Moving beyond good intentions towards inclusion: What the Changing Mindsets project reveals about unequal student experiences and outcomes (0305)

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Abstract: This paper explores initial findings from the two-year Office for Students (OfS) funded attainment gap project titled "Changing Mindsets: Reducing stereotype threat and implicit bias as barriers to student success". The project is focused on addressing unequal student outcomes for two student groups: Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students and socio-economically disadvantaged students. Initial analysis of data suggests that the attainment gaps cannot be explained by a student's tariff on entry (qualifications) into university, which is aligned with findings from previous attainment gap research (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015). Additionally, findings indicate that staff and students who have growth mindsets are more likely to want to create inclusion and to overcome bias. Staff and students with fixed mindsets are more likely to hold stereotype beliefs. Findings from the project are intended to inform higher education policies and practices to address inequalities in students' experiences and outcomes.

Introduction

The National Union of Students and Universities UK recently launched a joint initiative to tackle attainment gaps across the higher education sector. Universities UK also recently launched the Opportunities for Everyone campaign and the Office for Students has called for faster change in the sector to address the inequalities students face in higher education. The Changing Mindsets intervention is designed to be part of a larger institutional strategy to address persistent inequalities in student experiences and outcomes.

The Changing Mindsets project is a multi-university partnership led by the University of Portsmouth and including the University of the Arts London, the University of Brighton, Canterbury Christ Church University, and the University of Winchester. The project is a student and staff workshop-based intervention that builds a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017). The intervention aims to close the attainment gap in student experience, retention, progression, academic attainment and employability by changing mindsets and eroding stereotype threat (Steele, 1997) and implicit bias (Devine et al, 2012) as barriers to learning. The intervention workshops and evaluation research is underpinned by psychological (Dweck, 2017; Devine et al, 2012), sociological (Bhopal and Preston, 2012), and educational (Apple, 2015) concepts and theories.

Methodology

All five partner institutions have adopted the same core evaluation methods. Each institution has collected pre-cohort attainment data and pre and post intervention data. Anonymised pre-cohort attainment and outcome student data was collected from each institution for the previous five years in the schools and programmes in which the intervention has been run. Pre-intervention data included online surveys with both staff and students within the schools and programmes involved in the intervention.

Post-intervention data included online surveys with both staff and students within the schools and programmes involved in the intervention. Additionally, interviews were conducted with students and interviews and focus groups were conducted with staff. Attainment data for the students in the intervention schools and programmes will be collected at the end of their first year of the academic year. Longitudinal data will be collected through Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT).

For cohort one, the targets include delivering the intervention to 2,600 students and 400 academic staff across the partnership. Data collection and analysis for cohort one is scheduled to conclude in August 2018 and the final report of both cohort one and cohort two data will be published in March 2018. As of 1st June 2018, the current data collected for cohort one includes five years' worth of student outcomes within the pilot schools and programmes; 1154 student surveys, 230 staff surveys, and 50 staff and student interviews and focus groups across the project partnership.

Initial Findings and Recommendations

Whilst the project is still underway, there are five main overarching preliminary findings. Institutional average attainment gaps may hide substantial variations and outliers. Across the project partnership, findings within the pre-cohort data (five-year average attainment gaps for the schools and programmes participating in the intervention) vary widely, including lows of three percent and highs of more than 30 percent. The pre-cohort data collected across the project indicate that the attainment gaps cannot be explained by a student's tariff on entry (qualifications) into university, which is aligned with findings from previous attainment gap research (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015). Staff and students who have growth mindsets are more likely to want to create inclusion and to overcome bias. Within the pre-survey data for both staff and students, there are statistically significant positive correlations between growth mindsets and creating inclusion and overcoming bias. Staff and students with fixed mindsets are more likely to hold stereotype beliefs. Within the pre-survey data for both staff and students, there are statistically significant negative correlations between growth mindsets and stereotype beliefs. Most staff and student survey participants indicated that they are committed to speaking out against hate and to making all students feel welcome and part of the campus community. However, nearly all staff and students who completed the survey also admit to unintentionally stereotypical thoughts.

The initial findings from cohort one provide the basis for five recommendations for universities to consider as they build better strategies to address persistent inequalities in

student experiences and outcomes. Universities should develop strategies to tackle attainment gaps using learner analytics to examine existing institutional data to better understand patterns of inequalities at the school or programme level. Given the potential for variation in attainment gaps even within the same faculties (or similar disciplines) within the same institution, university strategies to address inequalities should be tailored to account for those differences. University strategies for tackling attainment gaps should include myth-busting campaigns to dispel widely-held erroneous beliefs about why inequalities in student experiences and outcomes, including attainment gaps, persist (including the myth of tariff on entry explaining attainment gaps). As our findings indicate that most staff and students are likely to want to actively work towards creating inclusion, universities should provide opportunities for staff and students to work in partnership to develop Growth Mindsets and to learn strategies for breaking bias habits. University strategies to address inequalities should be multifaceted, including multiple research-informed and evaluated approaches, and should be embedded within the institutional culture in order to contribute towards the possibility of real, lasting change.

References

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