I feel that these principles

have helped me to encourage dialogue within my assessment unpacking sessions and I feel that my students are now being provided with the specific information they feel that they need.”  
(Senior Lecturer in Biomechanics)

Perhaps more pertinently, however, there was evidence that this roll-out had helped to change the way that some staff unpacked the assessments within their modules. For example, staff teaching on the BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science pathway outlined that they were surprised by the seemingly obvious questions that students would ask about their assessment. These staff explained that this had helped to change their perceptions in terms of what students might be worried about. One comment, by a member of staff who taught on the BA (Hons) Physical Education pathway, was particularly helpful in outlining the potential that this initiative has for changing the way in which staff might approach assessment unpacking:

“ I found that the ‘What Works?’ principles helped to encourage dialogue between students and myself. This dialogue helped to highlight the disparity between what I think I have said in the assessment brief and what the students have understood. By the end of the process I felt more confident that the students and I had reached an agreement in terms of what they had to do.”  
(Senior Lecturer in Physical Education)

Dhillon and Oldham (2012) have outlined that students who do not have strong academic learning relationships with course tutors often turn to their peers for advice, which can often lead to a circulation of misunderstanding and an increase in assessment related anxiety. This case study has provided evidence to suggest that the ‘What Works at Wolves?’ principles may have helped staff to become more aware of the real concerns that students have when completing assessment. I felt that one of the most striking outcomes of this roll-out was the way that a simple set of principles encouraged certain staff to think differently about their assessment unpacking sessions. By encouraging a student-led approach it seems that these members of staff were able to address the actual concerns that students had so that agreement could be reached in terms of exactly what was required for each piece of assessment.

## Sustainability

This initiative should be taken forward following the end of this change programme. I feel that the roll-out across the Institute of Sport has provided evidence of how this initiative can have a positive impact on the practice of staff, which may in turn lead to improved student engagement, confidence and success in a wider number of students.

While the roll out across the Institute of Sport seems to have been a success, a wider roll-out across the Faculty and even across the University would require support from across the institution. In terms of a wider Faculty roll out this might occur with the support of departmental Attainment Champions and the support of any Principal Lecturer for Learning and Teaching.

## Lessons learnt

This simple initiative does seem to have the ability to change staff practice and contribute to increased student confidence. I would outline the following key points:

- There is evidence that the ‘What Works?’ principles do help students to develop their confidence in terms of completing assessments. There is evidence, however, that the principles may be more effective at Level Four and Five, with staff and students in the Institute of Sport suggesting that there was less engagement at Level Six. It is possible that these Level Six students were more familiar with assessment processes and saw less need for these sessions. We should also be wary that students may become less engaged if the same type of session is included in all of their modules.
- The ‘What Works?’ principles may be able to change the practice of staff. This case study has provided evidence that, via their use of these principles, staff started to understand the disparity between what they think they have said in their assessment briefs and what the students have understood. There was also evidence that the use of these principles helped staff to change their perceptions in terms of what students might be worried about with regard to their assessments. It is here that the student-led nature of these sessions is crucial. It would appear that the questions identified on the post-it notes have taken staff into areas that they otherwise would not have gone during their sessions.
- The roll-out in the Institute of Sport appeared to progress relatively successfully. These principles require relatively little preparation on the part of module staff and they allow for a certain degree of flexibility in terms of when they are delivered. As such, members of staff within the Institute of Sport were happy to engage. A wider roll-out proved more difficult. It might be that departmental Attainment Champions would be able to achieve a Faculty wide roll-out more successfully. This would help to ensure that such an initiative becomes embedded

in mainstream provision and would ensure a wider number of students would participate and benefit.

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## Appendix vii Implementing *WhatWorks?* Assignment Briefs, Assignment Unpacking and Fit to Submit via Peer Review

### **Embedding What Works? ... Across the Faculty**

#### **Assignment Briefs, Assignment Unpacking and Fit to Submit via Peer Review**

The Faculty of Science and Engineering at the University of Wolverhampton consists of six academic schools and supporting services. The Faculty has six Schools with distinct subject disciplines including Architecture and the Built Environment; Biology, Chemistry and Forensic Science; Biomedical Science and Physiology; Engineering; Mathematics and Computing and Pharmacy.

The Faculty manages its Learning and Teaching strategies through its Learning and Teaching committee. This has been formed within the newly created Faculty under the supervision of the Principal Lecturer for Learning and Teaching, Chris Williams. The committee meets three or four times per year and is made up of representatives from each School within the Faculty who have a particular interest in learning and teaching through research, pedagogic research or teaching.

As well as creating an annual work stream in relation to learning and teaching activity, approved through Faculty Quality and Enhancement processes, the Learning and Teaching Committee has a remit to promote and disseminate best practice across the Faculty and to support and develop teaching practice through various initiatives. It maintains its activity through the annual planning of a learning and teaching developed through the community of practice through school champions. The work of the committee also involves the management, undertaking and final reporting of Faculty/School teaching reviews, staff development through the University PG Cert In Higher Education and Membership of the Higher Education Academy and Fellow and Senior Fellowship levels. Current work streams also include Mid-Module reviews and Peer Reviews which require full participation across the Faculty.

One of the main functions the committee is required to undertake is in the area of the dissemination of best practice which was the rationale for the use of this case study. Staff drawn from the Faculty have been involved with the undertaking of pilot schemes through the What Works? initiatives and have produced valuable evidence of the effectiveness of various projects.

In the Peer Review system, various models are used. Recently peer to peer discussions have taken place (with groups of three) on topics involving retention and progression and assessment and feedback. The instructions for the peer review this academic year (2014-2015) contained specific

information to disseminate some of the strategies in What Works? and to raise awareness across a diverse range of subjects and learning activities.

The process adopted for the Peer Review exercise consists of requests to staff to participate, reminders to hold meetings and reminders to report. The percentage of staff participating in the review increased in this academic year. The process is briefly as follows:

1. Heads of Schools are notified in advance of when the Peer Review Exercise would take place to enable them to give advanced notification to all potential participating staff.
2. A schedule of staff from across the faculty were grouped together in triumberates and this was represented in a spreadsheet so that tracking could take place. The groups were mixed school; drawn from across the Faculty to encourage different perspectives on the subject matter to be discussed.
3. Heads of Schools, through the Learning and Teaching committee then notified staff of their groups in advance so that meeting appointments could be made during the defined weeks.
4. Instructions then sent out to staff
5. First meetings between staff groups took place.
6. After the first meeting one week was allowed for reflection during which time a reminder as sent to staff to meet for the second time and report on their own activity.
7. Finally a further reminder sent out to remind them to complete and return their reports.
8. The reports were then consolidated into a summary report document.

All student facing staff including the Senior Management Team within the Faculty; academic teaching staff and, technicians and demonstrators were involved with the exercise and Peer Review was seen as an ideal opportunity of explaining what the initiatives are and how well they are understood and utilised. The outcomes of the peer review activities will form the basis of work stream developments in the future. A series of questions were asked of the staff to promote discussion on the various issues involved.

**Assignment Briefs:**

- What different types of assessment do you use?
- In your view, how do assessments vary between the participating members of your group?
- In your discussions could you consider the various attributes of the alternative methods of assessing student performance?

- Having heard what assessments other members of your group may adopt are there any that you think would be useful on your modules than your current regime?

### **Unpacking the Brief**

- In your discussions would you should consider the “What Works” project in particular the “Unpacking the Brief”.
- The research says that some students are unsure of exactly what is required of their assessments and they may be quite intimidated to ask publicly what is required.
- Unpacking the brief is a strategy that entails handing out the assessment and leaving students to consider what they don’t understand and then ask collectively what it means. This can be done with post it notes or by question and answer sessions but can aid clarification of what is required.

### **Fit to submit**

- The University is exploring a “Fit to Submit” checklist (details attached). Could you discuss the merits of adopting this for use on all coursework prior to submission of the assessment work?
- Do you think your students would benefit from using the “Fit to Submit” checklist?

The intention of the exercise was to first, raise awareness of the importance of these issues to staff particularly in relation to the key performance areas of retention and progression and secondly to gauge the opinion of staff within the Faculty as to the potential of Faculty wide strategies aimed at supporting student success in the area of assessment.

There were many and varied responses received and this summary of the review consolidates the responses but still retains the emphasis on where, in the opinion of staff, changes or alternative strategies could be supported or developed. The range of response varied from two or three pages of considered thought to single sentences or bullet points – templates provided for the review for ease of analysis. The following list states the factors in general terms in their order of the comments received for each topic.

### **Assignment Briefs:**

- It is obvious from the responses that there exists across the Faculty a wide variety of assessment tasks. (This is indicative of the wide range of the subject disciplines within the Faculty) This was the section that received the most responses from staff and illustrated the range of activities undertaken in the name of assessment.
- In some subject disciplines the assessment was dictated by the professional body or accreditation institution – in the main this indicated that traditional closed examination or assessments are required.
- It was noted that there is some activity in computer based assessment across the Faculty but it was recognised that this is a challenge to establish; it is considered to be under resourced and is perceived to be more of a test of surface learning rather than an in-depth study of a particular topic area which was considered inappropriate in some subject areas.
- The use of problem solving assessment strategies was commonly used in vocational subject disciplines where “*real life*” examples or scenarios were adopted to avoid the temptation of copying or working too closely with other students and avoiding the risk of misconduct.
- The use of University marking descriptors and grading criteria appear to be widely used and understood.

### **Unpacking the Brief**

- A range of responses were received in relation to this section of the review. On the whole the majority of staff felt that they already provided lots of explanation of what was required to achieve success in the assessment task.
- It may not though have been recognised as “unpacking” but it was seen to be supportive activity.
- Unpacking was recognised as being slightly different to providing more detailed explanation as it is driven by the student. Questions such as “Is the language understood?” or “what constraints are there?” can be answered directly.
- Some respondents felt that the “Unpacking” could be a continuous exercise developed in the VLE Forum on WOLF over the course of a module through a Q and A session addressing the various issues as they arise.
- A few staff felt that the imposition of an unpacking exercise interfered with their ability to teach and assess professionally to the standards required of their professional discipline.

- In general it was also suggested by some participants that the non-engagement of students with the personal tutor support system was an issue and that “Unpacking” gave an alternative option

#### **Fit to submit**

- This area received the second most comments and the initiative was relatively well known with only a few respondents suggesting they had never heard of it.
- The responses to the value of this technique ranged from “really good” to “patronising” but the overall response being to the former rather than the latter.
- The document was seen as something that would benefit weaker students in particular.
- The responses to the use of a Faculty wide, one size fits all Fit-to-Submit reminders were rejected. It was seen by many staff that there should be flexibility in the use of the template to produce a meaningful and relevant document for each module of study.
- The timing of the publication of the reminder was also seen as being important - not as late as the reminder becomes useless and not so early as to be irrelevant.
- One group suggested that a similar document could be created by the students after the module assessment had been published – a sort of checklist to demonstrate that students have understood what is required of the brief but written by them rather than spoon-fed by the staff. It was also suggested that the language could be made more student-friendly.
- Many staff within groups suggested that they would be utilising a version of Fit to Submit template in their modules in the future.

As a result of constant Faculty structure changes this was the first opportunity to disseminate the What Works? initiative across the Faculty of Science and Engineering. Moreover, this approach has provided an chance explore the facilitators and barriers to the future embedding of the What Works approach. As a consequence the “What Works” project was not particularly well known outside of the School of Biomedical Sciences.

Some staff felt that they invested a lot of energy into discussing assignment brief requirements with students. However the involvement of students in driving the unpacking exercise has been highlighted by this review.

The “Fit to Submit” reminder sheet was in the main seen as useful and there were many instances where staff have said it would be adopted on their modules – especially if a future evaluation shows that the impact is positive. The one condition was that the fit to submit reminder should not be faculty

wide and should be tailored to meet the requirements for each module for which it issued. This was a common theme in responding to the use of Fit to Submit.

For both of the above there were comments from a few staff relating to how these approaches encourage students to be independent and autonomous and able to take responsibility for their own learning. This highlights the need to reiterate the theoretical underpinnings for the What Works? initiatives and its aim to enhance students' ability to and confidence in interpreting assignment briefs. In the long term this will support those students who struggle to understand how to engage with higher education and provide them with the skills and confidence to be independent and autonomous learners.

Areas that have been identified from the exercise include the following:

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- Faculty level
  - Provide increased support for the development of computer based assessment, including training and support – Faculty Resources and training/development courses
  - Monitor use and effectiveness of “Fit to Submit” templates – within Schools through Learning and teaching representatives from the Learning and Teaching committee
  - Roll out the “What Works – unpacking the brief” to include student participation in the exercise and monitor effectiveness
  
- University level
  - To continue to support activity to improve performance and student success across the University generally but specifically for underperforming groups.

## **Conclusion**

Using the peer review on such a large scale with over 280 staff returning results was an ideal opportunity to access a big group of staff across various although related disciplines. These results have informed the work streams of the Learning and Teaching Committee for the present academic year. The first objective of raising the profile of various strategic initiatives was achieved in that this large group of staff are now aware of the work undertaken and they have suggested the utilisation of the strategies will be increased.

The second objective was that of the impact of the interventions – this has not been fully evaluated as yet. The Learning and Teaching School representatives will monitor the use or incorporation of the

strategies in both semester 1 and semester 2 across the Faculty and compare results with previous cohorts to monitor effectiveness of the interventions. It can be seen that the next phase of monitoring of the results of the interventions need to be supported by the Faculty and staff encouraged to participate in using them. It can however already be seen that What Works? – unpacking the brief and Fit to submit have both engaged students who may not have been willing to engage otherwise and from week one student engagement in the assessment tasks can only have a good outcome. Improvements in confidence and participation have been noted.

One unintended consequence of these interventions is the empowerment of the student to query the requirements of the assessment tasks. This is something that previously could have been thought to have been beyond what students feel they should ask. Particularly in an institution where there is a high proportion of first I family to attend higher education and where widening participation perhaps involves students that are lacking self-confidence.

Using these interventions students will now have permission or legitimacy to follow up the brief and gain a greater understanding of what success looks like for their final submissions.

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