Tackling the BME attainment gap – the policy and research context (0316)

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Introduction: the scale of the gap

UK higher education can claim some success in widening the participation of UK domiciled Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students: a higher proportion now attend British universities than their white counterparts, although they are unevenly distributed (Tatlow 2015). Where the sector has manifestly failed is in ensuring the success of those students. BME students are less likely to achieve a degree, to gain a first or upper second, to move on to graduate employment or study, or to obtain any employment (HEFCE 2013).

Our focus is on the attainment gap between white and BME students who gain a first or upper second-class degree. Of all UK domiciled students graduating in 2014 across the UK 75.6% of white students achieved a 1st or 2:1, but only 60.4% of BME students – a gap of 15.2 percentage points (Equality Challenge Unit 2015). Or, to put it another way, 25% more of the white student cohort received a 1st or 2:1 than the BME student cohort.

While there is a variation in attainment across the broad ethnic groups, with Black African students doing least well and Chinese students doing best, all perform less well than white students. This is in contrast to schools where many ethnic minorities outperform white pupils (DfE 2015).

Despite the scale and persistence of the attainment gap, and the fact that it dwarfs the much more widely discussed differences related to gender or class, it has until recently received relatively little attention and has tended to be explained in terms of student characteristics, the 'student deficit', rather than institutional failings.

This paper describes the policy and research context and Kingston University's approach to addressing the attainment gap as a basis for a wider roundtable discussion of this complex issue. Two related papers explore interventions which are attracting particular interest in the light of the Teaching Excellence Framework, the use of value added scores and the development of an inclusive curriculum.

What causes the gap?

There is growing awareness that the causes of the attainment gap are complex and multi-causal. The narrative has tended to focus on the 'deficiency' model in relation to student factors such as entry qualifications, socio economic status, work and family commitments or cultural differences. However, this view has been challenged by studies that controlled for many of these issues.

An analysis of 65,000 UK students by Broecke and Nicholls (2007) found that controlling for a range of factors did reduce the attainment gap but 'being from a minority ethnic community [was] still statistically significant in explaining final attainment' (p. 3)

A recent report by HEFCE (2015) compared results of over 280,000 students graduating from English universities in 2013-14 and showed that the attainment gap of 16 percentage points (76% White vs 60% BME) was only reduced to 15 percentage points when controlling for entry qualifications, age, disability, participation of local areas measure, sex, subject studied, previous school type and institution attended.

We have therefore shifted our attention from the student, to look more at the relationship between the student and the institution.

An institution-wide approach

The key elements of our approach have been

1*. Raising awareness across the institution*

We undertook a year of intense activity including focused institutional communications, discussions with faculty and directorate staff to raise awareness of the attainment gap and bring people together to discuss what could be done about it. A consensus was reached on both the size of the task and the need to confront it.

2. Setting an institutional Key Performance Indicator (KPI)

The governors were invited and agreed to make this an institutional priority. We believe this to be a first in a large UK university

3. Getting the metric right: using value added data

A key component of the KU approach has been the development and use of Value Added (VA) data, as created for The Guardian newspaper league tables. The key to the VA approach is that it removes the influence of entry qualifications and subject of study. VA data has been produced for faculties, schools and courses for the last six years. It has proven to be both a very powerful way of presenting the attainment gap and communicating this to staff. Its use as an intervention and outcome measure is discussed in more detail in the next paper.

4.Improving institutional processes

The KPI is part of the annual planning round; course metrics; and quality assurance processes. Evidence of addressing equalities issues is a criterion for recruitment as well as promotion.

5*. Enhancing the knowledge and skills of staff*

In particular we have focused on:

a) Encouraging productive discussions about race. Conversations about gender equality seemed to engage more staff than conversations about race. Through regular letters from the VC, meetings with course teams to discuss their VA scores and unconscious bias training we have sought to encourage staff to talk constructively about race and to recognise that a colour blind approach which 'treats everyone the same' will not address the problem

b) Developing an Excellence Framework for an Inclusive Curriculum. There is evidence that suggests that when racial and ethnic minority students connect to the cultures of their campuses, they are more likely to succeed (eg Gonzalez 2003) . Three workshops explore why it is important to adopt this approach in learning and teaching practice and provide practical guidance and support in developing curriculum content, teaching practice and assessment strategies. We discuss this in more detail later.

6 Working with students

There are risks in highlighting the attainment gap. We have worked closely with the Student Association and course reps (training nearly 150) to ensure effective two way communication with our students.

7 Collaborating with others

Kingston has led a Higher Education Academy funded project to collaborate with three other universities to explore good practice

References

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