

Diversity and Progression among Social Work Students in England

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Department of Health.

List of acronyms used in this report

CCETSW	Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work
CRB	Criminal Records Bureau
DH	Department Health
DipSW	Diploma in Social Work
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEI	Higher Education Institute
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
GSCC	General Social Care Council

Executive Summary

This study was an exploratory study and the findings are indicative rather than conclusive. It explored the particular circumstances of black and ethnic minority, disabled, and lesbian, gay and bisexual students to identify the specific factors that contribute to their experiences on social work programmes.

The Research Methods Involved:

- Focus groups with black, disabled, and lesbian and gay students;
- Semi-structured interviews with black, disabled and lesbian and gay and bisexual students;
- Semi-structured interviews with key informants¹, including programme directors, teaching staff, practice learning co-ordinators, and learning support staff, such as disability officers/co-ordinators, mental health co-ordinators, and senior members of staff responsible for diversity and widening participation initiatives within the Higher Education Institution (HEI) sites.

Findings

The results of the study indicate that a number of factors may be having an impact on the three groups of students in both similar and distinctively different ways. In particular, the main messages from the research are that a number of overt and hidden processes interact to shape the overall learning experience in the HEI and practice learning environment, which may have an impact on outcomes for black and ethnic minority students, disabled students, and lesbian gay and bisexual students.

An overall conclusion of this study was that areas of inequality in social work education could still be identified, despite the introduction of a range of initiatives and policies designed to counteract them.

The study highlighted a number of interacting situational and institutional factors that had a bearing on student engagement, which in turn could affect timely progression or likelihood of completing the programme on time.

The cumulative effect of combined and intersecting disadvantage, (for example, for dyslexic black and ethnic minority students with financial, as well as caring responsibilities), meant certain students were particularly vulnerable to delayed progression. However, many participants were able to overcome cumulative disadvantage and barriers to progression, suggesting levels of persistence and resilience, which rendered them well suited to the demands of contemporary social work practice.

¹ The term 'key informant' is used throughout the report to refer to those academic and learning support staff who were selected on the basis of their experience and expertise to provide information about the social work programme, university and practice context.

Participants from all three target groups experienced feelings of marginalisation and reported divisions in the learning environment. However, black and ethnic minority and disabled students were more likely to report that these had affected their academic confidence. Factors mitigating feelings of marginalisation included: support from personal tutors and practice assessors; more opportunities to work in small groups; anonymous marking; effective use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and internal resources of self-belief and determination.

Students from the target groups varied in their approaches to help-seeking. This was often dependent on how available, both physically and emotionally, tutors were perceived to be. In particular, where programme tutors reflected the diversity of the student group, student participants said they usually felt more confident in seeking support.

In those sites where the programme seemed able to harness difference and diversity as a source of learning, rather than as a source of division, progression rates tended to be better.

Although examples of good practice in practice-based learning were found, concerns about equity in the provision of practice learning for the target groups were also raised. These particularly related to experiences of black and ethnic minority students in agencies where staff were predominantly white, the transfer of some disability services for disabled students, and the absence of awareness about the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual students.

Evidence from this study suggests an 'institutional effect' on rates of progression for students from our target groups. Whilst some of this 'institutional effect' could be seen as relating to the quality of centralised and programme level support, much seemed to centre on the overall institutional culture and priority afforded to equality and progression.

Implications for practice, policy and future research

As this study was exploratory study and the findings are indicative only, we suggest areas that programmes and national bodies may wish to consider. We also make recommendations about some particular areas where further research might usefully be conducted.

HEI Learning Environment

To create a more inclusive learning environment for black and ethnic minority, disabled, and lesbian, gay and bisexual students, social work educators could review to what extent the curriculum and teaching strategies foster cultural sensitivity. Educators could also consider how best to promote awareness of racism, disabilist attitudes, and heterosexism within the student group in order to counter feelings of marginalisation. Further research into how different teaching and learning approaches affect the learning environment for students from marginalised groups is indicated.

In order to provide an accessible learning environment for disabled students, programme providers could provide clear, written information about learning

support services, and pay specific attention to the quality of communication between disability learning support staff and programme-level staff.

Programmes with large intakes of students involving a preponderance of large-group teaching methods could supplement this with small-group teaching to minimise the factors that can impede effective learning in large groups. More small group learning opportunities would have clear benefits for students, in terms of better supporting their interactions in the classroom, to manage the inherent tensions that arise as a result of the different values, experiences and beliefs that a culturally and linguistically diverse learning community brings.

Programme could introduce more reliable systems for monitoring the factors in the learning environment that may be contributing to differential outcomes for student progression. This would require regularly evaluating how far institution-wide, as well as at programme level, equality and diversity policies are achieving their objectives, and include a more reflective process whereby outcomes can be measured against targets set.

Practice learning environment

Further research into the processes of allocating practice placements to these groups of students is indicated. Social work programme monitoring systems could pay further attention to this by, for instance, mapping the progression of students through the processes of placement finding and matching, the dates that different groups of students start and complete their placements, and final outcomes.

Action plans to tackle any differences in progression or inequalities between groups of students could include rigorous monitoring of the quality of practice learning through Practice Assessment Panels or other forums, and focused and timely support to individual students who may be disproportionately affected by differential progression rates.

If these are not already in place, clear protocols could be drawn up between HEI's and placement providers to determine responsibility for making reasonable adjustments for disabled students and ensuring students are able to access support services such as disability tutors while they are on placement.

In order to create an enabling environment for all students, tutors could play a key role in initiating discussions and raising concerns about equality and diversity issues with students, practice educators and other practice learning agency staff.

Regulatory and National Bodies

The College of Social Work and the Health and Care Professions Council could take a lead in supporting social work educators to develop inclusive approaches

to teaching and learning and thereby enable diverse groups of social work students to realise their potential and complete their training on time.

The Health and Care Professions Council could take responsibility for ensuring that systems are in place to monitor that programmes are addressing differential rates of progression. Emphasis could be placed on effective use of existing institutional and national data to monitor and act on differential progression rates.

The new framework for practice educators currently being developed by Skills for Care and other bodies could include an explicit requirement that practice educators demonstrate how they have promoted equality in respect of their students' 'race', gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and other relevant factors during matching, teaching and assessing processes.

The Quality Assurance of Practice Learning (QAPL) processes developed by Skills for Care could be amended to include monitoring of student characteristics and satisfaction in the promotion of equality and diversity during their practice learning. Equality within practice learning provision could then be monitored at a national level through the LeaRNs system designed to capture data about different aspects of practice learning.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This report presents the findings from the *Diversity and Progression Among Social Work Students in England* study that investigated the particular circumstances of black and ethnic minority, disabled, and lesbian, gay and bisexual students on social work programmes in England. The diversity and progression study was commissioned by the Department of Health (DH) under the Social Care Workforce Research Initiative of the Policy Research Programme, and was undertaken between 2007-2009. It used a qualitative approach to conduct an investigation into the particular circumstances of black and ethnic minority, disabled, and lesbian, gay and bisexual students to identify any specific factors that contribute to their experiences on social work courses. The study originated in the context of longstanding concerns that black and ethnic minority and disabled students have different progression and completion rates compared to other groups of students on social work courses (see Hussein and colleagues 2006, 2008 and 2009). Although there is no similar quantitative evidence, other research suggests that lesbian, gay and bisexual students experience prejudice and discriminatory behaviours, which present barriers to their participation on social work courses (Foreman & Quinlan, 2008).

Based on analyses of progression rates for black and ethnic minority students of individual higher education institutions (HEIs) performed by Dr Hussein of the Social Care Workforce Research Unit, eight HEIs were selected as case study sites. Included in the HEIs sample were undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, a geographical diversity of providers, and 'old' and post-1992 universities. The purposive selection of these sites enabled the research team to gather data on the factors that may have a bearing on these groups of students' experiences in the context of the HEI and practice learning environments, in order to conduct a careful examination of the issues that interplay. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with students and a range of key informants, including programme directors, teaching staff, practice learning co-ordinators, and learning support staff, such as disability officers/co-ordinators, mental health co-ordinators, and senior members of staff responsible for diversity and widening participation initiatives within the HEI sites. However, lesbian, gay and bisexual participants were drawn from universities across England as well as from the sample sites in order to obtain sufficient numbers of participants.

The research took place during a period of major reform of the social work profession and media debates were contributing to the negative image of social workers (Brindle, 2009; Doward & Slater, 2009). Much was said about getting the right people into the profession, and newly qualified social workers being fit for purpose. In particular, the role of social work education, in how it prepared graduates for the demands of front-line practice, was under intense scrutiny. At the time of the interviews, these concerns were a major preoccupation of the staff involved in teaching and learning on the social work programmes in the HEI sites that comprise the sample in this study.

An advisory group made up of social work educators, users of services, researchers, students, policy makers and regulatory body representatives guided the study and gave feedback during key stages of the research process.

The findings of the study indicate that a number of factors may be having an impact

on the three groups of students in both similar and distinctively different ways. A number of overt and hidden processes interact to shape the overall learning experience in the HEI and practice learning environment, which may have an impact on outcomes for black and ethnic minority, disabled, and lesbian gay and bisexual students. These findings have the potential to contribute to the implementation of the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force (2009) and the Social Work Reform Board (2010) in relation to creating a diverse, high quality workforce.

Structure of the Report

The report focuses on the key findings of the study and comprises eight chapters. Chapter 2 sets out the background context of the study and provides an outline of the methodology. The remaining 6 chapters present the findings. In chapter 3 the key findings cover how students' educational and work experiences, and family of origin, have shaped their journey into social work. Chapter 4 focuses on the HEI learning environment to elucidate the interacting factors potentially influencing the overall learning experience of students. Chapter 5 reports on the findings in relation to the practice learning environment. Factors that inhibit or facilitate the provision of accessible practice learning opportunities are identified. Chapter 6 reports support strategies utilised by students to enhance their learning experiences. Chapter 7 focuses on the institutional context of the HEI to debate the influence of the HEI structure, culture and approach to equality and diversity on students' experiences. Chapter 8 provides some reflections on the findings and draw conclusions. Finally, Chapter 9 set out some implications for policy and educational practice.

Chapter 2: Context and Methodology

2.1 Background to the Study

There is strong evidence from existing data that students from black and ethnic minority groups and disabled students take significantly longer to complete their social work programmes than students who are white or not disabled (Hussein *et al*, 2006, 2008 and 2009). Proportionately, black and ethnic minority students and disabled students are more likely to withdraw or take longer to complete their social work programmes, whether due to referrals, deferrals or outright fails. There is some evidence from the personal experiences of educationalists that students from lesbian, gay and bisexual backgrounds may face direct or indirect discrimination on social work programmes because of their sexual orientation (Trotter & Gilchrist 1996; Trotter *et al*, 2008).

The first comprehensive secondary analysis of data on student progression rates of students enrolled on Diploma in Social Work students in the England during the period 1995-1998 showed wide variations in completion rates, with disabled and black and ethnic minority students in particular at greater risk of non-completion, or taking longer to achieve their social work qualification (Hussein *et al*, 2006; Hussein *et al*, 2008). A further in-depth analysis of the first two cohort of undergraduate students undertaking the new social work degree (2003-2004) showed similar results, black and ethnic minority students and those with reported impairments were significantly more likely to progress more slowly than other students even after controlling for the hierarchical effect of HEIs (Hussein *et al*, 2009). Both studies highlight that disabled students and students from black and ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to fail their social work courses, have to re-submit work and defer for other reasons (Hussein *et al*, 2006; 2008 and 2009). Findings from the Evaluation of the Social Work Degree in England Team (2008) concur with the previous Diploma in Social Work findings in that students from black and ethnic minority backgrounds and disabled students appeared to experience poorer progression rates. This is concerning, not only in its implications for the ability of the profession to meet the needs of service users from a range of different communities, but also in the potential impact on the students concerned. It opens up the possibility that some groups of minority students are experiencing either direct or indirect discrimination on their social work courses, or have a particular set of circumstances that impact negatively on progression.

Black and Ethnic Minority Students

Although the differential progress of black and ethnic minority students in school has long been researched, the experiences of black and ethnic minority students in higher education have only more recently been investigated. Differential rates of success have been reported in the fields of law and medicine (Law 1996). Initially research tended to focus on admissions policies and outcomes rather than on the experience of students once in the institution (Bhattacharyya, 2003; HEFCE, 2004a; Neal, 1998), and on employment outcomes and career progress of black and ethnic minority graduates (Connor *et al*, 2004). More recently, large-scale analysis has looked at contributory factors in the degree attainment of black and ethnic minority students (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007). Additionally, the *Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment* study looked at participation rates and degree attainment based on students from ethnic minority backgrounds to investigate the types of institutional

practices that may have a positive or negative impact on degree attainment (HEA & ECU, 2008). This study found that even after controlling for factors such as prior academic attainment, subject of study or type of HEI, being from a black and ethnic minority background had a “statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment” (HEA & ECU, 2008:p6).

The differential progression rates of students from black and ethnic minority backgrounds on social work courses has been identified as a source of concern for some time. One study observed that 6.4% of black students failed the Diploma in Social Work in contrast to 2.2% of white students (Runneymede Trust, 1994). More recently, the results from the secondary data analysis of DipSW students shows that, of the groups analysed in the study, black and ethnic minority students have the lowest odds ratio of passing their course on time (Hussein *et al*, 2008; Moriarty *et al*, 2009). Black and ethnic minority students were considerably more likely to have difficulties (e.g. having to resubmit work or to repeat placements) or to fail their social work course outright (Hussein *et al*, 2006; Hussein *et al*, 2008; Hussein *et al*, 2009). According to the GSCC/CCETSW (2004), on average, the pass rate (at the first attempt) was almost 80% for White British students with only 1.5% failing (the remainder were referred, deferred a year or withdrew from courses). The figures were lower for every other ethnicity/nationality. The three most common ethnic minority groups on social work courses (black Caribbean, black African and Pakistani), at that time, had a pass rate of around 60% and were more than three times as likely to fail (5%). When fails and course withdrawals are taken together (i.e. those students who fail to complete their social work course) then failure among White students stood at 7% and all other ethnicities had a rate of 11%, i.e. they were 50% more likely to fail to complete their course.

A small number of qualitative studies have explored the experiences of black and ethnic minority students in higher education in general (for example, Housee, 2004; Bhatti, 2003) and of social work students in particular (De Souza, 1991; Weaver, 2000; Penketh, 2000, Bartoli *et al*, 2008, Moriarty *et al*, 2009). However, these studies have been primarily based within a single academic institution, some have not been covered British students and all involved small numbers of participants. Some have focussed on the specific experience of a particular section of black and ethnic minority students, e.g. Native Americans or South Asian women, or have subsumed the experience of black and ethnic minority students within the broader category of ‘non-traditional’ learners. There has been no larger scale research along the lines of the Economic and Social Research Council (2004) funded project exploring disabled students learning in higher education.

Black and ethnic minority students reported a range of experiences in these small-scale studies. Some considered that lecturers had expected them to assume the role of a ‘race expert’ and to disproportionately challenge racism. Conversely, others felt that the experiences and understandings that they brought with them as black people had been devalued. Some ethnic minority students reported a painful conflict between their cultural values and those they were learning on their social work courses. Some students reported that they had experienced, or feared they would experience, racist attitudes from practice teachers, social workers and service users during their practice learning placements (Furness, 2003; Penketh 2000). Aymer and Bryan (1996) explored strategies used by black social workers to survive a marginalised position within the profession and argued that while some of these

strategies have contributed to black people's progression others have been maladaptive.

The findings from the analysis undertaken by Hussein *et al*, (2006 & 2008), indicate that there are a number of factors that might influence this group of students' progression and this research sought to examine the factors that play a part when considering the experiences of black and ethnic minority students.

Disabled Students

Our review of the literature about disabled social work students indicated that this group of students are under-represented on social work programmes but are over-represented in the categories associated with poor performance on social work programmes (Baron *et al*, 1996; Crawshaw, 2002; Wray *et al*, 2005). Data from the secondary analysis of students on DipSW programmes during 1995-1998 evidenced considerable variation in the progression rates of students with self-reported impairments and students with no reported impairments (Hussein *et al*, 2008; Hussein, *et al*, 2009). The data prove that even when a wide range of other variables were taken into account, this group of students are more likely to have lower progression rates. For instance, they are more likely to have lower levels of previous educational attainment, and are at greater risk of non-completion. Wray *et al* (2005) in the PeDDS study identified that some disabled students may encounter potential barriers over practice placements. Disabled students with dyslexia, for example, may face additional difficulties such as needing extra time to complete course work, or may struggle to produce work to the appropriate standard, or indeed some students may not discover they are dyslexic until well into their course (Crawshaw, 2002; Wray *et al*, 2005).

Additionally, some students may not declare a hidden impairment, such as mental health difficulties, because of stigma and prejudicial attitudes, or they may have a disabling illness; thus hidden impairments may not be disclosed (Grant, 2002; Stanley *et al* 2011). Hence, an interacting range of factors may impact on the learning environment and contribute to learning experiences, all of which need further investigation. Characteristics such as age and prior educational experience seem to come together in a unique way for students with a self-reported impairment that have a significant impact on their chances of passing their course on time. It is worth noting that since 1998 (the period when the data for the Hussein *et al* (2008) analysis was gathered), major legislative changes have occurred with the introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001. There is now a requirement on HEIs to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled students are not placed at a disadvantage. It might be assumed that with the implementation of SENDA in HEIs, social work programmes are more proactive in reducing the barriers this group of students have to overcome to successfully complete their programmes and this appears to be the case in some institutions (Stanley *et al* 2011). The different factors that are relevant for disabled students warrant in-depth examination to understand what is happening for them in the learning environment.

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students

There is a paucity of discussion and data on the particular experiences of lesbian and gay students on social work programmes. Studies have tended to focus more broadly on lesbian, gay and bisexual issues within the context of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice on social work courses and not specifically on the participation and progression experience of students who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Trotter & Gilchrist, 1996; Burgess *et al*, 1997). There is a suggestion that this group of students may face direct or indirect discrimination on social work courses because of their sexual orientation (Trotter & Gilchrist, 1996; Burgess *et al*, 1997; Trotter *et al*, 2006). It has been noted that some lesbian, gay and bisexual students may not “come out” on social work courses because of homophobic attitudes and behaviours and that there is a general tendency of avoidance in dealing with the subject of sexual orientation (Trotter & Gilchrist, 1996). Currently most HEIs do not record students’ sexual orientation, and the GSCC does not collect information on this category of identity. Therefore, data are not available to give a clear picture of this group of students’ participation and progression rates on social work programmes. This may change with the new requirement under the Equality Act 2010 for providers of vocational training not to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation. This clearly has implications for social work programmes as well as practice settings.

On-Line Survey

The results from the on-line survey of the evaluation of the social work degree, relating to differences in attitudes, experiences and perceptions between black and ethnic minority students and other diverse groups also informed the research approach (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification Team, 2008). This multi-phase national online survey of social work degree students covered four intakes of students (2003-4, 2004-5, 2005-6, 2006-7) in successive years of their programmes. The survey permitted analysis of a series of variables, including ethnicity and disability, to identify any significant differences in opinions, experiences and perceptions between minority and majority student groups. For example, results for first-year students indicated that minority ethnic students were more in favour of the change from the Diploma in Social Work to a degree level qualification than white students, and they rated the importance of ‘access to IT equipment’ on campus much more highly. The Evaluation Team postulated reasons why acquisition of a graduate qualification may be especially valued by some groups, and whether access to IT at home may be less likely among some groups. In general, black and ethnic minority students tended to express greater satisfaction with many aspects of the new degree than the white students, while disabled students seemed broadly less satisfied than the non disabled students.

This research and other cognate studies (Hussein *et al*, 2008 & 2009, Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification Team, 2008) suggest that educational background *per se* is not a factor contributing to poorer progression in social work education, unlike in other subject areas in higher education. However, these researchers acknowledge that the data they were using may not have been sensitive to some variations (e.g. it did not distinguish between different ‘A’ Level grades). Holmstrom & Taylor (2008) suggest that previous academic attainment is a significant, though

not absolute, factor in helping to predict students that experienced difficulties on a social work programme. Nonetheless, there is a substantial body of research that illustrates the educational disadvantage faced by both black and ethnic minority and disabled students across all parts of the educational system from primary level to higher education (Cole, 2006; Cropper, 2000; HEA and ECU, 2008).

In summary, research suggests that different groups of students may have differing experiences on social work programmes. Much more needs to be understood about the factors that coalesce for students from marginalised groups, if matters of diversity, equality and inclusion are to be embedded in organisations. A central focus of this study was to examine not only the difficulties faced by students from socially marginalised groups, but also to identify what can effectively support them in their learning. This study builds on the work of Hussein and colleagues to investigate reasons for the differences in progression rates between black and ethnic minority students and their White counterparts, and between disabled and non-disabled students.

By focusing on three distinct groups of students this study gathered information on how characteristics of individual students such as age, race, socio-economic backgrounds intersect to create a particular experience that impacts on their progression. As the investigation into experience of lesbian and gay students is exploratory, it provides a platform for future research.

2.2 Study Aims

The study aimed to:

Provide an in-depth examination of the particular circumstances of black and ethnic minority, disabled and lesbian, gay and bisexual students to begin to understand what individual and structural factors interact to affect their experiences and progress on social work programmes.

Specific aims:

- Identify approaches to meeting the needs of minority students on social work programmes in England that appear particularly successful or interesting.
- Describe the experiences of minority students (including both some who successfully completed training and some who experienced difficulties), with a particular focus on identifying ways in which the students or their programmes developed strategies that they found helpful.
- Provide detailed case studies of eight programmes with innovative or interesting approaches to the needs of minority students.

2.3 Methodology

Given the research objectives and the questions under investigation, a qualitative methodology was deemed the most appropriate. Additionally, as one of the principal elements of the research was an investigation into the factors influencing students'

experiences on their courses, a qualitative approach was particularly suited to examining the constellation of factors that may interact in the learning process. Furthermore, because the research was primarily concerned with generating data about personal experiences that are possibly stigmatised and may involve sensitive and sometimes painful issues (Renzetti & Lee, 1993), it was important to choose methods that were “fit for purpose” (Humphries, 2008). The detailed nature of qualitative data was thus better able to capture the complex nuances in the learning environment. Ethical approval for the study was granted by Goldsmiths, University of London's Ethical Committee.

The Sampling Approach for Selecting the Case Study Sites

In determining the appropriate sample design for the case study sites, in the first stage, we drew on the quantitative data available from the GSCC on progression rates for black and ethnic minority students among Diploma in Social Work students, and the data of undergraduate cohorts for 2003-5 and postgraduate cohorts for 2003-6 (Hussein, 2008; Hussein, 2009). This was the most up-to-date data available and was made available to us by Dr Shereen Hussein of the Social Care Workforce Research Unit at King's College London to whom we are most grateful. It is important to note, however, that we do not know whether the pass rates contained in these sites are an ongoing trend or were particular to these cohorts. From this anonymised data, eight Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were selected across England as case study sites for generating a sample. The data for black and ethnic minority students were used as a criterion to select the sites because this group of students was the largest group in the sample. It should be noted that although we had anonymised data about disabled students, we did not include this in our sampling strategy, as the numbers across all the sites were too small to draw any meaningful comparison about overall pass rates. With the assistance of Dr Hussein, we therefore took multiple cases using maximum variation sampling in respect of the progression rates of black and ethnic minority students (Flyvbjerg, 2007). This meant that we selected some sites where the progression rates of these students were either much better or much worse than the average. Some in our sample were also in the middle range. Other criteria used in choosing our case study sites included: geographical diversity; including ‘old’ and ‘new’ universities, including both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes; and including programmes with large and small numbers of black and ethnic minority students.

Characteristics of the HEI sites

Dr Hussein provided quantitative data relating to three cohorts (2003-06) for postgraduates, and two cohorts (2003-05) for undergraduates, in the eight sites selected for the sample, in order to identify the differing characteristics of the HEIs. The size of the cohorts at the point of enrolment, the proportion of black and ethnic minority students and the differences in reported pass rates between the black and ethnic minority and white students are outlined below to indicate something of the characteristics of the HEI case study sites. We have not included the data for disabled students as the numbers were too small to be statistically meaningful.

Site A is a pre 1992 university that offers both postgraduate and undergraduate routes to the degree. There were 124 BA students of which 37% are from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Of the BA students, 65% of the black and ethnic

minority students passed at first attempt compared to 56% of the white students. There were 28 MA students of which 46% were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. 62% of the black and ethnic minority students passed at first attempt compared to 40% of the white students.

Site B is a post 1992 HEI with a BA programme with a number of different entry routes (full-time, part-time and employment-based routes). There were a total of 93 students and 27% of the students were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Of the black and ethnic minority students, 56% passed at first attempt compared to 65% of the white students.

Site C is a post 1992 university with a BA programme. There were a total of 208 students and 56% of them were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. 56% of the black and ethnic minority students passed at first attempt compared to 76% of the white students.

Site D is a post-1992 HEI with an undergraduate degree. There were 48 students of which 10% were black and ethnic minority students. 50% of the black and ethnic minority students passed at first attempt compared to 68% of white students.

Site E is a pre-1992 HEI with an undergraduate programme. There were 48 students and 42% were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. 50% of the black and ethnic minority students passed first time compared to 74% of the white students.

Site F is a post-1992 university that offers an undergraduate route to the degree. There were a total of 138 students of which 60% of the students were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. 6% of the black and ethnic minority students passed at first attempt, compared with 50% of white students.

Site G is a post 1992 university that offers an undergraduate route to the degree. There were 63 students of which 13% were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. 57% of the black and ethnic minority students passed at first attempt compared to 51% of white students.

Site H is a post 1992 university that offers an undergraduate and postgraduate route to the degree. There were 106 undergraduate students of which 73% were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. 28% of the black and ethnic minority students passed at first attempt compared to 33 % of white students. There were a total of 58 MA students of which 33% were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. 39% of the black and ethnic minority students passed at first attempt compared to 64% of the white students.

It can be seen that sites were selected to represent diverging progression rates between black and ethnic minority students and their white counterparts. Site A did not follow the national trend in that black and ethnic minority students were more likely to pass on time than white students both for the BA (11% points difference) and the MA (22% points difference). However, as numbers of students on the MA in this site were small this is a less reliable figure. In site G pass rates were also slightly greater for the black and ethnic minority students (6% higher than for the white students), although as the numbers of black and ethnic minority students were very small (only four) this is again a somewhat unreliable figure. At all the other sites the

national trend of black and ethnic minority students being less likely to pass on time than their white counterparts was found. For some sites such as B (11%) and (for the BA only) site H (5%) this difference was less great. Other sites showed a more marked difference: with site C showing a 20% point difference; site D an 18% point difference; site E a 24% point difference; and for the MA in site H a 25% point difference. In site F there was a very marked difference of 44% points, with only 6% of black and ethnic minority students passing on time. In site F there was a particularly high deferral rate for the whole student group of 55%. It is possible that these may have been untypical years for this site so interpretation of these data should be treated with caution. There were also substantial differences in overall pass rates for all students across the sites, ranging from 67% at site D to 21% at site F.

Recruiting Participants

Access to students was negotiated through course conveners and programme directors to gain permission to approach students, and students were contacted in a number of ways. Once the HEIs agreed to take part in the study they circulated the Project Information Leaflet to all the students enrolled on their social work programmes. In addition, where students' timetables allowed it (during the period when we were recruiting participants and gathering the data some students were on placements), the research team met with cohorts of students to recruit directly. To access participants within the target groups who had deferred, failed or had temporarily withdrawn from their programmes, the participating HEIs sent a letter and details of the study to the home addresses of this part of the study population. Once the participants had received information about the research, they were free to decide whether they wanted to take part in the study. Students who agreed to take part in the study signed a consent form. Although all the participating HEIs had given their approval to be one of the case study sites, we encountered some barriers in gaining students' agreement to participate. For example, in some sites, because students were dispersed over wide geographical distances on practice placements, it was difficult to schedule focus groups, whilst for others the intensity of workloads as a result of their timetable and academic work, coupled with other demands on their time, meant arranging times for individual interviews sometimes proved difficult.

Our sample of lesbian, gay and bisexual participants was drawn from social work programmes across England as well as from our sample sites. In addition to recruiting this group of students from the case study sites, we also recruited other HEIs to increase our chances of getting as large a sample as possible. From the outset, we anticipated that lesbian, gay and bisexual students might be a minority group on their programmes and that the numbers volunteering to participate from the individual case study sites might be small. Additionally, students might be reluctant to come forward in general. Our starting point was that this group of students was hard-to-reach, because they are part of a "hidden population" with socially stigmatised identities (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Brackertz, 2007). We therefore adopted different strategies to maximise the chances of obtaining a sample of this group of students. Furthermore, as this part of the research was more exploratory, it was less important to have a purposive sampling strategy around the HEI context. Additionally, participants for the lesbian, gay and bisexual sample were recruited via students who had participated in the online survey for the Evaluation of

the Social Work Degree and through the internet contact list of the Lesbian and Gay sub-group of the Association of Teachers of Social Work Education.

As noted above, the initial sample comprised eight case study sites. However, one site withdrew just before the data-gathering phase, necessitating the recruitment of a replacement, which affected the timing of the fieldwork. Additionally, in two out of the eight sites (site G and H) there was a low response rate from student participants despite active efforts to recruit them. As a result, the samples were too small to capture multiple perspectives in these specific settings, and it was thus decided not to use these two sites to develop full case study narratives. However, there is value in the data we have collected, so we draw on the rich data collected from these two sites in the general analyses.

It was also our intention to include in the study population a sample of students who had withdrawn or failed their programmes. We were not successful in recruiting as many participants who met this criterion as we had wished. Nonetheless we did recruit a small number of students who had failed outright or withdrawn permanently from their programme and we did speak to students who had either failed particular modules or years of study or who had interrupted their programme.

Data-Collection Methods

In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with students and a range of key informants within the case study sites. The sample of key informants included programme directors, teaching staff, practice learning co-ordinators, and learning support staff, such as disability coordinators, mental health coordinators, and senior members of staff responsible for inclusion and access policies within the HEI sites.

The study gathered data from a total of 118 participants (see tables 1 & 2 for a detailed breakdown of the characteristics of the participants):

- 66 Black and ethnic minority students
- 16 Disabled students
- 13 Lesbian gay and bisexual students (one of whom was interviewed in a focus group and also as an individual.)
- 23 key informants.

These figures relate to the identities that participants initially ascribed to themselves. However, we recognised from the outset that participants may have multiple identities. There was a substantial group of black and ethnic minority students that also described themselves as having an impairment.

This data-gathering methods included the following:

- Focus groups with black, disabled and lesbian and gay students;
- In-depth interviews with black, disabled and lesbian and gay and bisexual students;
- In-depth interviews with key informants.

Nine focus groups were undertaken: one with lesbian, gay and bisexual students from social work programmes across England as well as from our sample sites, six with black and ethnic minority students, and two with disabled students. A total of 41 individual interviews with student participants and 23 with key informants were held. All the individual interviews with students and key informants were carried out once. Based upon their preference, the majority of the interviews and focus groups took place at the HEIs, and a minority were held in an agreed upon location such as cafes or libraries, while a few were held at the HEI in which the researchers were based. The following information outlines the numbers of participants interviewed from each site as part of the black and ethnic minority and disabled samples. The lesbian, gay and bisexual students are not included as they were not all recruited from the sites.

Site A

The sample in this site included 11 female students (10 BA & 1 MA), 8 were interviewed as part of the black and ethnic minority sample and 3 in the disability sample. Five key informants were interviewed, including the MA programme director, a manager of the disability support services, a senior academic of equality and diversity, the BA programme director and a mental health advisor.

Two focus groups were conducted in this site (1 with black and ethnic minority students and 1 with disabled students).

Site B

The sample in this site consisted of 10 students (8 women and 2 men) and 7 students were interviewed as part of the black and ethnic minority sample and 3 as part of the disabled group. The 3 key informants interviewed consisted of a faculty wide learning support officer, placement officer and programme director.

One focus group with black and ethnic minority students was conducted in this site.

Site C

The sample in this site included 24 Students, (21 women and 3 men). 19 students were interviewed as part of the black and ethnic minority sample and 5 students interviewed as part of the disabled sample group. The 4 key informants interviewed consisted of the programme director, placement co-ordinator, equality officer and disability advisor.

Two focus groups were conducted in this site (1 with black and ethnic minority students and 1 with disabled students)

Site D

The sample in this site consisted of 8 students (7 women and 1 man). 6 students were interviewed as part of the black and ethnic minority sample and 2 students as part of the disabled sample. Two key informants were interviewed, the programme director and a senior academic manager.

One focus group was conducted with black and ethnic minority students.

Site E

The sample in this site consisted of 7 students (6 women and 1 man) and 6 students were interviewed as part of the black and ethnic minority sample and 1 student as part of the disabled sample. Five key informants were interviewed; the programme director, placement co-ordinator manager of student advisory, stakeholder agency representative and head of the disability support services.

One focus group was conducted with black and ethnic minority students.

Site F

This sample consisted of 21 female students, 17 BA & 4 MA. Of these, 19 students were interviewed as part of the black and ethnic minority sample, and 2 students were interviewed as part of the disabled sample. Two key informants were interviewed; a programme director and the employer representative responsible for practice learning in one of the partner agencies.

One focus group with black and ethnic minority students was conducted in this site.

Site G

Interviews were conducted with two key informants (1 programme director and one tutor responsible for practice learning).

No focus groups were conducted.

Site H

The sample consisted of 1 Black and ethnic minority female student. No key informant interviews or focus groups were conducted.

Details of the interview schedules are in the appendices. All the individual interviews and focus groups were taped and transcribed *verbatim*. In addition, field notes and summaries were produced relating to the sites.

2.4 Data Analysis

The analysis of the data used some of the procedures and techniques adapted from grounded theory. Grounded theory as an analytical approach to data analysis offers a set of procedures and techniques for developing categories, organising the data, and identifying themes (Charmaz, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory offered a systematic and rigorous set of procedures for ensuring consistency and accuracy in the way the data are analysed based on themes emerging commonly across all the study participants and making sense of large quantities of data that are rich and complex (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Key elements of grounded theory techniques that we utilised in the analysis were its coding schemes, memoing and constant comparison. The NVivo qualitative data analysis software package was used as a tool for coding, grouping segments of the data, organising themes and emerging patterns, as well as for the retrieval of coded segments of the data.

In order to begin the initial coding scheme we selected a sample of transcripts from across the sites, including transcripts of individual interviews and focus groups and from key informants in different job roles, black and ethnic minority, disabled and lesbian and gay students. All four members of the research team read these

transcripts and the data were coded into the following seven broad organising themes (with a number of sub-codes).

- Educational experiences
- Support
- Learning environment
- Learning experience
- Levels of satisfaction
- Understanding the professional role
- The practice environment.

Following the generation of these broad themes, each interview was then analysed using these themes to group segments of the data. Half the transcripts were read by two of the research team members working together. Carrying out this phase of the analysis was an iterative process, which meant reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, to identify a number of distinctive themes. As the categories emerged they were refined to identify relationships between five core categories: the HEI learning environment, practice environment, students' life experiences and circumstances, support systems, and institutional context. The constant comparative model in grounded theory enabled the key themes to be explored, to elucidate the full range of views, experiences, and factors identified by the study participants.

Initially, we analysed the whole dataset, using the same coding scheme for all of the interview data, including the individual and group interviews from both student participants and key informants. Once we had coded the data and had summarised the coded data into themes, we separated these into the case study sites. This also included the quantitative data supplied by the GSCC and a summary of the data sources used in that site. As indicated previously in sites G and H it was not possible to develop a full case site narrative, as response rates from these sites were low.

Each researcher took a different category and developed summaries of the key themes as they applied to each of the specific sites. Developing a case description, pattern matching and explanation building were key to this process of the analysis (Yin, 2009). In many regards, generating the broad categories for analysis together as a research team helped to ensure consistency in our approach, and also facilitated a process of reflexivity, which helped minimise risks of bias in our individual interpretations (Reay, 1996). We had to continually reflect on our own perceptions and assumptions based on our knowledge of the programmes and our experiences of data-gathering in particular sites.

As indicated above, although we had data from eight sites, we had a low response rate for two of these sites, so we only formed six full case study narratives (sites A, B, C, D, E and F). We used a loose triangulation approach by considering how far the different data sources were congruent with each other within each site, and what sense we could make of incongruities. To help us in this phase of the analysis we posed the following questions: What are the key characteristics of the sites? How could the characteristics of the individual sites help us make sense of the data overall about progression? How could the data help us make sense of the particular progression rates within the individual sites? This enabled us to develop a narrative for each site. For reasons of confidentiality these case study narratives have not been

included in this report. However, what we learned from this more nuanced analysis of the data has been incorporated throughout the report.

In order to draw out the emergent patterns, we analysed the data further in order to compare our categories with the findings from each case site. To help us select a core category of analysis, we considered the overarching theme of subtle processes and its impact on the students' experiences. In this way, it was possible to look at the conceptual linkages between all five broad categories to illuminate a common thread running through the data, that of how individual processes interacted with programme and institutional level processes in the HEI, to impact students' participation as active learners in the teaching and learning processes. This further enabled an exploration of how complex dynamics emerged in different ways, and varying degrees among sub-groups of students depending on the nature of the factors contributing to their circumstances. In light of the emergent ideas, we were therefore able to construct the explanation that patterns of marginalisation and devaluation permeated students' experiences and had implications for how they navigated the HEI and practice learning environment. Overt and subtle processes on their social work programmes ultimately became the overall core category of analysis because of its considerable scope to build explanations for conceptualising the complex constellation of structural and interpersonal factors that are important facets of the students' journey on their social work courses.

As explained earlier, our aim was to provide detailed case studies of the eight sites to highlight innovative teaching and learning strategies that worked effectively to meet the needs of diverse groups of minority students. However, our goal was not achieved quite as we envisaged. For example, one site that had been selected because of the innovative work they were developing to enhance the quality of the learning experience of disability students, withdrew from the study before the start of the data-gathering. Additionally, site G which was chosen because of the work they had developed to support black and ethnic minority students had a low response rate from student participants. Consequently, our ability to achieve the aim of providing detailed case studies of all the sites to showcase any innovative teaching and learning strategies was limited and we therefore took the approach of having a spread of programmes, to highlight where there is innovative practice taking place, as we have done, for example, in relation to site A.

2.5 Limitations of the study

Whilst the data gathered are important for understanding black and ethnic minority, disabled, and lesbian, gay and bisexual students' experiences on social work courses, we must consider issues of reliability and generalisability. Two factors are important to consider in highlighting the limitations of the study. Firstly, it is possible that a higher proportion of students who were dissatisfied with their courses, or had problems about progression, would come forward to take part in the research. Thus, an obvious limitation involves the representativeness of the data. Self-selected students may not represent all students; therefore, the findings may reflect only the experiences of a small group of students on their programmes and there may be important differences between students who did not volunteer to participate in the research. For example, students with more positive experiences may not have felt the need to take part in the research. Secondly, the data-gathering was taking place

during a critical time for the programmes in the sample, as the GSCC 5- Year Review and the Task Force review of social work was taking place, which might have had a bearing on the amount of time that programme providers were able to devote to supporting the study and to the kind of information key informants were willing to share with us. Hence, we have not attempted to make grand claims about the universal applicability of our findings but stress instead what we found in this particular study. Though the data from the sample are not generalisable to all students that fall within our study population, the knowledge generated in this study correlates with the results of other studies concerning non-traditional students' experiences on social work programmes in higher education. Most importantly, this study brings a new perspective to the literature on marginalised students' experiences, and thus makes a distinctive contribution to the knowledge base of social work education.

Chapter 3: Student participants' life experiences and circumstances

3.1 Summary

This chapter uses data from focus groups and individual interviews with student participants and from the brief questionnaire students completed about their personal circumstances and self-ascribed identities. It describes the characteristics and backgrounds of the student participants and examines what each of the three groups in the study had to say about the impact of these factors on their experiences of and progression on their social work programme.

3.2 Key findings

- Black and ethnic minority and disabled students reported factors relating to previous personal and educational experiences and current life circumstances that they felt may impact negatively on their progression on their social work programmes. Lesbian, gay and bisexual students did not report these, other than those who were caring for children.
- Black and ethnic minority, and to a lesser extent, disabled students reported disadvantaged educational backgrounds. This was not true for the lesbian, gay and bisexual group.
- Black and ethnic minority and disabled students did not, on the whole, describe family backgrounds where participation in higher education was a norm, and some identified particular difficulties, such as growing up in a poor community, that they had to overcome in order to enter social work education. This seemed less true for the white lesbian, gay and bisexual students.
- Black and ethnic minority, and to a lesser extent, disabled students reported that financial pressures and the necessity for term-time working were stressful.
- Participants who were parents in all three groups identified that caring responsibilities for children affected the time and energy that they were able to devote to their studies.
- Many, but not all, the black and ethnic minority and disabled students described having to negotiate multiple disadvantages. Black and ethnic minority students who were dyslexic seemed to face particular challenges. However, despite these disadvantages, many student participants demonstrated qualities of persistence and resilience to overcome these.
- No particular differences in the characteristics and reported current circumstances of the black and ethnic minority and disabled students were apparent between the different study sites.

3.3 Scope of chapter

This chapter examines what participants from all three groups said about the ways in which they feel their previous educational and work experiences and family of origin have shaped their journey into social work and their engagement in social work education. It also considers how the students' current circumstances were impacting on their experiences of learning on their programme. Differences and similarities between the three groups of students in the study are considered. The black and ethnic minority and disabled participants identified factors that might impact on their progression; the lesbian, gay and bisexual group did not consider that their sexuality *per se* was impacting on their progression but those that were parents did identify the additional pressures that this placed on them.

3.4 Characteristics of the student participants

Chart one: Breakdown of self reported ethnicity and race

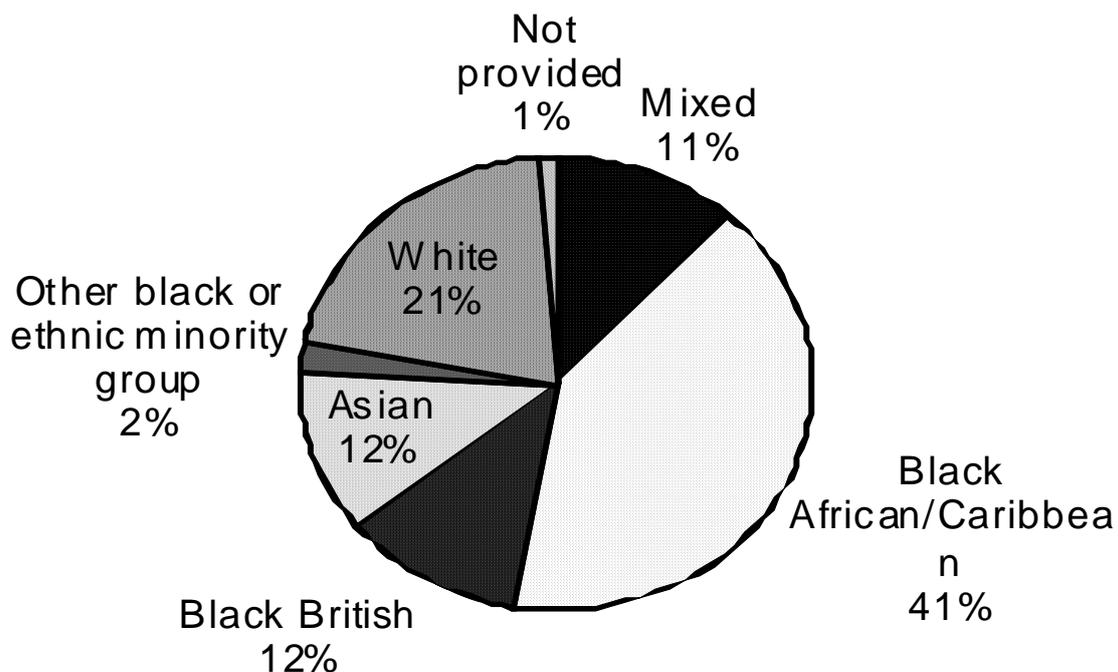


Table 1 Self declared ethnicity

Mixed	Black African/ Black Caribbean	Black British	Asian	Other black ethnic group	White	Not Provided
10	39	12	11	2	20	1
1 black and Chinese	25 black African/ black British African		4 Indian	1 Chinese	20 white British	
1 white and Asian	14 black Caribbean/ black British Caribbean		5 Pakistani	1 South American		
3 white and Caribbean			2 Asian Other			
3 white and black African						
2 other mixed black grounds						

Almost all of the students who participated in the study and who indicated that they were from any mixed or black or ethnic minority background identified themselves initially as wanting to be interviewed as a member of this group of students. Only nine did not do so. Of these, two students who came forward to participate as lesbian, gay or bisexual students and seven as disabled students identified as being from any black and ethnic minority background. Thirteen participants self-identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual, with six gay men, four lesbians and three bisexual women, all of whom came forward initially to participate as members of that group.

Over half (44/82) the black and ethnic minority and disabled participants had caring responsibilities. Twenty-seven of these two groups of participants said they did not have caring responsibilities and for eleven there was no information. Within the gay, lesbian and bisexual group (n=13), three identified as having caring responsibilities, the rest did not.

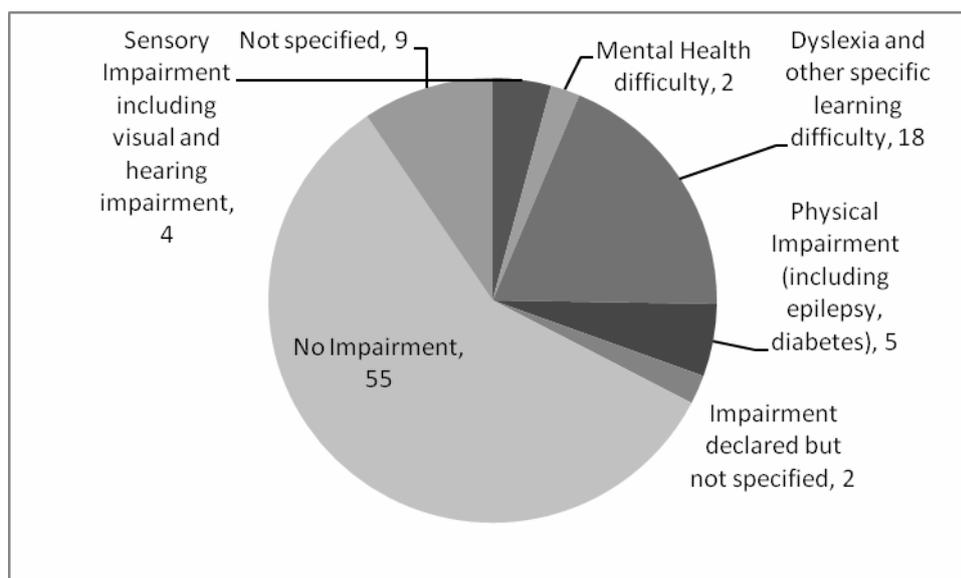
In terms of religion, the majority of the sample (50/95) identified as Christian (including three who described themselves as Roman Catholic). Seven stated that they were Muslim, two Buddhist, one Buddhist/Hindu, one Hindu and two unspecified religions. Eighteen indicated that they had no religion and 13 did not specify.

The large majority of the total sample (95) was female, with only 13 male participants. Of the total sample only 20 participants were under the age of 25, 43 were between 25 and 35 and 32 were over 35. Thus the substantial majority of the participants were mature students.

Table 2: Breakdown of self reported impairments

Sensory Impairment including visual and hearing impairment	Mental Health difficulty	Dyslexia and other specific learning difficulty	Physical Impairment (including epilepsy, diabetes)	Impairment declared but not specified	No Impairment	Not specified
4	2	18	5	2	55	9

Chart two: Breakdown of self reported impairments



Only two participants specified that they had mental health difficulties, though it is possible that other participants may not have wished to disclose such a diagnosis. Two of the lesbian, gay and bisexual participants identified as being disabled. Seventeen participants identified as being both disabled and from a black and ethnic minority background, with 12 of these having dyslexia or another specific learning difficulty. None of the participants described themselves as belonging to all three of our target groups.

3.5 Previous educational experiences

Black and ethnic minority students

Overall, the black and ethnic minority students who volunteered to participate in the study reported educational backgrounds that could be described as being disadvantaged. Few of the undergraduate participants described a traditional entry route into higher education, coming straight from school or after a 'gap' year. The vast majority were mature students and many had undertaken an access course to secure entry onto the programme. This black and ethnic minority student participant gave a graphic example of overcoming educational disadvantage:

At 40 I was awarded a medal for excellence and the Dean asked to see me and I thought I'd done something wrong but he wanted to shake my hand because he'd done some research in the sixties and my school was the worst school in England and Wales for academic achievement and he had never met anybody from my school at his college. (Site B, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

A number of participants talked about painful experiences of racism and exclusion in their schooling. Reports of difficulties at school, of leaving school early, of alienation in or of being excluded from school were relatively common amongst this group of students:

I went to an access course and because of my English I started very, very low, I done care entry, I done BTEC first, BTEC national, access to social work to make sure I can go forth into the university. (Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Whereas, I mean my previous school, my experience of schooling has been appalling in terms of being labelled, judged from start to finish from the age of seven 'til when I left, which is why it took me so long to come back into education because I thought there was no way I'm going back through all that again. (Site D, focus group black and ethnic minority student)

Going through the education system I hated it. You know, it was like, just the stigma attached ... and if you didn't understand the first time, you know it was a case of you were branded stupid. (Site C, focus group black and ethnic minority student)

A number of the black and ethnic minority participants identified that difficulties with their written or spoken English contributed to having failed an assignment, receiving lower marks than they had hoped for or having problems with progressing on placement. For some this was because English was an additional language, whereas others, though they identified as being English speaking, thought that they spoke a different form of English to that spoken by white British people. A number of participants in these groups had been educated outside the UK, most frequently in Africa. While some talked about having done well in education in their home country, the transition to the British higher education system for this group was not always straightforward:

We write and speak in English but we don't write and speak in the same jargon as students who have come from the UK education system, especially when you have come in from a different secondary background. (Site A, focus group black and ethnic minority student)

For some their encounters with the British educational system were particularly problematic and had led to a profound sense of unease and disturbance:

Coming from a country that has been colonised by the west, some of the ideologies that you have been brought up with, and then you come here and you see the opposite ... It's quite confusing because this is something that you cherish and then you come to this country and you realize that everything that

you cherish is what oppresses you. (Site E, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

However, not all participants felt that being educated abroad was a disadvantage. One thought that it had been a positive advantage.

I think that our academic systems back home are very good ... you really study everything and when you come here you're prepared for that hard work, long hours of reading, you're not scared of exams because we just go on doing exams back home. (Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Black and ethnic minority participants had been employed in a range of different roles such as childcare, manual work, care work and administration prior to training. Some had held positions as social work assistants and this had motivated them to consider entering higher education. Their employer was sponsoring some of these to qualify as a social worker.

Disabled students

Some disabled students also spoke about previous educational experiences that had left them with feelings of isolation and underachievement, particularly those who identified as being dyslexic. For example:

Moving onto high school ... there wasn't any support there to help us and it was just that you were dumb so you sit just in the corner thinking all this time that you are dumb you are stupid and as you are growing up you are hearing people saying oh you are not bright; you got your peers saying that you are stupid and other stuff like that. (Site C, focus group disabled student)

Another participant identified herself as always being in the 'bottom group at school'. She described bitter memories of often having to continue with her work after the other children had been allowed to go and play.

I found that the teachers were really not clocked on. And I just felt well, it's like they had no hope in me. (Site C, focus group disabled student)

Evidently these experiences would have affected these participants' confidence and their expectations of university life and study. Disabled students also reported that difficulties with written expression were also a significant factor in why they had failed assignments or had not achieved the marks they had wished. A substantial sub-group of students identified as being both black and dyslexic:

I am also dyslexic so punctuation, grammar, English they all fall into one place. Language lets us down, the punctuation and the grammars. (Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

With me when I was doing the access course...I was doing the English and the comment that the lady made she said like when I made the mistakes she thought it was because I was Black that I was making these mistakes and missing off the s, say she thought ...she mentioned patois well you know...and she was saying things like that. (Site C, focus group disabled student)

What this last participant seems to be saying to us is that her dyslexia had not been recognised because of negative assumptions that were made about ethnicity and academic ability. Here it seems that stereotyped expectations about the under-achievement of black and ethnic minority students may have hindered the accurate diagnosis of her difficulties.

A number of the disabled students did not discuss their previous experiences of work prior to entering university but those that did presented a broadly similar picture to the black and ethnic minority students. Some described having left school to work in an office and one that she had done voluntary work in order to gain a place on the social work programme. However, one said she had been a teacher prior to doing social work, and others had worked in social care posts.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual students

The lesbian, gay and bisexual participants shared some of the same characteristics of the disabled and black and ethnic minority students, as many were mature students who had chosen to work, some for many years, before going to university. However, none spoke about negative experiences of education as having had a detrimental effect on their self-confidence or career paths. Only one reported having undertaken an access course, and most said that they had taken 'A' levels. Several participants had entered university soon after leaving school. One participant described starting a degree at a prestigious university after doing science 'A' levels, but he had left because he felt more attuned to a career working with people. Only one, who also indicated that she was from a black and ethnic minority background, reported that she had found the transition to university, academically, a challenge.

A number described having been employed in professional type roles such as teaching, training and development, welfare rights advice, youth work and policy development prior to joining a social work programme. Some, like their black and ethnic minority and disabled peers, had been working in childcare or as a social work assistant. Four had trained as teachers prior to entering social work. One participant suggested that her reason for coming into social work was that she had found social care workplaces less homophobic than the school environment in which she had been teaching.

3.6 Families of origin

Black and ethnic minority students

The black and ethnic minority student participants did not, in the main, describe family situations where going to university was an expectation. Some student

participants had grown up in environments where many of their peers had not succeeded in education and had faced social problems such as involvement in drug misuse or crime. One described herself as coming from a poor background. For many they were the first in their family to go to university. Some described how aspects of their upbringing had damaging effects on them personally or educationally. Two participants put it like this:

I think my parents sort of forgot about me - they were getting themselves educated, being the daughter of immigrants – I had a lot of responsibility (at home). (Site A, focus group black and ethnic minority student)

When I think about my own family's background and they are Jamaican born and when I think about the household that I got brought up in they couldn't kind of support very much my learning. (Site A, focus group black and ethnic minority student)

Some described how expectations in their families regarding gender roles had adversely affected their education.

My brothers got a little bit more attention than the girls did, and I was pushed more to do the domestic stuff, but my brothers more into education.... So I was kind of, always pushed aside. And not, I suppose ignored in a way, so I was kind of told that I wasn't, I weren't able to reach my potential, so my place was to do the washing, Hoover and ironing, so the domestic stuff, so I kind of grew up believing that, so I didn't really succeed. (Site A, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

So I hated being at home but loved being at school, which is normally the reverse for most people. When I turned 17 my parents forced me into a marriage and I got taken to... (place name deleted). It was forced and I didn't even know what marriage was because of the way I was brought up. My home life was so strict that I didn't know anything about marriage. (Site A, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Some spoke about personal or close family members' experiences of being a social work service user or of other experiences of trauma or disadvantage, and that this had motivated them to go into social work. Others had parents or other family members who had social work or nursing qualifications. For these participants this was a positive experience that had helped give them confidence in deciding to undertake social work training. Others identified a desire to provide a good social work service to their own communities as a motivating factor for coming into the profession. Although some student participants felt that they had faced obstacles

arising from coming from a black or ethnic minority background, this had also given them a powerful desire to succeed:

When you've got Asian social workers and they are doing a home visit for an Asian person and (are) from a similar background it is a lot easier to understand because there is that understanding there. (Site A, focus group black and ethnic minority student)

Historically, the motivating factor for many black and ethnic minority people...(is) having something to strive towards...the belief that anything is possible so you push yourself. (Site E, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Disabled students

Disabled students had less to say about their family of origin though they, like the black and ethnic minority students, did not appear to come from backgrounds that were particularly privileged. A number spoke about having come from backgrounds where going to university was not the norm. The following extract is an example of this:

My generation you didn't leave school and then go to university; that was an option for people with money, it wasn't an option for us. (Site B, individual interview disabled student)

Lesbian, gay and bisexual students

This group of participants did not describe families of origin where participation in higher education was not the norm. Some had faced opposition from their families in relation to their sexuality. These participants expressed a belief in their capacity to contribute positively to the profession. On the whole, with one particular exception, this group of students did not describe personal experiences of being a user of services or having experienced difficult life circumstances as a key motivator to becoming a social worker. Rather they described how they had worked in social welfare or policy fields and attributed their motivation to enter social work to their work experience and their political or intellectual commitment to social justice:

I know a lot of people who did social work, you know years ago....and the left wing values that drew them to it. (Individual interview lesbian, gay and bisexual student)

3.7 Family Responsibilities and Financial Pressures

This section discusses the socio-economic factors that were currently impacting on the student participants' learning experiences. Most frequently, student participants identified these as their caring responsibilities and stress related to limited financial resources. These two, frequently interlinked, factors placed pressure on participants'

time and commitment to their programme of study. In what follows we examine in detail the impact of family and financial commitments and resources upon the learning experiences of the student participants.

Family Responsibilities

Over half of our participants identified that they had caring responsibilities for children or others. This is congruent with the Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Team's (2008) survey that almost half of the black students responding to the on-line survey were caring for school age children compared to 36% of all students. Across all of the sites many of the student participants identified that meeting family responsibilities was time consuming, which meant that it was sometimes difficult to manage the competing calls made upon them.

Black and ethnic minority students

Some black and ethnic minority participants spoke of the demands placed on them by their families' expectations:

There are a few Muslim girls but you know they are from different, they haven't really had the same experiences as growing up as I did... I think home makes it difficult sometimes for me to concentrate on my course and stuff. It does have a big impact on my work definitely because there is so much pressure at home and there's always a lot going on and it definitely has a big impact on the course. (Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

A number of participants in this group (some of whom were disabled as well) identified that their commitment to their children was a major pressure on their time. This meant that they were sometimes unable to give their full concentration to lectures and seminars, their assignments and their placements. Two of these student participants noted:

It is harder when you've got kids. Very, very hard, because you've got to ensure they've eaten and, you know, you've got to allocate time. It's not just about your studies as well. (Site A, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

It's hard to be a mother, to try to fulfil your children's needs. (Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

A number of the participants described themselves as single parents. They noted the additional pressures of this. One black and ethnic minority participant, not a single parent herself, made this comment.

I know other people within my class are mums who are Afro-Caribbean (and) are most likely to be single mums. You know, they don't have the support of their partner or a husband, so

financially it's a big sacrifice that they're making by coming to university, and also they've got children, young children and the commitment they still have to make to their children, and also most of them are working, like myself. (Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Some participants experienced conflict about whether they were able to care for their children in the way they wished while at the same time meeting the requirements of the social work degree. A number of the student participants were also caring for parents or other family members, sometimes on top of having children. However, despite the stress of managing multiple responsibilities, some participants thought that being a parent did not only have a negative effect on their studies. They felt that having children motivated them to do well and meant that they had had to develop good organisational skills. They believed that being a good role model for their children and undertaking professional training in order to be better able to support them in the future were of positive benefit to their children.

Disabled students

Disabled participants also spoke about the impact of responsibility for children on their studies, however this tended to be less of a theme in their accounts. Nonetheless, examples were given of similar tensions to those reported by the black and ethnic minority students. This participant described how, because of her impairment, she had to put much more time into her studies and felt this had negative consequences for her daughter.

I mean I've got a ten year old daughter. I feel because I have to work so hard at what I'm doing that I'm not neglecting her but I'm not giving her the attention she needs, and at times I've thought why am I doing this... I neglect her because I have to put so much effort into the work. And she doesn't really understand, she just says to me I want you to give it up, why are you doing it, I never see you, and you just think... (Site E, individual interview disabled student)

Two of the disabled participants also described the extra responsibilities of having a child who was also disabled: for instance one had a child with dyslexia who needed additional support at home and school, and another had a child with Asperger syndrome who could only be cared for by a relative. The additional pressures of being a single parent were also noted.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual students

By contrast, a smaller proportion of the lesbian and gay sample of student participants (3 out of 12) identified that they had caring responsibilities. However, for those that did, these responsibilities were sometimes seen to be a more significant barrier to progression on the programme than their sexuality. This group also described conflicts in managing the competing priorities of meeting their children's needs with the requirements of the programme:

I worked on my placement until the birth, which isn't fair. But I had to do it in order to cover my days on the placement, and it's worse when you hate the placement. I've still got 8 weeks left which I have to complete by August and it's horrible thinking that you have to leave a new born child for something that you hate. (Individual interview, lesbian, gay and bisexual student)

I got really bad postnatal depression right after having me son...being a mother has caused me more problems (Individual interview, lesbian, gay and bisexual student)

Financial pressures

Black and ethnic minority students

Many of the black and ethnic minority student participants said that financial pressures were impacting adversely on their studies. Participants described having to juggle working, sometimes long hours, with undertaking their programme of study. This meant that some were studying late into the night as their weekends were taken up with work. Those who were working nights felt particularly stressed:

On that point when you said responsibility back home and you have bills to pay it really adds an additional pressure on you... My employer wouldn't just give me the part time that I needed, they wouldn't even give me nights so that I could just manage it, it was either I resign or keep my full time job and I said no there is no way and by the time I came out to sort all that it was about 4 weeks for me to hand in my assignment and I had 4 assignments to do and I thought no matter what I have to do I just have to pass this assignment. (Site A, focus group black and ethnic minority student)

Financially I would also say that hinders because, like I said I don't get the full experience of the programme because I work and as soon as I leave here instead of going to the library and sit down and read for three hours I dash off to work and it is cramming in a lot of stuff because I have to work if I don't work I can't support myself on the course. (Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

I was working nights. Oh yeah, I was coming to a lecture and falling asleep and my work was slipping and everything...I was getting capped (marks were limited) because a lot of the work, I couldn't actually hand in on time. So yeah, it did affect my grades. (Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

In relation to financial and family commitments a number of black and ethnic minority students were sending money to their families in their home countries:

You don't feel comfortable using all this money when somebody is also crying out for school fees – the best necessity in one's life, the only investment you can make for somebody is education. So you find that we are sort of over stretched I would say in terms of resources that's why you find that sometimes people opt out to do part-time training. (Site B, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

I'm obviously from an African background and my parents are back in Africa and, yeah, I have to sort of look after them financially mainly because they're in a very poverty-stricken country so sometimes I have to do a bit of extra work to get money. (Site E, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

In one site in particular it appeared that many of the black and ethnic minority students were paying overseas fees on top of trying to support themselves and their families either here or abroad. Some felt that they were treated unfairly in relation to home students, with the university being quicker to remove them from classes or take them out of their placement if they had not paid their fees. They reported that it would have been very helpful if they had been able to pay in instalments:

Yeah, I've had an experience because sometimes being an international student they will say my fees are paid on this day and they will just give you a deadline. And if you have a look at the other students, they are home students, they haven't even received their bursaries but because you are an international student you have been spotted out and sometimes they will tell you not even to attend the classes, but there are still students there who haven't received their bursaries. (Site D, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Because nothing changes, you know, because it's like with the issue of fees I just say okay, I'm going to maybe pay like in instalments... then they will tell you no, we want our fees right away. (Site D, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Disabled students

Disabled students had less to say about their current financial circumstances, though this was a factor for some. Some disabled students pointed out the difficulties caused by the late receipt of disabled student's allowance.

Financially, it's a big, you know, but I've managed. (Site F, individual interview disabled student)

My commitment is get home, pay the bills, and I haven't got the luxury of living at home and having money to spare. I should have done this when I was 18. (Site C, individual interview disabled student)

Well with having the kids, you know ... you're still got the financial factor, I've got to pay bills. (Site C, individual interview disabled student)

Lesbian, gay and bisexual students

The lesbian, gay and bisexual sample did not mention financial pressures as being a major problem for them, apart from one participant who identified that becoming parents had put financial pressure on their family. Indeed, one made the point that she felt more financially secure now than she had in the past as she had been able to save while in relatively well paying jobs before coming on the programme.

3.8 Summary and discussion

As in Aiken *et al's* (2001) research into black women's completion of a nursing programme, our black and ethnic minority and disabled student participants described both situational and psychosocial barriers to progression on their programme. For our black and ethnic minority, and to a lesser extent disabled, participants key situational barriers included: caring responsibilities for children and other family members; the need to undertake paid work in addition to undertaking the social work programme; and lack of financial support from partners or other family members. Overseas students, in particular, described additional financial pressures. Interestingly, the lesbian, gay and bisexual students who were parents indicated that they perceived that this had had a greater impact on their capacity to complete the programme than their sexuality. Bartoli *et al* (2008) and Moriarty *et al* (2009) also found that students in their studies reported that caring responsibilities had a major impact on their capacity to complete their social work training.

Research (see Metcalf 2001) has shown that term time working has a detrimental effect on students' performance and may reinforce existing inequalities. A number of the black and ethnic minority participants reported having to undertake paid work alongside doing the social work programme. As the majority of the student participants we interviewed were mature students their financial responsibilities may be greater than those of younger students. Participants frequently described having financial commitments such as mortgages and providing for their families. Indeed, for many who had caring responsibilities it was the financial stress that was the key factor that was impacting on their ability to study. Unsurprisingly, the employment-based student participants were a group that did not mention financial pressures as being a barrier to participation. There was an indication that the black and ethnic minority participants, and to some extent the disabled participants, may have previously been employed in roles with a somewhat lower professional status, and

possibly therefore lower paid, than the predominantly white and able-bodied lesbian, gay and bisexual group.

Psychosocial factors that may have been barriers for our participants related to the impact of previous experiences of education and family life on their self-confidence and preparedness for higher education. Lesbian, gay and bisexual participants did not identify such barriers or indicate that their sexual identity had had a specific impact on their progression on their social work programme. Their accounts tended to focus on current experiences within the university and practice learning agencies. These are explored in subsequent chapters.

A number of the black and ethnic minority and disabled students, and to a much lesser extent the lesbian, gay and bisexual sample, described having experienced difficult personal circumstances that were the motivator for them coming into social work. This echoes research by Sellers and Hunter (2005), which found that 69 percent of the graduate social work students they surveyed (n = 126) indicated that they had a family history of problems relating to substance misuse, mental health difficulties and violence. While not all those who had experienced such difficulties thought this had influenced their career choice, black and ethnic minority students were more likely to report that their family history had influenced their choice of career. Sellers and Hunt also found that black and ethnic minority students tended to report violence and substance misuse in their family of origin somewhat more frequently than the white students. Collins *et al* (2008) undertook a survey of 76 social work students investigating stress, support and well-being. They suggested that a history of family problems could be a contributory factor in their finding that a significant number of social work students in their study reported problems of low self-esteem, emotional exhaustion and psychological distress.

On the whole the black and ethnic minority and, to a lesser extent, the disabled student participants described relatively disadvantaged educational backgrounds. This contrasts with the lesbian, gay and bisexual group that did not mention previous negative experiences of education as affecting their academic confidence or progression on the programme. Black and ethnic minority and disabled participants did not report experiences of high academic achievement and many gave examples of how they had felt marginalised and alienated at school. Others described the challenge of adapting to the British higher education system having been educated abroad. Language differences and difficulties were identified as a key reason given to them as to why academic assignments on their social work programmes did not receive higher grades. A number also reported circumstances in their family of origin that had not supported their educational progression. Although previous research (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification Team, 2008; Holmstrom & Taylor 2008; Hussein *et al*, 2006 & 2008) has been inconclusive about whether previous educational background is a factor contributing to poorer progression in social work education, the findings here suggest that for many of the students we interviewed this was an important factor.

Many of the black and ethnic minority and disabled student participants in this study described negotiating multiple intersecting disadvantages. While differences in educational qualifications alone may not account for the lower progression rates experienced by these groups, the interaction between these disadvantaging factors could help to explain the barriers to progression that they face. Although not all of

the black and ethnic minority and disabled students experienced one or more of these barriers, a substantial number did. The group of students who identified that they were both dyslexic and from a black and ethnic minority background seemed to face particular challenges. For students with difficult personal histories, entry onto a social work programme may evoke painful memories, which could, in turn, impact on their progression. Similarly the feelings of exclusion, marginality and oppression associated with education described by a number of the participants may re-emerge on entry to university, possibly creating barriers to their participation. All of these factors evidently affect the amount and type of support that students need to enable them to engage with the requirements of social work training and education.

There were no significant differences between the different sample sites in terms of the accounts by black and ethnic minority and disabled student participants of previous personal or educational experiences. This included site A where progression rates for black and ethnic minority students were better than for their white counterparts. In fact, in this site, participants spoke about some very challenging personal circumstances that they had to overcome in order to get into university. This suggests that, if our participants are representative of the whole body of students, the make-up of the student group may not fully account for the different progression rates across the study sites. It could be, therefore, that factors such as the ways that students are taught, assessed and supported both in the university and in their practice learning may also be contributing to the differential progression rates. The following chapters explore these areas.

Chapter 4: The University Learning Environment

4.1 Summary

This chapter draws on data from student participants to examine the findings in relation to the factors that had an impact on the university learning environment for students. The findings suggest that there are some overt and subtle processes at play for black and ethnic minority students, disabled students and lesbian, gay and bisexual students that affect their overall learning experience. Many participants in our sample reported feeling that they were not in a supportive learning culture, which greatly framed their experiences in the learning environment. Some participants felt that their sense of invisibility and devaluation was reinforced by the way that diversity issues in the curriculum and classroom environment were addressed on their programmes. Whilst there were some common experiences of feeling devalued and marginalised across all three samples of students, there were nevertheless distinctive differences in the way such aspects were manifested in the learning environment.

4.2 Key Findings

Students reported positively on the benefits of a range of learning resources provided by the virtual learning environment in their HEIs, which helped them to engage more effectively in their training. These included being able to download lectures notes and handouts in a format of their choice and with sufficient time to prepare for the relevant lecture. Students on undergraduate programmes reported that their previous educational backgrounds and experiences had a major impact on how equipped they felt to participate in the learning environment.

The black and ethnic minority students, as well as lesbian, gay and bisexual students reported that equality and diversity issues did not permeate the curriculum. Black and ethnic minority students expressed concerns that the life experiences they brought to their programmes were not valued, which had an impact on their self-confidence and affected their overall learning experiences.

In one site, the black and ethnic minority students reported positively about the role played by a black member of the teaching staff in empowering them to organise in a learning support group. This was highlighted as significant in facilitating mutual support and enhancing their coping strategies.

Views differed among the lesbian, gay and bisexual students on issues about invisibility and devaluation in the learning environment. While some were broadly satisfied by their programmes others reported learning environments where heterosexism was endemic.

Disabled students with 'hidden' impairments or health problems reported being reluctant to declare that they had particular support needs in the learning environment, to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Students from sites with large cohorts of students report largely negative experiences about being taught in big groups. In particular, they stressed that the size of the learning group reduced contact time with tutors. It also significantly affected the inter-relational dynamics in cohorts and contributed to feelings of being unsupported.

4.3 Scope of the chapter

This chapter considers two sets of factors that participants identified that had an influence on the learning environment. The first of these related to the teaching and learning environment, and the second the size and profile of the learning or student group. Whilst some of these issues were concerns for all students the particularities for each group are drawn out to highlight the differential impact of the learning environment for our sample groups of students.

4.4 Teaching, learning and assessment strategies

In some sites participants were very positive about how the use of a variety of teaching methods and learning tools facilitated their learning and interaction in the classroom. In particular, participants highlighted the positive benefits of a range of learning resources provided on the virtual learning environment and online forums in their HEIs that they could utilise to enhance their learning and enable them to engage more effectively in the learning environment. For example, they felt that being able to access lecturers' material on line before sessions greatly assisted their learning and enabled them to engage with the classroom session in more depth. Participants identified the importance of being provided with a coherent overview of their course structure so that they could understand the relationship between different elements of their programmes

In particular, the participants on undergraduate programmes from all the sites identified how their previous educational backgrounds and experiences contributed to how equipped they felt for engaging with the learning opportunities provided. Some highlighted their difficulties with coping with the academic workload, which meant they struggled to engage in an effective way in the learning environment. This created high stress levels:

It would be better if we had a range of ways of teaching and easy access to tutors. It would be good to know who to speak to, if I was struggling with an assignment. (Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

This student's experience may not be unusual. Several research studies of students' transitions into higher education identified that some non-traditional entrants may have a more difficult time adjusting to study in high education, and understanding what is required of them, particularly in the context of a programme with academic and professional requirements (Cree *et al*, 2009; Christie, *et al*, 2008; Dumbleton *et al*, 2008; Heron, 2010; Murphy, 2009; Worsley *et al*, 2009).

The extent to which the curriculum and the teaching and learning strategies employed to deliver the curriculum reflected equality and diversity issues was a major issue for some the black and ethnic minority students, as well as lesbian, gay and bisexual students. Whilst in some sites participants appeared satisfied that the curriculum did sufficiently address diversity issues, others reported less satisfaction in this area. One participant remarked:

The teaching team is quite diverse and the fact that they get different people from different sectors come in and give us lectures.... so it is actually a wide network that we are exposed to which is quite helpful

and all the lecturers have been very respectful of us. Some of them have been quite accommodating and some have been quite difficult in the sense that they have got a method of working and that's the way they want to keep it but they do try and facilitate where they can. (Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

There was a range of views expressed about the assessment processes. A number of participants in some sites reported positively about the guidance and support given on their programmes. However, a significant number of participants reported feeling unclear about assessment expectations on their programmes, and stressed that much depends on the individual lecturer teaching the module, and in particular, how approachable they were to answer any questions. For many participants it was the contact with tutors that was particularly valued. However, gaining access to tutors on a regular basis was more of a problem for those students on programmes with very large intake of students.

In some sites, participants expressed disquiet about the lack of anonymous marking. Some black and ethnic minority participants in particular, reported feeling fearful about raising concerns about the assessment processes; some participants expressed their fears that there would be a backlash were they to voice any disquiet in public. For example, some black students' perceptions were that their academic work would be marked down because of their race. Whilst it may be tempting to dismiss this as irrational, it is necessary to situate students' perceptions within the structure of power relationships to understand how this may cause some students to harbour such fears and adopt a stance of restraint ('not rocking the boat').

In terms of feedback on assignments a number of participants stressed that much depends on the individual markers and reported a lack of consistency between teaching staff. The concerns raised by students in this study correlate with others' findings that a major source of students' dissatisfaction with their courses concerns assessment and feedback (Heron, 2010).

Black and Ethnic Minority Students

A wider range of approaches to teaching and learning with more opportunity for dialogue in small groups and improved access to tutors were identified by black and ethnic minority participants as something of which they would like to see more. In particular, many of the black and ethnic minority participants reported high levels of dissatisfaction in this area, and cited the prevalence of a Eurocentric perspective of the curriculum as a major negative factor. Here the participants were referring to a knowledge base of social work that is predicated on western values that undervalue or pathologises black experiences and perspectives (Hall, 2005; Robinson, 1995). They reported feeling that a Eurocentric focus did not promote inclusiveness and they felt excluded in the classroom thus reinforcing their sense of marginalisation. Participants from some sites reported that there were huge disparities between the different lecturers and often initiatives rested upon the commitment of individual lecturers rather than a collective approach. Most importantly, there was a feeling that the richness of the life experiences they brought to their programmes was not valued. This had an impact on their self-confidence and affected the learning experience for them and led to high levels of discontent. Common themes included

how well the curriculum prepared all students for working in multi-racial and distinctive communities, and a Eurocentric focus of the curriculum. The following observations were made by participants from three sites:

Everything is taken from the white man's perspective and I am used to that now. I know I am different. I am brown and I know that I have to prove myself again and again to the world. (Site A, individual interview, black and ethnic minority student).

Well they try but it's just the way even the books are written, you know, everything is very white. The theories are quite white. I mean obviously having come from a different country, when I'm being taught I'm thinking no, I know it's written in the book but I don't think so. (Site D, individual interview black and ethnic minority student).

Most of the modules are really based on Eurocentric ideals and whilst there is some element that does prepare you it is not consistent across the module then I don't think it does. (Site E, individual interview black and ethnic minority student).

The nuances of race in the learning environment manifested itself in myriad ways. For example, there appeared to be reluctance on the part of some black and Asian students to be direct about race. However, there was evidence in the data to illuminate how the subtleties of race significantly affected how black and ethnic minority students interacted in the classroom and the overall quality of their experience on the programmes. A number of participants across all the sites described a form of 'segregation' taking place in the classroom; whereby students tended to occupy the physical space in the classroom around racial lines.

One participant made this point:

What tends to happen, and I am not sure as to why it happens... people group together for support, I understand that bit, but what happens in class is, you find that a certain group of people will sit together and they bounce off each other but not in a positive way. It tends to be being a bit loud or chatting nonsense as far as I can see. And they sit at the back. Why don't you sit at the front and get on with what you are doing, that sort of thing. You've got a slight element of that, and I think it's a shame. (Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Whilst another participant offered this reflection:

People come to the classroom..... white sit with white, black with black. It's very rare to see white and black. Although the course is very diverse but I don't think in people's minds, because when it comes to the class white people at the back and black people at the front. And I used to complain, I did complain to one of my tutors last year and I

said what is it and sometimes when you go there before some of the white people and sit at the back when they come they will go and sit at the front. (Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Essentially this did not promote inclusion, and significantly influenced the nature and quality of the relationship between students, and was a barrier to respectful engagement in the classroom environment. Some participants reported that they avoided discussions in the classroom altogether, particularly where it concerned issues to do with values and beliefs.

One participant gave this example:

There is, I think you feel the difference that, you know, this group wants to stay with themselves and this group wants to stay with themselves, and sometimes when questions are raised in class and say somebody answers it from the different colour group and it's sort of a sensitive one, then you see a different reaction from the other groups. So you can feel there is that tension, and sometimes even when you want to give a valid answer but you feel that it's a cultural or racial sensitive one you just feel perhaps it's not a good idea to touch on that so. (Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Whilst another offered this solution:

I think it's something beyond the course. It should be that all people, white, brown and black should be made to mix compulsory. Like a compulsory out of hours social things. If people don't mix then there won't be an opportunity to have a positive learning environment. (Site A, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

In the above instances the students saw the 'segregation' in the classroom as creating a disempowering rather than a liberating learning space (Sandoval, 2000).

For a number of the black and ethnic minority participants the racial composition of the staff group was a major influence on the overall learning environment and learning experience for them:

Somebody that is from your culture and understands what kinds of things you have been through, what kind of things your family expect from you because I don't think we have, I mean we've got an Asian tutor but I've never really spoken with him. I think if we were to have a Muslim lecturer or somebody here to help us with the cultural side of things and helps us with the course that would be really good. Because I think that would definitely help me. (Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Do you know what I do think is unfair? I think we need more black lecturers, and I think what I've noticed is there is the white

students' relationship with the lecturers. You kind of see their relationships with the white students kind of building, and with us I don't think you see that as much, but I think that's within the Uni, there's nothing we can do about that. (Site F, focus group black and ethnic minority student)

Some black and ethnic minority students had a different, if somewhat higher expectation of black staff, and if this was not lived up to they felt let down. This extract from one participant in a focus group illustrates this point:

I don't know about anybody else but... there are black lecturers but I feel black lecturers are worse than white lecturers. I think they can be more... arrogant and rude, I don't know what anybody else is feeling? I don't know... with black lecturers you expect to have more respect, and you thought that they are gonna be cool and you thought they are gonna be reasonable. Well, some of them turned out to be the worst. It is not a colour thing, it is not a colour thing! (Site C, focus group black and ethnic minority student)

Viewed from the vantage point of students it is worth considering why some black students may have higher expectations of black academics. However, it is possible that the ethnic hierarchy in HEIs, particular in terms of staffing, as referred to by Modood & Acland (1998), means that some black academics have expectations placed on them to do the emotional work with black students, and therefore are more likely to be a target for criticism.

Importantly, for a number of the black and ethnic minority participants the make-up of the staff group was also a major influence on the overall learning environment. Whilst some participants were more hesitant in voicing that it was largely a white staff group teaching on their programmes, others were much more explicit in naming this as a major factor that affected how they experienced the learning environment:

It was good to have a tutor as a black role model - that was very inspiring as they were someone we could talk to. (Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

It is the same yeah she is the only who does advocate real social work in terms of bringing down the barriers. I mean these are people – our white counterparts, we are all training to be social workers and we don't have a choice in terms of who we serve but it seems like the majority of them do have a choice in whom they serve and they don't want to be dealing with issues with people that are black or whatever which they seem to distance themselves from and you know when it is brought up they get a shut down mechanism. (Site E, focus group interview black and ethnic minority student)

An important source of support for the black and ethnic minority participants in one site was the input provided by a black member of the teaching staff in helping them to explore their learning experiences through the lens of race, and who, in particular,

acknowledged and valued the experiences and perspectives they were bringing. This, they described as empowering and contributing in a positive way to facilitating mutual support, as well as helping them to develop their professional identities as social workers from black and ethnic minority backgrounds.

This participant made the following observation:

I think first and foremost she is a very effective role model and she is says it constantly when you are doing child protection and when you are doing other sorts of work you know we are not looking for popularity we are looking to work effectively and if we do work effectively they at least respect us for what we have done and this is why she is a very good role model for us because we want to be like her. So it does have a very big impact. (Site E, focus group interview black and ethnic minority student)

Another participant in the same site offered this observation:

Yeah she is the lone ranger. I think she tries to support the black and ethnic [minority students]. She deals with it and she is the one to raise it on our behalf and I think by doing that she is being scapegoated herself and gets herself into trouble because she is trying to speak out for us.....Some of the white students completely shut down in class as soon as she starts speaking because she has always got sort of her black hat on.She will challenge people's stereotypes which makes them uncomfortable, and it is what she should be doing..... because everyone sort of knows what she is like but they just completely shut down. (Site E, focus group interview black and ethnic minority student)

Greater diversity within the staff group and within study groups was also seen as something that would improve engagement and build more of a sense of a learning community. Participants also suggested lecturers should take more of an active role in disrupting the homogeneity of self-selected groups as they valued learning from older students and those with more professional experience. The diversity of the student group was valued and contributed to the overall learning experience and environment.

The accounts of these participants echo what has been highlighted in the literature on students' experiences of the learning environment. For example, as Moriarty *et al* (2009) noted, social work educators needed to pay attention to the ways the changing profile of social work students may affect the inter-relational dynamics in cohorts and have implications for the learning environment. Similarly, Modood & Acland (1998) found that black students' experiences in higher education are often tainted by feelings of alienation and these significantly shape the way they manage and cope in the learning environment.

Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Students

The extent to which the curriculum reflected the life experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people was a major factor for this group of participants. Almost all the participants from this sample of students reported levels of dissatisfaction in this area. Common themes emerging for this group of students were issues concerning their visibility and the perception that there was a hierarchy of oppressions; “with lesbian, gay, and transgender issues being at the bottom”. One participant described this as “a hierarchy of acceptability”, and went on to make this observation:

*I mean I also think then there's a problem because this happened in the first year and I did say at the time that first year students need the opportunity to question and be challenged about their views and what they think about these things. There has to be a period of time when say a social work student, or a trainee social worker can go through that kind of period of being challenged and re-thinking some of those values. But at what point do you say no longer is that acceptable and if you still believe that or are prepared to spout that sort of discriminatory language you shouldn't be on this course and I think that's a difficult question to answer. **(Lesbian, gay and bisexual focus group)***

In relation to the hiding of sexuality the following extract captures the dynamics underlying students' experiences:

*There were some people that were on the course that were..... absolutely adamant that I go out of my way to advertise my sexuality.... a total projection onto me that I would always be the one to raise issues of sexuality. **(Lesbian, gay and bisexual focus group)***

The above extract serves to illustrate, some of the risks for students of “coming out” on their programmes.

Some participants reported feeling that this lack of presence in the curriculum did not promote inclusiveness, and noted that they felt alienated in the classroom, thus heightening either a sense of invisibility or hypervisibility, which had an impact on their self-confidence and ultimately affected the learning experience for them. Participants specifically emphasised assumptions held by students and staff, namely that the student body was presumed to be heterosexual, which had a major bearing on their capacity to be open about their sexual orientation. Participants felt their curriculum did not sufficiently promote inclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual issues and as a result there was not an atmosphere of mutual respect in the classroom. The main message illuminated here was that attitudes of heterosexism significantly affected their participation and engagement in the classroom as it was difficult for them to feel like valued individuals in a learning environment where they were held in low esteem and their experiences were rendered invisible.

This participant commented:

*I'm quite confident in my day-to-day life but in university I don't think I am. I can be quite unconfident sometimes particularly if I'm feeling or knowing that I'm the only gay person in the group I can still feel quite unconfident and quite self aware of in terms of not wanting to be the one to raise the issue of sexuality. I'm very conscious that I don't want to look like the militant lesbian. **(Lesbian, gay and bisexual focus group)***

Another participant made this point:

*I mean only close friends knew that I am bisexual. It was never an issue so it didn't need to be discussed. **(Lesbian, gay and bisexual individual interview)***

One of the two black female participants who identified as lesbian also reported how aspects of her identity intersected to heighten her sense of invisibility in the learning group:

*Because they made an assumption about me having a boyfriend or something, or talking about something, and I said well, first golden rule, number one for anybody, is never make any assumptions. And I felt comfortable in letting them know. And I don't know whether that's because they're all white and quite liberal. That's probably why. Because if anybody else had done it, because I hate it sometimes when we're all in big discussion around lunch or something and they're talking about this, that and the other and I said, I mean I think that there was the topic of marriage at one stage and I was just like [whistles] oh I just need to go to the loo - because I don't want to be put on the spot **(Lesbian, gay and bisexual individual interview)***

The same participant continued:

*I have visions of graduation day actually turning around and saying, I hope you know all this time that you've been studying with me and I'm gay, out and out, but just so you know that you can't judge anybody on the basis of their sexuality... But I feel that there are people that would feel threatened by me if I was to come out. **(Lesbian, gay and bisexual individual interview)***

Some lesbian, gay and bisexual participants drew attention to what they perceived to be a hierarchy of oppressions:

I think maybe particularly in (name of city deleted) where there is, I say a big emphasis on race and culture so erm... It just doesn't feature a lot really at work or in university, in spanning the things we need to be sensitive about it. Race, culture, disability, gendered language are all things across the board. People mention issues of sexuality, its like people still feel quite uncomfortable with it even if

you are not in the presence of gay people it still seems to be like a bit of, a bit of something that is said under the breath you know. (Lesbian, gay and bisexual individual interview)

In their accounts participants described situations where some of their fellow students were quite openly hostile towards them because of their sexual orientation, and justified such behaviour because of their personal beliefs. They also reported that students with homophobic viewpoints did not get challenged sufficiently by the teaching staff or other students, thus failing to provide them with learning opportunities for exploring some of their beliefs in the context of social work values. This finding is supported by theoretical discussions and empirical findings (see, for example, Gates, 2010; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Valentine *et al*, 2009; and Van den Bergh & Crisp, 2004) that highlight how heterosexual privilege and homophobia pervade the learning environment.

Two participants in a focus group reported these experiences:

The other point that I made was that if there had been someone in that room stating equally offensive remarks about race or gender that person would have been removed from that course and the issue for me was that what they were doing was by not responding in the same way was creating a hierarchy of you know minorities. (Lesbian, gay and bisexual focus group)

I was just going to say exactly the same thing happened to me and it was about religious views and that kind of challenge with that sort of traditional values. I found that the lecturer didn't know what to do because it was two minoritieschallenging one another. (Lesbian, gay and bisexual focus group)

The major criticism coming from this group of students is that the teaching staff largely failed to create a positive learning environment where students can explore their personal beliefs and values as it may conflict with the core values of social work. This finding is consistent with the findings of other research (e.g. Messinger, 2004; Morrow, 2006; Satterly, 2007). What is clearly highlighted is that this group of students feel stigmatised and it becomes easy to see how they may feel they are not afforded the same rights and respect as other students. For example, with one notable exception, although key informants stressed the importance they placed on the inclusion of equality and diversity issues in the curriculum, they had little specific to say about how lesbian, gay and bisexual issues were addressed in the learning environment.

Disabled Students

The marginalised position of disabled students in the classroom was a notable factor in terms of presenting barriers in the learning environment. In particular, the negative attitudes of other students on the course were said to have the effect of some disabled students not declaring their additional support needs in the classroom because they felt it would draw attention to themselves.

One student with mobility impairments reflected:

I didn't really think there was a lot they could do. With dyslexia and stuff obviously there is things they can perhaps do, maybe with the handouts and things like that, but with me it's a different type of thing altogether. I wouldn't get any, I didn't want to be singled out as having like different chairs or anything either, I think that was another thing. You don't necessarily want to draw attention to it, you want to just manage. And that's a big thing with a lot of, you don't want, you just want to manage. (Site D, individual interview disabled student)

Stigma and feeling excluded because of their disability were major themes in the disabled participants' narratives. One participant had this to say:

There were incidents where you do feel a bit excluded I suppose as well, because you can't always keep with up everybody else. (Site D, individual interview disabled student)

Whilst for another:

You don't want to be sort of seen as a special group but just sort of little allowances made and such as the support plan being a bit more, it's very comprehensive but a bit more used. Because I think the having to go the doctors for letters all the time is, one it is, I don't know, it's costly but two is I think it's a bit of overkill. (Site D, individual interview disabled student)

Some participants with hidden impairments or health problems reported that they were often reluctant to declare that they had particular support needs in the classroom, to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

For participants with mobility and sensory impairments a number of factors contributed to how students' learning experiences were enhanced or hindered in the learning environment:

I don't think that's just because of my eyesight either it's because it's really hard to find places. I mean I actually only sort of use I think two or three buildings for social work but quite often you have to go to a different room to what we've been to previously and it's not just me that struggles. Everyone does. So yeah it's spread out quite a lot. (Site B, individual interview disabled student)

For example, another student with a hearing impairment commented:

At the moment I have two hearing aids which I wear at home, but I found at Uni the noise was overpowering because of the large groups and because of the people constantly talking, so it was more of a hindrance. But it's lovely because it's so quiet here, there's just a room with three of us in so for me that's lovely. But there it was just horrendous because of the group size. It's like too overpowering for me. (Site C, individual interview disabled student)

Another participant with a hearing impairment described her experience:

*I wasn't expecting specialised treatment, but I was expecting support I didn't realise the course was going to involve so many students, because there was 146 of us, so it's a big lecture hall where my main communication is either through lip reading or one to one. So for me I was overwhelmed when I first got there. I always tried to go half an hour earlier than the lecture starts so I can sit at the front. My first lectures I was really struggling because it was so noisy I couldn't hear. The lecturer, even though I sat at the front, would walk around so I'd miss the plot, so I missed big chunks of lectures, and it was purely I was approaching the lecturers and saying, "Is there anyway you could just stand still, I'm trying to face you, I'm trying to lip read" but you'd tell the lecturers and then within ten minutes they've forgotten and they'd be walking round again. **(Site C, individual interview disabled student)***

One participant described how discriminatory attitudes towards students with disabilities were openly expressed in a teaching session:

*We were required to work in twos to do a role play situation, like one's the service user and one's the interviewer, and there was a, one of the students in front of me and a friend and she said - because we couldn't pick who we wanted, so it was picked out of a hat. So the girl in front of us was paired up with another girl who had a disability, she was wheelchair bound, and she said something along the lines of, you know, I can't believe I'm working with, you know, wheelie, or something to that effect, you know, and I just looked at my friend and I couldn't believe what I heard what she was saying, I'm thinking what are you doing on this course if you've got views like that? **(Site A, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)***

One key informant with a hidden or unseen health condition highlighted his experience of discriminatory and disabling attitudes across the sector, which left him reluctant to declare his particular needs:

*Well I know the institution so I don't declare it, because you have to have confidence in the institution and you've got to and there is an issue of trust and it is interesting. I mean mine is diabetes so you can't tell normally until I fall over at lunch-time. **(Site D, key informant interview senior manager)***

That this key informant would be reluctant to publicly disclose his health status is a telling comment about the institutional environment in which he was working and the students were studying.

To summarise, the above examples highlight the kinds of oppressive behaviours disabled students may sometimes encounter in the classroom which make them feel invisible and undervalued. This finding is consistent with other studies (e.g. Holley & Steiner, 2005; Smith, Foley & Chaney, 2008). As is most clearly illustrated there are

numerous challenges for disabled students in achieving an enabling context for learning. Participants highlighted the shortcomings they had encountered and wanted improved provision, and above all better communication and co-ordination between different parts of the institutions, to address what they experienced as a gap between equal diversity policy statements and practice.

4.5 The Profile and Size of the Learning Group

Two key issues emerge here that are important for understanding how the profile and size of the learning group hindered active participation in the learning environment: the age range of students on the programme; and the size of the learning group.

Age

Some participants reported that the age range of the student cohort overall (a large number school leavers in some sites) had a significant influence on the learning environment and described the classroom environment as being two camps; the young students on one side and the mature students (aged 25+) on the other side. For some of the case study sites the main message illuminated here was how this affected the quality and nature of the teaching; according to participants the teaching had to be pitched at too many different levels.

One participant had this to say:

More diversity in terms of the age range in groups, because often the young people get stuck together, and don't have the benefit of those with experience. (Site C, individual interview disabled student)

Whilst another student gave this more detailed account:

Yeah, it affects us a lot because there's been several comments made by the students, by the older mature students saying that - how, I don't think they will get through, it's too tough for them. And because they got more life experiences they're more aware of things and knowing how to interact with people more, they know, they're a bit more stronger and have more experience of life basically. (Site H, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Another participant made this observation:

I think if it was happening to me on placement if it was something that I feel I couldn't manage I think I would be confident enough because of my age and because of my experience, because of my family background I think I would be quite happy to go in and see somebody and you know but I think if it was someone younger...I don't think the university is set up well enough for that you know what I mean. I think they need, I think with all the students especially the younger ones I think they need to be more proactive, they need to be phoning people, they are relying on people to phone them if there's

a problem. (Site B, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Ultimately, for a number of participants, the issue of the age range combined with the size of the learning group was a barrier to any meaningful discussions in the classroom, particular where it concerned sensitive issues that brought into question students' values and beliefs. This they felt hindered their learning and placed them at a disadvantage.

Another participant made this observation:

Yeah, I say, well it depends on the individual. If you're an 18 year old just doing a degree for the sake of it, and getting into social work and really have no passion for it, then it will affect you because the degree demands a lot from and expects a lot from you. And being 18, maybe I'm being judgemental but you don't really have.... well maybe there's not much experience of life. (Site H, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Whilst for this participant:

See you have to kind of fight to get your word in and stuff like that it does happen. And I don't know maybe it might not be because I'm Black or whatever. I mean I feel discriminated because I'm young all the time anyway because I'm like one of the youngest people on the course. (Site B, focus group black and ethnic minority student)

A black disabled participant had this to say about how age impacted her participation in the learning environment:

I would say that age has helped me really, just because I wasn't ready for and you know for all the little, I suppose little embarrassments as a younger person, I probably wouldn't have had the confidence to say well actually yeah I do need a chair and table so that's that. But I suppose with age you get used to being embarrassed about things and just sort of get on with it and also sort of not giving up. I would probably have given up a lot easier. (Site D, individual interview disabled student)

In terms of age, several participants on undergraduate programmes perceived negative effects of the younger students' presence in the learning environment, but this may be due to the higher proportion of mature students who formed the great majority of the students in our sample. Thus, as the proportion of younger students in the sample was small, the data are insufficient to get a more balanced view of their impact on the learning environment. It is possible that the older students may be undervaluing the life experiences that younger entrants bring to the learning environment, therefore the initial impressions need to be interpreted with some caution. Of note is that key informants highlighted that the younger students tended to have greater difficulties on placement. Nonetheless, as it is a relatively new development (since 2003) to have traditional A-level school leaver entrants on social

work courses, further insights into the impact of a younger group of students on the learning environment may be garnered by future research.

4.6 Size of the Learning Group

Turning now to the size of the learning group, the main points illuminated here, were how large class size inhibited learner-focused approaches and affected the quality of the interaction and participation in the classroom. A major criticism raised by participants from the sites with large cohorts of students is that they were mainly taught in large group lecture forums and had fewer opportunities to work in small groups to discuss the impact of their own as well as their fellow students' values and beliefs on the learning environment. Essentially, they reported that they needed more small groups where they could explore and manage the sensitive and complex issues that can arise when personal beliefs and value orientations are brought to the fore in a diverse classroom environment.

For some participants the size of the group was a major factor in the quality of the interaction in the learning environment:

I think class sizes could be smaller. The huge class size doesn't help. Even if the lectures are in large groups, we should break into smaller seminar groups. I felt more supported at the access college and would like more opportunity in groups to have discussions. (Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

The large size of the cohort seemed to add to feelings of anonymity and confusion about whom to approach regarding difficulties with assignments. Participants reported that essentially, the size of the learning group militated against having closer relationships with tutors and fellow students and feeling supported within their programmes.

4.7 Summary and discussion

How do the findings that have been highlighted in this chapter relate to progression? Although we cannot say with certainty that the experiences highlighted here in themselves will lead to poor progression outcomes, nevertheless, it is probable that they are important factors to consider for understanding how they might compound the problems that face students from disadvantaged groups. As has been highlighted above, there are multiple factors that interact for students in the learning environment, such as: how different dimensions of oppression are reinforced; being rendered invisible; and being made to feel devalued and marginalised by the lack of attention in the curriculum to the diversity of experiences. Arguably, the interplay of these factors operate to place additional pressures on students in terms of the impediments they have to overcome in the HEI learning environment to be competent and motivated learners. This inevitably raises questions about the level and quality of support given to students on their programmes. Other research has highlighted what can appear to be a disjuncture between students and social work educators' perception about the nature of support (Cree *et al* 2009; Worsley *et al*, 2009). In sum, the accounts provided by the participants can help us identify ways in

which the issues raised in the learning environment are exacerbating factors in shaping the overall learning experience of the students.

A key finding is that particularly on the programmes with large intakes of students the practical and emotional support that some students need to navigate the challenges they face in the learning environment is often not available. Whilst for others, how they make time to use the support available posed a major challenge because they had so many competing priorities (these issues are addressed in more depth in chapters three and six). That said, it is testimony to the resilience of those students who are succeeding, despite the obstacles they encounter. It is perhaps not surprising that, for some students, their inner resources of believing in themselves and recognising their strengths played a key role in how they developed coping strategies to manage the demands on them in the learning environment to achieve their potential. One explanation for why some students are succeeding against the odds could be about how resourceful they need to be to engage effectively in the learning environment. There is much we can learn from the insights of Mirza (2009) on the ways marginalised groups utilise positive strategies in a negative environment and challenge us to develop a more nuanced multi-factorial understanding of non-traditional students' responses to the obstacles they face in their aspirations to succeed in higher education.

Chapter 5: The Practice Learning Environment

5.1 Summary

This chapter draws on data from the student participants and from interviews with key informants responsible for managing, organising or supporting practice learning. It examines factors influencing the delivery of practice learning and students' experiences, and considers the potential impact of this on the progression of the three groups of students in the study.

5.2 Key findings

- Key informant and student participants described institutional processes, such as local practice forums and tutor involvement, that helped deliver high quality placements and supported all students.
- However, key informants highlighted the challenges of providing appropriate practice learning opportunities for all of their students. In one site late starts appeared to be relatively commonplace. There was a suggestion in this site that it might be more difficult to place some black and ethnic minority students, but due to the individualised nature of placement allocation processes it was not possible to establish how far this was true in this or any other site.
- Key informants suggested that some disabled students may be more difficult to find placements for, either because of disabling attitudes amongst placement providers or providers' limited capacity to meet particular students' requirements. Nonetheless, key informant and student participants reported many examples of placement providers and HEIs working together well to deliver reasonable adjustments for disabled students.
- Although most disabled student participants reported that their practice assessors were supportive, some barriers regarding the transfer of disability services such as dyslexia support, technical difficulties with equipment, transport arrangements, placement hours and timing, and confidentiality requirements were highlighted.
- Some key informants recognised that black and ethnic minority students may face particular challenges on placement. Black and ethnic minority students in practice placements in predominantly white areas commonly reported experiences of racism: being subject to stereotypes; differential expectations from practice assessors; prejudicial attitudes from service users and discriminatory social work and recruitment practices in the placement agencies.
- The data highlight that HEIs and placements providers had given little specific attention to developing anti-heterosexist practice education. Lesbian, gay and bisexual students' experiences were mixed: some reported positive experiences whereas others gave examples of open or more covert homophobia.

5.3 Scope of chapter

A number of general points about the organisation and provision of practice learning opportunities are examined. Factors that could impact on student progression rates include whether placements start and finish on time, the suitability of the placement for the individual student, the quality of the practice assessment and the commitment of the agency as a whole to student practice learning. Although these factors apply to all students as well as those groups in our study, it is possible that black and ethnic minority and disabled students could be affected in different ways by problems in the supply of good quality practice learning opportunities. Specific issues affecting the three groups in the study are examined. For disabled students factors that inhibited or facilitated the provision of accessible practice learning and assessment opportunities were important. For black and ethnic minority students the different experiences of students who had been placed in predominantly white areas or agencies compared to those in multiracial areas appeared to be particularly significant. In the main, there was a lack of awareness by key informants of the specific experiences of lesbian, gay or bisexual students, though some of the student participants in this group had important things to say about these.

5.4 General factors

In some sites, particularly A, B, E and F, key informants described positive partnerships with local authorities and other stakeholders, which enabled effective planning and provision of placements. They thought that local and regional forums where placement providers and HEIs could discuss the management of the whole placement process were crucial. Where these were in place, the programmes were in a better position to secure sufficient good quality placements for all their students. Strong personal relationships with practice assessors were also considered to be important. One HEI included a students' charter outlining their rights and responsibilities in the programme handbook. One key informant reported that they quality controlled all placements and would only place a black and ethnic minority student in an agency that could work positively with such a student.

The contribution of programme tutors in meeting with practice assessors to establish a climate where students are taught and assessed fairly was stressed. Tutors, in their role as chair, were responsible for raising any issues that might affect a student's learning. This could include childcare needs, support of students who have English as an additional language, disability support requirements, and an acknowledgement of socio-economic factors, such as 'race' and ethnicity, that may affect the student experience. One key informant gave an example of how he had supported a student to manage feelings that had been evoked during her time in a mental health placement. By offering the student a space to talk through her anxieties he was able to reassure her and encourage her to make use of counselling support.

Key informants from practice learning agencies also gave examples of good practice. This included the provision of student groups, support and training to practice assessors, and the employment of specialist staff to manage and support placement development. They also stressed the importance of laying the groundwork with students and practice assessors about power differentials, expectations and roles, specifically within the placement agreement. Groups for black and ethnic minority

and gay and lesbian staff that were also available to students on placement were also mentioned as a potential resource.

Student participants from all three groups gave positive examples of practice learning. The things they valued most were: practical and efficient support from practice assessors; a good range of learning opportunities including a chance to learn from examples of good social work practice; awareness by the practice assessor of their personal and cultural needs; fair and transparent assessment processes; regular supervision; and support to integrate theory and practice. One had this to say:

I have had a fantastic practice teacher, she has been very supportive as has the whole team. I have been able to learn from her feedback. I thought I might have found that difficult as I have been doing the job so long, but it has been great because there are always different ways of doing things and I can go back and talk to her. I was given an in-depth induction; cases were given to me on a step-by-step basis. I was used to a big caseload but this really enabled me to think about what I was doing, to apply theory. Now I can handle more complex cases, but at every stage I can ask if I'm unsure of something. (Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Some participants gave examples of how their needs had been taken into account in matching them with placements, for example one said that her placement was only five minutes away from her son's school.

Student participants' views regarding support from university staff while they were on placement were more or less equally balanced between positive and negative comments. Email contact with tutors and their attendance at placement meetings were highly valued by some student participants. Support in preparing their portfolios and in managing their workload was also perceived to be helpful. However, some students did not find their tutors helpful, citing instances where they felt tutors had been insensitive, arrogant or absent. Student participants across a number of sites thought that they had not had sufficient preparation for their placement, had been informed of their placement very late and had not been helped by the HEI staff to prepare their portfolio. Some felt that there was a lack of clarity about what the tutor's role was while they were on placement, whilst others thought strongly that the second placement meeting should be face-to-face, as sometimes this was just done by email or phone.

However, key informants acknowledged the formidable difficulties for HEIs in maintaining consistency and quality control over the whole range of placement settings. Placement scarcities and competition between HEIs for placements were a critical factor in a number of sites. In site C in particular, late starts seemed to be commonplace. All groups of participants reported that late matching of placements was stressful. Sometimes they described having to wait a long time to be allocated a placement, and that there was a lack of support and information from the university when they were waiting. This even seemed to be the case in sites A & B where key informants felt that placement finding and matching processes went well and where

progression rates were better, though this was less pronounced. Some students reported that they thought HEIs took a lack of care in placing students:

I think we're just chucked in to whatever placements are left. (Site D, focus group black and ethnic minority)

We are paying for this course, so a lot needs to be done to make our learning experience a lot better. (Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

This contrasted with the care given to some employment route students in matching them to their placement. One key informant confirmed that seconded students are given priority in placement allocation (as confirmed by Manthorpe *et al* 2010). The shortage of placements also meant that students' individual requests, for example to develop their skills in a particular area of practice, might not be met.

5.5 Disabled students

Placement finding and matching

In each of the sites key informants described arrangements for finding accessible practice learning and assessment opportunities for disabled students. Programme staff, university staff in the wider institution, and agency staff showed some awareness of the responsibilities of the HEI and the placement provider in this respect. In all sites they reported that disabled students would have had the opportunity to have an assessment to ascertain their specific learning and assessment requirements within the practice learning setting.

However, in some instances awareness was somewhat general and superficial and some key informants seemed to lack detailed understanding of legislative requirements, resources and established good practice. For example, some key informants appeared to be unclear about who was responsible for funding adjustments for disabled students while on placement. None of the key informants referred to Sapey *et al's* (2004) comprehensive guide to practice learning and disabled social work students. One key informant felt that there was a need for further disability awareness for practice assessors and other staff involved in placement development and delivery.

The key factors necessary to support disabled students on placement were identified as: early identification; thorough assessment; and forward planning. Key informants from two sites reported that their programmes were building up a bank of accessible placements for those with mobility impairments. All of the sites noted some successful instances of providing high quality placements to students with different impairments. The responsibility for negotiating adjustments and services usually lay with the programme placement co-coordinator who would typically meet with disabled students to gain a detailed understanding of their access requirements:

For example, I met with a student with glaucoma to work out what would be the most accessible placement, as he has to use public transport. I won't give him a long journey. For one

student we ensured that she got a placement as close as possible to home. (Site E, key informant interview)

In site C, key informants reported that students had a placement action plan, including a dyslexia or mental health plan if relevant, which was shared with placement providers with the student's consent. Staff from the central disability service could be more actively involved in negotiation with placement providers if required. They reported that they could visit at the midway point of the placement to negotiate further adjustments if needed. A new post for a disability support advisor for practice learning had also just been agreed in this site. One agency representative reported that they had good liaison with the dyslexia unit at the university. HEI staff recognised that it was their responsibility to suggest to smaller placement providers how they could make adjustments to accommodate disabled students.

However, despite these positive examples of good practice, some key informants identified that at times placements appeared reluctant to take on disabled students. For example, one key informant from site B stated that some placements seemed to reject students because they were disabled. She thought that you had to be careful about how much you asked for from the outset in case that jeopardised the practice learning opportunity. Another key informant in site C thought 'Lots of places don't necessarily want to take on disabled students.' Sometimes practice assessors – or more commonly their managers – gave what seemed to be somewhat spurious reasons why they could not accommodate a particular student:

With hearing impaired students we had difficulty placing a couple of students – I felt that sometimes agencies were giving other excuses but that they didn't want to cope with special needs. (Site E, key informant interview)

Although it might be easier to find placements for disabled students in social work disability teams, key informants argued that these students should also have access to wider placement opportunities.

Physical barriers were sometimes an obstacle to finding placements for students with mobility impairments. For instance, some of the placements in site F were in smaller voluntary projects that were located in houses that were inaccessible to wheelchair users. In rural areas there could be additional problems of placement accessibility for students with mobility impairments. Another key informant described a situation where a student had some very specific requirements that were difficult to meet in practice. Some key informants reported that although the social work offices were supposed to be Disability Discrimination Act compliant, not all of them were. While access arrangements are being negotiated placement starts can be delayed and students experience stress.

It was acknowledged that large student cohorts added to the challenge of both finding sufficient placements and to meeting the specific requirements of disabled students. Student participants themselves seemed aware that their specific requirements as disabled students could be compromised by a scarcity of placements. One described year two and three placements as like 'gold dust'. Even if the placement was not perfect she could not afford to turn down a placement, as she knew that others were without placements:

I will struggle on and will do my best as long as I'm on placement. (Site C, individual interview disabled student)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, key informants from central disability support services were somewhat more critical of the level of support for disabled students on placement than those from programmes or agencies. These individuals saw themselves as an advocate for disabled students, whereas programme and agency staff described competing priorities relating to preserving budgets and maintaining standards of social work practice. Some key informants described disabling attitudes of placement providers:

There is a 'they're not going to do it' type of attitude and you're like well, why? Why would we put barriers there, let's make reasonable adjustment. So it is about awareness and it is about understanding what's difficult for that person. (Site C, key informant interview)

This key informant acknowledged that some disabled students may have difficulty with spelling or report writing. She argued, however, that different teaching and learning techniques were able to make a difference. For example, dyslexic students may not find a map useful but if they physically accompany someone they will learn where to go. 'Show, don't tell' was her advice. Another key informant queried whether visually impaired students could operate as children and families social workers; there had been an instance where a visually impaired student had been offered a placement, but there had evidently been much debate about whether or not the student should be allowed to work in a setting that involved child protection work. In this instance a sighted assistant had accompanied the student but there was debate about whether this should be acceptable.

A key informant in site A thought that there were negative views from some placement providers towards social work students with mental health impairments. In his view, this had led to a somewhat risk adverse attitude on behalf of placement providers. HEI staff thought that if a student had been accepted on the programme, was registered with the GSCC and there were no obvious concerns about the suitability of the student for social work, then being a mental health service user should not necessarily be a bar to being offered a placement. However, in one instance a key informant reported that a local authority had sent a strongly worded email to demand that a student who was a mental health service user was automatically removed from the programme. In another programme an instance of a student with mental health difficulties who had to have his placement terminated was also cited. A number of key informants thought it would be helpful if the GSCC were to provide more detailed guidance about suitability for social work for those with mental health impairments in order to support programmes to resolve these difficult issues locally.

Key informants also raised issues regarding students' difficulties in acknowledging their needs. In their view, students sometimes thought they would be perceived by practice assessors as having problems rather than needing adjustments and that this

made some students reluctant to disclose. They reported that on occasions students had not followed up what they needed to do to access disability services. Some disabled participants, particularly those that had been recently diagnosed, acknowledged that they did not know what their rights were and felt reluctant to insist on them:

I'm not one of those people who make an issue of it. (Site E, individual interview disabled student)

However, although key informants in all the sites reported that processes were in place to ensure that disabled students were able to access practice learning opportunities, student participants' perceptions were not always congruent with these claims. The extent to which there was congruence between the reports from participants and the accounts given by key informants differed between sites. This may have been a case of the key informants wishing to present a good impression of themselves or of their institution, but in some instances it seems that the resources and processes described had been fairly recently instituted and had not been functioning when the students we spoke to had been on placement.

Responses by placement providers to disabled students

Generally, once in placement disabled student participants were positive about disclosing their impairment.

I brought it up at the beginning of the placement and everything was fitted around me and my needs and could be reviewed – my support on placement was wonderful. *(Site A, focus group disabled student)*

It didn't feel difficult to tell them about the dyslexia. *(Site A, focus group disabled student)*

Many participants had complimentary things to say about individual practice assessors who had been proactive in ensuring that they received the support they needed on placement. Disabled participants appreciated when information about their impairment was only shared with people who needed to know and when practice assessors were flexible, caring and reasonable. Equally other members of the team and team managers were also generally perceived to be helpful:

My practice assessor has been brilliant....I would say I have been treated equally. *(Site B, individual interview disabled student)*

However, experiences were not universally positive. Not all placements had been audited on their suitability for disabled students. One participant believed that her placement provider was only offering a placement for the money she brought, consequently they would be reluctant to spend money or staff resources on making adaptations for her:

I made them aware of my needs at my interview. I had no adjustments on my placement. **(Site F, individual interview disabled student)**

My disability wasn't taken into account in setting up my placement. The onsite supervisor wasn't sympathetic. Financially they don't support me – they probably wouldn't pay to go and have something put on the computer to help me. But I know what they are like with spending money....Because I have been told that I'm there because they get money for me being there. **(Site E, individual interview disabled student)**

Although disabled participants reported generally supportive attitudes towards them by practice learning providers, accounts about how well they were able to access support services on placement were somewhat more mixed. Key informants reported that there are sometimes difficulties in transferring services, with a reduction of support while students are on placement. This then could have a negative knock-on effect on students' confidence and performance. One key barrier is confidentiality. Students may not be allowed to take confidential information away from the placements or, on occasions, to make use of learning support workers in undertaking placement work.

Dyslexia support

Access to support from dyslexia tutors during periods of practice learning was sometimes problematic. Although some were allowed to see a dyslexia tutor so long as it fitted in with other commitments, others reported that they had not been able to access this support at all. This was because practice assessors had not allowed them to use placement time to see their dyslexia tutor and the hours that tutors were available coincided with their time on placement. In some instances university staff had entered into discussions about how and if the student could continue to take up university learning support services whilst on placement, whereas in other cases it appeared that the student was left to negotiate this on their own. Some student participants reported that practice assessors had actively supported them to develop their writing skills, for example by helping them to draft their reports. However one key informant noted that practice assessors are sometimes surprised that they are expected to work with the university to address problems with writing. Some practice assessors feel that it is not their remit and they do not have the time to give feedback on, and to correct, pieces of writing.

Access to equipment and technology

Some participants had been able to install specific software on computer equipment in their placement settings. For example, agency forms had been converted into an accessible format. However, physical environments with high noise levels sometimes meant that use of voice activated computer software was sometimes problematic. In other instances students were not able to transfer their preferred software onto computer equipment in the agency or use their own laptops that had been adapted to meet their requirements.

In-depth 'desk' assessments, which looked at lighting, desk height and computer layout were sometimes provided. However a key informant pointed out that, increasingly, students were being expected to share desks, which could potentially mean that such adaptations would be difficult. Access to telephone equipment for students with hearing impairments or forms of dyslexia that affect aural processing sometimes caused problems. For example, participants reported not being provided with equipment on their disability support plan or having to use their own adapted telephone equipment at their own expense.

Transport and physical access

Some examples of the use of the disability student allowance to enable students to pay for the additional cost of getting to the placement were given. In one instance the disabled student allowance did not cover the extra travel costs of undertaking placement duties so the local authority had to fund the additional costs of the taxis the student needed to use. One key informant reported that they had to be creative to make this happen but the practice learning agency agreed to use the staff development budget:

They had a commitment to make sure that it did work and the student had an excellent placement and it really worked well for her.
(Site B, key informant)

Timing and hours for placement

One issue raised by student participants was the requirement to do a full-time placement.

I would say the full time placements are very difficult... I was informed that the placements would be full time. My condition is up and down. I haven't asked for part time as I know the university would look down on it. I would like to have a contingency plan.
(Site D, individual interview disabled student)

Some students were told that if they took time out of their placement as a result of their condition they would have to repeat the placement. Students felt that this requirement was unfair as if they had been able-bodied and had an accident or period of ill-health they would have been allowed to take time out and then return to placement. In addition there are often extra pressures on disabled students like attendance at hospital appointments. One key informant from a disability support service thought that it would be good if there were a part-time option. Programme staff acknowledged that they required students to have full time placements but said that sometimes they have negotiated that disabled students can have a full day a week at home by enabling students to combine placement study time with undertaking placement tasks that could be done out of the office.

5.6 Black and ethnic minority students

In a number of the sites black and ethnic minority student participants reported practice learning opportunities were offered in agencies staffed predominantly by white people and in geographical areas where ethnic diversity was limited. Although

not all of the student participants thought this had impacted adversely on their experiences of practice learning and assessment, many did. Student participants and key informants did report positive experiences of practice learning for black and ethnic minority students in this situation, however the majority of comments were about the difficulties they faced. This was particularly true in site E. In this site, which did show a disparity in the progression rates of black and white students, key informants were acutely aware of the problem and had attempted to take action to remedy it. Where placements were situated primarily in larger multi-racial cities or conurbations this did not emerge as a major issue.

In the main, key informants showed awareness of the difficulties being articulated by the students, but this did not always reflect how intensely the students felt about the issue. Key informants in site B, C and E speculated that placement difficulties might be contributing, both in their programme and in others, to differences in the progression rates between black and white students. Others, for instance in site F, did not discuss this despite the different progression rates between black and ethnic minority and white students on that programme. One key informant in site B wondered if some students might be experiencing discriminatory experiences that were not being reported to the programme.

Positive experiences of practice learning

Both student participants and key informants acknowledged that many black and ethnic minority students do well on placement. Some participants reported that they felt they had been treated fairly and equally and that their ethnicity had been taken into account when being allocated placements. These positive experiences were reported more frequently when students were placed in agencies that were multi-racial. One HEI reported that some placement agencies, particularly those offering domestic violence services, specifically prefer students from particular ethnic backgrounds to work with those communities. Some student participants felt that sharing common experiences with service users from particular ethnic backgrounds had enabled them to practice social work more effectively with that group.

Some students felt supported by the clear anti-discriminatory policies and complaints procedures in the HEI, and that they had been able to use these to sort out problems they had faced. Examples of good practice and positive learning experiences were given: teams where practice issues relating to racism and cultural diversity were openly debated; teams with diverse multicultural staff groups; practice assessors, some of whom were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds themselves, that acknowledged black and ethnic minority students' experiences and offered support to them in challenging racism. One participant felt that:

The course has helped me along a lot in who I am. I was encouraged to challenge (discriminatory practice) and to report it. The placement had clear policies on equality. **(Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Another student participant described how she had been supported to overcome a personal block to learning through being allocated a specific placement.

I am glad I had the opportunity... to face up to my fears and my emotions. I had to force myself to look back and reflect on myself and look really deep inside. **(Site A, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Placement finding and matching

Key informants acknowledged that all students feel anxiety about practice assessment, however a view was expressed that for black and ethnic minority students there may be additional anxiety. One site had no option but to place students locally as other programmes had the monopoly of placements in the neighbouring and more ethnically diverse metropolitan area. This often meant placing black students in teams where black people are underrepresented. There was a recognition that students do experience overt racism. One HEI in a predominantly white area had undertaken a focus group with some of their black students. Some students were quoted as saying that some agencies 'didn't see further than the colour of my skin.' Students had reported instances of being treated differently such as: being asked to make the tea; not being given the keys to the building although white students had been; and being expected to be the expert on diversity issues. One key informant commented:

Some of the incidents of racism were quite worrying and on one occasion we took it up with the agency because it was so overt and we withdrew from using that as a practice learning opportunity. **(Site G, key informant interview)**

Other key informants acknowledged that there might be difficulties for black and ethnic minority students placed in white areas. However, when matching students there were often more pressing factors to take into account: for example the students' learning needs and whether or not they were a car driver:

We say if we can't meet all your needs choose the key one. **(Site F, key informant interview)**

Some participants described being offered placements where overt racism was prevalent, for example in areas where the British National Party had won seats on the local council. Examples were given of students who had been offered placements in areas where racist incidents such as black people being spat at or physically attacked had occurred. A question was raised by one participant about how far the university was seriously concerned about her, and other black students', safety or whether they were more interested simply with getting students out on placement. Students had different responses to being offered placements in these areas. Some refused to accept them, whereas others appeared to feel it was part of the job:

People were worried about me but I'm in social work I've just got to face it. **(Site D, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

One key informant suggested that individual factors relating to students were contributing to a greater preponderance of placement difficulties or interruptions for black and ethnic minority students. For example, she cited a number of situations in

which black students had left their placement because they were pregnant, who were challenging for or to their practice assessors, or because of CRB difficulties that emerged after the student had been placed. She also went on to explore whether finding placements for black and ethnic minority students was more challenging. Though this was not conclusive she thought that this might be the case:

Black students - I'm not saying they are the last to be placed, but given the proportions of black students on the course, the ones who are struggling are the black. It could be the way they fill out the forms, or the way they present themselves at interview. You are competing with your other colleagues, so you've got to go and do the business. *(Site C, key informant interview)*

What this key informant seemed to be saying was that in situations of placement scarcity black and ethnic minority students may be disadvantaged in placement matching and this could contribute to them being more likely to be allocated their placement late. She suggested that this may arise from them not 'competing' successfully with the white students. This does, however, seem to be an individualistic way of understanding the difficulties black and ethnic minority students may face, seemingly arising from a 'deficit' model of black and ethnic minority students. In contrast, the black and ethnic minority student participants identified that it was discriminatory behaviours and attitudes among practice assessors, other professionals, and service users that contributed to the differences between their experiences and those of their white peers.

Consequences of placement shortages

Black and ethnic minority student participants were acutely aware of the consequences for them of the limited availability of placements. One described it as having to 'put up and shut up'. Others expressed fears that if they did complain or turn down a placement then they would not get a placement at all or get a very late one. Participants described the increased stress and uncertainty that late starts placed on them. For example, having to do a placement in the summer vacation might mean increased childcare costs and the loss of time to be with their children. It might also mean loss of opportunities to work over this period, hence potentially adding to financial stress. Having to complete practice-based assignments over the summer meant that students would have to move straight into the next year of the programme without a break. Given our findings in chapter two regarding the socio-economic pressures facing many black and ethnic minority students it could be that this group of students are disproportionately adversely affected by late starts.

CRB Checks

Some student participants suggested that they were treated differently to their white counterparts in respect of their CRB (Criminal Record Bureau) checks. They thought it was possible that they were scrutinised more closely. An instance was cited where a placement provider seemed to overreact to a situation when the student could not find her copy of the CRB check:

There seems to be a massive emphasis on CRB checks and black students. *(Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)*

Another participant described how it had taken a long time for the university to send off her CRB check. She was told that it was necessary to contact her home country again, despite having had a number of CRB checks since being in this country. However, this took so long she ended up not going to the placement. Other participants raised issues regarding the difficulties for overseas students in providing the information required for CRB checks, as often in their home countries administrative processes were not as formal as they are in the UK. Another concern raised was the potential impact on the safety of refugees if enquiries are made to authorities in their home countries.

Experiences of racism on placements

A number of student participants described different experiences of racism on placement. They identified a range of discriminatory processes including: being subject to derogatory stereotypes and hostility from practice assessors and other staff members; feeling excluded and isolated; being expected to work harder and to be more capable than their white counterparts; being placed in agencies where racist practices were in evidence; and being subject to racist discrimination by service users, and, on occasions not being supported by other staff members in challenging this. One particular theme that a number of students spoke about was their belief that certain accents – particularly African accents – were devalued, and this contributed to negative judgments being made about them by practice assessors and others.

Stereotypes

Student participants reported that they encountered stereotyped negative beliefs about themselves and about other black people, including service users, in different forms. These stereotypes appear to draw on deep-rooted assumptions associated with black people that have been commonly reported in literature about equalities in education in general (Cole, 2006) and in social work practice learning in particular (De Souza 1991; Singh, 2006).

For example, one instance was reported by a participant that as her name did not sound as if she was an 'ethnic person' she thought that staff at the placement were surprised to find she was black:

They saw me and ...it was like hi and their faces all went and their eyes went and it was like hi hi and there was a false façade put on automatically and I know ...I can't prove it but I know. *(Site E, focus group black and ethnic minority student)*

Later she reported that people had made comments to her that suggested she was more mature than they had expected. She wondered:

Did you expect me to come around with a knife or something? Just because I'm from (place name deleted) and you are supposed to have a certain way of speaking and certain way of being. (An) immaturity about me that once they might have seen in other black girls that walked across the road in front of their car. **(Site E, focus group interview black and ethnic minority student)**

One participant reported that things were said about her – for example that she was lazy and that she had an ‘attitude’ – that she perceived to be merely racist stereotypes. Some participants reported that they thought they were always being compared with other black and ethnic minority students, with the implicit assumption that all black students were the same. However one black and ethnic minority participant felt that she had to be careful about making a complaint as she would be labelled as:

A big black woman with an attitude... But by not saying anything you are oppressing yourself but, you know, ultimately we all just want to get this degree and go out and work. **(Site D, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

Another participant was shocked that she had been called coloured. Others felt that their experiences of constant belittling were not recognised and thought that if they expressed high aspirations for their future in social work they would be put down. A view was expressed that expectations of black students were low and when those expectations were exceeded white people would be shocked:

They are really insensitive to all of the negative remarks. If you challenge it is ‘oh you are getting on your black high horse and you are too sensitive’. **(Site E, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

I made the mistake of saying I am a mature student and I want to achieve more, to be a lecturer and since then I have seen that they have tried to bend things and say I am not competent. **(Site E, focus group black and ethnic minority)**

One key informant described black African students in particular as having an ‘aura’. What this seemed to mean is that they tended to stand out both as being different and that they were more likely to be perceived in negative ways. He thought that when black African students had difficulties practice assessors may move into a fail recommendation more quickly.

A frequent observation from student participants was that having an African accent was commented on negatively. For example:

Even more than colour is the accents. Sometimes they would like not to hear what I've said because of my accent.... They are policemen ‘We didn't really understand what you were saying and

that's why we didn't do it this way'. It's really difficult for me. **(Site B, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

One key informant confirmed that some practice assessors comment on accents in their reports.

Exclusion and isolation

A number of student participants recounted being one of very few black members of the organisation – or even of being the only one. This could lead to experiences of isolation, exclusion or hyper-visibility:

It's as if I am non-existent in that room. How does that make you feel, what does that do to your self esteem? Do you not exist? I mean we as practitioners, we are meant to be everything not just to the service users but to one another...it's amazing out there really. **(Site E, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

They just didn't speak to me – the onus was always on me. Once I was being friendly and the person made a complaint that I was being ageist to my practice teacher. She could have said something to me, it seemed like she wanted to make trouble for me. **(Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Exclusion was not only experienced on the grounds of skin colour. One instance was given of being placed in an agency where most of the staff were Urdu speaking. This meant that the student could not participate in the office conversations.

Differential expectations of black students

Participants perceived that being different to the majority of the staff in their placement appeared to have impacted significantly on the amount of help they were offered by colleagues:

We ought to be able to rely on our team members but the first thing is she is not one of us or he is not one of us. So they don't really help us out – they expect us to know things (like local protocols and the name of the person to email or the hospital). **(Site E, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

Some black and ethnic minority participants argued that they had to perform better in order to be recognised as competent. They were adamant that expectations of them were different. What they were describing was not general placement pressure; it was what they felt was the unequal treatment of black students in relation to white students. They had found that many of their white peers reported having lower caseloads and being more protected by their practice assessors. This contrasted sharply with their experiences:

I know students who have had real issues to do with racism in their placements. You work so hard, put so much more effort in, working longer hours perhaps than the white students are doing

and then always having this racism being the factor that gets you.
(Site E, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Reactions from service users

There were instances where black students reported a discriminatory response from service users:

You could see they were staring at me, like I'd dropped from somewhere. **(Site D, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

One service user called me a black bitch. I said I'm here to help you. I am human. I reported it to the manager who said that if he carried on he would have to be banned. **(Site D, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

The service users were predominantly white – some had never interacted with a black person before. By the end people who were shunning me didn't want me to leave. I realized these people were misinformed... when they hear people talk bad about black people, you know a black person was stabbed in London so they tend to think these blacks maybe they tend to do that. **(Site B, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

I was a key worker to someone who looked at me and said I don't really want to work with you, you don't know what you are doing. **(Site D, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

Participants raised particular problems about using the telephone. They pointed out that people's accents are often more pronounced on the phone and that some service users had 'switched off' as a result of their African accent:

You pick up the phone and say hello and that's it, you feel demoralised and left out. They are not looking at the service they are looking at the accent. **(Site B, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

Some students spoke about situations of working with children who had never encountered a black person before. For example, one student recalled that although they initially asked 'funny questions like does this happen in Africa?' and wanted to touch his skin, he was able to form a good relationship with the young people. Even if students did not encounter racism from service users, anxiety and stress arose out of their fear that they might.

Participants thought that sometimes this had been dealt with well and sometimes not. In one instance a participant had been allocated a service user who had been racially abusive in the past. The manager accompanied this student to an interview and the interview had gone well. However, in another instance, a participant reported that when a previous student had experienced racial abuse from a service

user the manager had told this student that it was her responsibility to deal with it as she was black:

I brought it up in the team meeting and said this is unacceptable. If it happens again I will be really upset. It is not my fault I am black... If you were abused because you were older than me or because you had a disability you would expect me to stick up for you and say that it was inappropriate...I just want to you to stick up for me in that situation ... and not just sit there and let me be abused. **(Site E, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

Student participants expressed concerns that they would be judged negatively by their practice assessors if service users failed to engage with them because of racism. This added to the stresses they were experiencing.

Discriminatory agency practices

Student participants described discriminatory practices in respect of both employment practice and social work practice. Some agencies employed no or very few black workers. One participant reported that other staff had asked her numerous questions about her religion and culture. Though she was happy to answer these, she thought it strange that the workers were not better informed, especially given that the placement was situated next door to a mosque. Another made the point that the client group would be better served if the staff group better reflected their experiences:

The team was white. I think more could have been done to recruit black workers – like come to the university and not relying on internal recruitment. **(Site D, individual interview black and ethnic minority)**

In some agencies student participants noted that few black and ethnic minority people used the service:

This was a voluntary preventative service – I wouldn't be surprised if more Black people use the statutory 'higher end' service where I will be on placement next year. **(Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority)**

Examples of how young black men were stereotyped as being violent and criminal were also given. One participant was allocated the case of a young boy who had been removed from his foster carer because he was reputedly violent. The student queried whether his behaviour was really worse than that of other white children and saw him more as a distressed and frightened child. She also felt that she had been allocated the case because she was the only black person in the office:

He's tall and he's a male and he's black and the foster carer they felt sorry for and they removed him. Is he just a normal kid? A big tall black boy with an afro can be very scary for some people.... and they want to give him to me... they were using me because I

was the only other black person and they thought you must know, you must have a brother. You must have a connection with black people. **(Site E, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

Another student participant cited an instance of a fellow student being told by her white practice assessor that she was going to try to allocate her a black service user so 'she can really experience youth offending work'. The student thought this illustrated how racism in the criminal justice system operates. She pointed out that these kinds of attitudes influence the kind of reports that social workers write and hence which sentences young people receive.

Power differences

A number of students commented on how powerless they felt while they were in placement. Some were disappointed that the agencies they were placed in were resistant to feedback they had given. Others felt that the power practice assessors had was arbitrary and that if they wished to fail a student they would do it regardless of what the student did:

You know these people (practice assessors) have the utmost power. The university has no authority and I think there should be a way out of this. **(Site E, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

The anxiety of one black student who was experiencing difficulties on his placement is illustrated in the following:

I am starting to have sleepless nights. My wife is telling me to take it easy. I pray to God and I keep saying only 50 more days to go ... Even yesterday I was somewhere in the church and I was saying 50 more days and they said what is 50 days...I didn't know I said it out loud...Everyone is watching me and waiting for me to pick up the phone. They don't tell me that is what I'm supposed to do, they just leave it and when you don't pick it up the comments start flying. **(Site E, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

Coping strategies

Student participants described different coping strategies and responses to these discriminatory experiences:

I don't really think my progression was affected but if I had not been so strong I might have crumbled. **(Site D, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Working in the placement has made me realise: "Basically, don't tread on people's toes, I think it is about being safe in the context of like ...(being) ethnic minority...I'm going to have to work harder

to prove myself than the average person. **(Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Some student participants felt that in order to succeed as a black social worker in the future they would need to prove themselves by working harder, volunteering for unpopular jobs, being more loyal and more subservient to managers than their white colleagues.

One group of students was particularly vociferous that they would not countenance working for the local authority where they had done their placements:

I am definitely not working here ...no matter what recession I would rather live on the streets than work here. I would go back to (name of city deleted) it might not be that much better ... and the pressure might be higher but I will take the extra pressure just to be treated like I am a human being rather than me being the one that is not like the rest of the people in this world. **(Site E, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

I want to be more respected, more validated and then you can focus on getting on with social work because really what your practice should be about (is) the service users. Having to deal with the politics within your own organization or agency because then that obviously takes away emotionally and so the time that you should be spending on doing for or on behalf of service users and all the politics is taking that away. **(Site E, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Some students gave the impression that they just wanted to 'put their head down and get the placement over and done with' rather than challenge what they thought was racist practice. There was a fear of being seen to be someone who complained about racism, perhaps in order to cover up one's own deficiencies:

Even if it was apparent, sometimes you've just got to deal with it. You should be able to disclose that kind of information but really I don't, I don't feel comfortable enough to disclose that. **(Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

5.7 Lesbian and gay students

Few key informants had much to say about lesbian, gay or bisexual students and their practice learning experiences. No programme gathered specific information or statistics about this group. One commented 'I can't say it is something I have particularly thought about.' However, others acknowledged that they should be more aware of this area. Generally, key informants from social work agencies seemed to assume that discrimination against lesbian, gay or bisexual students should not be an issue because their agency had policies about discrimination:

I think it would be ok to come out – our placement agencies have fairly active policies – they're part of a rainbow group. You would

expect social workers to be more tolerant of sexuality issues. (**Site E, key informant interview**)

One key informant gave an instance where a gay student had raised issues about being discriminated against in the previous year. Though this student had reported it to his manager (he was an employment based student), he had not wanted to take it further. Hence she had not had much to do with this situation; however she was clear that action should be taken if discrimination occurred. Another key informant speculated that lesbian, gay and bisexual students might feel isolated, but thought that unless students disclosed they could not be offered support:

It's not going to be part of your induction to your team is it you know X, Y and Z are heterosexual and A, B and C are lesbian and gay.... And again the client issue wouldn't be an issue unless they chose to disclose whether they were lesbian or gay. (**Site F, key informant interview**)

Another key informant reported that she did not normally have students who declared they were lesbian, gay or bisexual, although she remembered one student had put this on his placement profile. She talked to him because she wanted him to be aware of any potential reaction and to make it clear that the programme would not tolerate discrimination. This student had already encountered homophobia many times so felt he had strategies for dealing with it. She commented that their programme had not encountered this before.

Student participants' views about whether they wanted or felt able to 'come out' on placement varied. The gay men in our sample were all 'out' to their practice assessors and other staff on placement, with one saying that the only issue that had arisen was with a colleague who had been mortified that she had presumed his heterosexuality. However, another spoke about the importance of being open in order to give a message to others that he would not accept homophobic views being expressed. He saw it as a way of protecting himself, although he recognised that other students might not have the confidence to do this. He had been in a situation where he was concerned about his placement as there were a number of openly Christian members of staff, whom he feared might hold some intolerant views about lesbians and gay men. His practice assessor gave him the impression that she was somewhat uncomfortable about discussing the issue. Hence he raised it with the team manager who was clear, though she recognised that it might not be easy for him as a gay man in the team, that she would take action against overt homophobia.

Generally the lesbian student participants appeared to have adopted more nuanced responses. One had felt completely at ease in disclosing her sexuality on both placements and she contrasted the high level of awareness about lesbian and gay equality in social work and social care with her experiences of discrimination as a teacher in the education system. Another described how her previous experiences had taught her the importance of being open in work settings. However, in one of her placements her practice supervisor, who was a lesbian, was not 'out' and this had not been a helpful role model for her. The lesbian women had usually told their practice assessors of their sexuality but seemed more ambivalent about this. They reported being open with some members of staff but not necessarily to all. One described a

situation where on the first morning of her placement she had woken to find her house and car daubed with homophobic graffiti. This had caused thousands of pounds worth of damage. She was obviously extremely distressed and felt that she had to tell her practice assessor what had happened. This was not how she would have chosen to give out information about her sexuality and it made her feel disempowered. Another reported that her usual strategy, and one she had adopted at university, was, initially, to bide her time before disclosing her sexuality. For example, she would use gender-neutral terms such as 'my partner' and then gauge people's reactions.

Two of the bisexual participants were clear that they had not and would not disclose their sexuality to anyone on placement. One felt that it was a private matter that was irrelevant to her practice. Another presumed, perhaps in a rather stereotypical way, that because most of the staff members in one of her placement settings were older, they 'would not understand about bisexuality'. However, she had felt supported by the presence of another lesbian student. In another placement she was adamant that she would not have wanted to disclose her sexuality:

Because I felt very intimidated by the situation as it was and I didn't need something else to add to it... I think the service users would have been fine because there were quite a few of them that were openly gay but the staff were not supportive at all. It was a very closed group with the staff and I was very on the outside.
(Lesbian, gay and bisexual student individual interview)

One student participant had set up his own placement in order to ensure that he would be in a positive situation:

The manager knows I'm gay. It's going to be quite open there. When you are working in Social Services you are more protected. Whereas here (university) is different, everyone is too singular, there isn't any one real process and nobody's ever been reprimanded from what I can see and the process isn't clear.
(Lesbian, gay and bisexual student individual interview)

Another student felt that his sexuality had advantaged him in securing a placement with an organisation that provided services to lesbian, gay and bisexual communities. Interestingly, he noted this organisation was at pains to ensure that heterosexual staff and students did not feel excluded.

Although none of the lesbian, gay or bisexual students thought their progression had been directly affected by discrimination, some students did report incidents that had been harmful to them. One reported a serious incident of verbal abuse, which involved a member of staff openly declaring to another professional that a student was gay in answer to a question about his gender. This member of staff had then gone to shout out a sexually explicit and highly offensive comment in front of members of his team. The student participant had raised this with his tutor who had taken action with the placement provider. Although this member of staff was subsequently asked to apologise he felt she had done this rather grudgingly. That she had later felt able to circulate a 'joke' about gay men indicated to him that she had not taken it seriously.

Another participant, who was an employment-based student, spoke at length about her experiences in her workplace. Although she had now moved teams, for much of her time on the course she had been in a workplace that she had found extremely oppressive. This had involved both bullying treatment from a manager, and unchallenged homophobic comments and behaviour from colleagues. One instance she gave was where she had been abroad with her partner's family when her partner's younger brother was murdered. This meant that she returned home a week late. Instead of being offered sympathy her leave was categorised as 'unauthorised' and she was threatened with disciplinary action. She thought that she would not have been treated in this way if she had been heterosexual. She gave another instance of a colleague who had expressed homophobic views when working with a lesbian couple. Colleagues or managers had not challenged this. These experiences had seriously impacted on this participant's mental well-being and hence her ability to engage fully with the learning experience on the programme.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual students also debated whether or not it was right to disclose their sexuality to service users. None stated that they would definitely be open. Some took the view that their sexuality was not relevant and that therefore it would not be necessary to discuss it. One participant stated:

It's not something you have to announce. Particularly the area I was working with – children and couples. All the couples were heterosexual, there were no homosexual couples. **(Individual interview lesbian, gay and bisexual student)**

It is interesting, however, that this participant did not reflect on why all the service users were, or were assumed to be, heterosexual. Another participant, whom in all other respects appeared secure about her sexuality and confident about being open, acknowledged that with the service users she was working with she had 'lied' about her sexuality by substituting a male rather than female pronoun when talking about her partner. She had done this because she was working with a mainly male service user group with substance misuse problems:

If people ask and I'm not very comfortable with them in terms of thinking it might be a little bit – lecherous is a bit strong, but you know what I mean, then I just think it is best not to. **(Lesbian, gay and bisexual individual interview)**

In another instance a gay male student participant had been asked by one of the young people he was working with whether or not he had a girlfriend. He had felt unsure about how to answer and had used his tutor to think through the issues raised by this.

In general, student participants felt that neither the taught nor the practice learning element of the programme had been particularly successful in preparing them to work in a way that promoted lesbian, gay and bisexual equality:

It tends to mirror what happens in society. It doesn't acknowledge it, not talked about. **(Lesbian, gay and bisexual individual interview)**

It no way equips you to go out into a workplace and feel confident about tackling discrimination or oppression when it comes to sexuality. (*Lesbian, gay and bisexual individual interview*)

5.8 Summary and discussion

In summary, across all of the sites key informants and student participants gave some positive examples of practice learning processes and opportunities. In terms of institutional processes in HEIs and practice learning agencies, a number of factors contributing to the availability of good practice learning opportunities were described. Key informants thought that factors such as good relationships between employers and the HEI and opportunities for potentially contentious issues to be openly discussed were vital in addressing the challenges faced in providing sufficient good quality placements. Some HEIs had researched the experiences of their black and ethnic minority students on placement and were explicitly committed to developing strategies to overcome difficulties that had been reported. This included specific schemes to support black and ethnic minority students at risk of failing their placement, a student's charter, processes to monitor the quality of placements and the development of placements that were accessible for disabled students. Equally, key informants and student participants considered that it was important that students were given forums in which they could talk about the complex feelings and dilemmas that can be evoked by the placement experience and by social work itself.

All groups of student participants were clear that they valued practice assessors who were organised, who enabled them to link theory to practice and who assessed them in a fair and transparent way. They thought that understanding and taking account of personal and cultural needs and ensuring that disabled students were able to access appropriate disability support was vital. They appreciated opportunities to learn about good social work practice through observing their practice assessors and others. Black and ethnic minority students, in particular, valued social work settings where practice issues relating to racism and cultural diversity were openly discussed, and support to the students was offered by the practice assessor and the whole team in managing actual or potential experiences of racism. This group of participants valued opportunities to work with black practice assessors.

However, the data presented in this chapter also point to some significant barriers in providing fair and equal practice learning and assessment opportunities for disabled, black and ethnic minority students, and lesbian and gay students. Instances of both overt but also more hidden processes that could lead to experiences of discrimination and unequal treatment were given. In general HEIs have less control over the availability and quality of practice learning opportunities than they do over HEI based learning. Key informants described that the 'grace and favour' model of practice learning (Rogers 1996) is still prevalent. Because of the individualised nature of placement finding and matching, processes that discriminate against certain groups of students would not be easily identifiable. Some key informants suggested that it is possible that practice assessors may be more likely to reject black and ethnic minority and disabled students, particularly when students are competing against each other for placements. If this were true, it could be due either to students being directly discriminated against or indirectly because students in these groups may lack the educational or employment advantages enjoyed by their white, non-

disabled peers. Currently, there is no mechanism for monitoring whether or not all students are being treated fairly in the placement allocation process.

If it is true that black and ethnic minority and disabled students are disadvantaged in placement allocation, given the socio-economic factors already affecting these students (though not exclusively these groups) it could be that late starts, when they do occur, impact disproportionately in negative ways on them. Our participants, as did those in Bruce's (2008) study on placement delays, reported that hearing about their placement late or starting late caused stress and, sometimes, financial difficulties and negative impacts on family life.

Black and ethnic minority student participants gave graphic examples of some discriminatory experiences from their placements. These processes were reported more frequently when students were in HEIs where many of the placements were in agencies where most staff were white or in geographical areas with little ethnic diversity. Some expressed strong feelings of powerlessness and fear about the practice-learning environment they had been placed in. Moreover, some were clearly of the view that they were directly discriminated against by practice assessors and other colleagues through: exclusion; being offered less support; and by the practice assessors having different – and more stringent – expectations of them. This is reminiscent of Purwar's (2004) argument that black professionals are subjected to greater surveillance than their white colleagues. In some instances students were placed in areas known for racism and instances were given of service users responding to students in discriminatory ways. This compounded the black and ethnic minority students' pre-existing fears that they would not be treated equally, both in terms of threats to their physical or mental wellbeing, but also in terms of how their practice skills will be assessed and judged.

Participants and key informants described the extra anxiety that, in particular, black and ethnic minority students express about practice learning. This appeared to be true even if they did not experience overtly negative experiences. Adult learning theories (see, for example, Tennant 1997 for a detailed discussion of relevant approaches) would suggest this is not a conducive environment in which to learn. Participants described that one way of surviving negative experiences on placement was by not complaining, and just trying to get through. Again, these strategies may not serve students well in the practice learning process, as practice assessors may feel that such students are not engaging fully with the learning opportunities being offered.

A comprehensive research study about provision and support for disabled students produced for the Higher Education Funding Councils for England and for Wales (2009) concludes that while there has been a transformation in the climate of thinking about disability in higher education in the past decade much still needs to be done. Our research reflects a similar picture in relation to disabled students' experiences of practice learning. There were numerous examples of good practice in setting up placement opportunities for disabled students and transferring disability services. There was evidence of commitment from staff to ensuring equal treatment for disabled students. However, barriers were reported regarding disabling attitudes amongst practitioners, difficulties in finding suitable placements and transferring disability services into practice. There was a suggestion that disabled students may also be more vulnerable to late starts. Firstly, because some agencies appeared

reluctant or unable to provide practice learning opportunities for some disabled students and, secondly, that making the necessary arrangements can take additional time. Once on placement most of the students interviewed had positive experiences of their placements, however some reported unhelpful attitudes and poor provision of adjustments and disability support services. Specific difficulties in accessing help from dyslexia tutors while students were on placement were raised and, for some, agency confidentiality policies appeared to be a barrier in accessing disability support.

Some disabled students who had been more recently diagnosed seemed to be less aware of support that was available and, possibly, felt less entitled to ask for it. This echoes findings from Panting and Kelly (2006) who report that disabled students in their study who had not received support at school were less likely to be aware of what may be available for them in the university. For some disabled students the effort required to manage the effects of their impairment, in particular the physical tiredness and pain resulting from their condition, constituted additional hurdles. Although this did not emerge in the student participant data, key informants spoke about challenges faced in agreeing a common framework for determining suitability for social work and negotiating practice-learning opportunities for students with mental health difficulties.

Key informants generally had little awareness of issues facing lesbian, gay and bisexual students and this seemed to be an 'invisible' group of students. This is broadly congruent with previous studies cited in chapter two. Although none of our student participants felt that their progression on placement had been directly affected by their sexuality, our findings do not suggest there are grounds for complacency. Other than one student who had been placed in an agency that provided services to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered service users and another in an adoption team, none of the key informants or student participants reported practice environments that demonstrated an explicit commitment to social work practice that promoted lesbian, gay and bisexual equality. Student participants gave mixed reports about their own personal experiences. In the main, with exceptions, they reported that they felt able to 'come out' with their practice assessors. Nonetheless, there was again little evidence that practice learning coordinators and practice assessors as a group had a developed understanding of what anti-heterosexist practice teaching might look like. Some student participants felt that they had been placed in environments where their colleagues were comfortable with their sexuality. However, others gave examples of open or more covert homophobia. Some discomfort about how to present oneself with service users was expressed.

Student participants and key informants emphasised the importance of the tutors' active engagement in the practice learning process. However, there appears to be scope for further work in disseminating good practice and developing tutors' skills in establishing a fair climate for practice assessment for all of the student groups in our study, perhaps through the provision of staff training. This may also be true for other staff involved in the development of practice learning opportunities given our findings that not all key informants responsible for this seemed to have detailed knowledge of the law, good practice guides, and funding streams. This is also congruent with the study by Higher Education Funding Councils for England and for Wales (2009) that highlights staff training as an important area for development.

Key informants showed some recognition of the need to provide equality awareness for practice assessors. It was noticeable, however, that qualifications for practice assessors and the framework for post qualifying practice education were not mentioned as possible solutions. This would appear to be an important area for development given the introduction of the practice educator framework (Skills for Care, 2009).

Chapter 6: Support

6.1 Summary

This chapter draws on data from both student participants and key informants responsible for managing or providing support to students. It examines what participants had to say about the supports, both informal and formal, that were available to students.

6.2 Key findings

- A number of black and ethnic student participants reported that friendship groups on the programme tended to be split on 'racial' lines. This had a positive aspect in that black and ethnic students could identify with each other but, more negatively, meant that valuable opportunities for support and learning across differences could be lost.
- Supportive relationships with fellow students had a positive influence on disabled students' participation on the programme, however some disabled students expressed feelings of shame or stigma about how their impairment and use of services would be perceived by others.
- Lesbian, gay and bisexual students valued some individual relationships with peers, however almost all reported instances of fellow students making homophobic remarks or heterosexist assumptions, which, unsurprisingly, was alienating.
- Family and friends were important sources of emotional and practical support for all three groups of students in the study; key informants seemed less aware of the importance of this than student participants.
- Black and ethnic minority and disabled students varied in their knowledge of, and willingness to access, formal support.
- Responses from black and ethnic minority students to centrally provided academic and language support were mixed, with some reporting that they had found these to be valuable while others found them less helpful or accessible.
- Disabled students valued disability support services that offered timely assessments and support plans, effective delivery of the resources outlined in the plans, and good communication across the university. It was also important to them that support workers and staff members from disability units were aware, sensitive, and skilled.
- Students from all three groups affirmed that support from personal tutors, when they were accessible and understanding of students' concerns, was important in sustaining their participation on their programme.

6.3 Scope of chapter

This chapter addresses what student participants and key informants had to say about the kinds of support outside of the classroom teaching environment, both formal and informal, that were available to students. It also examines what strategies students from the different groups used to access support and how they valued these different forms of support. The ways in which students are supported academically, personally and socially to integrate into the HEI milieu are acknowledged to be important influences on retention and progression (Tinto, 2003).

6.4 Informal support

Key informants did not really discuss students' use of informal support, however many student participants reported that these support mechanisms were an important component in succeeding on their programme. They described two main sources of such support: peers on the programme, and family and friends. There were no major differences between participants in the different sites, though in two sites black and ethnic minority participants had some more nuanced comments about the positive and less positive characteristics of the support students could give each other.

Peers

Black and ethnic minority student participants from four out of the six sites identified support from peers on the programme as crucial to their successful progression. By getting together with others who really understand what doing a social work programme is like, students could learn from, encourage and sustain each other:

Other friends outside, I don't think that they can relate to what you're going through on the programme, because it's not like a normal degree programme, it's like a journey into yourself.... One time I broke down and I thought ... I'm going to give up and I just rang her up and I just, talking to her, just knowing I could talk to her and she's like no come on we'll do it together, we'll graduate together. **(Site A, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

In terms of support I'd say a few black students get together and sort of try to encourage each other because obviously we have the additional pressure of racism and we try to be aware that we have to work that much harder. **(Site E, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Although the HEI did not particularly assist such groups, participants thought that having people you could share difficulties with was a real help. Having experiences in common, such as being mature and having children, were also sources of solidarity. However, the 'segregation' black and ethnic minority participants described (see chapter 4) tended also to extend beyond the classroom. As one participant noted:

Black people stick together, they are friends, sit together, have lunch together. **(Site B, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

A view was expressed that this may have some negative consequences for the progression of black and ethnic minority students. A participant in site F suggested that the white European students tended to get together to discuss topics and write assignments. However, this participant reported that the black students were less likely to do this when they met together; rather they used these opportunities to share feelings of stress and marginalisation.

For disabled student participants having a supportive peer group seemed to be important. Visually impaired participants described how peers supported them to orientate themselves and to share lecture notes. There was also a sense that disabled students valued the help they gave each other as there was a mutual understanding of each other's needs:

Five or six of us tend to sit together and do our work together and I told them quite quickly.. just so they could help me to get to lectures and things if I got lost I wouldn't feel quite so stupid. **(Site B, individual interview disabled student)**

There's about four of us who have (impairments), well there are six in total, we've all stuck together **(Site C, individual interview disabled student)**

Lesbian, gay and bisexual participants expressed some ambivalence about their peers. In chapter four, some lesbian, gay and bisexual participants describe instances where their peers expressed homophobic views, which at times were not challenged by other students or even by teaching staff. These views were not only expressed in the classroom but also in more informal meetings of students and in self-directed learning groups. Unsurprisingly therefore, few of the lesbian, gay and bisexual participants were unambiguously positive about relationships with their peers. Some did report that in general their peers had been supportive and were interested in finding out more about local lesbian, gay and bisexual communities.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual participants reported feeling somewhat isolated within the student group, perhaps only having a smaller number of other students that they were close to, though in some instances these appeared to be strong and supportive relationships. A particularly serious instance of homophobic exclusion was reported, where a student was not allowed by peers to join a learning group:

(They) were a bit of a clique anyway because they all lived in the same geographical area. I think four of their husbands worked together as well....I mean I'm not the sort of person that thinks, oh they didn't because I am gay, but they did actually say that as well 'Oh I feel uncomfortable having you in my house'. **(Focus group lesbian and gay and bisexual student)**

However, there were barriers for students from all groups in forming links with each other. It was hard to network with students from other year groups because the length of time spent on placement meant that they rarely coincided at the HEI. Others referred to the difficulties of balancing outside pressures of work and family with spending time with other students. In some sites there were also divisions between students who were on employment-based routes and those who were not.

Family and friends

All three groups of student participants mentioned family and friends as important forms of support. Support from family and friends came in two forms: practical and emotional, and professional and academic. Practical and emotional support involved taking responsibility for the household, sharing childcare, offering encouragement and just being there in a crisis.

In one instance a black and ethnic minority participant felt she could phone her best friend at any time, even at two in the morning. Others talked about support from other extended family members, though husbands and partners were most frequently mentioned as providing this form of support:

I've got my family behind me...so I mean they look after my child, you know, after school...Like I had a placementI didn't get home until like half past 10 that night, because disaster happened. But you know, they're there, so it were great. My husband is there as well. He does all the housework and the jobs.
(Site A, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

In chapter three, many student participants who were parents described particular stresses. Although participants did not identify that they lacked support it was clear that, without support from partners, friends or extended family, these pressures could be particularly extreme:

When I have an assignment to give I always have three nights of no sleep. It's hard.... Sometimes, I close my eyes and think what about if I had no children, I would go to uni two days, I would do my work and finish at a good time and then go back home and sleep but ...I cannot have a good night's sleep, I am thinking what I have to do and then my mind is tired and my body is tired.
(Site F, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)

Infrequently, black and ethnic minority and disabled participants mentioned specific support from others in terms of the academic and professional content of the programme, for instance in receiving help in discussing academic issues or in proofreading assignments. More frequently, these participants mentioned family and friends who were qualified as social workers or other professionals as being helpful in their professional development and understanding. Some of the lesbian, gay and bisexual students reported being supported academically through their personal networks, for instance, having a partner who was a university lecturer.

6.5 Formal support

Student participants and key informants referred to a range of more formal support systems. These included: university societies, induction and orientation; language and academic development; library services; disability support services and plans; and personal tutors. One key informant believed that retaining the system of pastoral and academic support through personal tutors on social work programmes, even if other subject areas had moved away from this system, was a key factor in helping students to progress. Other programmes had monitoring systems to track students' progress and additional tutorial help for those who failed assignments.

Two main approaches to providing language and academic support were described by key informants. In some sites academic support was embedded in the teaching programme. Some programmes included teaching sessions on academic study and reflective writing integrated into other subject teaching. In one instance staff from the support services offered classes that were 'wrapped around' other teaching sessions. One programme had an English language tutor that came to the department to support students for whom English was an additional language. Interestingly, no student participant noted in his or her response that academic support had been delivered this way. It may be that they perceived it to be part of the academic teaching rather than a support service. Additionally, central support for students was offered in all sites. Support was further offered in academic writing, referencing, mathematical skills and assignment preparation.

Black and ethnic minority students

In one site, student participants particularly emphasised the value of positive encouragement for black and ethnic minority applicants:

The admission process was excellent, and they seemed to want people from ethnic minorities. **(Site D, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

However, overseas students, in this site and in others, felt that their particular needs were not always recognised. For instance, one HEI provided a specific member of staff to support overseas students, however they were not told about this during their induction:

I know, especially for other students who are international students, there is a lot of difference. When you get into this programme we are in the dark, we are not really sure what exactly we're going to come to. **(Site D, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Key informants recognised that overseas students faced more difficulties than home students in adapting to student life. This was probably even more so for social work students, as not only did they need to be orientated to the British higher education system and rapidly adjust to British society, they also needed at the same time to learn about and be able to practise in the welfare system in this country. For participants in one site in particular, the Islamic society had been a valuable space to talk about

how their religious and cultural identity related to their developing social work identity.

Some black and ethnic minority student participants commented positively on how central learning support services had supported their learning, valuing, in particular, a Harvard referencing course and support for assignment planning:

They can help and support you on whatever aspect you find useful, even if you don't understand the question properly you know you can do an essay plan with them so it is very useful. **(Site B, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Some participants reported that this had been useful in the first year but less so in subsequent years as the support was not specifically geared to the subject area. Negative responses to academic support services included the following: international students thought they had not been fully informed of services available to them; students who were in difficulties were not actively encouraged to make use of them; and the timing of workshops made them inaccessible to those who had children. Student participants reported that there was no specific support for black and ethnic minority students, though in site G a mentoring scheme had been developed for these students. Some specific criticisms were made about learning support services:

I have used the personal development centre...(They) basically read the question out to you. I have had that but I don't think it was that helpful. **(Site D, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

A number of black and ethnic minority student participants gave positive accounts of support from personal tutors. When tutors were helpful they were seen as a key resource. Some described their tutors across all the sites as excellent or good. They valued tutors and lecturers who were: available; understanding of their experiences as black students; emotionally and academically supportive; knowledgeable; and able to help them prepare for placements. Generally, tutors were seen to be responsive, particularly through replying quickly to email contact:

If I had a personal issue to discuss with him, if I had problems personally or academically, and it was brilliant. **(Site D, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Black and ethnic minority participants also pointed to a number of unhelpful factors, particularly when they were only offered group tutorials. Some felt that their relationships with tutors were impersonal. This meant that some students felt that they could not go to their tutor if they needed help with an assignment:

They can't even remember your face. When you see them they walk past you like they don't really know you. **(Site C, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

Some participants found their tutors were unavailable through sickness or not actively making contact with them. Some reported a falling off in support in the second and third years. Participants in one site thought tutors could make the times that they were available more transparent.

Even when they did try to be helpful some were not always effective in the help they did give:

They won't discuss a plan ... just keep referring you to the guidelines. **(Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

Some student participants, while recognising the support tutors offered, felt that tutors were sometimes unable to address their cultural needs or the structural factors that may be contributing to the poorer progression rates of black and ethnic minority students. In one site participants spoke about how they had observed some tutors treating black students differently:

I kind of feel I can't put it across to any of the tutors here because they wouldn't understand because it is a cultural thing. So I don't really feel that they would understand. **(Site C, individual interview black and ethnic minority student)**

They won't just come up and make friendly conversation with us. You would actually have to approach them. **(Site F, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

At times internal barriers to seeking help from tutors were cited:

Because you are already demoralised you just feel it's a waste of time. **(Site D, focus group black and ethnic minority student)**

Disabled students

Disabled student participants did not speak about using other centrally provided services such as mainstream academic learning support or HEI services. Views about disability support differed, with some extremely positive experiences and some quite negative ones. There were differences across the sites, with some appearing to provide a swifter and more co-ordinated service. However, as different numbers of disabled students were interviewed across the different sites caution is needed in interpreting the data. Findings have been grouped into three main categories: students' experiences of how disability services were organised; identification and assessment; and the provision of assistance and adjustments. Disabled students also had much to say about how lecturers and tutors put support plans into practice, which is touched on in chapter three. Disabled students' experiences of the transfer of disability services into practice learning settings have already been discussed in chapter five. A number of student participants across the different sites expressed difficult feelings about receiving support for their impairments. Some were concerned that fellow students might think they were being given preferential

treatment or that they were creating more work for staff. Others seemed generally reluctant for others to know about their impairment.

Disabled participants reported that the admissions and induction processes were particularly important in making them feel welcome and reassuring them that disability support services would be available. One instance was cited where a visually impaired student had booked support in order to visit the HEI but this had not been forthcoming on the day. This had almost led to the participant deciding not to take up the place. Disabled participants from another site reported that they were not routinely given information about the disability service, sometimes only finding out through student peers about available services.

From the students' perspective, experiences of how services were organised were mixed. Some reported that they had found them to be professionally organised and that communication between different parts of the HEI was good. This was particularly true in site A.

However some disabled student participants made a number of criticisms, particularly in one site:

I find that the disability service doesn't always know what to do, which is no help, for example my adjustments were not put in place but they weren't sure who to speak to. **(Site C, focus group disabled student)**

Another student reported:

My LEA says this is the only university that doesn't know that the disability allowance just continues. There is no communication. **(Site C, focus group disabled student)**

Other examples of poor communication and organisation, particularly in this site, were given. These included: support plans not being passed to the department; timetables not being passed between the department and the disability office so support workers could not be booked in advance; room changes not being notified to the disability office so support workers did not know where to go.

One key informant suggested a possible reason for this:

I'm pulling together a single equality scheme – if I'm honest this institution is a quite a long way behind in terms of developing its policies particularly in relation to students. **(Site C, key informant interview)**

This key informant thought that in this site there had been less institutional control and more departmental autonomy. Some things they were now trying to achieve were better joined up work and more sharing of good practice.

Another issue raised by student participants and key informants was that of 'dyslexia alerts' on assignments. These inform markers that the student is dyslexic and invite them to take this into account when marking. Practice varied across institutions; they

were used in some but not others. Opinions about whether they should be used were also divided. From the students' perspective, regardless of whether or not alerts were used, it was important that practice was consistent, that all staff, including academic and disability support officers were aware of what was expected and that this was communicated in writing to the students. An instance was given where a student had failed an assignment due to confusion over this.

Key informants stressed the importance of a thorough assessment for disabled students at the beginning of the programme. In site E a key informant reported that programme staff made efforts in the induction session and at other points in the programme to acknowledge that between 5% and 10% of students in the room will have a writing difficulty. The key informant reported that staff would inform students about what support was available and would refer students to the disability and dyslexia services for assessments, special learning plans and advice on funding. Learning support services were also able to direct disabled students to disability services.

For some disabled student participants their impairment was identified after arrival at the HEI. These students spoke of the benefits of having a diagnosis of dyslexia or dyspraxia as it helped them understand why they were experiencing particular difficulties. Non-stigmatising, welcoming, responsive services that recognised the specific experiences of disabled students from black and ethnic minority backgrounds were especially valued. Although disabled participants were generally positive about the assessment process when it was offered to them, some participants reported that they had not experienced an efficient service. Some experienced delays in being given an appointment and in the production of their assessment report. A number spoke of having to chase to get a response. Some expressed regret about going to a specific HEI as they felt they had been disadvantaged by the poor service they had received, which had contributed to receiving poor grades.

Participants described a whole range of adjustments, services and assistance that were identified on their support plan. This included provision of dyslexia tutors, note-takers, extra time in examinations and course work, computer equipment and packages and course materials in different formats:

They gave me a laptop and set it up with a printer and scanner and talked me through it. It was brilliant. I get £300 a year for books and printing costs – so I can print something and highlight it and scribble over it – I have tunnel vision. Because it takes me longer to read I can buy the key texts. ***(Site B, individual interview disabled student)***

Support from dyslexia tutors was valued particularly when this was regular, there was continuity of tutor and the tutor helped students to structure their approach to learning and writing. One participant compared unfavourably the skills of the dyslexia tutors at her current HEI with her experience of tutors elsewhere. She thought that:

If a dyslexia tutor is doing their job right you need to sort of do it yourself really. So I feel that's a bit different here, that sort of shocked me that they don't have anything like that here for any

student with dyslexia. **(Site B, individual interview disabled student)**

One participant noted that being given extra time for course work was not always beneficial:

I think the support is probably about right because you've got to balance it between giving too long an extension and getting the work done. Sometimes you don't want to delay it, you just want to get the work done. **(Site D, individual interview disabled student)**

A number of disabled student participants reported that they had to keep chasing to ensure that they received the services specified on their needs assessment. Some felt 'fobbed off' when they insisted on their entitlement. There was a view that in some sites, due to the large demand on the service, the disability office was under-resourced and so there was not enough money to pay the support workers.

Some specific criticisms of support offered to hearing impaired students were made. As discussed in chapter four, sometimes the acoustics of the classroom meant that using hearing aids was problematic. On occasions support workers did not turn up and the same person rarely came twice. A particular dilemma for hearing-impaired students was highlighted: choosing to wait for a support worker risked losing a place in the front row, which was necessary in order to lip read. Participants in this group expressed the view that they would have had better marks had services been in place, as they had missed significant parts of the teaching.

Participants whose physical impairments were such that they experienced pain when sitting for long periods of time found examinations particularly difficult. Although they were given extra time this had not really helped. An instance was given where a student reported being in such physical pain she failed an exam:

The last question I couldn't really care less what ...I just couldn't think straight... oh if I don't get up and move aroundwill I be able to get up when we do get up? **(Site D, individual interview disabled student)**

Disabled student participants had both positive experiences of library services and suggestions for improvement. They valued the opportunity to keep books for longer and for fines to be waived if this had been specified on their support plans. However, other disabled students reported that, despite specific adjustments being on their support plans, library staff seemed unaware of this and, at times, unwilling to carry out the specified tasks. This included having help to carry books or allowing someone else to collect books. Some participants would have valued a more flexible and individually helpful approach by library staff.

Some disabled student participants found programme tutors helpful. One felt that as she was a confident person, this enabled her to access the support she needed:

They will just talk to me, they pull ideas from me and that's been really helpful ...I will go and knock on the door .. I'm a bubbly personality. **(Site C, focus group disabled student)**

However, most of these participants' accounts focused on what tutors could improve. Some felt that tutors had not been particularly responsive to them or helpful in helping them understand how to structure essays. Some tutors had tried to do this but participants felt it had not helped them. Two students reported instances where they felt that tutors had treated them badly:

There hasn't been any support from my tutor in relation to my dyslexia. I did get a response. It was a bit of a joke how people keep coming on this course and then suddenly getting a diagnosis of having dyslexia, and I thought, oh sorry, I didn't know I had dyslexia and it sort of put me off even mentioning it again. **(Site E, individual interview disabled student)**

As a disabled student I don't feel I have been supported enough, such as my feedback in assignments, very negative, and undermines my confidence. **(Site F, individual interview disabled student)**

Lesbian, gay and bisexual students

Key informants had little to say about the support needs of this group. Student participants also had little to say about their use of formal academic support. They did not identify that they had specific learning needs and none of the lesbian, gay or bisexual students described making use of central learning support or disability services. Some lesbian, gay and bisexual students had found the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Society valuable, though others felt that these societies should promote themselves more actively and it was acknowledged that not all HEIs had such societies. Although participants agreed about the benefits of these societies, some disquiet was expressed when individual lesbian, gay and bisexual students were encouraged by staff to set up support systems for others, as this was an additional pressure for students who were already undertaking a demanding full time programme. In one instance a bisexual student reported being expelled from the Christian Society on the grounds of sexuality. The counselling service was identified by one participant in this group as being useful in supporting their 'coming out' and identity formation process.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual student participants, as with the other groups, were mixed in their responses to the support offered by their personal tutor. Some had very good experiences, others not so good. On the whole, this group of participants did not attribute these differing experiences to their sexual orientation rather they suggested that this resulted from the tutor's individual qualities and abilities. However, a student participant reported an instance where a tutor had appeared to suggest that because of her relatively privileged position she should not feel upset by homophobic comments from a fellow student. Tutors who were lesbian, gay or bisexual themselves and/ or who took a strong stand in support of lesbian, gay and bisexual equality were highly valued by these participants.

6.6 Summary and discussion

For many of the black and ethnic minority and disabled participants support from their fellow students was a key factor in sustaining them through the programme. This accords with, for example, Kirk's (2004) and Kinnear *et al's* (2008) research. Some disabled students mentioned that they were able to offer each other support and understanding. Research suggests that for disabled students interpersonal support is of particular importance (Higher Education Funding Councils for England and for Wales, 2009). Our disabled participants tended to affirm this and reported that where there were supportive relationships with fellow students, disabled or non-disabled, this had a positive impact on their experience of the programme. However, as discussed in chapter three, some disabled participants expressed feelings of shame and stigma about how their impairment and use of support services may be perceived by other students. There was a fear that their peers would think that they were receiving preferential treatment. Hence, they sometimes used strategies of concealment or managing without support. This potentially could be a barrier to disabled students receiving support from other students, though could also be seen as a positive strategy of the 'management of perceptions' (Olney & Brockelman 2003) designed to protect them from potential discrimination.

Some black and ethnic minority participants reported that friendship groups on the programme tended to be 'segregated'. This, they felt, had both positive and negative effects on their progression and achievement on the programme. Positive factors related to the ways in which black and ethnic minority students could identify with each other's 'struggles'. However, in site F a black and ethnic minority participant reported that black and ethnic minority students might not be in a position to offer the same academic support to each other as the white students were. It seems that where students were not able to engage with each other across differences valuable opportunities for support and learning were lost.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual participants were less likely to speak about the support offered by groups of students, but did value some individual relationships with peers. Almost all of the lesbian, gay and bisexual student participants cited instances of homophobic comments being made by some of their peers. Although none of the lesbian, gay or bisexual students suggested that their progression on the programme had been adversely affected by the attitudes of some of their peers, nonetheless, our data suggest that, for many, the environments in which they were studying were not conducive to learning. It appears that these students were succeeding in spite of, not because of, the support that their peers were offering. Where programme staff actively challenged homophobic views, lesbian, gay and bisexual participants felt supported. When they did not, participants frequently felt angry and let down. A clear message coming from this group is that lecturers and tutors need to have skills and confidence to confront homophobia not only in the classroom but also more generally in establishing an anti-heterosexist culture within the student group. The generally low level of awareness amongst our key informants of lesbian, gay and bisexual experience suggests there may be training and development needs for staff in this area.

Family and friends were also important sources of emotional and practical support for many of the student participants from all three groups. Black and ethnic minority

and disabled participants did not report being offered intellectual support from family and friends, though some of the lesbian, gay and bisexual students did refer to receiving such support from partners and others. This relates to the earlier discussion in chapter two regarding the previous personal and educational experiences of the participants in the study. It may be that many of our participants do not have access to the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1988) or 'social capital' (Schuller, 2002) of white, middle class students. In this way both the 'segregation' reported above and the ways in which our participants were able to use their social support may be reinforcing existing inequalities.

In all sites some form of centrally managed language and academic and disability support alongside a personal tutoring system were offered to students. Disabled and black and ethnic minority student participants across all sites had positive and negative things to say about the support offered in each of these categories, though the overall balance between negative and positive views varied between sites. Although some of our participants made use of central academic support services, this was less widely reported. Some participants from overseas felt that they could have been better informed about the services that were available to them.

Although generally accepted as a model for good practice (Wingate 2007; D'Andrea & Gosling 2005; Kirk, 2004), where programmes 'embedded' learning support into the teaching processes, the student participants did not identify this as an important form of support. Specifically, sites E & F provided support in this way, so this was not particularly linked to the programmes with low differences in the progression rates between black and white students. However, it may be that students were benefiting from academic support being delivered in this way but did not identify it as such as it may have been perceived as a seamless part of the teaching.

Disabled participants valued: disability support services that offered timely assessments and support plans; effective delivery of the resources outlined in the plans; good communication across the university; and aware, sensitive and skilled support workers, staff in disability units and lecturers. They gave examples of situations where, had services been delivered in such a way, they believe they would have achieved better marks or would not have failed assignments. Although it seems that there has been considerable progress in creating more 'enabling environments' for disabled students, many of the barriers that have previously been described in the literature appeared still to be evident (Baron *et al*, 1996). Crawshaw (2002) provides a helpful audit tool for social work educators, to which would be useful for programmes to refer. Few disabled students appeared to be confident in talking about their identity as a disabled student from a 'social model of disability' (Oliver 1983). However, in site A key informants gave examples of how students had been able to use their learning from working alongside disabled students on the programme to help them develop confidence in understanding anti-oppressive practice with disabled service users.

Student participants from all groups reported mixed experiences of support from their personal tutors. Where tutors were seen to be accessible and to have an understanding of the students' concerns and circumstances they were highly valued. There were instances of positive support from tutors in all the sites, however these were reported more consistently in sites A and B. Students appeared to have different strategies in accessing support from tutors. Some expressed confidence in

asking for help, whilst others seemed to find this more difficult and to be discouraged if they had not immediately found this valuable. Some disabled students felt that their tutors had been dismissive of their needs or lacked the skills or motivation to help them. Similarly, some black and ethnic minority students felt that their cultural needs as black students had not really been addressed and that, despite having good intentions, tutors were not able to address the barriers they faced. Some also felt that certain tutors appeared to give more personal attention to white students than to black students.

In sum, student participants strongly affirmed that informal support from family, friends and peers and formal support, particularly that provided by tutors and disability support services, could play an important role in sustaining them on their programme. Our findings are congruent with Stewart *et al* (2008) who found that social work students reported that key sources of support for them were fellow students and their tutors, with other staff being less important. However, relationships with peers were not always unambiguously positive. For some participants, divisions between students, whether on the grounds of 'race', sexual orientation or disability status appeared to inhibit potential for mutual learning and support. In turn this could have the effect of reinforcing existing inequalities. Throughout the chapter students' views of what was valuable about the formal support offered by the HEI, and how it could be improved, are highlighted. In the following chapter key informant perceptions are explored in more detail.

Chapter 7: Institutional context: monitoring and managing diversity, equality and progression.

7.1 Summary

This chapter draws on interviews with key informants across seven sites (A, B, C, D, E, F, and G) to build a picture of the wider institutional culture and priority afforded to differential social work student progression in these HEIs. Interviews with senior managers, central support staff and programme level lecturers and practice development tutors uncovered institutional, professional body, personal and situational barriers which rendered certain students particularly vulnerable to delayed progression. The chapter highlights strategies that had been introduced to mitigate these barriers and concludes with an exemplar of good practice in promoting inclusion and timely progression for students from the study target groups.

7.2 Key findings

- The majority of key informants reported that their perception of differential progression within their programmes tended to be based on general impressions rather than systematic local research or audit, suggesting a need for improved, more nuanced monitoring.
- Senior managers acknowledged that funding levers linked to widening participation had led to more of a sector-wide focus on monitoring access and achievement of students from groups traditionally under-represented in higher education, rather than tracking the progression of students from the study target groups.
- Programme level informants identified intersecting structural and situational barriers which rendered black and ethnic minority students (particularly if they were from overseas) at higher risk of delayed progression.
- Disabled students, particularly those with mental health difficulties, were viewed by informants to be at higher risk of delayed progression than non-disabled students.
- Key informants reported having less understanding of the issues facing lesbian, gay and bisexual students within their programmes, signifying a need for more attention to be paid to this equality area.
- The challenge of reconciling the professional gate-keeping role with duties under equalities legislation was highlighted by informants; particularly when it came to decisions about 'suitability for social work' where students were experiencing mental health problems.
- Many informants appeared unaware of the level of marginalisation and exclusion student participants reported and the impact of factors such as class size; class composition; curriculum content and staff profile on student experience.

- Where social work programmes were embedded in a wider institutional context which prioritised equality in terms of: leadership; a systemic change approach; staff training and development; and inclusive teaching and learning strategies, black and ethnic minority progression rates were comparatively high.

7.3 Scope of chapter

This chapter sets out to examine: the overall institutional context in which programmes are embedded; the role of equality management and monitoring arrangements; issues which rendered target group students vulnerable to delayed progression and initiatives that had been introduced to address them.

7.4 Diversity and Equality management

Despite strenuous efforts to interview senior managers, there were only two sites where individuals from the top tier of university management contributed to the study: both had a specific brief to ensure effective implementation of equality and diversity policy and practices. One (from Site A) was an academic, appointed at a senior level to undertake research and deliver on the university's equality and diversity agenda and the other (from Site D) was a senior manager with a specific "equality champion" role. Unsurprisingly, these informants brought more of a policy and strategic management perspective to the issue of diversity and progression, profiling the requirement for "culture change" if HEIs were going to succeed in meeting the needs of a more diverse student population. Both of these "equality champions" held positions of authority therefore they were able to push for more of what Shaw *et al* (2007) describe as a "transformative" approach to organisational change.

While these two senior key informants were cognisant of some areas in which progress had been made within their HEI, they were also realistic about the challenges ahead: the level of systemic change that would be necessary to counteract institutionalised inequality and make inclusive teaching and learning a reality. One senior manager hinted at the contemporary sector-wide retreat from the more overtly politicised and radical approaches to equality which emerged in the 1980s (Thompson, 1995) when she explained:

We have an equality scheme because we believe that there are [ongoing] issues of inequality..... we need people openly acknowledging that the issue of diversity and how we manage behaviours, are not things that we should be shying away from, but are things that we need to openly talk about. (Site A, key informant interview)

This key informant admitted that there was room for improvement in monitoring student performance and progression at programme level, as indicated in the following quote:

We need better monitoring at programme level, so that we can capture the data better..... At programme level there is a feeling that progression seems to be okay...but I'm not sure we've got the data to back this up because what we've got is more the achievement data,

which is readily available.....at the moment the programmes are looking very carefully at issues in relation to the broad issues about recruitment, progression, retention issues obviously and achievement and success issues[currently] they concentrate on issues of gender, ethnicity and age and, I know you are going to come onto lesbian, gay and bisexual students, but we don't capture that data. (Site D, key informant interview)

There was also an acknowledgement that funding levers linked to widening participation had led to more of a focus on monitoring access and achievement of students from groups traditionally under-represented in higher education, rather than tracking the progression of students from the study target groups.

On the whole, key informants who were more closely involved in social work training as programme leaders and placement co-ordinators, had less of an orientation towards systemic change and seemed anxious to draw attention to the HEI and programme strengths in the area of equality and diversity. The one area where HEI based informants did acknowledge specific concern was in relation to the practice placement. Key informants conceded that students from the study target groups were frequently exposed to both overt and covert forms of discrimination which led to higher rates of interpersonal tension and placement breakdown, particularly for black and ethnic minority students placed in locations where there was limited ethnic diversity. While some programmes had introduced specific initiatives aimed at addressing unfair and unequal practices within placement, it was recognised that the current scarcity of placements and the 'grace and favour' model meant this was an area which had proved more resistant to change.

As a result of a range of successful initiatives aimed at increasing the number of social work students enrolled on qualifying programmes in England (Moriarty and Murray, 2007) several of the case study sites reported having either increased the size of their intake or developed new qualifying programmes in recent years, with many choosing to pursue both avenues. This had led to a subsequent increase in the number of students from black and ethnic minority communities across each of the case study sites which was viewed by some key informants as proof of equitable treatment of students, as indicated in the following statements from two programme leaders:

We have a diverse population within our course with 50% from BME communities). I wonder whether you reach a certain tipping point so some of the tensions and sense of being excluded diminish. That might take the sting out of the issue, because compared to my experience several years ago in another HEI the students here are not voicing collective concerns. (Site F, key informant interview)

When you go to the award ceremony its brilliant because our course is predominantly.....has a lot of black students and when they come through it is great. It is the volume of students in comparison to others that is encouraging..... Maybe traditional courses have poorer progression of students from these groups, but not social work. (Site C, key informant interview)

The anti-oppressive value base of social work was seen as guaranteeing fair and equitable treatment of students; therefore some informants struggled to understand why students from our target groups were taking longer to complete their training. As one programme leader put it; “*nobody I’m sure discriminates against individuals, especially in social work*”. Another programme leader from a different site elaborated on this position as follows:

I think you know by the, by the nature of social work that we do try to operate in an anti-oppressive way as far as we possibly can. Nobody’s perfect, but we do strive to ensure that we support individual students.
(Site D, key informant interview)

Writers such as Archer (2007) point out that increased diversity in higher education does not necessarily indicate greater equality of outcome. Additionally, the danger of believing that social work was intrinsically fair and inclusive was that it could lead to a certain level of complacency as identified by a faculty disability support co-ordinator who noticed that social work placement providers were not availing themselves of disability awareness training in the way other professional placement providers were:

In my capacity as learning support co-ordinator I haven’t done any training roles for placement providers for social work but I have for other professions. I respond as and when requested and I think... well my own feeling is that the social workers feel they already know it.
(Site B, key informant interview)

Overall the findings emerging from the key informants coalesced around four areas: issues and characteristics which rendered students from the study target groups especially vulnerable to delayed progression; the quality of equality and diversity benchmarking and monitoring; tensions between HEI and professional body approaches to suitability for social work, and initiatives that had been introduced to address the needs of students who were viewed as especially vulnerable to delayed progression.

7.5 Vulnerability to delayed progression

Disabled students

By and large across the seven sites, key informants in different roles were alert to the multiple barriers disabled students faced within social work programmes and how this frequently contributed to delayed progression. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA) were seen to have led to greater disability awareness amongst staff, especially in relation to dyslexia and an expansion in disability support provision. As one senior manager explained:

Yeah I think... I am thinking that having been in this HEI for a good number of years I can see the progress in perceptions of dyslexia.....At the beginning of every academic year all our students

go through dyslexia screening....it is voluntary but I haven't really come across a lot of students who did not want to go through that For me that is a very welcome development. (Site A, key informant interview)

This increased awareness of dyslexia had led to the establishment of a separate centralised dyslexia support unit at this site (Site A).

As is customary across the sector, each of the sites had a central, generic disability service that was responsible for providing assessments and organising support to students across the HEI. Key informants agreed that effective liaison between central services and programme staff was essential to ensure timely progression for disabled students. In order to enhance liaison one site had established a disabilities co-ordinators group, which included people with specific responsibilities for disabled students and staff, as well as staff from the disability service and senior managers (Site D).

One key informant, a member of the programme staff in another site, reported that staff from disability services regularly consulted with them regarding acceptable adjustments. This included discussions about the requirements for a particular assignment and whether an alternative form of assessment could be used. This meant the course team had been able to introduce more flexible assessment methods for disabled students, as long as the alternative method did not compromise academic standards and met the relevant learning outcomes. For example, sometimes disabled students had been allowed a *viva*, rather than a written exam, or a video rather than a verbal presentation.

A programme leader highlighted the way in which support for students with mobility problems or sensory impairment was often compromised by the fact that many buildings within universities and placements were not accessible. This problem of poor access to buildings was also raised by some disabled student participants:

If you look at how we got into this building, it's almost impossible for somebody who has difficulty getting up stairs to access this room or anything. We have one building which is just about compliant but it's not good. (Site G, key informant interview)

Another barrier to the effective organisation of disability services was the delay in arranging disability assessments and support plans for students who had applied to the programme late in the admissions cycle, through clearing. A programme leader, from site D, reported that many students applied late to that programme (implying that it had been unable to fill its places in the normal student recruitment process), which meant that it was difficult to get services organised in advance. This sometimes resulted in delay of several months before some students received the appropriate support or adjustments. Another barrier was where the HEI was based on a number of campuses and the disability office was not geographically close to the department.

Black and Ethnic Minority Students

The black and ethnic minority students whom key informants viewed to be most at risk of failure or delayed progression were students who faced intersecting structural barriers to progression linked to race, class, age and disability. This concurred with participant accounts of having to overcome multiple barriers, as outlined in chapter three. Programme leaders and placement co-ordinators reported that a significant number of students with this profile were returning to study as mature students, through access routes, so often arrived at university without the academic skills and confidence of some of their traditional entry route peers. They perceived that a combination of family and other financial responsibilities were impeding black and ethnic minority student's engagement with the programme. As one programme leader remarked:

BME students are juggling too many things – caring commitments, work so there may be gender and cultural dimension..... a number of our students are also lone parents with childcare responsibilities and limited finances. (Site B, key informant interview)

While it was acknowledged that students with this profile faced more barriers to engagement, a handful of programme level key informants were at pains to point out that this did not necessarily lead to differential progression within their programme. Instead HEI programme staff spoke of a range of effective re-engagement strategies they had developed to ensure that students remained on the programme and, where possible, completed on time. These included provision such as: a staff team that reflected the diversity of the student group; careful monitoring of attendance registers; skilled and timely tutorial intervention to identify appropriate support and assessment regulations which allowed students to progress whilst carrying fails. As another programme leader explained:

Compared to other professional programs at the University, I think we are doing better in supporting BME students to complete their training on time and it has taken many years to get to this point. (Site C, key informant interview)

Programme staff highlighted how frequently these students were at a stage in their lives where they had dependents, so felt compelled to supplement their bursary with paid employment. This meant they could find themselves on the periphery of the student group due to their inability to participate in the 'hidden curriculum', e.g. to socialise with other students, stay behind for informal discussions or undertake follow-up library based study. A significant number of students in this category were parents from the outset of the course however, it was noted that there were students who had become pregnant during the course of their studies, adding to the already considerable demands on their time and energy.

Overseas students

A subsection of this category of black and ethnic minority students identified by key informants as facing distinctive intra-personal and interpersonal barriers to progression, were overseas students. One programme leader observed that overseas

students frequently entered social work training with less social capital (Schuller, 2002) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1988) and sometimes struggled to acclimatise to a less pedagogic and more reflective approach to adult learning. He explained:

English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) may be part of the difficulty for some BME students. It would be interesting to compare what is happening with white students with ESOL – I think they do struggle academically as well. With the widening participation brief, often we're getting black students who were the first members of the family to come to university – they come with less social and cultural capital. Some students have a relationship with tutors, and with the British education system that is very respectful/ deferential. African students call me Sir... and they are expecting a more instructional style to education, so may struggle with producing reflective essays, and having to use their initiative within placements. (Site E, key informant interview)

Another programme leader highlighted how unfamiliar, less hierarchical approaches to power and authority within practice placements, posed a difficulty for some overseas students:

I suppose they have to learn about what we are looking for and so there can be that sort of transition and I think for some students that can be difficult.....I think in terms of practice it's a key issue as well about understanding of social work and the role and again I can think of this one particular student from Africa who was quite deferential really to staff.....and managers on placement and thought it was a sign of respect. So he was able to work on that to understand..... But he also came with a view that social work was about 'being the expert and doing for people', you know, 'instructing and guiding' and so the notion of empowerment or enabling was quite a big jump for him to make but he was able to do it. (Site A, key informant interview)

Overseas students were also seen as frequently needing more time and support to grasp the policy context of health and social care in England and adjust to different notions of formal care and approaches to child rearing practices, which could also render them more at risk of delayed progression. As commented on by two programme leaders from different study sites:

With ESOL students many come up with good honours degrees, but others are unfamiliar with the English education system and struggle with academic writing protocols both in college and on placement. They might also have less understanding of the systems and norms relating to issues such as child discipline. (Site D, key informant interview)

I think for some students, particularly the BA students, there have been a number of issues particularly to do with placements, about understanding of, I suppose, legal expectations and responsibilities which is very worrying because you don't want to disadvantage people because you know some can succeed on the course whereas

others can't. And how do you make that decision early on about people's values or understandings because sometimes it only comes to light when something quite serious happens. (Site A, key informant interview)

A placement co-ordinator outlined the way in which overseas students sometimes encountered difficulties in placement as a result of dress, accents and non-verbal communication.

Overseas students where English is not their first language can find themselves encountering difficulties in placements, however, these usually revolve around cultural differences: such as lack of eye contact [and] the invasion of personal space. In a city where the majority currently are predominantly white, there is still an expectation of being able to see people's faces, having eye contact and being understood. Sometimes it is not that they don't speak good English, it's just that they speak quickly or their accent may make it difficult for people to understand. And I think that's a lot of the impact that we have, and often it's cultural differences and people not understanding the nuances of each other's cultures rather than it being aboutreligious backgrounds. (Site C, key informant interview)

It is perhaps worth noting that whilst this informant framed placement difficulties for overseas students as frequently revolving around “cultural differences”; black and ethnic minority participants, when exploring similar territory, spoke of the de-valuing of their accents and culture as a form of discrimination. This evidences something of the dissonance that could be found between key informant and student perceptions in relation to some of the identified barriers to timely progression.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual students

With the exception of informants from Site A, the majority of key informants had comparatively little to say about the experiences and progression of lesbian, gay and bisexual students within their programmes. They were, however, keen to underline an overall institutional commitment to ensuring that no student from any social minority group was treated less favourably. Informants pointed out that because there was no requirement for statistical monitoring of lesbian, gay and bisexual students, there was no way of knowing if this group were over-represented amongst those who were taking longer to complete their training. As one programme leader clarified:

With respect to gay, lesbian and bisexual people there's no requirement for disclosure so there's no way of identifying those people.....so we wouldn't have any information. (Site G, key informant interview)

Another programme leader noted that in the past more students were “out” within the programme and put the current lack of openness about sexuality down to a number of factors, including an increase in intake of younger students who lacked the maturity to participate in in-depth explorations of identity. This informant explained:

Ten to fifteen year ago we had anti-oppressive practice workshops and ongoing groups which worked very well, and it was resourced by the teaching team and issues could be explored as a much deeper level. At the time we had a member of the team who was a lesbian.....however, subsequently these groups have been dropped, we don't have the resources and staff have changed. Additionally the students we are getting are younger and sometimes less experienced. They don't seem to have the maturity to manage this kind of group.
(Site C, key informant interview)

With the exception of site A, the majority of key informants seemed unperturbed by the lack of disclosure in this area and viewed this as related to students' desire for 'privacy'. There was an absence of any consideration that non-disclosure might be related to the wider institutional climate or perceived levels of safety within the programme. This was in stark contrast to some student participant accounts which highlighted experiences of a pervasive hetero-normative culture and both overt and subtle forms of discrimination on campus. Few key informants raised the issue of discrimination in the classroom as a possible barrier to disclosure, despite this being profiled in student participant accounts and recent research indicating that a third of university students have not disclosed their sexuality to staff out of fear of victimisation (Equality Challenge Unit, 2009).

None of the informants referred to the changing legal context, namely the introduction of the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007, which clarified the fact that discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, in the provision of education, was illegal. In fact informants conveyed a general lack of knowledge of this equality area and limited understanding of the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual students within their programmes. This accords with other research (Hylton 2005; Fish 2008; Messinger, 2004) which found that gay, lesbian and bi-sexual students were frequently 'invisible' within social work education and that issues related to sexuality tended to be marginalised. This suggests a need for social work educators to pay more attention to this equality area, consider the introduction of statistical monitoring and provide staff training and development to ensure compliance with recently introduced legislation relating to this group. A report by the Equality Challenge Unit (2009) provides useful guidance on strategies HEI can adopt to ensure improved equality and inclusion for this group of students.

7.6 The quality of benchmarking and monitoring related to progression

For most sites there was little evidence of a systematic and integrated approach to monitoring student progression despite the critical role of monitoring in ensuring fair and equal treatment for students highlighted in publications such as 'Equality and Diversity Monitoring in Higher Education: A guide to good practice' (HEFCE 2004b). We found that little use appeared to be made of institutional student data, beyond descriptive presentation in annual reports. This meant that some informants assumed strengths in this area, despite available progression data that suggested otherwise. Most programme level informants acknowledged that, in the past, students from the study target groups might have been over-represented amongst those taking longer to complete their training, however the general impression given was this was no longer a major issue within their programme. This was especially

true of those sites with a better than average track record in attracting a diverse range of students to their social work programmes. Those few informants who accepted that differential progression might still be a current reality seemed to believe this was offset by the fact that students did eventually qualify, as evidenced in the following quote:

I think our statistics would show most of our students get through eventually, our drop rate is not high. (Site G, key informant interview)

With the exception of one HEI (site E) that was currently investigating the high levels of placement breakdowns for black and ethnic minority social work students, little contemporary local research appeared to be taking place across the study sites. Instead most key informants relied on anecdotal information to gauge whether or not they should be concerned about levels of progression. New programme level initiatives introduced to promote improved achievement and progression were largely based on broad impressions rather than detailed quantitative or qualitative data, as indicated in the statement from a disability support officer:

Yeah it wasn't good feedback in terms of all written down ... it was very much we got feeling from what we knew. (Site B, key informant interview)

Key informants seemed to lack skills and confidence in making use of institutional data to make comparisons of levels of progression between their programme and similar professional programmes within the HEI or assess the impact of recently instituted policies and initiatives. Instead, the primary responsibility for the collection and analysis of progression statistics was seen as residing in remote quality assurance units, as encapsulated in the statement from a practice learning co-ordinator:

As far as I'm aware the university collates that [progression] information. (Site C, key informant interview)

This surface level approach to data collection and analysis was elaborated on by a second programme leader who explained:

We do collect progression statistics in the Annual Report of Programme Monitoring [but] we don't break it down ...well actually we collect which groups of students who come in and how many there are in each year. What we haven't ever done is then do that the next layer of saying which students have dropped out? Are they, do they come under a particular group? Which groups of students have attained the highest degrees or something like that? So we haven't done that next layer of work.....(Site G, key informant interview)

Perhaps more telling is the postscript to this admission:

We could do this job of monitoring more closely by age, ethnicity, disability, etc, but we haven't done it. (Site G, key informant interview)

This is echoed by another programme leader who felt that equality and diversity monitoring had become less rigorous since the introduction of the social work degree, and complained that:

There is no detailed tracking of differential progression now. On the Diploma in Social Work, the Annual Quality Assurance [reporting mechanisms] used to require this but GSCC doesn't require it for BA programmes and institutional Quality Assurance don't require this detail. (Site F, key informant interview)

An additional possible reason for programmes not making better use of centralised statistics was provided by a programme leader who identified problems in compatibility between university level and programme level systems of monitoring as follows:

Centralised statistics are there but often they don't actually give you the sort of data that you need..... just as an example.....our course starts in January, the monitoring statistics are really geared up for a September start, so often students can be counted twice within the statistics, so it is easier for me.....[to track student progress].....because I know the students as individuals. (Site A, key informant interview)

7.7 Tensions between HEI and professional body approaches to suitability for social work

Decision-making in relation to professional suitability has always been part of the role of HEIs and social work educators. The introduction of professional body registration for social work students in 2005, alongside a raft of measures aimed at increasing public confidence in social workers, brought about a strengthening of this professional gate-keeping role. It is therefore now an explicit professional body requirement for HEIs to screen out unsuitable applicants to social work at the admission stage, and terminate training where it becomes apparent that a student is not suited to social work.

Termination of training for non-academic reasons emerged as a highly contested issue for key informants as the Disability Rights Commission inquiry observed (Sin and Fong 2009). HEI staff encountered significant ethical dilemmas in attempting to reconcile the professional gate-keeping role with duties under equalities legislation. One senior manager considered that the university's commitment to social justice and widening access was not always compatible with social work professional body (GSCC) requirements related to suitability for social work. He expressed a view that this requirement often prevented students from declaring a disability, particularly if it related to mental health. Additionally it was observed that there was sometimes an anxiety on the part of the HEI that students who had been accepted onto the social work programme might subsequently be denied access to the social work register:

Those with mental health issues are hesitating in declaring and I don't think we've made it an environment where it is easy to declare as students do not wish to be labelled.....Last year, the Dean and I were talking through some of the problems and we felt that there were some instances, where we were at odds with the profession. Sometimes there are students with a mental health problem and we might be prepared to take students on, but we then felt actually we might get into difficulty with the professional body. But the feeling was that we were right, and certainly felt mandated by the law, if nothing else, to recruit such students. This presents a real difficulty, because we are in the middle, where we are trying to recruit students, and yet we worried because we may recruit a certain student [only to find] the professional body then says no. (Site D key informant interview)

Procedures for assessing suitability for social work varied across the study sites with programmes struggling to balance their duties under disability discrimination legislation with their duty to ensure public protection and high standards of professional competence. One programme leader hinted at the level of anxiety surrounding decision-making related to 'suitability for social work', when he expressed his relief that decision-making in this sphere was delegated to a local hospital occupational health department and that to date the programme had managed to avoid any termination of training on the grounds of issues related to health or mental illness:

We refer to the occupational health department of a local hospital, who carry out the health assessments on our behalf, and thus feed into the suitability procedures. So what we get back in fact is a simple certificate of assessment and clearance from the hospital. We've not hit the crunch point of someone being referred back to us saying this person is not suitableand we've not actually had to tackle that mercifully. (Site F, key informant interview)

Programme staff were aware of how transition points in the academic year, for example the start of the programme or preparations for the placement could precipitate a relapse for students with mental health problems. It was argued that where students acted on advice to make an early disclosure, extra support could be put into place to help manage such pressure points and reduce the risk of relapse. This is elaborated upon in the following comment from a faculty level inclusive learning co-ordinator:

Those who are willing to disclose are encouraged to do so early. If we know we can release information to placement, so that adjustments could be made in time, in order to set up a level playing field. Students can have been stable for some time, but we often find the placement looming can trigger a relapse. (Site C, key informant interview)

Initiatives to address the needs of students at risk of delayed progression

Across the seven sites it was possible to find examples of innovative and effective programme level practice in relation to equality and diversity. However, what

became evident was how commitment to equality and diversity often resided within specific individuals with strong personal investment in the area. This was acknowledged as a precarious state of affairs which often led to a loss of impetus to sustain equality initiatives if there were personnel changes and these individuals left the HEI. A programme leader described how successful group work which assisted students in developing strategies for managing marginalisation atrophied once the member of staff who had taken a lead in developing this approach left the institution:

As part of the anti-oppressive practice module at Year 1, we used to run groups for black women, black men, white men, black women, Asian, gay men etc..... These groups were very....they were excellent..... It was abandoned because time; simple as that, time. Yet for me, it was the most powerful group because you got to know so much more at a deeper level about students because they could talk freely..... It's sad to say really, and I think it's about changing staff and a different staff profile, that you lose some of these good things, don't you, when people move on... it was just gently abandoned. (Site C, key informant interview)

For most sites, innovative projects and practices to promote inclusion and improved progression largely related to the practice learning environment and tended to be targeted at either disabled students or black and ethnic minority students. Practices and protocols aimed at promoting inclusive practice learning for disabled students are described in detail in chapter four.

A programme leader from one of the HEI sites (G) spoke of an initiative that had been introduced to address barriers to progression. She described how two years earlier a focus group had been set up for students from black and ethnic minority students to share their experiences within the programme. One outcome of this focus group was a change in the way that teaching related to anti-oppressive practice was delivered. Instead of a permeation approach, the programme introduced discrete anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice workshops:

What the focus groups did a couple of years ago they trusted us and were brave enough to.....actually make some of those comments and I think that's really helped us look at how we teach anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice.....It seems to go in cycles; a long time ago there was like very overt training, anti-racist training and then it was 'let's embed it in the curriculum' and I think it got so embedded that it got lost.....So what we did last year, far more in a practice learning side, was to be really clear that we are teaching this as a specific issue and not saying well you know it's embedded within anti-oppressive practice.....and the feedback from the students is that it's helped. (Site G, key informant interview)

Another outcome of the focus groups was the establishment of an independent and confidential black and ethnic minority mentoring scheme. This was set up to assist students in managing the marginalisation and racism they were encountering on placement, particularly in areas that were not very ethnically diverse. Another example of good practice in relation to black and ethnic minority students centred on the skill and diversity of the staff team and emphasis placed on regular tutorial

support. A programme leader stressed the importance of maintaining links with black and ethnic minority students after they graduated from the programme. She explained how in this way it had been possible to secure their ongoing involvement with the programme as guest lecturers, practice teachers and role models for current students.

Two of the seven case study sites, located in less ethnically diverse parts of the country, had clearly focussed their efforts on addressing comparatively high levels of placement difficulty and breakdown amongst black and ethnic minority students. Both HEIs had introduced specific initiatives in an effort to address this problem. One (site D) had obtained institutional funding to set up a time-limited project providing combined language, study skills and emotional support to overseas social work students. In site E the university, alongside the main local placement provider, had developed strategies to rigorously monitor the progression of black and ethnic minority students through the practice assessment panel. This had revealed that black and ethnic minority students were more likely to experience problems on placement. This programme had then been successful in gaining funding to employ independent practice educators to provide early intervention and additional support in situations where black and ethnic minority students were identified as being at risk of failing their placement. This independent practice educator also had the role of monitoring the quality of learning opportunities provided and the fairness of the assessment of the student's practice. As this project was in its first year no evaluation data was available regarding its effectiveness in reducing disparities between the progression of black and ethnic minority and white students in their practice learning.

Several informants as well as student participants spoke of how Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the virtual learning environment had acted as a force for inclusion, by enabling students with a range of learning needs to download lectures notes and handouts in a format of their choice and with sufficient time to prepare for the relevant lecture. This facility was enhanced within one HEI site, which also provided a printing and copying allowance for disabled students (Site B) and another site where laptops could be loaned to students who were awaiting a disability assessment or experiencing a delay in receiving their Disabled Student Allowance (Site D). However, a note of caution in the use of ICT was signalled by one key informant who had noticed how the introduction of an on-line discussion forum had acted as a barrier to inclusion for some dyslexic social work students who did not want their difficulties in spelling exposed. This learning co-ordinator commented:

And the other thing which we came across time and time again which was really hard to get staff to understand was when [staff] would say well we've made it easier by having an on line discussion.... . we can't understand why they [dyslexic students] don't take part because they can take their time to read it and do it slowly and it doesn't matter if you don't spell properly in emails and things'. But actually if you are dyslexic and you know you've got a spelling problem you hate doing any writing that somebody else is going to see without it being spell checked because you don't want people to think you are stupid You don't want your fellow students to think you're thick and it doesn't matter how many times you say to them that people don't care if they

get it wrong in an on-line discussion, they care! (Site B, key informant interview)

A HEI (site A) which emerged as an exemplar of good practice

One of the challenges HEIs within this study clearly encountered was in translating policies and mission statements related to equality and diversity into practice. One site (site A) stood out as having achieved a greater level of success in this area. This HEI appeared to have adopted more of a 'transformative' (Thompson, 1995) change approach to equality and, uniquely, had developed strategies to promote inclusion and improved progression for all three of the study target groups. This was also the site where available progression data provided by Dr Hussein revealed much better than average rates of progression for black and ethnic minority students. While student participants from this site shared concerns common to participants across all the sites, the overall level of student participant satisfaction within site A was comparatively high. This is why a more detailed picture is provided of the strategies and practices this HEI had instituted, to embed equality values and support students from the study target groups to complete their social work training on time.

Site A had more of the structures and specialist posts in place to ensure that good practice was disseminated and equality and diversity values were embedded, throughout the university. Perhaps reflecting the institution's strong commitment to equality and diversity, this site had appointed a senior academic manager, with an exclusive brief to deliver on the university's equality agenda.

This site reported significant investment in the disability support services, with programme level informants reporting that their experience of the service had been extremely positive. In particular, student participants and key informants from this site cited instances of good practice, such as, offering ongoing individual assistance to students with particular support needs and employing two specialist mental health advisors. These mental health advisors had the role of promoting mental health and wellbeing and assisting programmes in assessing 'professional suitability' on the grounds of mental illness. A particular sensitivity to the needs of black and ethnic minority students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties was also evident in key informant accounts.

Within this site programme level informants profiled staff training and development as essential elements of achieving culture change. This resonated with a senior level informant explaining how the HEI had introduced seminars on 'managing diversity in the classroom', in addition to a mandatory diversity e-learning module for staff:

We run regular seminars on managing student diversity, the issue of widening participation.we help colleagues with (developing) confidence and the ability to manage diversity in the classroom and the methods that we use in the classroom and how we actually respond to the students needs because that will be diverse as well. Some of those distinctive needs....have to be managed not just in the traditional way of equal opportunitiesbut I think that we can do more. And one of the things that I have agreed with my line manager is that in this coming year we will introduce open spaces for lecturers

*to talk openly about the issues...and what the challenges might be in an environment where they can say 'we have a problem'... actually to get people to say 'I really want to challenge that and can you help me'.
(Site A, key informant interview)*

This site was also exceptional as the only HEI within the study where sexual orientation was viewed as an important aspect of equality and diversity and the homophobia lesbian, gay and bisexual students encountered on campus was understood as invariably having an impact on their sense of safety, confidence and overall learning experience. A senior academic manager from this site not only demonstrated an acute awareness of the issues facing lesbian, gay and bisexual students but was clearly actively engaged in developing robust strategies to address them, as highlighted below:

I think this is an area we are developing at the University. At the moment, the Student's Union have got a very good Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transexual staff network, which is also available as a support network.....There was an example where a student union officer analysed what was going on, and found that certain parts of the university had very high rates of homophobic hate crime against students and something has been done. We still need to move very quickly to openly talk about these issues and have a support unit for both students and staff to tackle these types of problems. We are working to ensure that the university has a culture which combats homophobic hate. (Site A, key informant interview)

A programme leader from the same HEI spoke about the need for teaching and learning strategies within social work training aimed at promoting inclusion and self awareness. She stressed the importance of understanding the level of anxiety non-traditional learners often brought with them to higher education and the need to create a safe and respectful learning environment, as an antidote to the damaging and confidence eroding experiences many students had suffered within their compulsory education. As a consequence, she emphasised the importance of building group cohesion, cultural awareness and safety from the outset of the programme in order to assist students from marginalised communities to "find their voice":

I teach values and ethics and I try from the beginning to get people to work with different ...individuals or groups of people and I'm trying to look at developing this notion of cultural competence so that students can have an understanding of their own sense of who they are and the values that they bringsometimes maybe you can see certain students having less confidence to maybe speak up in class so I think it is important to build up people's confidence really to be able to participate more. (Site A, key informant interview)

This programme leader also highlighted how emphasis needed to be placed on creating a learning environment where personal and professional value tensions associated with faith and sexual orientation could be respectfully and openly debated.

In class what I do in the values and ethics [teaching], particularly at the beginning we have scenarios which looks at different people's situations and I think that can be a way of talking about people's viewsWe are getting more students who are of faith and I think they have to come to the view that maybe their own positional church view might be quite condemning and quite discriminatory towards people that are [gay and lesbian] but in social work it's about having an openness and an acceptance of different people's lifestyles.....but I think some people have got a journey to make with that and I suppose if you're in a group whereby people are articulating they are maybe of Christian or Muslim faith then that can stifle other people talking about themselvesso I think it is hard. (Site A, key informant interview)

Alongside a particularly strong disability support unit, this HEI also had a policy of screening all new students and offering assessments to those who showed dyslexia related signs, in an effort to increase understanding and reduce stigma in relation to dyslexia. This meant that mature, non-traditional entry route students, with previously undetected, dyslexia difficulties, could be supported to fulfil their potential. Additionally a 'student engagement' strategy providing integrated academic support from the outset of the programme had been introduced for new entrants.

7.8 Summary and discussion

The accounts from key informants, combined with relevant website information, highlighted that diversity and equality tended to be embraced at an institutional level, and were reflected in HEI marketing materials, mission statements, strategic plans and handbooks. However, the extent to which equality and diversity policies and priorities had filtered down, and were understood and implemented by the range of individuals responsible for programme delivery, especially placement agency based staff, seemed to vary across the sites. This suggested a need for more proactive and sustained approaches to embedding equality and more targeted strategies for addressing the problem of differential progression.

Key informants accepted that across the sector as a whole certain groups of students were over represented amongst those who were taking longer to complete their social work training. These were: students with mobility and sensory impairment; students with mental health problems, and black and ethnic minority students who faced intersecting barriers linked to financial and caring responsibilities. Overseas students and those with English as a second or other language were also viewed to be at particular risk of delayed progression. Most key informants admitted that they had less of a grasp on the issues facing lesbian, gay and bisexual students within the programme, signifying a need for more attention to be paid to this equality area. When it came to their own HEI, most programme level informants saw differential progression as a problem of the past and appeared content with current approaches to equality and levels of support available to students from the target groups, without sufficient hard evidence to support this stance.

Given the wide ranging changes within higher education emerging from Part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act, the Special Educational Needs Act 2001 (SENDA), issues relating to disability were in the foreground for most of the key informants interviewed, particularly placement co-ordinators and disability support staff. These informants highlighted a range of initiatives and protocols that had been introduced to improve support and transfer of services to placements for this group of students. Disabled student participants also reported that good co-ordination and communication between HEI and placement providers was key to a successful practice learning experience. In particular, “suitability for social work” emerged as an area of ongoing confusion and uncertainty for informants, which often resulted in delayed disclosure and ensuing problems in arranging timely and effective “adjustments” to placements. This pointed to a need for students to be better informed about the suitability requirement within social work, clearer professional body guidance to assist programme staff in assessing ‘suitability for social work’, and clear exit routes to related programmes for those students who were not suited to social work.

A striking finding from key informant data was how little detailed, nuanced interrogation of social work student data appeared to be taking place. Instead informants relied on their impressions of increased diversity within the programme to gauge performance in relation to progression. It also emerged that progression data frequently failed to reflect in a meaningful way the complex and diverse nature of contemporary social work training: for example those trailing students who were facing combined disadvantage and barriers linked to race, disability and parental status. This pointed to a need for improved monitoring systems, as well as staff training and development to increase confidence in making effective use of institutional and GSCC data, as identified by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA 2008).

Across the sites, there were notable differences in “stakeholder” perspectives on diversity and progression in social work training. Generally senior managers and disability support staff were more concerned with broader equality and diversity policy and organisational practice issues. Those key informants working more directly with students, however, such as programme leaders and university based placement co-ordinators, seemed anxious to highlight their achievements in this area by profiling initiatives they had developed to support black and ethnic minority students and disabled students. There were some areas where concerns raised by key informants, such as students encountering discriminatory and disabling attitudes within placement, resonated with the experiences outlined by participants. On the other hand, it was noticeable that informants seemed unaware of the level of marginalisation and exclusion participants experienced within the classroom or on campus. They underplayed the impact of factors such as class size, class composition, staff profile, curriculum content and assessment practices in promoting an inclusive and enabling learning environment.

Key informants also seemed to under-estimate the value participants attached to the informal support they received from family, personal tutors and fellow students and the impact of problems in any of these realms on their engagement and ability to access formal support. Student participants spoke of how family responsibilities in addition to part-time employment often left them with little time for study. This reflects the findings of a study by Reay *et al* (2010) which identified how working

class students combining paid work with family responsibilities, frequently ended up only partially engaged in student life and were therefore more at risk of developing a 'fragile and unconfident learner identity' (Reay *et al*, 2010:8). For disabled and black and ethnic minority students it appeared that this 'fragile learner identity' was often exacerbated by the earlier painful educational experiences, as described by student participants in chapter two. This highlights a need for programme staff to create spaces within the curriculum and provide students with the language and analytical tools with which to explore aspects of identity, build a sense of themselves as successful learners, and thus lay the foundations for ongoing professional development and reflective practice.

Chapter 8: Reflections and Conclusions

8.1 Summary

This chapter reflects on findings from the preceding chapters to draw overall conclusions.

8.2 Findings

- The study found that areas of inequality in social work education could still be identified, despite the introduction of a range of initiatives and policies designed to counteract them.
- The study highlighted a number of interacting situational and institutional factors that had a bearing on student engagement, which in turn could affect timely progression.
- The cumulative effect of combined and intersecting disadvantage, (for example, for dyslexic black and ethnic minority students with financial, as well as caring responsibilities), meant certain students were particularly vulnerable to delayed progression. However, many participants were able to overcome cumulative disadvantage and barriers to progression, suggesting levels of persistence and resilience, which rendered them well suited to the demands of contemporary social work practice.
- Participants from all three target groups experienced feelings of marginalisation and reported divisions in the learning environment. However, black and ethnic minority and disabled students were more likely to report that this had affected their academic confidence. Factors mitigating feelings of marginalisation included: support provided by personal tutors and practice assessors; more opportunities to work in small groups; anonymous marking; effective use of the VLE and internal resources of self-belief and determination.
- Students from the target groups varied in their approaches to help-seeking. This was often dependent on how available, both physically and emotionally, tutors were perceived to be. In particular, where programme tutors reflected the diversity of the student group, student participants usually felt more confident in seeking support.
- In those sites where the programme seemed able to harness difference and diversity as a source of learning, rather than as a source of division, progression rates tended to be better.
- Although examples of good practice in practice-based learning were found, concerns about equity in the provision of practice learning for the target groups were also apparent. These particularly related to experiences of black and ethnic

minority students in agencies where staff were predominantly white, the transfer of some disability services for disabled students and the absence of awareness about the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual students.

- Evidence from this study suggests an ‘institutional effect’ on rates of progression for students from our target groups. Whilst some of this ‘institutional effect’ could be seen as relating to the quality of centralised and programme level support, much seemed to centre on the overall institutional culture and priority afforded to equality and progression.

8.3 Scope of chapter

This is the first national qualitative study to look at diversity and progression on social work programmes in England, for black and ethnic minority, disabled and lesbian, gay and bisexual students. Quantitative research (Hussein *et al*, 2006, 2008, 2009) has established that there are differential progression rates both between black and ethnic minority social work students and their white counterparts and between disabled and non-disabled students. This chapter addresses how students’ experiences are shaped both by their backgrounds and by the university and practice learning environments: it also offers insights into the resourcefulness of individual students to succeed. A picture of the interacting and intersecting factors that may be impacting on diversity and progression on social work programmes nationally is presented.

8.4 Policy context

Recent years have seen a move from elite to mass higher education in England. This gained momentum with the widening participation agenda and a subsequent range of initiatives aimed at increasing the numbers of traditionally under-represented students in higher education. A government target was set of 50% of young people accessing higher education by 2010 (DfES, 2003). Parallel to higher education being seen as an engine for inclusion and enhanced social mobility, recent changes in equality legislation relating to ‘race’ and disability have also led to an increased emphasis on equality within higher education. Within social work education recent years have seen the introduction of similar initiatives aimed at promoting equalities for different groups of students (See for example De Souza 1991; Sapey *et al*, 2004; Singh 2006; Wray *et al*, 2005). The study found that in some sites local initiatives to address areas of inequality by providing additional support to students had been established or were planned.

An overall conclusion from this study was that despite a range of initiatives and the various policy drivers towards enhancing equality within HEI, areas of inequality in social work education could still be found. These inequalities ranged from differential progression, to divisions in the classroom, isolation and discrimination on placement, distant relationships with academic staff and feelings of marginalisation and devaluation amongst students from our sample groups. The following interacting situational and institutional factors were found to have a bearing on student engagement, which in turn could affect timely progression.

8.5 Students' personal and educational experiences

Hussein *et al's* (2008) research suggests that in social work education previous academic achievement is not related to poorer progression *per se*, thus this alone cannot explain why black and ethnic minority students and disabled students have poorer progression rates than white students and non-disabled students with the same qualifications. Hence our analysis has tried to establish what additional factors may be at play to explain this. Our findings suggest that the interaction of multiple factors arising out of past experiences, current pressures and the learning environment created stresses for many of our black and ethnic minority and disabled student participants, which had the potential to jeopardise their timely progression. It seems that for these students there was a 'thin line' (Moriarty *et al*, 2009) between successful and unsuccessful progression.

The cumulative effect of combined and intersecting disadvantage

Congruent with other research (Cree *et al*, 2009; Holmstrom & Taylor 2008; Jones, 2006) about the academic background of social work students, our disabled and black and ethnic minority participants did not report previous high academic achievement. Student participants described how their academic confidence had been undermined partly as a result (for some of them) of not succeeding in secondary education but also from a sense of alienation in school. Although subsequent success in the workplace had to some extent ameliorated these negative experiences, at least enough for the participants to have had the confidence to apply and to be accepted onto a social work programme, for many these painful early experiences were still potent. Others felt that their families of origin had not wanted to or had been unable to support their academic aspirations. Many black and ethnic minority participants also identified that their academic assignments had been failed or marked down due to problems with written English. This was true both for some British born and overseas participants, though for some the difficulties were more related to the use of standard academic English and for others the fact that English was not their first language. Key informant accounts were congruent with this.

The impact of these past experiences and language differences on student participants' confidence and ability to meet the demands of higher education interacted with the pressures that current financial difficulties and caring responsibilities were placing on them. There were commonalities between the black and ethnic minority and disabled participants in that both groups identified similar issues, and indeed there was a large sub-group of our participants that identified as belonging to both groups. Over half of our disabled and black and ethnic minority students identified that they had caring responsibilities. Many worked long hours alongside undertaking their studies. The pressure on single parents was particularly acute. Black and ethnic minority students from overseas emerged as especially vulnerable to the cumulative effects of these intersecting sources of disadvantage, as reported in an Australian study of the experiences of overseas social work students (Irizarry & Marlowe 2010). In essence, it appeared that those students who needed to devote the most time to study and to access support to enable them to adapt to the demands of higher education and professional practice had the least time to do so.

It could be argued that students experiencing so many challenges should not have been recruited onto social work programmes. Indeed, some of our participants indicated that they were struggling to progress or had already failed outright or withdrawn. While the scope for social work programmes to remedy previous educational disadvantage is necessarily limited it is essential that social work is able to serve diverse communities. This highlights the importance of rigorous admissions processes and the ethical dilemmas facing HEIs in widening access whilst ensuring professional and academic suitability. Research into social work admissions processes and criteria undertaken by Holmstrom (2010) and Holmstrom & Taylor (2008) and practice initiatives by the Children's Workforce Development Council and Skills for Care, may help social work programmes in this complex sphere of decision-making. The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP) have produced resources to aid programmes in the admissions process, including a special edition of 'in focus' (Higham, 2009) which argues that for social work to attract good quality applicants from diverse backgrounds, high quality access programmes are vital. Our participants affirmed the importance of access programmes in preparing them for university study, however not all believed that their access programmes had prepared them sufficiently for independent and self-directed learning.

While many of the black and ethnic minority and disabled student participants had experienced setbacks and disadvantage, they were able to reflect on how adversity could also act as a powerful motivator to qualify as a social worker. Participants described their desire to: counter negative perceptions from others; provide good role models and financial security for their children; contribute to good social work practice within their own communities and advance their career prospects. It is notable that some felt that the skills they utilised to manage their family responsibilities were also applicable to managing themselves in the learner role. Many of the students we interviewed were passionate about providing good quality social work to disadvantaged service users and seemed able to draw on their personal experiences of disadvantage to help them to do so. Kinnear *et al* (2008) found that students' personal and career goals and motivations were particularly important in helping them persist with their studies and encouraging resilience to overcome barriers to achievement. The challenge for social work programmes is to create the type of learning environment which harnesses these motivating factors and fosters the type of relationships with peers and staff that will sustain wavering students and enable them to progress into the profession.

What was very evident from this study was that many student participants had been able to overcome cumulative disadvantage and barriers to progression, suggesting levels of persistence and resilience, which rendered them well suited to the demands of contemporary social work practice within diverse communities. These are qualities which would seem to be invaluable in assisting individuals and communities to overcome similar multiple disadvantage.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual students had a somewhat different profile, with none describing negative previous educational experiences or barriers arising from their family backgrounds. For this group of students the motivation for their career choice seemed to be primarily political or intellectual. Lesbian, gay and bisexual students who were parents felt that this had more of an impact on their ability to complete the programme than their sexuality.

Divisions within the classroom

A key finding that emerged across all of the case study sites was of student participants describing divisions between the black and ethnic minority and white students, with students 'naturally' gravitating to those who they perceived as being similar to themselves. These divisions manifested themselves in both the formal learning environment and in social relationships and friendships formed between students. Other divisions relating to age, disability, ethnicity and sexuality were also identified, though these were less starkly delineated. Student participants reported both positive and negative aspects of these divisions. For some, peer support from others who shared characteristics and experiences was invaluable. However, at times, the divisions described appeared to be inimical to a constructive learning environment.

Marginalisation and a sense of "otherness"

A number of the black and ethnic minority and disabled student participants described feelings of alienation from and dissatisfaction with the learning environment. This seemed to arise from stresses linked to a sense of invisibility, exclusion, and devaluation that they were encountering within their programmes. In a number of the case study sites black and ethnic minority student participants reported that the curriculum had a Eurocentric focus and that the richness of their life experiences was not always valued. Evidence from this study highlighted how this experience of marginalisation permeated the students' learning and frequently affected their self-confidence and participation in the learning environment. This corresponds to Aiken *et al's* (2001:318) study of black trainee nurses which found that marginalisation within their programmes of study led to what the researchers described as "psychological distress, resulting from a culture of discrimination and being Other". It is thus possible that this type of "distress" together with painful earlier educational experiences presented significant barriers to engagement with their programmes.

It is notable that some lesbian, gay and bisexual participants described situations where they had actively been excluded from joining peer learning groups or where they felt uncomfortable about participating in social activities with groups of heterosexual students that they perceived may be homophobic. Indeed all the students had some actual experiences of homophobia or heterosexist assumptions to report, however for some this was not seen to be a major problem. Findings from this study are consistent with previous work (Hunt *et al*, 2007), that looked at the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual social care and health workers. Lesbian, gay and bisexual students felt that as a group their experiences tended to be marginalised and that sexuality issues in the curriculum were rarely addressed. However, this group of students, particularly those coming to higher education from traditional entry routes with higher levels of social capital and self-belief, seemed to have developed effective strategies and greater resilience in managing this "marginalisation". This may explain why this group did not report that their progression had been affected by the instances of exclusion they described. It could be that the lesbian, gay and bisexual students we interviewed were not representative of this group of students as a whole, and that only the more confident and apparently high achieving students chose to participate in the study.

In those sites, in particular sites A & B, where the programme seemed able to harness differences between students as a source of learning, rather than as a source of division, progression rates tended to be better and student participants were more positive about their learning experiences. Factors that mitigated the psychological distress and disadvantage that student participants encountered included: informal support within and outside the programme; support provided by personal tutors and practice assessors; curricular content and approaches to teaching and learning that harnessed their life experiences and identities; and internal resources of self-belief and determination.

A significant number of student participants were unhappy about the quality of their learning experience and what they saw as an over-reliance on formal lectures to large numbers of students. A strong message from participants was that they wanted more opportunity to work together in small, diverse groups. They also felt it was essential that programmes provided opportunities for them to gain support both formally and informally from other students sharing some of their experiences and characteristics.

In the programme with the highest progression rates for black and ethnic minority students relative to their white counterparts (site A), key informants described that they were aware of divisions in the classroom. They reported that they were active in encouraging students to develop links with each other across differences as well as encouraging students from social minority groups to participate in group discussions. Comerford's (2005) framework for learning about diversity exemplifies this approach. She describes how the learning process can enable students both to engage with each other around culture, identity and difference while at the same time engaging with learning about anti-oppressive social work practice. She identifies that the key elements of this approach comprise: exposure, engagement, emotion, empathy, narrative, personal disposition, the learning environment and a sense of 'self-in-relation.' It seems that site A was able to create an environment where these elements were present, thereby enabling students to learn from and value each other rather than the diversity in the group becoming a source of separation or conflict. This finding fits with the increased attention being paid to the experiences of black overseas students within social work education and training. One such study, by Bartoli *et al* (2008), examines the difficulties encountered by black African social work students in their HEI, outlining strategies to promote inclusion and improved outcomes. These strategies include: facilitating the development of a peer support group for black African students, ensuring that teaching content, style and reading lists draw from African-centred as well as Western paradigms, establishing a notice board to display material of relevance to black African social work and developing a shadowing and mentoring scheme for this group of students. These represent some practical actions that social work educators could take (adapted to local circumstances) to counter the sense of 'otherness' that participants expressed and build on their strengths.

8.6 Trust and attitudes to help-seeking

Our findings show that some students were confident and active in seeking help from peers or staff. However, study participants often varied in their knowledge of, and willingness to, access available formal support. For example, some disabled participants admitted to routinely enduring high levels of pain or discomfort or

“masking” their impairments in order to avoid calling attention to themselves. Some of the disabled students seemed fearful of being seen by other students as having an unfair advantage if they pushed too hard for their disability support needs to be met. Similarly, key informants spoke of how a deferential approach towards tutors amongst some overseas black and ethnic minority students militated against them seeking timely help and advice with academic writing or referring themselves for dyslexia screening. This is consistent with previous work (Rudowicz & Au 2001; Irizarry & Marlowe 2010) which identified a cultural dimension to help-seeking amongst black and ethnic minority social work students and the way in which a culturally informed fear of exposing weakness and difficulties could act as a barrier to students accessing HEI support services.

Evidence from this study revealed that some of the black and ethnic minority participants seemed better able to voice their concerns about inequitable treatment, when it arose, to members of staff. This was particularly true in one site (Site E) where a black member of staff had been vocal about ensuring that the programme offered specific support to these students. This support took the form of facilitating meetings with black and ethnic minority students, offering personal moral support and in motivating black and ethnic minority students to succeed. Others described having discussions about their experiences of racism within their black and ethnic minority peer group, however they had not used formal forums to raise these issues. This was particularly true in the site (Site F) where the black and ethnic minority students’ progression rate was lowest overall and in comparison with the white students. In this site the key informants did not seem aware of these student perceptions.

What seemed to make a difference to black and ethnic minority students was whether they had been introduced to conceptual tools that enabled them to name experiences of racism and discrimination and whether at least one member of staff had encouraged them to articulate their experiences. For all three groups in our study the characteristics of staff members were important. Where the staff members, in particular individual tutors, reflected the diversity of the student group, student participants usually felt more confident that their support needs would be met. It is important to note here that this is consistent with the Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment study findings (HEA & ECU, 2008). In one of our case study sites, a black lecturer was an important role model for black and ethnic minority students. Lesbian and gay students valued the presence of lesbian, gay or bisexual teaching staff that were open about their sexuality but, perhaps even more importantly, they valued staff that could confidently tackle discrimination on grounds of sexuality.

In common with much of the existing literature (Collins *et al*, 2008; Hafford-Letchfield, 2007; Moriarty *et al*, 2009) of particular importance to all students was their perception of how physically and emotionally available tutors were. As Thomas (2002) maintains: ‘if students feel that staff believe in them, and care about the outcome of their studying, they seem to gain a lot of confidence and motivation, and their work improves’ (p:432). Where good relationships already existed students were more likely to be able to make use of tutorial help. However, an important question remains about how realistic expectations of tutors were. Some students recognised that they needed to be more independent as learners than they had been on, for example, their access course, but not all had, it seemed, the skills to do this. A

common misunderstanding was to interpret independent learning as referring to solitary learning and thus failing to capitalise on available sources of support.

The virtual learning environment was of particular importance to many of our student participants. Where staff made good use of this to communicate with students and to post lecture notes and other important documents this was much valued, not only by dyslexic students and those with sensory impairments, but also by those that were challenged in other ways by the expectations of Higher Education. For those who had caring responsibilities and had limited time to spend at university it was also particularly valuable. Student participations did not report that they had used the virtual learning environment to communicate with each other.

In some sites, student participants reported that academic marking was not anonymous. Black and ethnic minority student participants, in particular, felt this was critical. Worryingly, some expressed the view that they did not trust that they would get assessed fairly, fearing that staff would be unduly influenced by their lower expectations of black and ethnic minority students. Anonymous marking would seem to be an important step that all programmes could institute, to assuage the fears students have that staff would be unduly influenced by their lower expectations of black and ethnic minority students. External examiners may have a role to play in promoting this.

8.7 Practice learning experiences

Many examples of good practice in this sphere could be found across the sites (See Chapter five for details); however, concerns about equity in the provision of practice learning opportunities for our target groups were highlighted. In particular, black participants placed in predominantly white areas reported experiences of racism. Although most disabled students reported that their practice assessors were supportive, some barriers were highlighted. It is possible that these factors could be contributing to the poorer progression rates for disabled and black and ethnic minority students, as suggested in the quantitative data (Hussein *et al*, 2008 & 2009). Though lesbian, gay and bisexual student participants did not report that they thought that their progression had been affected by their sexuality, they did have important things to say about how their experiences could be improved.

Black and ethnic minority students in agencies with predominantly white staff or service users

Black and ethnic minority student participants who were placed in agencies with predominantly white staff or service users reported experiences of racism in many different forms. These included: a concern that black and ethnic minority students were exposed to greater scrutiny in relation to CRB checks; being subjected to derogatory stereotypes, sometimes because of their accents; feeling excluded; being expected to work harder and to demonstrate more competence than their white counterparts in order to pass their placement; being placed in agencies where racist practices were in evidence; and being subject to racial discrimination by service users.

Evidence from this study suggests that black and ethnic minority and disabled students may also be vulnerable to inequitable treatment in more indirect ways. For

example where there is a shortage of placements and a 'grace-and-favour' model of placement allocation, it is possible that black and ethnic minority and disabled students may lose out if they have to compete with white and able-bodied students. Additionally, late placement starts are likely to have a disproportionate impact on black and ethnic minority students because of additional stresses this placed on them in respect of caring and financial responsibilities. The study highlights a need for further research into actions and policies that have a bearing on black and ethnic minority and disabled students progression through their practice learning.

Experiences of racism were also a theme, to a greater or lesser extent, amongst student participants in other sites that had many of their practice learning opportunities located outside diverse metropolitan areas. In the site with the best progression rates, which was situated in an ethnically diverse metropolitan area, this did not emerge as an issue. One explanation could be that here a more active and strategic approach to developing a pool of appropriate placements for a diverse group of students was taken. In other sites programmes reported initiatives designed to achieve this. This included, in one site, systematic monitoring and quality assurance of placements provided to black and ethnic minority students, with clear decisions being made to discontinue use of placements that were found to be discriminatory and the provision additional support at an early stage to black and ethnic minority students at risk of failing their placement. Some programmes had in the past or were intending to offer mentoring schemes for black and ethnic minority students.

Evidence from this study would suggest that for universities where black and ethnic minority students are being placed in agencies with predominantly white staff and service users, specific arrangements for monitoring and support should be established. Our findings would also suggest that these students should receive specific priority in placement matching.

Disabled students' experiences of practice learning

Across all of the sites disabled students reported instances of good, and not so good practice, in terms of the transfer of disability services into or adjustments made in the practice-learning environment. Specific, detailed examples of what worked well and what could have been improved are given in chapter five. Overall they reported broadly positive experiences of attitudes from their practice assessors. Disabled student were particularly positive about the support offered to them in site A. What appeared to make the most difference to these disabled students was that communication between the university and the placement provider had been effective, and that timely adjustments were in place.

However, some key informants highlighted that finding appropriate placements was not always easy. Some placement agencies or specific teams gave, what appeared to them, spurious reasons for rejecting disabled students. There were some organisational, financial, practical and technical challenges to making the required adjustments and providing adequate disability support within practice placements. Some key informants also reported that stereotypical beliefs about, and attitudes towards, disabled students, particularly those with mental health difficulties were still quite widespread. To some extent this was apparent in the views expressed by some key informants themselves. Overall, knowledge about the needs of disabled

students, available resources, and the legal framework was somewhat mixed, pointing to a need for training and professional development for practice learning staff. The study also identified training needs for practice assessors.

Broadly our findings are consistent with the study by Wray *et al* (2005), which found evidence of good practice in provision for practice learning for disabled social work students, but also room for improvement. Encouragingly, students' experience was, on balance, somewhat more positive than reported in Wray *et al's* study (2005). This may be a result of increased awareness and understanding of HEI responsibilities under SENDA, since the publication of their research and the proactive work on this subject by the GSCC.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual students' experiences of practice learning

Lesbian, gay and bisexual students who participated in this study, in the main, reported good experiences of their practice assessors and did not perceive that they were being assessed unfairly, though this was not universally the case. Some participants expressed reservations about being open about their sexuality in the practice-learning environment and many of them cited instances where homophobic comments had been made either by colleagues or service users. Most reported that practice issues relating to lesbian, gay and bisexual service users, carers, staff or students were rarely discussed either with their practice assessor or with other staff. Our findings indicate that Messinger's (2004) study of North American students' experiences of field education, in which many students reported heterosexism to be pervasive in their social work placements, is also pertinent here.

8.8 Institutional context

The findings from this study suggest an 'institutional effect' on rates of engagement and progression for students from our target groups. It seemed that the wider institutional environment and processes, together with the practice learning environment had a bearing on the extent to which students who participated in the study felt welcomed and could thrive. Whilst some of the 'institutional effect' could be seen as relating to the quality of centralised and programme level support, much seemed to centre on the overall institutional culture.

The study found that as a supplement to centralised support services (language development, disability support, counselling etc.) study sites had developed, or were planning, programme level initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for disabled and black and ethnic minority students. Commonly, central support services and programme initiatives appeared to be orientated towards helping non-traditional students to fit into the existing HEI culture. This concurs with a study of HEI strategies aimed at improving student retention and outcomes which found that strategies tended to err on the side of promoting 'assimilation' (Zepke & Leach 2005). There was, however, one study site (A), which seemed to have focused effort on 'adaptation', e.g. changing the institutional culture in order to fit the needs of a more diverse student population. This HEI emerged as an exemplar of good practice, as the site with comparatively high levels of student participant satisfaction, and rates of progression for black and ethnic minority students according to data provided by Dr Hussein (See chapter seven for details).

The concept of the 'institutional culture' may be helpful here in understanding the different approaches as well as differences in institutional commitment to diversity and equality that could be found across the study sites. This also seemed to be an important element of why one site (A) appeared particularly successful in not only welcoming students from the study target groups, but in enabling them to develop a sense of belonging, build a more confident 'learner identity' and complete their training on time. Thomas (2002), drawing on Bourdieu's ideas on higher education as a means of reproducing class structures, highlights how, "educational institutions favor knowledge and experiences of dominant social groups (e.g. white, middle-class men) to the detriment of other groups" (p: 431). Thomas goes on to illuminate how this affects relationships between staff and students as well as peer relations within the classroom. This resonates with student participant accounts of their experience of marginalisation within their programmes, divisions within the classroom and the devaluing of their accents.

Another significant concern identified within this study was how the widening participation agenda had encouraged a focus on student 'access', with social work programmes often excelling in recruiting students from diverse, non-traditional backgrounds. This had led to complacency and a subsequent glossing over of more hidden areas of inequality relating to, 'institutional culture' (Reay *et al*, 2010), academic staffing (Deem & Morley 2006), and differential social work progression (Hussein *et al*, 2008). Where HEIs adopted a more comprehensive, sustained, systemic change approach to equality however, the experience and progression of students from our target groups were likely to be better.

This study has attempted to elucidate the factors underlying poorer progression rates for black and ethnic minority and disabled students on social work programmes. Overall the findings suggest that multiple and interacting factors at individual, programme, practice learning and institutional levels may all be important in contributing to negative outcomes for this group of students. In this study we did not find any data to suggest that poorer progression is a particular cause of concern for lesbian, gay and bisexual student. However, lesbian, gay and bisexual students did report serious instances of homophobia and that this area of equality tended to be marginalised. Some examples of positive actions to support black and ethnic minority and disabled students that social work programmes, practice learning providers and HEIs had taken were reported, however none of these had been rigorously evaluated.

Chapter 9: Implications for Policy and Practice

The purpose of this study was to provide an examination of the particular factors that contribute to the experiences of black and ethnic minority, disabled, and lesbian, gay and bisexual students on social work courses. The findings highlight that for each HEI there will be a unique constellation of factors affecting the progression rate of different groups of students. This study was an exploratory study and the findings are indicative rather than conclusive. Therefore we suggest areas that programmes and national bodies may wish to consider and make recommendations about some particular areas where further research might usefully be conducted.

9.1 HEI Learning Environment

To create a more inclusive learning environment for black and ethnic minority, disabled, and lesbian, gay and bisexual students, social work educators could review to what extent the curriculum and teaching strategies foster cultural sensitivity. Educators could also consider how best to promote awareness of racism, disabilist attitudes, and heterosexism within the student group in order to counter feelings of marginalisation. Further research into how different teaching and learning approaches affect the learning environment for students from marginalised groups is indicated.

In order to provide an accessible learning environment for disabled students, programme providers could provide clear, written information about learning support services, and pay specific attention to the quality of communication between disability learning support staff and programme-level staff.

Programmes with large intakes of students involving a preponderance of large-group teaching methods could supplement this with small-group teaching to minimise the factors that can impede effective learning in large groups. More small group learning opportunities would have clear benefits for students, in terms of better supporting their interactions in the classroom, to manage the inherent tensions that arise as a result of the different values, experiences and beliefs that a culturally and linguistically diverse learning community brings.

Programmes could introduce more reliable systems for monitoring the factors in the learning environment that may be contributing to differential outcomes for student progression. This would require regularly evaluating how far institution-wide, as well as at programme level, equality and diversity policies are achieving their objectives, and include a more reflective process whereby outcomes can be measured against targets set.

9.2 Practice learning environment

Further research into the processes of allocating practice placements to these groups of students is indicated. Social work programme monitoring systems could pay further attention to this by, for instance, mapping the progression of students through the processes of placement finding and matching, the dates that different groups of students start and complete their placements and final outcomes.

Action plans to tackle any differences in progression or inequalities between groups of students could include rigorous monitoring of the quality of practice learning through Practice Assessment Panels or other forums, and focused and timely support to individual students who may be disproportionately affected by differential progression rates.

If these are not already in place, clear protocols could be drawn up between HEI's and placement providers to determine responsibility for making reasonable adjustments for disabled students and ensuring students are able to access support services such as disability tutors while they are on placement.

In order to create an enabling environment for all students, tutors could play a key role in initiating discussions and raising concerns about equality and diversity issues with students, practice educators and other practice learning agency staff.

9.3 Regulatory and National Bodies

The College of Social Work and the Health and Care Professions Council could take a lead in supporting social work educators to develop inclusive approaches to teaching and learning and thereby enable diverse groups of social work students to realise their potential and complete their training on time.

The Health and Care Professions Council could take responsibility for ensuring that systems are in place to monitor that programmes are addressing differential rates of progression. Emphasis could be placed on effective use of existing institutional and national data to monitor and act on differential progression rates.

The new framework for practice educators currently being developed by Skills for Care and other bodies could include an explicit requirement that practice educators demonstrate how they have promoted equality in respect of their students' 'race', gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and other relevant factors during matching, teaching and assessing processes.

The Quality Assurance of Practice Learning (QAPL) processes developed by Skills for Care could be amended to include monitoring of student characteristics and satisfaction in the promotion of equality and diversity during their practice learning. Equality within practice learning provision could

then be monitored at a national level through the LeaRNs system designed to capture data about different aspects of practice learning.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Black and ethnic minority student interview agenda

Opening Statement

The purpose of this interview is to seek your assistance in helping us to understand the factors that contribute to particular groups of students' progression on social work programmes. The interview is confidential and I agree not to reveal your name or any other details.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Educational Experiences

What has been your journey into social work?

Description of educational experiences

What is your educational background?

What was your experience of your course?

What or who influenced your decision about whether to go study social work at university?

What does it mean to you to be a student on the programme?

What were your expectations prior to starting the course?

How have your previous experiences of education helped your learning and in what ways?

How has it hindered your learning and in what ways?

Experiences of teaching, learning and assessment processes on the programme: What are your experiences of the teaching, learning and assessment processes on the programme?

Teaching of the course:

How was it presented to you? Course outline explained? Were those teaching the course helpful, able to explain fully, were they able to relate to your needs as an individual? Could you suggest what methods or style of teaching that was helpful and/or unhelpful to you?

Learning experiences:

What do you think your particular learning support needs are?

What factors have helped or hindered your learning?

Could you suggest what methods or style of learning that was helpful and/or unhelpful to you?

Assessment processes

In what form did assessments take place?

Written, practical, peer assessments? Group work?

What is your evaluation of the assessment process/systems?

What kind of feedback (if any) did you receive? Was it written feedback? Were you able to see the tutor in question? Was it regular feedback?

**Placements: What was your experience of your practice assessor(s)?
What was your practice assessment like?**

Process

Direct observations

Assessment reports

Any other aspect of the practice assessment process (e.g. second opinion/ practice assessment panel, tutor's role)

Evaluating the support networks and their availability: How do you evaluate the support networks that are available to you?

What are the key areas of support for you?

What kind of support networks or resources do you draw on? Are they widely available to you?

Are they formal or informal?

What would you change/add/amend?

Respondents' accounts of their personal circumstances and how this has affected their progress on the course: What are your personal circumstances and how do you think it is contributing to your experience on the course?

What are the demands on your time outside of College?

How does your circumstance influence the way you engage in university life?

How do you think your experiences outside the classroom are impacting on your learning?

Respondents' descriptions of how characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, disability, social class and sexuality) intersect: Consider your own identity in relation to (age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion or faith, disability, social class) on your learning experiences. What has been the impact of any of these dimensions on your experience of the course?

How do you regard these as an issue?

What changes would you like to see to consider your characteristics?

What suggestions do you have about ways in which policies or practices might be improved to meet the needs of black and ethnic minority students?

What would help provide a positive learning environment?

What helps you to engage with learning?

Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

Appendix 2

Students With A Disability Or Long-Term Health Condition Interview Agenda

The purpose of this interview is to seek your assistance in helping us to understand the factors that contribute to particular groups of students' progression on social work programmes. The interview is confidential and I agree not to reveal your name or anything you tell me to anyone who is not directly involved in this research project.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

How do you identify yourself in terms of your impairment or ongoing health condition? Which of these HESA categories, if any did you tick on your application form? Which terminology do you prefer?

*HESA Disability categories:

Dyslexia

Blind/Partially sighted

Deaf/have a hearing impairment

Wheelchair user/have mobility difficulties

Personal care support

Mental health difficulties

An unseen disability

Multiple disabilities

Other disabilities

Autistic Spectrum disorder (including Asperger Syndrome)

Educational Experiences: Looking back, what educational experiences and expectations of teaching and learning do you have?

What is your educational background?

What or who influenced your decision to study social work at university?

Why did you choose the university you attended?

What did it mean to you to be accepted onto the social work programme?

What were your expectations prior to starting the programme?

In what ways have your previous experiences of education helped your learning on the social work programme?

Are there ways in which they have hindered your learning?

What other life/work experiences were important to you in preparing you to come onto the social work programme?

***Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is the central source for the collection and dissemination of statistics about publicly funded UK higher education. What do you think of the Fitness to Practice requirement for social work training?**

Did you advise the HEI of your condition or impairment? If so at what stage?

On application form;
At interview;
On being offered a place;
During the first term;
At a later stage of the programme.

Why did you inform the HEI at this stage? What was the outcome?
Were you generally open about your impairment or health condition amongst peers and college staff? What influenced your decision? What response did you get?

If you decided not to declare any impairment of ongoing health condition what influenced your decision?

Experiences of teaching, learning and assessment processes on the programme: What are your experiences of the teaching, learning and assessment processes on the programme?

Teaching of the course:

How was the programme presented to you? Was the course outline explained? Were those teaching the course helpful? Were they able to relate to your needs as an individual? What methods or styles of teaching were helpful and/or unhelpful to you?

Were adjustments made, to take into account your impairment or long-term health condition? Were these adjustments adequate and sensitively implemented?

Learning experiences:

Do you think you have any particular learning support needs? Please elaborate.
What factors have helped or hindered your learning?
Did you encounter any barriers to a positive learning experience in terms of buildings, resources, staff attitudes?
Did the programme have clear statements/policies relating to students with disabilities?
Overall do you think the programme prepared students to practice social work in a way that promoted equality for people with impairments or long-term health conditions?

Assessment processes

In what form did assessments take place?
Written, practical, peer assessments? Group work?
What is your evaluation of the assessment process/systems?
What kind of feedback (if any) did you receive? Was it written feedback? Were you able to see the tutor in question? Was it regular feedback?

Do you think your progression on the programme was affected in any way by your impairment or health condition? Please elaborate on how.

Placements:

What was the process of setting up the placement like?

What was your experience of your practice assessor(s)?

What are your views about the work allocated to you? Did the practice assessor take your specific needs or health condition into account in terms of the volume or pace of work?

How did you experience the tutor's role?

What was your practice assessment like?

e.g. Supervision

Direct observations

Assessment reports

Getting feedback from service users/other professionals (e.g. second opinion/practice assessment panel)

Were you open about your impairment or health condition whilst on placement? Were adjustments made, to take into account your impairment or long-term health condition? Were these adjustments adequate and sensitively implemented?

Evaluating the support networks and their availability: How do you evaluate the support networks that are available to you?

What are the key areas of support for you?

What kind of support networks or resources do you draw on? Are they widely available to you?

Are they formal or informal?

What would you change/add/amend?

What type of support would you have found helpful?

Respondents' accounts of their personal circumstances and how this has affected their progress on the course: What are your personal circumstances and how do you think it is contributing to your experience on the course?

What are the demands on your time outside of College?

Has your disability influenced the way you engage in university life? Please elaborate. How do you think your experiences outside of the classroom have impacted on your learning?

Respondents' descriptions of how characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, disability, social class and sexuality) intersect: Consider your own identity in relation to (age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion or faith, disability, social class) on your learning experiences.

What has been the impact of any of these dimensions on your experience of the course?

Do you think the programme was affirmative to your overall identity? Did it have clear statements and policies directed at equality issues? How were these put into practice?

What suggestions do you have about ways in which policies or practices might be improved to meet the needs of students with impairments or ongoing health conditions?

What would help provide a positive learning and assessment environment?

What advice would you give to social work programmes about how to improve the climate for learning and assessment for students with impairments and ongoing health conditions?

Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

This interview, relates to students who have an impairment or long-term health condition, such that they are likely to meet the definition of “disability” used within the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. This includes people with sensory and visual impairments, learning disabilities, mental health conditions and long term and/or fluctuating health conditions such as diabetes, HIV, multiple sclerosis and cancer.
Disability Rights Commission 2007
17.3.08.

Appendix 3

Interview agenda for students who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual

Opening Statement

The purpose of this interview is to seek your assistance in helping us to understand the factors that contribute to particular groups of students' progression on social work programmes. The interview is confidential and I agree not to reveal your name or any other details.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Educational Experiences:

What has been your journey into social work?

What or who influenced your decision to study social work at university?

What does it mean to you to have been accepted onto the social work programme?

What were your expectations prior to starting the programme?

What is your educational background?

In what ways have your previous experiences of education helped your learning on the social work programme?

Are there ways in which they have hindered your learning?

What other life/work experiences were important to you in preparing you to come onto the social work programme?

How do you identify yourself in terms of your sexuality?

2. Experiences of teaching, learning and assessment processes on the programme: What are your experiences of the teaching, learning and assessment processes on the programme?

Teaching of the programme:

How was the programme presented to you? Were those teaching the course helpful?

Were they able to relate to your needs as an individual?

What methods or styles of teaching were helpful or unhelpful to you?

Homophobia has been defined as fear or hatred of lesbian/gay or bisexual people. Heterosexism has been defined as an ideology that denies, denigrates or stigmatises non-heterosexuality. Whilst on the social work programme did you notice any homophobic or heterosexist views being expressed? If so what was said/done/written/omitted?

How was this dealt with? By whom?

Did the programme have clear statements/policies around lesbian and gay equality issues?

Overall, do you think the programme prepares/prepared students to practice social work in way that promotes equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people?

Learning experiences:

Do you think you have any particular learning support needs?

What factors have helped or hindered your learning?

Were you open about your sexuality to your peers and your lecturers/tutors?

Was it important to you to be open? If so, what are your reasons for this? If not, what are your reasons for this?

Overall do you think the programme prepared students to practice social work in a way that promoted equality for gay and lesbian people?

If you were open about your sexuality, what responses did you have from peers and college staff?

Assessment processes

In what form did assessments take place?

Written, practical, peer assessments? Group work?

What is your evaluation of the assessment process/systems?

Have you ever failed an assessment/examine?

What kind of feedback (if any) did you receive? Was it written feedback? Were you able to see the tutor in question? Was it regular feedback?

What has the outcome of the assessment been so far?

Homophobia has been defined as fear or hatred of lesbian/gay or bisexual people. Heterosexism has been defined as an ideology that denies, denigrates or stigmatises non-heterosexuality. Whilst on the social work programme did you notice any homophobic or heterosexist views being expressed? If so what was said/done/written/omitted?

How was this dealt with? By whom?

Did the programme have clear statements/policies around lesbian and gay equality issues?

Overall, do you think the programme prepares/prepared students to practice social work in a way that promotes equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people?

(If already undertaken) Placements:

What was the process of setting up the placement like?

What was your experience of your practice assessor(s)?

What are your views about the work that was allocated to you?

How did you experience the tutor's role?

What was your practice assessment like?

e.g. Supervision

Direct observations

Assessment reports

Getting feedback from service users/other professionals

Did you experience any other aspect of the practice assessment process (e.g. second opinion/ practice assessment panel,)

Were you open about your sexuality on placement? To your practice assessor? Other members of staff? Service users or carers?

Was it important to you to be open? If so, what are your reasons for this? If not, what are your reasons for this?

If you were open about your sexuality, what responses did you have from placement staff or service users/carers?

What has the outcome of the practice assessment been so far?

Do you think your progression on the placement was affected in any way by your sexuality?

Did the placement agency have clear statements/policies around lesbian and gay equality issues?

Overall, do you think the placement prepares/prepared students to practice social work in way that promoted equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people?

3. Evaluating the support networks and their availability: How do you evaluate the support networks that are/were available to you?

What kind of support networks or resources do you draw on? Are they widely available to you?

Are they formal or informal?

What would you change/add/amend?

Do you think that lesbian/gay/bisexual people have particular support needs? If so, what are they?

4.Respondents' accounts of their personal circumstances and how this has affected their progress on the course: What are your personal circumstances and how do you think it is contributing to your experience on the course?

What are the demands on your time outside of College?

In what way do your circumstances or sexual identity influence the way you engage in university life?

How do you think your experiences outside the classroom are impacting your learning?

5.Respondents' descriptions of how characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, disability, social class and sexuality) intersect: Consider your own identity in relation to (age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion or faith, disability, social class) on your learning experiences.

What has been the impact of these interacting dimensions on your experience of the course?

Do you think the programme was affirmative to your overall identity?

Did the programme have clear statements and policies directed at equality issues?

If so how were these put into practice?

What do you think helps provide a positive learning and assessment environment?

What advice would you give to social work programmes about how to improve the climate for learning and assessment for all lesbian/gay and bisexual students?

6. Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

Appendix 4

Diversity and Progression Research - Key Informants' Interview Schedule

The purpose of this interview is to seek your assistance in helping us to understand the factors that contribute to particular groups of students' progression on social work programmes. The interview is confidential and we agree not to reveal any individual's name or the name of the institution to anyone who is not directly involved in this research project.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. The Institutional Environment

Existing data has shown that black and ethnic minority social work students and students with disabilities are more likely to take longer to complete their studies and to pass their course.

Is the issue of differential progression rates a concern for your programme?

Currently, how do you collect information about the achievement of social work students by race, sexual orientation or disability?

What are some of the particular issues for black and ethnic minority students in this institution?

What are some of the particular issues for disabled students in this institution?

What are some of the particular issues for gay, lesbian and bisexual students in this institution?

What are your institution's strategies for meeting its duties under discrimination acts against disability, sexuality and race?

2. The Programme Environment

Are there factors that affect black and ethnic minority students and students' with disabilities' and students who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual participation and progression on your social work programme in any way?

Possible prompts:

- What enables progression for the different groups of students?
- What hinders it?

How would you evaluate the assessment processes in relation to academic assignments?

What procedures do you have in place to support students who are failing or who are at risk of non-completion?

How are equalities and diversity issues taken account of in the teaching and learning/curriculum?

What systems do you have in place for enhancing the learning environment for students with impairments and ongoing health conditions?

What policies or practices do you have in place to contribute to greater inclusivity on the programme?

Possible prompts:

- Teaching methods and tutoring
- Content of the curriculum

What aspects of your social work programme do you think most enable black and ethnic minority/ disabled students/lesbian, gay and bisexual students to progress well?

Are there aspects that may present barriers to successful progression?

What systems do you have in place to identify where students may need some additional learning support?

How do you promote climate of openness and safety for Black and ethnic minority, disabled and lesbian and gay and bisexual students in the learning environment?

What do you consider to be the factors that influence the different groups of students' experience on the social work programme?

Possible prompts:

- Are there any issues that hinder individual students?
- Issues relating to the subject being studied?
- Issues relating to the institution?

How do you seek students' feedback about their experiences concerning equalities and diversity issues on the programme?

3. The Practice Learning Environment

What challenges do you think black and ethnic minority/ disabled students/lesbian and gay and bisexual students face in combining the academic and practice component of their course?

How are disabled students and students with dyslexia supported on placement?

What in your view makes a positive placement experience for black and ethnic minority/ students with disabilities/lesbian and gay students?

Need to develop this section more fully

How are the institutions contributing to the experiences of the students?

What support is there available/provided by the HEIs to the students whilst on placement?

What support systems are available whilst on placement?

4. Concluding Questions

Is there any existing good practice from your programme/university that you would like to share?

Could you identify one thing that your programme/university does well to support students?

Appendix 5

Focus group questions

1. You've come along today to a focus group for Black and Ethnic Minority students/Disabled students/ Lesbian and Gay students. Could you say something about what this identity means to you?
2. Quantitative research has shown that black and ethnic minority social work students/ disabled students are somewhat more likely to take longer to complete their studies and to pass their course. We are trying to understand the causes of this. What do you think some of the reasons may be?

Or (for the lesbian, gay and bisexual focus group)

Quantitative research has shown that black and ethnic minority social work students/ disabled students are somewhat more likely to take longer to complete their studies and to pass their course. Because the GSCC does not collect statistics we do not have any information about lesbian, gay and bisexual students' rates of progression on their programme. This research project is interested in finding out whether the same may be true for lesbian, gay and bisexual students. Do you think that a student's sexuality has affected their progression on your social work programme in any way?

(Some prompts relating to key areas might be

University culture/ support

Specific programme culture/ support/ curriculum

Placement culture/support/curriculum

Factors relating to the individual student: previous educational/ work experiences, caring responsibilities, money etc)

3. Assessment processes at your university

What do you think about this in relation to academic assignments?

How about assessment of practice in placements?

Fair/ not fair

Transparent/ not transparent

4. What aspects of your social work programme do you think most enable black and ethnic minority/ disabled students/lesbian, gay and bisexual students to progress well? What are the aspects that hinder this?
5. One thing that your programme should definitely keep
6. One thing that your programme could do differently