

Narrowing awarding gaps: the contributory role of placements and foundation year programmes

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

In 2019 the Office for Students (OfS) launched the B3 criteria, which sets for all students three measures selected to represent successful delivery of higher education. This paper presents the results of an extended ordinal probit model seeking to make use of institutional data from an English university to assess the evolution of the awarding gap over the undergraduate degree programme. We contribute to the understanding of awarding gaps by looking at the data longitudinally, in terms of the student's journey through their programme.

Focusing on the key stages of continuation and success, we find the awarding gap for BAME students increases over the degree programme and that there is scope to target placements and foundation years to support the closure of these gaps. In addition, our preliminary results suggest some benefit to using institutional data to look at the evolution of awarding gaps over the degree programme.

Full paper

In 2019 the Office for Students (OfS), the regulator for English Universities, launched the B3 criteria, a set of conditions including absolute outcomes and relative outcomes to benchmarks with other universities in the sector. These criteria were set for students in all levels of study (undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research) against three measures selected to represent successful delivery of higher education:

1. continuation and completion, considering the proportion of students who successfully progressing through the first year on the programme of study and ultimately finishing the course.
2. degree outcomes, including both the proportion of students obtaining a good degree (1st or 2:1) and differentials outcomes by various student characteristics.
3. graduate employment, focusing on the proportion of students gaining a graduate job or higher-level study in higher education.

The introduction of the B3 criteria is one of three measures in which the OfS now repeatedly measures the quality of higher education provision within England. The other two are largely focused on the experience within undergraduate study in England. The first of these is the Access and Participation plans (APP), which focused on differential access into higher education and the subsequent differentials in obtaining success in terms of degree outcomes and progression in terms of graduate outcomes. The second is the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which awards bronze, silver and gold to institutions based on their students continuation, success and progression through their programmes of study together with an reflective account of the wider institution support for the students in their care.

This suite of measures from the OfS provides a series of stages for students on their journey through higher education. The pre-university stage in which fair access for all is monitored (access APP), the journey through higher education in which students need to pass successfully through the stages of their programme to finish (continuation APP, TEF and B3), a measure of how well they complete their programme in terms of the grades awarded (success APP, TEF and B3) and ultimately their successful progression into graduate employment or further study (progression APP, TEF and B3). Of all the conditions set, those in the B3 criteria represent the toughest set of conditions.

In addition to the focus on the student journey and associated metrics, the focus on differential outcomes for different groups of students provides a focus for research in the area of eliminating these gaps in outcomes. The work of the What Works Centre Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) provides an landscape encouraging universities in England to focus on the causal evaluation of their various initiatives, to provide evidence of the impact of university interventions on the closure of these gaps in access and outcomes between different groups of students. Whilst the dominant feature of work at TASO is the use of randomised controlled trails to assess programme effectiveness, there is growing evidence that exploiting natural experiment designs and institutional data can prove to be a fruitful avenue to provide causal evidence (Cagliesi, Hawkes and Smith 2023, Cagliesi and Hawkes 2023). This paper builds on this approach and makes use of institutional data from an English university to assess the evolution of the awarding gap over the course of the undergraduate degree programme. We consider the key stages of continuation (moving successfully onto the second year of study) and ultimately success in terms of degree award.

We use an extended ordinal probit model to explain variation in an ordered categorical dependent variable (degree classifications) as a function of a series of independent variables while accounting endogenous sample selection.

We estimated the eoprobit using clustered Standard Error to account for variability across cohort. Our key results show that whilst there is no significant difference in continuation outcomes for BAME students, these appear by the end of the degree programme with Black students having significantly lower results than their white counterparts. The results are presented both including the placement students and not, the placement results suggest there is a benefit in terms of grades from doing a placement year.

We find the awarding gap for BAME students increases over the course of the degree programme and that there is scope to target placements and foundation years to support the closure of these gaps. In addition our preliminary results suggest some benefit to using institutional data to look at the evolution of awarding gaps over the degree programme.

References

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