Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC): Dissertation Retreats and Awarding Gap Student Panel

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# Enhanced Theory of Change diagram

An Enhanced Theory of Change diagram titled “Enhanced ToC: Dissertation Retreats and Awarding Gap Student Panel.” The diagram is structured from left to right with the following sections:

Problem statement: There is an awarding gap between white and Black students, contributing to ongoing inequalities in career opportunities for Black graduates.

Inputs: Include resources and expertise for dissertation retreats (e.g., staff time, funding, pre-intervention research, student buy-in, communication strategies) and for the Awarding Gap Panel (AGP), such as community event resources, informational materials, training, and feedback systems.

Activities:

Dissertation Retreats: Developing retreat content, running full-day sessions, student recruitment, and targeted residential retreats.

Awarding Gap Panel: Recruiting and training student panel members, holding meetings, collaborating with faculties, facilitating student events, raising awareness, and producing materials such as the Black Freshers’ Guide.

Short-term outcomes:

Students: Improved goal-setting, confidence in academic and supervisory conversations, use of student support services, project management, and self-efficacy. Increased understanding of higher education and racial inequalities, greater sense of belonging, and more professional development opportunities.

Staff: Increased cultural competence.

Medium-term outcomes:

Students: Improved academic writing skills, agency, and leadership and management skills.

Staff: Increased accountability for addressing racial inequalities.

Long-term outcomes:

Students: Improved dissertation performance, higher overall degree grades, and an increased number of Black students achieving a First or 2:1.

Impact:

Students: Greater equality in academic experience, stronger progression and trust, and reduced perception of the university as predominantly white.

University: Closure of the ethnicity awarding gap, stronger institutional understanding of what reduces inequalities, improved reputation, and increased Black student enrolment.

Arrows illustrate causal links from inputs through activities to outcomes and impact.

# Enhanced Theory of Change narrative

## Background

### Problem statement

There is an awarding gap between white and Black students, with Black students being less likely to be awarded a 1st or 2:1 degree than white students. This contributes to ongoing inequalities in access to future careers and opportunities for Black graduates.

**Additional context**

The two interventions covered in this theory of change (i.e., the dissertation retreats and the Awarding Gap Panel (AGP)) align with the University's broader goals of reducing the ethnicity degree awarding gap (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.

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 the University, 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 when an EPQ had been completed. 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.

## Design and implementation

### Inputs

**Dissertation Retreats**

* Input from related strategic work
  + Such as the Race Equality Charter and APP
* Risk assessments
* Pre-intervention research and evidence
  + Literature review and report compiled by the Student Success team
* Communication strategies for targeted activities
  + Using institutional data to send emails to students who belong to target groups; promotion via relevant student societies
* Buy-in from students and senior leadership team
* Funding
  + Budget to be spent on staff, venue, catering, resource development
* Good relationships across teams

**Awarding Gap Panel (AGP)**

* Resources to organise community events and networking programmes
* Informational resources
  + Developed by previous panel members, supported by the University
* Communication strategy and tools
  + Aiming to inform the rest of the student body about the work of the AGP and to promote engagement with their work
* Training materials for panel members
* Funding
  + Budget to renumerate students' time and to support them with the running of events
* Data and feedback collection tools
* Networking infrastructure
  + Physical and digital spaces for panel members to engage in events and communicate with each other

### Activities

**Dissertation Retreats**

* Develop dissertation retreat content
  + The Dissertation Retreats intervention is a dissertation development programme, comprising 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.
  + 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.
* Delivery of full-day dissertation retreat (open to all students)
  + 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 retreat. The retreat 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 target participants of these retreats include other groups of students (e.g., students from IMD Q1 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.
* Student recruitment and selection process
  + 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, 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 (Awarding Gap Panel, Care Experienced and Estranged, and mature students). Students nominated by Student Inclusion staff.
    - Tier 2 – Students involved in any of the above projects but have not been nominated by a staff member.
    - 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.
* Targeted students attend residential retreat
  + The targeted 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.

**Awarding Gap Panel (AGP)**

* Recruitment and selection process for the AGP
  + 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, which 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).
  + The main beneficiary group of the AGP student panel 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.
* Using communication channels for promotion and dissemination
* Student panel induction and training
  + Upon being recruited to the panel, new participants receive training in leadership, public speaking, and HE and racial equity terminology. Training sessions will be delivered in person, as a single, three-hour group training workshop comprised of two parts:
    - A general Awarding Gap Panel induction (which covers important elements such as data) delivered by Student Inclusion staff
    - A race equity session delivered by an external consultant.
  + Students are provided with a training handbook that has all the necessary induction information.
* Panellists attend regular panel meetings
* Engaging in collaborative projects with faculties and local organisations
* Running student voice events and engaging students in leading decision-making processes
  + Gathering student opinions through surveys and focus groups on the panel and its projects.
* Facilitating student events, activities and projects as informed by the AGP
  + 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. Events include:
    - ‘The Debate’, an evening hosted by AGP students to explore current issues around being Black at university
    - An annual cultural gala, celebrating Black students and allies through music, talks, workshops and social activities.
    - Events related to Black History Month.
* Implementing awareness-raising communications and training for staff
  + Involving student inclusion coordinators and institutional leaders
* Overseeing the updating and distribution of the Black Freshers' Guide

#### **Target group**

**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, 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 (Awarding Gap Panel, Care Experienced and Estranged, and mature students). Students nominated by Student Inclusion staff.
* Tier 2 – Students involved in any of the above projects but have not been nominated by a staff member.
* 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.

#### **Delivery stakeholders**

**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 around 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, the local City Council), and ‘guest’ staff who request to consult with the panel (usually staff within Professional Services, for examples the Residences team).

#### **Mode of delivery**

**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.

**AGP:** For Tier 1 panellists, there are weekly meetings, and monthly meetings for Tier 2 panellists. 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.

#### **Location**

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

* 1 x residential retreat at an external venue, with accommodation and catering provided.
* 1 x on-campus mini retreat (1.5 days) at the University Conference Centre with catering
* provided.
* 1 x online session.
* 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 university campus. Black History Month events are a combination of both in-person and online sessions and are hosted across the wider city.

#### **Timeframes**

The project as a whole is funded for five years in the first instance.

The dissertation retreat programme includes the following annual activities:

* 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).

#### **Tailoring**

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 Panel decision making process. Year-on-year, these outputs are determined by students, ensuring they are tailored to students’ needs.

## Expected change

### Outcomes

**Students**

* Improved goal-setting skills
* Increased confidence in navigating conversations with their dissertation supervisors
* Increased confidence in accessing student support services
* Improved project management skills
* Increased self-efficacy
* Increased confidence in academic writing
* Improved academic writing skills
* Improved student performance on dissertation
* Improved overall grade awarded for degree
* Increased number of Black students awarded a First/2:1
* Increased knowledge and understanding of higher education and racial inequalities
* Increased professional development opportunities
* Increased sense of belonging and community
* Increased sense of agency
* Improved leadership and management skills

**Staff**

* Increased accountability of staff in addressing racial inequities
* Increased cultural competence of staff

### Impact

**Students**

* Equality in academic experience
* Students feel empowered and equipped to progress during and after their degree
* Student trust increases
* There is reduced perception of the University as a predominantly White institution

**University**

* Closure of the ethnicity degree awarding gap
* Institutional knowledge of contributors to the EDAG and what works to reduce inequalities
* Improved reputation of the University and increased number of Black students enrolling

## Causal pathways and change mechanisms

### Causal pathway 1

Skills acquired in the dissertation retreats increase the likelihood of 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” (1st or 2:1), in turn reducing and closing the awarding gap at the University.

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” (1st or 2:1), in turn reducing and closing the awarding gap at the University.

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 mechanisms**

* The targeting of this programme means that only Black students receive the intervention. Therefore, the improved dissertation performance is likely to be more prominent in Black students, which will result in the closing of the attainment gap.
* Data from previous surveys has shown that students with better academic writing and project management skills are more likely to perform highly on their dissertations.
* The dissertation retreat will include a range of workshops and activities which will equip participants with a range of skills. They will be delivered in an interactive way so that participants can practice their new skills.
* Our previous evaluations have demonstrated that students who have developed a range of soft skills show improved academic writing. Participants will be equipped with practical tools that they can use to apply their new skills in practice and develop their writing.

### Causal pathway 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 enable peers to foster relationships between each other, and with university staff, allowing community-building (Tremlay-Wragg et al., 2021; Maheux-Pelletier, Marsh & Frake-Mistak, 2019). These relationships will extend beyond the writing retreat, equipping participants with an effective peer-support network. Student engagement, such as in tailored interventions like the Dissertation Retreat, improves student belonging and success (e.g., attainment) (Thomas, 2013). This will translate into increased help-seeking behaviours following the retreat, and participants will be more likely to engage with student support resources and facilities as they prepare for their dissertation. This will increase the number of Black students awarded a “good degree” (1st or 2:1), in turn reducing and closing the awarding gap at the University.

#### **Change mechanisms**

* The targeting of this programme means that only Black students receive the intervention. Therefore, the improved dissertation performance is likely to be more prominent in Black students, which will result in the closing of the attainment gap.
* If a student feels a greater sense of belonging then they will be more likely to participate in other campus activities which are designed to improve attainment (Thomas, 2013). This will support students in raising their attainment and developing skills to help them write their dissertation.
* The delivery format of the retreat will include relationship-building activities which will support peer-to-peer connections. This in turn fosters community-building and an enhanced sense of belonging (Tremlay-Wragg et al., 2021).
* Data from previous surveys has shown that students with better academic writing and project management skills are more likely to perform highly on their dissertations.

### Causal pathway 3

Black students on the student panel and in the wider student population will feel an increased sense of belonging and community, which leads to improved grades for Black students and reduces the awarding gap at the University.

The Awarding Gap Panel (AGP) enables amplification of the Black student voice at the University by:

* Running 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).
* Implementing awareness-raising communications and training for University 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” (1st or 2:1), in turn reducing and closing the awarding gap at the University.

#### **Change mechanisms**

* Data from previous surveys has shown that students with better academic writing and project management skills are more likely to perform highly on their dissertations.
* The training will include aspects that are student-led and focus on their lived experiences. This will enable staff to directly engage with the students and the challenges they face, increasing their cultural competence.
* The student panels and events that stem from them will allow students to meet one another and build connections with their peers. This will foster a sense of belonging and community (Chipato, 2022).
* If a student feels a greater sense of belonging then they will be more likely to participate in other campus activities which are designed to improve attainment (Thomas, 2013). This will support students in raising their attainment and developing skills to help them write their dissertation.

## Moderating factors

### Moderating factors

* The content delivered throughout the dissertation retreat is relevant to the knowledge and skills gaps the students have
  + Mitigation: 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.
* Students engage with programme content and outputs
  + Mitigation: Dissertation retreat support is 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. 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. AGP activities are planned by current students, so are designed to be relevant and engaging for 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.
* Students have sufficient capacity to participate in extra activities
  + Mitigation: The dissertation retreat 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, so can fit in with their capacity. Consistently monitoring student engagement patterns within the panels ensures they are adjusted if needed (e.g. moved on- or offline, more or less frequently).
* Changes in staff cultural competence and accountability translate into changes to their practice
  + Mitigation: Providing delivery staff with feedback from participating students, to be integrated into future iterations of the retreats. Staff will be supported to meet and discuss how they have made changes to their practice, to offer peer support and accountability.
* Programmes and activities designed by the AGP reach their intended audiences and are engaged with.
  + Mitigation: 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.

## Impact and outcome measures

### Impact measures

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Impact** | **Impact measure** |
| Students feel empowered and equipped to progress during and after their degree | Student self-report, qualitative data collection |
| Student trust increases | Student self-report, qualitative data collection |
| There is reduced perception of the University as a predominantly White institution | Student self-report, qualitative data collection |
| Closure of the ethnicity degree awarding gap | Internal institutional monitoring of awarding gap |
| Institutional knowledge of contributors to the EDAG and what works to reduce inequalities | Application of evaluation findings to future intervention design |
| Improved reputation of the University and increased number of Black students enrolling | Internal institutional monitoring of application and enrolment data, broken down by ethnicity |

### Outcome measures

How will you measure whether and to what extent your intervention has led to your outcomes? This could include self-report measures, performance measures, or behavioural measures.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Outcome** | **Outcome measure** |
| Improved goal-setting skills | Pre- and post- participant feedback surveys |
| Increased confidence in navigating conversations with their dissertation supervisors | Pre- and post- participant feedback surveys |
| Improved project management skills | Pre- and post- participant feedback surveys |
| Increased self-efficacy | Pre- and post- participant feedback surveys, using TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire |
| Increased confidence in academic writing | Pre- and post- participant feedback surveys |
| Improved academic writing skills | Pre- and post- participant feedback surveys |
| Improved student performance on dissertation | Monitoring dissertation performance using internal data |
| Improved overall grade awarded for degree | Internal institutional monitoring of degree attainment |
| Increased number of Black students awarded a First/2:1 | Internal institutional monitoring of degree attainment by ethnicity |
| Increased knowledge and understanding of higher education and racial inequalities | Participant feedback surveys |
| Increased sense of belonging and community | Pre- and post- participant feedback surveys, using TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire |
| Increased sense of agency | Participant feedback surveys |
| Improved leadership and management skills | Participant feedback surveys |
| Increased accountability of staff in addressing racial inequities | Staff self-report, qualitative data collection |
| Increased cultural competence of staff | Staff self-report, qualitative data collection |

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