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Abstract

This brief paper draws upon part of the findings of a HEA Sponsored evaluation of work conducted in 8 Universities across UK aimed at addressing the attainment gap between BME and White students. Following a grounded theory approach, semi-structured interviews with staff at each of the institutions were analysed and three main themes identified: Organisational Sensitivities: Language: and, Ownership. This paper provides a brief discussion of the issues identifying two areas where positive change is needed in institutional practice. The conclusion highlights the complexities of the underlying issues impacting and shaping the Attainment Gap before reaffirming the need to identify and evaluate which interventions are most likely to be transferable across the Sector so as to address the issues and thus enhance the experiences of all students.

Introduction

Despite the fact that anomalies in degree attainment between White and BME students were first identified in the late 1990's by Bhattacharyya et al. (2003), the issue remains largely outside the public consciousness (Law et al., 2004; Deem et al., 2005) with the majority of the population unaware that an 'attainment gap' exists. Indeed in many institutions the existence of a 'gap' in the attainment of BME and White students is a taboo subject, that colleagues are afraid to acknowledge, let alone discuss. Moreover, previous studies indicate that whilst disparities in degree attainment may be statistically significant, they are exceptionally difficult to explain (Turney et al., 2002; Back, 2004).

In seeking to address this, the HEA sponsored 8 Universities to put into place 'positive interventions' aimed at addressing the attainment gap at an institutional level, concurrently two external evaluators were commissioned. This paper draws upon the findings of the evaluation.

Methodology & Findings

A mixed methodological approach has been adopted enabling a comparative cross-institutional analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. This paper reports on the emergent findings of part of this meta-analysis, qualitative interviews with academic colleagues working in each institution.

Following grounded theory techniques in which the data was analysed using axial coding, three main themes have been identified: Organisational Sensitivities: Language: and, Ownership. Each of these is now briefly discussed.

- **Organisational Sensitivities**

From a project-wide perspective, one of the main institutional challenges relates to the sensitive nature of the BME attainment gap; colleagues are reluctant to openly discuss the nature of the 'gap' within their individual institution, indeed only one project lead was prepared to do so:

The gap is highest between Black African and White British students. It's 29.4% overall. Following that the gap between Pakistani students and White students is 27.3%...

Whilst on the whole organisational culture meant that the attainment gap was deemed too politically and culturally sensitive to discuss in terms of quantifiable figures, all project leaders expressed concern at the challenges afforded not only by the gap but notably, by the fact that the subject itself is generally deemed too sensitive to talk about.

- **Language**

Perhaps reflective of the sensitivity felt by most staff in acknowledging the 'attainment gap', issues relating to language were widely expressed. Indeed, the potential consequences of miscommunication represent the most significant finding in terms of the student experience, particularly in relation to students' misconceptions of learning outcomes, assessment requirements and feedback:

Miscommunication around assessment criterion is a big issue. The students don't know what the lecturers were asking.

There is concern about how we write our advice to students about how they write their assignments and what we're looking for. ... It's the old age problem of whether students really understand what we're looking for.

The thing of whether students understand what they're getting back in terms of feedback is important. Tutors write using academic language. Students don't always get it.

Other language related challenges reflected questions of 'how' to discuss the attainment gap in a culture where 'labelling' people according to ethnicity is deemed politically incorrect.

- **Ownership**

The final theme to emerge thus far from the data relates to 'ownership', particular in relation to how staff may be supported in addressing the attainment gap:

We didn't want to impose our suggested solutions onto our colleagues so what we did was to raise the issues with them and then get them to think about how they can deal with the issues in a local context.

Having raised staff awareness and acquired institutional buy-in, Project leaders turned their attention to the student body engendering in 'shared ownership' of the issues which in turn led to shared solutions:

We've managed to raise awareness amongst the student body about the attainment gap by working with the NUS and giving lectures to the course-reps.

Discussion

Bringing together the findings, Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic representation of the emergent Conceptual Framework.

Figure 1: The Multi-Layered Nature of the BME Attainment Gap

In looking at the project findings as a whole, the need to expand the curriculum so that it is no longer dominated by a Western, White-British paradigm is one factor that reaches across all three emergent themes. Those institutions that have done this have not only lowered the attainment gap but have also improved student engagement across the board. However, it is important to recognise that whilst the attainment gap itself is universally problematic, it's underlying causes, and hence solutions, vary greatly dependent upon institutional context. The sensitivity around the issues make the subject almost 'taboo' with many colleagues expressing dismay and disbelief when presented with evidence of the gap in their own teaching.

Conclusion: Recommendations

Two main recommendations to enhance student experience are made:

1. **Institutional Support: Two main areas requiring action are identified:**
 - Executive Support: The sensitive and urgency of the issues means that Executive backing is key to future change at institutional level
 - Awareness Raising: In order to address the issues, institutions need to acknowledge the 'attainment gap' raising staff awareness and encouraging staff and students to work together to address the issues.

2. **Language: Issues related to language reflect two main areas:**

- Sense-Making in terms of Assessment & Feedback: The need for colleagues to clarify student understanding of assessment requirements and to make sure that feedback is given in a clear and accessible manner is paramount to promoting the student experience.
- Curriculum Development: Academic standards need to remain high, but there is clearly a need for a paradigm shift away from 'traditional' and often 'outdated' pedagogies and content towards a more inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum.

In conclusion, this brief paper has begun to hint at the complexities of the underlying issues impacting and shaping the BME Attainment Gap. Research is on-going to identify and evaluate which interventions are most likely to be transferable across the Sector so as to address the issues and enhance the experiences of all students.

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