

Access and Participation Plans and the Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap: Widening Participation, Accountability and Research.

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This paper focuses on the Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap (EDAG) and uses comparative data from the Access and Participation Plans (APPs – a regulatory requirement linked to Widening Participation) of 6 HEIs to explore the tensions inherent in the Widening Participation agenda. Combining corpus linguistics-aided discourse analysis (Perez-Paredes 2020), critical discourse analysis and perspectives from Critical Race Theory, the paper will explore the ways in which a racialised 'gap' is being conceptualised and what assumptions these reveal about HE, teaching and learning in HE and how to bring about change. Problematising the production of knowledge in this area through statistics, the paper ends by proposing that research rooted in a racially literate methodology is essential to illuminate the causes of the EDAG. Such a methodology would need to foreground the lived experiences of black and brown students, the perspectives of teaching staff and of community participants.

Full paper

From its inception, Widening Participation in HE in the UK has embodied two contradictory impulses. On the one hand, rooted in a general appeal centred on social justice, its stated aims were to increase access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, lower-income households, and other under-represented groups; on the other, it has drawn on a neoliberal instrumentalist discourse which positions HE as a producer of human capital serving national economic interests (Harrison and Waller 2017). The consolidation of a marketized architecture for HE has seen a series of performance indicators including the Teaching Excellence Framework and the National Student Survey complemented with regulatory mechanisms that oversee the implementation of WP.

The Office for Students (OfS), established as a new HE regulator by the Higher Education Research Act (2017), is empowered to monitor HEIs' performance against mandatory WP

targets as detailed in universities' Access and Participation Plans (APPs). APPs are a performative mechanism that supposedly make HEIs accountable for an approximate spend of £800 million from tuition income on outreach work (OfS, 2019) in any given year. Performance against a range of targets is detailed in these publicly available self-assessment documents that present a series of metrics related to the access, achievement, completion and destinations of students from under-represented groups and that evaluate outreach initiatives (French et al 2025) to increase access into HE. Amongst these targets, the Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap (EDAG) refers to the statistical disparity in the percentage of students from marginalized ethnic backgrounds who are awarded a first or upper-second class undergraduate degree compared to their white peers (TASO 2023).

The historical persistence of the EDAG is signalled by numerous reports (Mountford-Zimdars et al 2015, HESA 2024) but as a performance metric, it has a greater significance for post-1992 universities whose student profiles typically include more students from different racial groups often overlapping with a broader range of socio-economic backgrounds and age ranges. This intersectionality signals that the causes of the EDAG may originate in an interplay between social factors and university assessment and teaching and learning practices.

In their reliance on performance data, APPs can be viewed as integral to the marketized architecture of HE. In relation to EDAGs, OfS's regulatory powers have created the conditions for new accountability procedures to take root; for example, quality improvement practices may involve HE teachers presenting performance data to a panel of more senior staff, to account for any existing 'gaps' and to propose steps to address them.

Worryingly, the culture and practices engendered by high-stakes performance monitoring effectively short-circuit authentic change while disguising inaction beneath a misrepresentative veneer of (statistical) data. Performativity and the fabrication of data are amongst the well-researched and evidenced effects of the deployment of datafication in schools (Ball 2002) and further education colleges (Smith and Duckworth 2022). Furthermore, OfS's pseudoscientific approach to APP evaluation privileges RCTs despite critiques of their use for the EDAG (Stevenson et al, 2019). The expectation of annual 'changes' privileges gaming of returns and responsabilisation of lecturers for EDAG changes, over longer-term structural changes at an institutional level.

Our research used corpus linguistics-aided discourse approaches (Perez-Paredes 2020) informed by Critical Race Theory in an analysis of the APPs of 6 HEIs. The approach involved the formulation of research questions and the identification of key terms within the corpus of APPs (Anthony 2021). A discursive analysis of the context and usage, the qualities and features attributed to different social actors, phenomena and processes followed (Wodak 2015, Datonji and Amousou 2019). Initial findings provide insights into how/why the EDAG persists and how the APPs themselves risk being complicit in the structural and systemic racism it signals. They suggest that reliance on a metrics and data-focused system will inevitably incentivise performativity which is likely to obscure and even

disable any long-term improvement in teaching and learning. To that extent, APPs are themselves entangled in the reproduction of practices that produce the EDAG.

Within the APP as a technology of accountability, the EDAG is a denuded (mis)representation of lived experiences of racism. Its datafication – a transformation into the disembodied inauthenticity of statistical data – signifies symbolically a refusal to acknowledge the embodied experience of systemic, structural and everyday racism as experienced by students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. Research on the EDAG requires a participatory methodology that centres different embodied ways of knowing. Without that, APPs will continue to function to prioritise a neoliberal purposing of HE that ignores how high-stakes performance data technologies reproduce the very inequalities that the WP agenda claims to address.