

Does diversifying curricula reduce White/BAME awarding gaps? Lessons from a process evaluation

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Imperatives to eliminate racial inequalities in higher education (HE) have led to calls for diversification of curricula. Yet we do not know whether diversifying curricula will contribute to reducing “awarding gaps” between White students and Black, Asian and minority ethnic students. This study draws from a wider evaluation that examined the effects of diversification on students’ achievement in first year social science modules. We report on the implementation and process evaluation that determined whether the intervention was implemented as planned and worked according to the theory of change. We compared two “reformed” modules to two matched “comparator” modules (n=352). We measured diversification in four ways: reading lists, lecture slides, assessments, and students’ perceptions in surveys and focus groups. We found different patterns of diversification across different measures and little relation between curricular measures and students’ perceptions. We highlight lessons about evaluating complex curricular interventions, particularly those seeking to diversify curricula.

Full paper

Introduction

Calls to diversify or decolonise higher education curricula (Douglas,

Shockley & Toldson 2020; Peters 2018; Thomas & Jivraj, 2020) have gained traction given increased global attention to racialised inequalities. In England, disparities in outcomes persist between White students and Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) students (Advance HE 2020). The nature of the curriculum has been identified as one cause of these gaps (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015; Dale-Rivas, 2019; UUK, 2019). Universities are now responding with a variety of initiatives, particular attending to diversifying reading lists (Adewumi and Mitton 2021; Borkin 2021; Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2020; Thomas, 2021).

While there is qualitative evidence about racially minoritised students' perceptions of their curricula and its impact on them (Thomas and Jivraj 2020; Harper, 2013; Harper et al, 2018; Meda, 2020), we do not know whether diversifying curricula will lead to better outcomes for BAME students or close awarding gaps between White and BAME students. This study reports on a process evaluation of the pilot of "Kappa University's" "Diversity Demonstrated" initiative designed to include more BAME perspectives on reading lists, making it more culturally sensitive. It is theorised to increase students' engagement and, consequently, achievement. The initiative involved a student-led reading list audit, student focus groups, and debriefs with module convenors across core social science modules. The intervention lead interviewed module convenors following the audit and student debrief. If module convenors discussed detailed plans for diversifying reading lists, those modules were deemed reformed. If not, those modules were deemed comparators.

The research questions were:

RQ1) Was the intervention implemented as planned? (were reformed modules more diversified than comparator modules?) If not, why not?

RQ2) Did it work according to the theory of change? (i.e. did students perceive differences between the modules and report differences in engagement with reformed versus comparator modules?)

Methods

We used a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design to compare two reformed modules with two matched comparator modules (n=352; 38% BAME; 77% female), with a particular focus on BAME students' experiences. We researched one iteration of each focal module, taught in the same term in 2020-21. Each module was a required module in its social science degree programme at level 4 worth 15 credits, running over 12 weeks with a typical teaching pattern combining lectures and small group seminars, longer reading lists with a variety of sources, and two to three take home, individually written assignments (1000-2500 words).

To address RQ1, we undertook content analyses of curricular materials for the four focal modules to develop three measures of diversification: 1) % of BAME authorship on core readings; 2) % representation of racially minoritised individuals in lecture images and; 3) the cultural sensitivity of assessments. To address RQ2 we surveyed students (n=158, 126 Female; 54 BAME) about the cultural sensitivity of the modules (Thomas & Quinlan, 2021) and conducted four focus groups (18 BAME). We also surveyed students on two measures of engagement (interest and interactions with teachers), which we theorised would mediate between perceptions of cultural sensitivity of the curriculum and attainment.

Results

The four focal modules were implemented as planned insofar as the reformed modules had higher percentages of BAME authors on their core reading lists than the comparator modules. However, the two comparator modules had higher percentages of lecture images likely to be inspiring to BAME students than reformed modules. Three of the four modules had at least one culturally sensitive assignment. Overall, the highest levels of diversification were only 22% for BAME authorship and 24% for inspiring images.

BAME students perceived modules as less culturally sensitive than their white peers, reported significantly lower interest in their modules and lower perceptions of the quality of their relationships with teachers than white students. There were no statistically significant differences between students' perceptions of the cultural sensitivity of reformed modules versus comparator modules. Culturally sensitive assignments was the only measure of

diversification that significantly predicted BAME students' interest. BAME students perceived some efforts at inclusion as tokenistic.

Discussion

Diversification involves more than reading lists. The study contributes to the field by developing three different methods of analysing the diversification of curricular materials, showing that reading list diversification may not coincide with diversification of lecture images or assignments. The “dose” of “diversity” on all three measures of curricular diversification was low relative to the percentage of BAME students. Perhaps because of these low doses, BAME and white students have different experiences of the same curriculum. Research on the impact of culturally sensitive assignments on students' interest and attainment are promising next steps.

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