

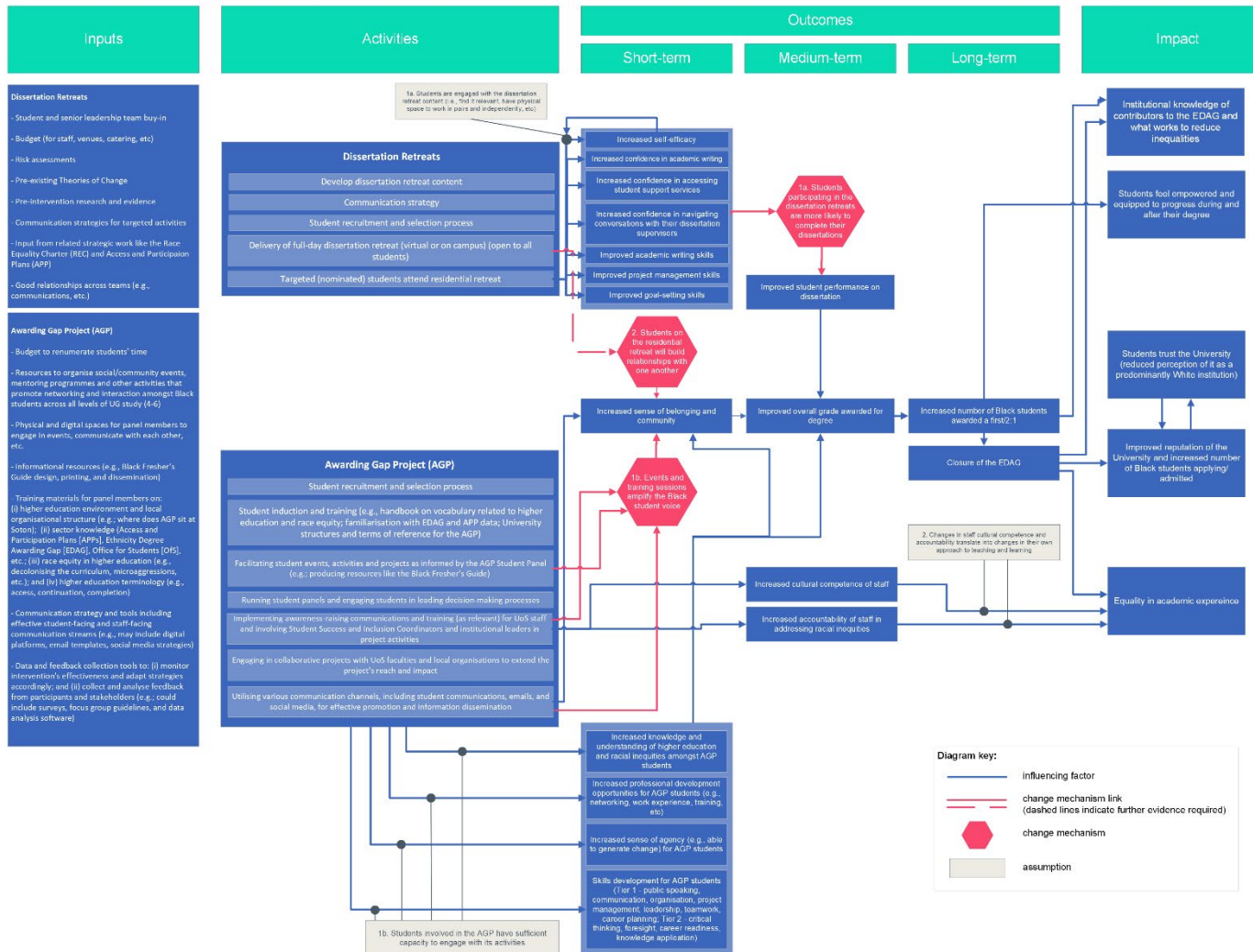
# Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC) University of Southampton – Dissertation Retreats and Student Panels

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**Dissertation Retreats**  
Enhanced Theory of Change



1\_ Click to view larger version of diagram



**ENHANCED THEORY OF CHANGE UNDERPINNING NARRATIVE**

VERSION

**Version 2 – March 2024**

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NAME

**Using dissertation retreats and student panels to improve Black student outcomes at the University of Southampton**

## WHY IS THE INTERVENTION BEING RUN?

As part of their University Strategy, Access and Participation Plan (APP) and Race Equality Charter (REC) to address the racial inequities within the student experience, the University of Southampton (UoS) Widening Participation and Social Mobility (WPSM) directorate has developed three workstreams themed around Curriculum, Culture and Community, identified by sector research and current students as key areas of focus for change. From these areas, UoS has selected two activities to form part of a multi-intervention Theory of Change (ToC), both of which target full-time UK domiciled Black undergraduate students and have the shared goal of reducing the ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG) for Black students at UoS, with individual objectives that contribute to that overarching aim.

The two interventions covered in this evaluation plan (i.e., the dissertation retreats and the Awarding Gap Project (AGP)) align with the University's broader goals of reducing the EDAG between white and Black students to 10.9% by 2027-28, as part of its commitment to race equity, recognised in its Race Equality Charter (REC) award and the 2024-25 to 2027-28 APP.

**Rationale for the dissertation retreats:** It is expected that improving dissertation awarding would make a significant difference to the overall awarding outcome, as a double-weighted module. More specifically, undertaking an independent research project such as an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) positively impacts university awarding outcomes, but Black students are less likely to undertake an EPQ than white students. At UoS, a five-year aggregate period (2016-17-2020-21), shows the awarding gap between Black and white students who *had not* completed an EPQ was 15.4%, compared to 4.2% when students *had* completed the qualification. In some years the awarding gap was entirely reversed. As many parallels exist between the dissertation or final year project and the EPQ, developing and practising the skills required for completing a research project are expected to reduce the awarding gap.

External research into the impact of dissertation retreats (Murray, Rowena & Newton, 2009; Mattsson, Brandin & Hult, 2020; Edwards et al., 2020) shows that retreats boost confidence in writing ability and assists students by providing dedicated, quiet study space, as well as accountability and skills support if needed. Retreats will demonstrate to students the importance of their writing and provide them with strategies which they will be able to use and adapt in future writing projects.

**Rationale for the AGP student-panel:** The AGP launched in 2021 and targets the 18.1% awarding gap between Black and white students. The project is centred around the 'three Cs' - Community, Culture, and Curriculum - it seeks to build trust and a sense of belonging among Black students, a factor crucial for academic success. The project is underpinned by a student panel comprising of Black UK domiciled undergraduates, who lead the development of interventions like the Black Fresher's Guide to foster inclusivity.

### References

Murray, Rowena, and Mary Newton. 2009. "Writing Retreat as Structured Intervention: Margin or Mainstream?" *Higher Education Research and Development* 28 (5): 541–553; Kornhaber, Rachel, Merylin Cross, Vasiliki Betihavas, and Heather Bridgman. 2016. "The Benefits and Challenges of Academic Writing Retreats: An Integrative Review." *Higher Education Research and Development* 35 (6): 1210–1227.

Mattsson, J., E.-K. Brandin, and A.-K. Hult. 2020. "Get a Room! How Writing Groups Aid the Development of Junior Academic Staff Writing Practice and Writer Identity." *Journal of Academic Writing* 10 (1): 59–74.

Edwards, B, K Horwood, A Pusey, M Hope, and D. Haigh. 2020. "Making Space for the Dissertation: A Rural Retreat for Undergraduate Students." *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* 8 (1): 147–156.



## WHO IS THE INTERVENTION FOR?

### **Dissertation Retreats:**

The dissertation retreats are targeted at full-time UK domiciled Black undergraduate students. In addition to considering ethnicity, the eligibility criteria for the retreats also prioritises students on the *Awarding Gap Panel* (in the AGP), [Ignite Your Success](#) (IMDQ1 or care experienced) and any Black final year students. The nominations process for the retreats is tiered:

- Tier 1 – Nominated students who are supported by our Student Inclusion team (Ignite Your Success, Awarding Gap Project, Care Experienced and Estranged, and mature students). Students nominated by Student Inclusion staff.
- Tier 2 – Students involved in any of the following projects but have not been nominated by a staff member - Ignite Your Success, Awarding Gap Project, Care Experienced and Estranged, and mature students.
- Tier 3 – Any student who meets the retreat eligibility criteria (IMDQ1, Black/mixed Black ethnicity, Care Experienced and Estranged, and mature students).

Across all three groups, students on track for a borderline 2.1 or below are prioritised. Only students in their final UG year and home domiciled are eligible.

### **AGP:**

The main beneficiary group is UK domiciled undergraduate Black students (both those on the Awarding Gap Panel and in the general student population). It should be noted that auxiliary beneficiaries may include **all** Black students because of the community-building elements of the AGP, even though the project is not formally monitoring the attainment of international Black students for example.

## WHAT IS THE INTERVENTION?

The Dissertation Retreats intervention is a dissertation development programme, comprising of a fully funded residential writing retreat (for approximately 20 participants held between the 29<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2024), one 1.5-day mini writing retreat held on campus, and a DIY “retreat toolkit” held online which can be accessed asynchronously. The retreat on campus was re-developed into a ONE day session with 0.5 delivered online due to adverse weather conditions preventing safe access to campus. The target participants of these retreats include other groups of students (e.g., students from IMDQ1 postcodes) as well as Black students. In tandem, ongoing personalised and enhanced support (such as that from Personal Academic Tutors) aims to empower students to excel.

The residential writing retreat will offer two structured days dedicated to writing the dissertation. Prior to the retreat, staff from the Post-Entry Academic Skills team will provide students with group coaching sessions to help them feel prepared and in the best position to make the most of the dedicated writing time.

On arrival at the location of the retreat, Cumberland Lodge, students will be asked to reflect on the progress of their dissertation and discuss what they would like to achieve over the course of the two dedicated writing days. The two days will be led by facilitators from the Post-Entry Academic Skills team and aligned to a clear schedule. The emphasis is placed on the processes of writing but there will be sessions to explore the practices, creativity and skills involved in writing. The writing retreat will be structured so that writing sessions are collective and interspersed with regular breaks from writing to maintain momentum and flow. Writing and Maths & Stats specialists will also be available for students who wish to discuss the progress of their dissertation work.

The AGP student panel is made up of full-time UK domiciled Black undergraduate students who oversee the curation of student-focused interventions, with resources and support provided by staff. This is a paid position and the panel members’ responsibilities include facilitating student events and collaborating with key stakeholders to harness student voice in institution-wide projects.

Implementation of the AGP and its student panel includes:

- Running the application process and recruitment protocol.

- Inducting and training Black undergraduate students for the student panel, focusing on leadership and public speaking skills, higher education (HE) and racial equity information/terminology.
- Delivering a framework or schedule of events/activities (e.g., social events, networking, community-building, etc).
- Facilitating student events, activities and projects as informed by the AGP Student Panel (e.g., producing resources like the Black Fresher's Guide).
- Running student panels and engaging students in leading decision-making processes.
- Implementing awareness-raising communications and training (as relevant) for UoS staff and involving student inclusion coordinators and institutional leaders in project activities.
- Engaging in collaborative projects with UoS faculties and local organisations to extend the project's reach and impact.
- Utilising various communication channels, including student communications, emails, and social media, for effective promotion and information dissemination.

## WHO IS DELIVERING THE INTERVENTION?

### **Dissertation Retreats:**

Dissertation retreats will be delivered by the Writing and Study Skills Officers, who regularly run academic skills sessions, and will facilitate the tailored sessions with the students. The facilitators will manage the time and space, but students will be responsible for their own productivity during the workshops. The broader WPSM team will support funding and resourcing the retreats, as well as communications for recruitment, and there will be additional staffing from the Student Inclusion Manager. Personal Academic Tutors will provide auxiliary support for the programme aims re: dissertation guidance/advice.

### **AGP:**

The AGP is primarily delivered by the Student Success and Inclusion Co-ordinator and the Student Inclusion Manager, as well as all panel members (both tiers 1 and 2), local organisations (including Black History Month South, Our Version Media, John Hansard Gallery and Southampton City Council), and 'guest' staff who request to consult with the panel (usually staff within Professional Services, for examples the Residences team).

## HOW IS THE INTERVENTION DELIVERED?

### **Dissertation retreats:**

The dissertation retreats are delivered in a variety of formats to improve their accessibility. There is a residential retreat that allows students to remove themselves from their normal study environment and fully dedicate their time to improving their academic writing skills and/or focusing on writing their dissertation. The 1.5-day retreat was in-person and took place during core hours. Students will be asked to bring their own laptops. If they do not have access to personal laptops, arrangements will be made for these students. Writing materials will be provided by the Post-Entry Academic Skills team, including pens, notepads, large writing sheets for shared work and marker pens.

In terms of procedure, the dissertation retreats involve coordination across multiple teams including the Enhancement Team and the Student Success team (both within the WPSM) as well as the Data, Analytics and Insight Team (to provide contact details for eligible students), the Centre for Higher Education Practice, and the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice team. In developing the sessions, a number of key activities must take place including the development of a communication strategy to recruit target students, risk assessments, refinement of recruitment protocol (e.g., eligibility criteria, reviewing applications), and designing the programme contents, learning outcomes and structure. While implementing this intervention, key tasks include training all delivery staff, running the individual retreat sessions, collecting demographic information from participating students, and engaging with students' Personal Academic Tutors. Alongside these, evaluation data will be collected throughout the delivery of the retreats and disseminated to related teams (e.g., REC and APP teams) and senior governing committees, as well as to colleagues delivering the sessions to inform the next iteration of the retreats.

### **AGP:**

As it is in its third year, the AGP student panel has established recruitment and application procedures with potential participants. The opportunity to participate on the project is advertised at the beginning of the academic year through various internal student channels, at welcome week events and in the Black Fresher's Guide. Students must complete a short application (in which they state whether they would like to apply to be a member of the panel, the Board, or both). Applications are shortlisted anonymously by the previous year's panel. Shortlisted candidates are then invited for group interviews. Following the interviews, candidates are assigned offers based on their overall performance (i.e., deciding which role to offer candidates who applied for both the Panel and the Board). Students from last year's panel are automatically offered a position on the Board the following year and are not required to undergo the recruitment process again (this is a recent change made to retain previous panel members, whilst ensuring recruitment for an entirely new student panel remained possible).

Upon being recruited to the panel, new participants receive training in leadership, public speaking, and HE and racial equity terminology. Training previously ran via a series of sessions covering different topics (e.g.; intro to data session, race equity session, etc.) delivered in a mixed format (online and in person). For this and future years, training sessions will be delivered in person, as a single, three-hour group training workshop comprised of two parts:

- a general Awarding Gap Project induction (which covers important elements such as data) delivered by Student Inclusion staff; and
- a race equity session delivered by an external consultant (for instance, this year [Don John](#) delivered this part of the workshop).

Students are provided with a training handbook that has all the necessary induction information.

For Tier 1 panellists, there are weekly meetings, and monthly meetings for Tier 2 panellists. In addition to these meetings, the AGP panel:

- Oversees the updating and distribution of the Black Fresher's Guide.

- Multiple events throughout the academic year including 'The Debate', an evening hosted by AGP students to explore current issues around being Black at university, as well as an annual cultural gala, celebrating Black students and allies through music, talks, workshops and social activities.
- Events related to Black History Month.
- Gathering student opinions through surveys and focus groups on the panel and its projects.

Panel and Board meetings are delivered in a mixed format, both online and in-person. However, most of the panel (tier 1) meetings, tend to be online due to the smaller numbers and weekly frequency.

## WHERE IS THE INTERVENTION DELIVERED?

### **Dissertation Retreats:**

The intervention is delivered in a variety of ways, including:

- 1 x residential retreat at Cumberland Lodge (29 – 31 January 2024), with accommodation and catering provided.
- 1 x on-campus mini retreat (1.5 days) at the University Conference Centre (31 October – 2 November 2023) with catering provided.
- 1 x online session hosted on 2 November 2023 (added in as half of the on-campus day could not be delivered due to a storm).

1 x asynchronous DIY “writing retreat” toolkit which will be accessible online.

### **AGP:**

The intervention is delivered through panels and these meetings take place both online and in-person to balance flexibility, accessibility and maintaining participant engagement. The events coordinated and hosted by the panel (i.e., The Debate and cultural gala) are mostly in-person and located on the UoS campus. Black History Month events are a combination of both in-person and online sessions and are hosted across the wider city.



#### HOW MANY TIMES WILL THE INTERVENTION BE DELIVERED? OVER HOW LONG?

The dissertation retreat programme includes:

- A fully funded residential writing retreat (for approximately 20 participants)
- 1x 1.5-day mini writing retreat held on campus
- A DIY “retreat toolkit” held online which can be accessed asynchronously.

With regards to the AGP, to make the panel accessible to a broader group of students, the AGP offers participants the opportunity to contribute at two levels of engagement:

- Tier 1 – Weekly meetings (a standard total of 2 hours of work per week, inclusive of pre-reading or follow-up tasks).
  - These meetings tend to be an hour long and an additional hour is reserved for work outside of meetings such as preparation tasks and hosting events).
- Tier 2 – Monthly meetings (a standard total of 5 hours of work per month inclusive of pre-reading or follow up tasks).
  - These meetings tend to be about two hours long and are co-facilitated by the Student Success and Inclusion Co-ordinator and the Tier 1 panel students. Other working hours are reserved for any preparation tasks or pre-reading, as well as involvement in other work (such as supporting Tier 1 panel with hosting events).

## WILL THE INTERVENTION BE TAILORED?

### **Dissertation Retreats:**

- The intervention will be tailored by providing effective support and referral opportunities to students based on the tiered nomination process.
- Support can be tailored based on academic discipline and stage in dissertation process.
- Writing and Maths & Stats specialists will be available for students who wish to discuss the progress of their dissertation work, ensuring that students from a range of disciplines can engage with tailored support.
- The intervention is tailored by providing a range of joining options to fit with people's needs and commitments (residential. 1.5 days with catering, etc.)

### **AGP:**

- Activities, projects, and outputs are student-led via the panel. This ensures that students are central to the Awarding Gap Project decision making process. Year-on-year, these outputs are determined by students, ensuring they are tailored to students' needs.

#### HOW WILL IMPLEMENTATION BE OPTIMISED?

There are four main strategies for optimising the delivery of the dissertation retreats:

- Training for all staff delivering the retreat sessions.
- Providing delivery staff with feedback from participating students, to be integrated into future iterations of the retreats.
- Developing an enhanced promotion and communication strategy to increase student awareness and participation in the retreats.
- Providing group coaching from the Post-Entry Academic Skills Team for students to help them to feel prepared and in the best position to make the most of the dedicated writing time.

With regards to the AGP, the following approaches have been implemented to optimise the performance of this group:

- Using staff to increase the visibility of the project across the university, city and sector, achieved through working with student communications teams, delivering internal staff training, networking at city-based events, and conference attendance.
- Disseminating the panel's work and outputs at conferences.
- Consistently monitoring student engagement patterns within the panels (e.g., this led to a move towards more in-person meetings last year to increase engagement and motivation of students).
- Involving the panel in the development of other projects across the university, with students playing a consultancy role to amplify the Black student voice and provide insight into the diversity of student perceptions and experiences.

## WHO ARE THE KEY ACTORS / STAKEHOLDERS?

### **Dissertation Retreats:**

- Student retreat attendees
- Dissertation retreat delivery staff – Post-Entry Academic Skills Team’s Writing, Study Skills, and Maths & Stats Officers to provide support and lead sessions at retreats. Student Success’s Student Inclusion Manager to provide pastoral support for students if needed.
- Student facing staff, such as Personal Academic Tutors – providing auxiliary support to programme aims with dissertation guidance/advice
- Widening Participation and Social Mobility (WPSM) Directorate - delivering targeted comms to ensure engagement.

### **AGP:**

- Student panel members (Tier 1 and Tier 2)
- Student Success and Inclusion Co-ordinator – manage and facilitate the project, panels, and outputs to enable and empower student panel members.
- Local government and organisations (e.g. Black History Month South) – the AGP engages with externals to provide elements of panel training such as:
  - Local race equity consultants (i.e., [Don John](#))
  - Southampton City Council
- Residences team, EDI team, Admissions, Student Engagement team – enable successful delivery of some outputs/activities (e.g., Residences team support dissemination of Black Fresher’s Guide)
- Personal Academic Tutors – raising awareness of AGP work, such as Black Fresher’s Guide, and events to wider student population.

- Student-facing teams (e.g., Careers) – identifying those who may be interested/engaged in future panels
- Prospective staff - students involved in the AGP could be prospective staff as the AGP is one way of supporting the student to staff pipeline in Professional Services, where greater staff diversity happens to be a by-product.
- WPSM Directorate
- Head of Student Success and Head of Enhancement
- University Executive Board
- University leadership and senior management - Director of WPSM, Head of EDI, Executive Director of Student Life, Senior Executive Director of Professional Services, Associate VP EDI and Social Justice

## CHANGE MECHANISMS

### **Dissertation Retreats:**

Although mechanisms of change require deeper exploration, it is expected that this programme will help to reduce the awarding gap through intermediate outcomes such as improved dissertation performance and enhanced academic skills, belonging and confidence that contributes to wider degree performance, when compared to participants' baseline average. This project will be evaluated using a quasi-experimental design, comparing participants' outcomes against a control group that has not undertaken the programme.

#### Change mechanism 1a

- Through the dissertation retreat(s), Black students will have the opportunity to develop academic and soft skills (i.e., increased self-efficacy, increased confidence in academic writing, increased confidence in accessing student support services, improved academic writing skills, improved project management skills, improved goal-setting skills). These acquired skills increase the likelihood of these students' completing their dissertation and improve students' performance on the dissertation. This leads to improved overall grades awarded for Black students engaged in the retreat, increasing the number of Black students awarded a "good degree" (1<sup>st</sup> or 2:1), in turn reducing and closing the awarding gap at University of Southampton.
  - It is proposed there is an association between student's self-confidence in abilities, self-efficacy and their academic performance, therefore improving students' confidence around their dissertation (Mardiansyah, 2018; Lane, Lane, Kyprianou, 2004).
  - Research indicates that writing retreat as an intervention can enhance motivation, increase confidence and catalyse a more positive outlook for undergraduate capstone projects (dissertations, independent research project, etc.) (Sangster, 2021).
  - Writing retreats can be a learning tool which enhance students' academic language and writing skills (Makena, 2023; Hamerton & Fraser, 2011; Rentzelas & Harrison, 2020).

#### Change mechanism 2

- Through delivering the dissertation retreat(s), relationships are built between students on the retreat which leads to an increased sense of belonging and community for student attendees. The increased sense of belonging translates to improved overall grades for Black students who engaged with the retreat.
  - Student writing retreats enables peers to foster relationships between each other, and with university staff, allowing community-building (Tremay-Wragg et al., 2021; Maheux-Pelletier, Marsh & Frake-Mistak, 2019).
  - Student engagement, such as in tailored interventions like the Dissertation Retreat, improve student belonging and success (e.g., attainment) (Thomas, 2013).
- This will increase the number of Black students awarded a “good degree” (1<sup>st</sup> or 2:1), in turn reducing and closing the awarding gap at University of Southampton.

**References for dissertation retreat change mechanisms:**

Lane, J., Lane, A. M., & Kyprianou, A. (2004). Self-efficacy, self-esteem and their impact on academic performance. *Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal*, 32(3), 247-256.

Maheux-Pelletier, G., Marsh, H., & Frake-Mistak, M. (2019). The benefits of writing retreats revisited. In *Critical collaborative communities* (pp. 92-105). Brill.

Makena, B. (2023). Perspective Chapter: Writing Retreat-A Trajectory towards Academic Language Enhancement. In *Higher Education-Reflections From the Field*. IntechOpen.

Mardiansyah, R. (2018). A correlation between self-confidence and essay writing achievement. *Edukasi: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pengajaran*, 5(2), 154-166.

Rentzelas, P., & Harrison, E. (2020). Creating a Learning Activity in the Form of a Writing Retreat for Psychology Undergraduate Dissertation Students. *Psychology Teaching Review*, 26(1), 77-82.

Sangster, H. (2023). The use of “writing retreats” in supporting geography and environmental science undergraduate independent research projects. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 47(2), 248-268.

Thomas, L. (2013). Student engagement to improve belonging, retention and success. In *Aspirations, access and attainment* (pp. 109-122). Routledge.

Tremblay-Wragg, É., Mathieu Chartier, S., Labonté-Lemoyne, É., Déri, C., & Gadbois, M. E. (2021). Writing more, better, together: how writing retreats support graduate students through their journey. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(1), 95-106.

Hamerton, H., & Fraser, C. (2011). *Writing Retreats to Improve Skills and Success in Higher Qualifications and Publishing*.

**AGP:**

There is an expectation that the student panel will contribute to reducing the Black awarding gap in several ways. Students will have opportunities to build community and enact changes within the institution which authentically speak to their lived experiences and those of their peers. There is an expectation that outputs like the Black Fresher’s Guide will signal that the University is a welcoming space for Black students, improving their sense of social fit in the institution and their sense of belonging, which is positively associated with awarding (although this is challenging to attribute to causality).



#### Change mechanism 1b

- The Awarding Gap Project (AGP) enables amplification of the Black student voice at University of Southampton by:
  - Running AGP Student Panels to engage Black undergraduate students in leading decision-making processes at the institution.
  - Facilitating student events, activities and projects informed by the student panel (e.g., producing resources like the Black Fresher's Guide); and
  - Implementing awareness-raising communications and training for UoS staff and involving Student Success and Inclusion Coordinators and institutional leaders in AGP activities.
- By amplifying Black student voices, Black students (both on the panels and part of the wider student population) will feel an increased sense of belonging and community. In turn, this leads to improved overall grades awarded for Black students engaged in the retreat, increasing the number of Black students awarded a "good degree" (1<sup>st</sup> or 2:1), in turn reducing and closing the awarding gap at University of Southampton.
  - Early findings from the AGP pilot report found that students developed a sense of belonging through the programme (Chipato, 2022).
  - Through engaging students as partners, students are actively engaged and gain from the process of learning and collaborating. Engaged student learning is positively associated with positive student success outcomes (e.g., attainment) and learning gain (Healey, Flint, Harrington, 2014).
  - Co-creating in higher education provides a transformative intervention to engage students in, as evidenced with co-creating curricula. These transformations positively impact and shape students' ways of working and self-reflection, which change attitudes and behaviours beyond the intervention and into their study (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021).
  - Student partnership and co-creation can foster a sense of belonging in ethnically minoritised students by empowering and amplifying these students' voices within their institution (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021).

**References for AGP change mechanisms:**

Chipato C. (2022). The Awarding Gap Project: Project Pilot Report 2022. Unpublished: Internal University of Southampton report.

Cook-Sather, A. & Seay, K. (2021). 'I was involved as an equal member of the community': how pedagogical partnership can foster a sense of belonging in Black, female students. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 51(6), 733-750.

Healey M, Flint A, Harrington K. Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education: Higher Education Academy, 2014.

Lubicz-Nawrocka T, Bovill C. Do students experience transformation through co-creating curriculum in higher education? *Teaching in Higher Education* 2021.

## ASSUMPTIONS

### **Dissertation Retreats:**

#### Assumption 1a

- We assume students are engaged with the dissertation retreat content (i.e.; find it useful, have space to work effectively in pairs and independently, etc.).
  - This assumption is based off the fact that support and sessions will be tailored to meet students' needs and delivered in a timely and effective manner that ensures they support the dissertation timeline.

### **AGP:**

#### Assumption 1b

- We assume students are involved in the AGP have sufficient capacity to engage with its activities.
  - This assumption is based off the fact that student panel members will be compensated for their time. Furthermore, to account for differing levels of capacity and commitment, there are two different tiers of engagement for the panels which students can participate in, to support their capacity to take part in activities.

#### Assumption 2

- We assume that changes in staff cultural competence and accountability translate into changes in their practice and own approach to learning and teaching.
  - Some outcomes of cultural competence professional development for staff include increased responsibility for performance/instructional expertise, increased personal commitment to work, and promoting an environment of inquiry and acceptance that leads to greater organisational effectiveness (Kruse, Rakha & Calderone, 2018). These attitudinal and cultural changes are assumed to help translate staff learning into practice.

### **References for the assumptions:**

Kruse, S. D., Rakha, S., & Calderone, S. (2018). Developing cultural competency in higher education: An agenda for practice. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(6), 733-750.

## WHAT IS THE EVALUATION AIM?

The aim of the evaluation is to identify the impact of the dissertation retreats and AGP, both of which target full-time UK domiciled Black undergraduate students and have the shared goal of reducing the EDAG for Black students at UoS.

**Dissertation Retreats:** This intervention comprises of a fully funded residential writing retreat (for approximately 20 participants), one 1.5-day mini writing retreat held on campus, and a DIY “retreat toolkit” held online which can be accessed asynchronously. It is expected that improving dissertation awarding would make a significant difference to the overall awarding outcome, as a double-weighted module. The retreats are open to a broader group of students (e.g., students from IMDQ1 postcodes) that includes the target group of Black undergraduate students.

**AGP:** The intervention is centred around the 'three Cs' identified in previous internal research at UoS – Community, Culture, and Curriculum – as it seeks to build trust and a sense of belonging among Black students, a factor crucial for academic success. The intervention is underpinned by a student panel comprising of UK domiciled Black undergraduates, who lead the development of interventions like the Black Fresher’s Guide to foster inclusivity.

## WHAT ARE THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS?

### **Dissertation Retreats:**

#### **Primary:**

- Does participating in the dissertation retreat programme improve student awarding on their dissertation (compared to their previous awarding/academic trajectory and to students who did not attend the dissertation retreats)?
- Does participating in the dissertation retreat programme improve students' degree awarding (compared to their previous attainment/academic trajectory and to students who did not attend the dissertation retreats)?

#### **Secondary:**

- Does attending the residential dissertation retreat improve students' academic self-efficacy and confidence in their academic skills (e.g., academic writing, project management, goal setting)?
- Does attending the residential dissertation retreat improve students' sense of belonging?

### **AGP:**

#### **Primary:**

- What is the impact of the AGP on the general sense of community and belonging amongst Black students at UoS? In other words, since the panel's establishment, have there been steady improvements in Black students' sense of community and belonging?
- How do the AGP outputs (e.g., events, Black Freshers' Guide, etc) contribute to Black students' experiences and outcomes?

#### **Secondary:**

- Does participating in the AGP panel promote a sense of community amongst participants?
- Does participating in the AGP present participants with additional opportunities for professional development (e.g., for training, work experience, skill development, networking, etc)?

WHAT METHODOLOGY ARE YOU USING?

**Dissertation Retreats:**

- Pre- and post-intervention comparisons of student outcome data
- Pre- and post-intervention surveys

**Awarding Gap Project:**

- Interrupted time series analysis
- Student interviews
- Staff reflective journals

RISKS AND LIMITATIONS

**Dissertation Retreats:**

RISK AND LIMITATION	MITIGATION
Lack of ethnically diverse representation among dissertation retreat delivery staff.	Try to recruit ethnically diverse coaches and peer mentors to act as ambassadors.
Inaccessibility of residential retreat to students with childcare responsibilities, or students who are currently employed.	The wider dissertation retreat programme offers students the opportunity to engage with the content of the retreats in a non-residential format, either in-person as a full-day retreat or asynchronously, to be as inclusive to different groups of students as possible.

**AGP:**

RISK AND LIMITATION	MITIGATION
Limited staff resources: The AGP may strain existing staff resources, particularly as it scales up beyond the pilot.	It will be critical to ensure clear responsibilities and accountability structures for the AGP as the student panel continues to grow. Monitor the training and support needs of delivery staff and students throughout the delivery of the project to accommodate this growth.
Limited reach/visibility of project due to small scale	Considered buy-in from senior stakeholders, improved thought leadership to ensure project is leading the way in the sector, comms strategy for university, city and sector