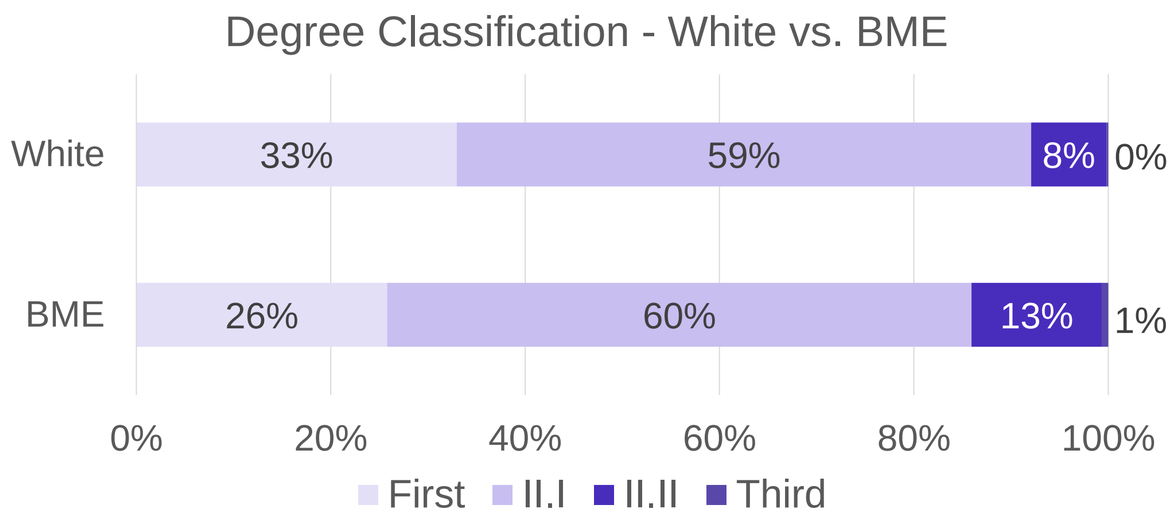
The BME Attainment Gap

Hannah Buttle and Otso Hao

What is the Attainment Gap?

BME undergraduates at UCL are, on average, **6% less likely to achieve a 2.1 or above, compared to White students**. This gap is mostly due to a lower share of first class degrees within BME students.



Why does it matter?

This gap is concerning because graduates with a 2.1 are expected to **earn**, on average, seven percent more than those graduating with a 2.2 or below. Furthermore, with BME students less likely to achieve the first class degrees needed for academic careers, attainment gaps can create a "**feedback loop"** that reinforces the minority status of BME individuals within academia.

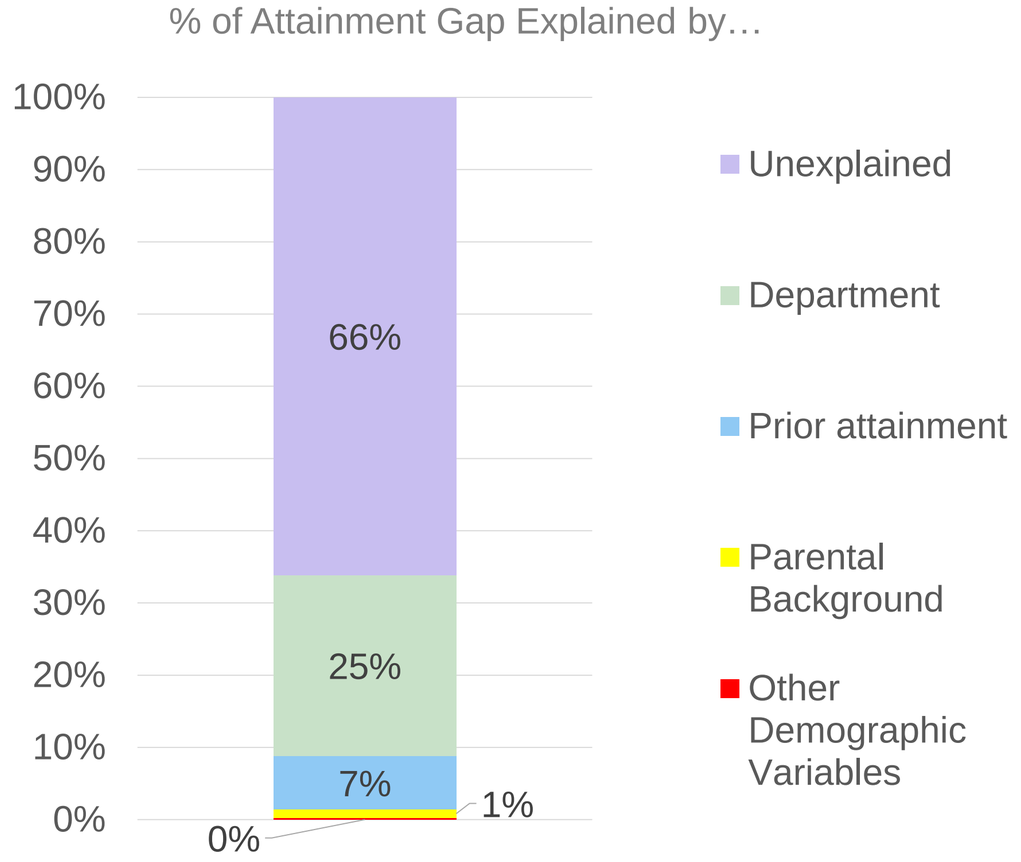
Decomposing the Attainment Gap

Original attainment gap → **After controls**

6% → **4%**

From a dataset of around 10,000 domestic students who graduated from UCL between 2010-2016, we find that controls for demographic characteristics, department, and prior attainment, reduce the gap to **4%.**

Nevertheless, using Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition, we find that **66%** of the attainment gap **remains unexplained** by differences in these characteristics.



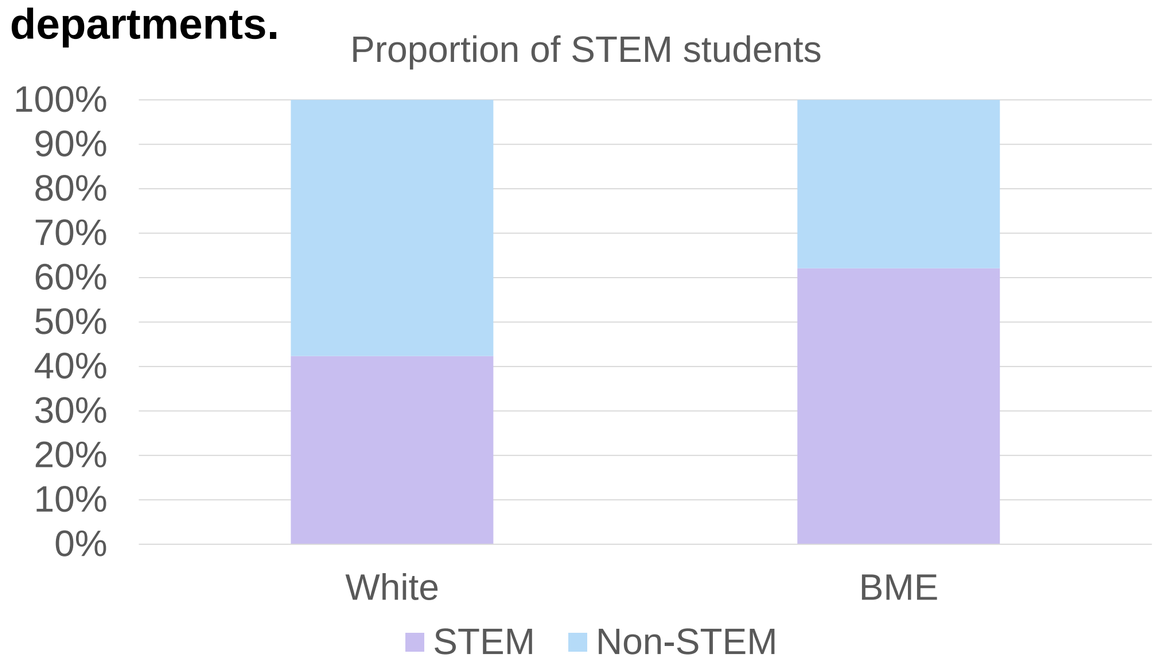
Discussion

The large size of the **unexplained** component indicates that reasons beyond these characteristics could be driving the attainment gap. One possibility is that, due to the low proportion of BME students and faculty members, BME students may feel like they do not **belong** at UCL. As a result, they may be less motivated to study and feel less entitled to take advantage of the university resources.

Differences in **family background** only account for a **very small part of the BME gap**, even though we find that BME students, on average, are less likely to have parents who work in professional occupations such as scientist or engineer.

BME students also tend to enter UCL with lower UCAS tariff points. This may be because BME students are more likely to come from low-income families and/or attend poorer quality schools. However, **differences in UCAS tariffs only account for a small part of the attainment gap.**

Department choice accounts for 25% of the gap. One reason for this could be that **BME students study "harder" subjects**, such as STEM, where a lower share of students are awarded a II.I or above. We find a significant negative correlation between the percentage of BME students and the percentage of students achieving a II.I or above within a department ($r=-0.5158$, $p<0.01$). Nevertheless, significant BME gaps **remain within departments.**



Conclusion

- There is a **6% BME attainment gap** in "good degrees" at UCL
- Around **a third** of the gap is explained by differences in prior attainment and department of study
- However, the majority of the gap is **unexplained** by differences in characteristics observed in our data.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Lord Laidlaw for his generosity in funding this project. References are available upon request.