How to address ethnic disparities in degree awards

*There is a gap in degrees for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students at UK universities. This is often referred to as an 'attainment gap', as if the students were responsible for the inequality. However, many systemic factors – including institutional structures, racism and discrimination – contribute to student success. **Leslie M Gutman** and **Fatima Younas** describe their research to create positive change.*

Across UK universities, there is a long-standing and pervasive gap in 'good (first or 2.1) degrees' for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students. For example, using 2021-2022 data, the Office for Students reports that the proportion of Asian students who achieved first class degrees was 4.9 percentage points lower than the proportion for all students, while the proportion for black students receiving firsts was 15 percentage points lower (OfS, 2022).

Often referred to as an 'attainment gap', this term implies that the responsibility for inequality lies with the students, failing to acknowledge that multiple systemic factors – including institutional structures, racism and discrimination – contribute to student success. The National Union of Students refers to this phenomenon as an 'awarding gap', highlighting that grade disparities result from institutional action or inaction, rather than students as individuals (NUS, 2022).

Higher education institutions must take the initiative to create positive change. University College London (UCL) has been working to close the gap through the 'BAME Awarding Gap Project'. In 2020, the BAME Awarding Gap Project created a [toolkit](#) to help staff provide outstanding and inclusive teaching for all students. The toolkit highlights four key themes: inclusive curriculum; inclusive teaching, learning and assessment; belonging and creating safe spaces.

A wide variability in the awarding gap exists across UCL departments, programmes and even modules. For example, in Psychology and Language Sciences, the 2021-2022 gap for a good degree was 5.3% compared to 3.1% for UCL overall. The impact of exam conditions and assessment type may contribute to this disparity. In a natural experiment, the gap for a good degree fell to zero in 2020-2021, when in-person exams were dropped and assessments diversified due to the emergence of COVID-19, but the gap returned the following year.

We want to understand what influences students' performance on module assessments and consider what strategies can be put in place to ensure more equitable assessments. To this end, we are talking to UK BAME students in BSc Psychology to understand their lived experiences. So far, we have talked with 14 BAME undergraduate students. Preliminary findings support the themes highlighted in the BAME Awarding Gap Project Toolkit. Regarding an inclusive curriculum, students expressed feeling distanced from the content of modules mostly because they lacked inclusion of cross-cultural research and placed an emphasis on 'Eurocentric' research.

"I'd say they're very focused on maybe European groups, American groups. You don't really hear about many (…) studies or things being mentioned and actual content about (…) minority groups or people from (…) our vast array of countries. I feel that studies done by minority researchers would also be kind of encouraging because I definitely feel that I haven't really gotten to see that many non-white researchers being mentioned in coursework."

TIP 1

Highlight the voices and perspectives of individuals from different ethnic backgrounds including real and practical examples and draw on research produced in the Global South (p. 11; BAME Awarding Gap Project Staff Toolkit).

Students also felt that racial diversity was absent in peer groups and among the university lecturers. This tied into the toolkit's themes of belonging and creating safe

spaces, affecting how students felt engaged and identified with the module's content.

"BAME lecturers within Psychology… Seeing that would be nice because it would show that UCL are interested in the experiences of people of colour. It would make me feel more engaged because it would be… OK, they're trying to cover a lot of things here, including things to do with me and my experience…they're acknowledging that there's something going on there. And that understanding, that impact it will have on people who look like me, my culture and my identity essentially."

TIP 2

Ensure some teaching is delivered by BAME academics. Where no in-house staff lecturers are available, invite guest lecturers from a BAME background (p. 33; BAME Awarding Gap Project Staff Toolkit).

For the theme of inclusive teaching, learning and assessment, some students noted that they wanted more academic training, especially with critical reading skills and essay writing in terms of structure, style and vocabulary. This may reflect differences related to educational experiences.

"I feel (…) when you're brought up in (…) a private school background… you're kind of taught to (…) explore things and (…) really challenge your mind. But I remember from my education experience (…) we weren't really encouraged to do that…. But a lot of people don't really know about that…how to read critically."

TIP 3

Conduct an early formative assessment to allow students to learn from your feedback and understand their strengths and weaknesses as well as to help address any knowledge/skills gaps ahead of the final summative assessment (Ambrose et al. (2010), p.145).

Another notable finding was the effect that knowledge of the BAME awarding gap had on students. Many were not familiar with the phenomenon and some expressed shock that such a gap existed citing it as 'unfair'.

"…one of those systemic hoops that we have to go through…especially for all entering with the same qualifications…it makes me feel like it's unfair but also makes me think…what can we do to change that? What is causing this gap if we're all receiving the same education?"

TIP 4

Only seven per cent of survey respondents reported that their university discussed the BAME awarding gap with students (NUS, 2019). University leaders and their management teams should acknowledge and take ownership of closing ethnicity degree awarding gaps with transparent policies and plans (NUS, 2019). Co-production with students (reimbursed for their time) should be implemented to ensure initiatives reflect students' lived experiences (NUS, 2022).

Other BAME students, however, seemed less surprised and notched it up to their belief of having to work harder to get the same recognition as their white peers.

"We have to do more than everyone else… just to get to the same level as everyone. And I think sometimes that can very much weigh down on us as individuals. On the one hand, I think it helps me in a way, because if I can sort of close that attainment gap as an individual, it enables me to stand out from other people. On the other hand, I find it annoying as well because it also means that to some extent there is this consensus… Some people may underestimate me or just assume that, generally speaking, I might not be suitable for certain posts, positions, that kind of thing."

TIP 5

Students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds are more vulnerable to high levels of impostor syndrome, which is associated with perfectionism and poor mental health (Cokley et al., 2013; 2018). Fostering a sense of belonging can enhance self-esteem and minimise 'impostor syndrome' (Kilby et al., 2022). Hosting inclusive events, such as an induction where students have an opportunity to meet peers and teaching staff, setting office hours for students to approach lecturers outside the classroom and even having regular coffee mornings can increase feelings of safety and belonging among students. Encouraging teamwork and collaboration in the classroom can strengthen peer relationships. These strategies can work towards creating an inclusive environment where BAME students can feel valued and derive a sense of belonging, increasing their self-confidence and achievement (p. 33 - 34; UCL BAME Awarding Gap Toolkit).

Overall, the awarding gap has reverberating impacts, widening access and participation in higher education and beyond. A gap in first class degrees at the undergraduate level translates into a gap for those continuing onto postgraduate education, which perpetuates the lack of minoritised ethnic and racial diversity in academia. The awarding gap is a complex and multifaceted issue, with differential impacts based on intersectional factors, among ethnic groups and across departments within an institution. Closing the awarding gap would strengthen the pipeline of ethnic minorities into postgraduate education and the academy – reinforcing a sense of place, inclusion and belonging for future generations.

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