

TASO

Transforming Access
and Student Outcomes
in Higher Education



Report:

Approaches to addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap

Contextualising the landscape and developing a typology

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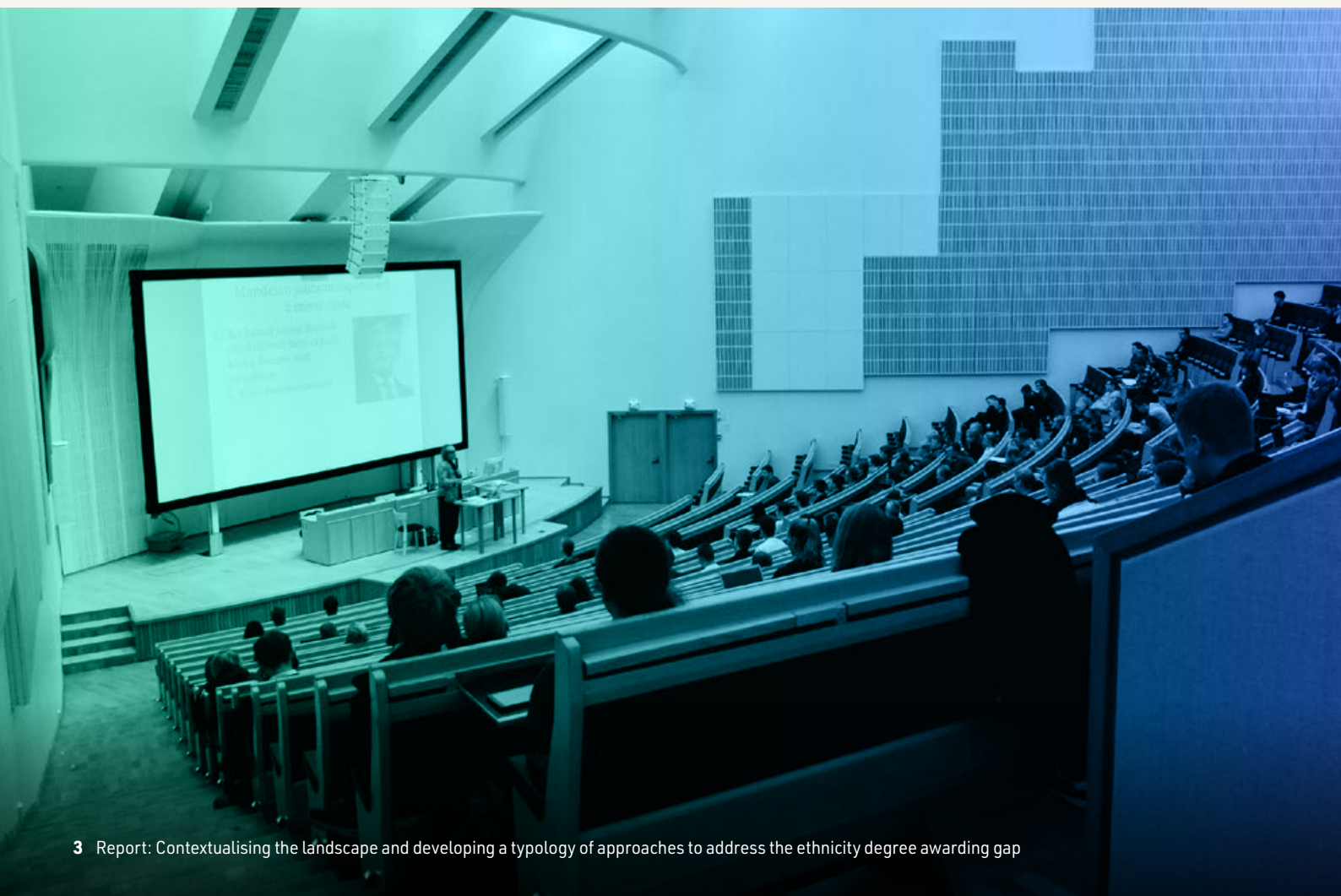
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

This report was commissioned by TASO to develop a typology and narrative of current approaches to address the ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG). The findings are intended to inform TASO's future work, influence policy and decision-making in the sector and provide a data dashboard for researchers. Through these mechanisms, we hope these findings will drive change in addressing inequalities in student outcomes.

1.2 Methodology

Access and Participation Plans (APPs; N=249) were coded according to their evaluation strategy, [Theory of Change \(ToC\)](#) model, targets through which to address the EDAG and nature of approaches described. This included the type of approach, type of change, target groups, clarity of change description, mechanisms of change, intersectionality and whether the approaches were targeted or universal.

Stakeholder consultations were held with staff from higher education (HE) providers in England. Participants were recruited based on their experience in addressing the EDAG in their role and represented a diverse range of roles at different levels within the provider. Participants were asked about their own experiences with the EDAG and their organisation's approach in semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

An expert reference group provided critical reflection and discussion when developing and refining the findings and recommendations. This group comprised experts from various fields across HE providers (HEPs) and HE charities.

1.3 Context

Recent events both within the UK and worldwide have heightened awareness of racial inequality in HE and prompted further action in this area.

The Office for Students (OfS) and the broader HE sector have committed to tackling the persistent EDAG (OfS, 2019). This gap refers to the notable difference in the proportion of students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds who are awarded a first or upper-second-class undergraduate degree when compared to White students. However, there is relatively little evidence on what works in reducing this gap. TASO recently commissioned an evaluation of two curriculum reform projects to investigate whether, and how, diversified curricula address the EDAG (TASO, 2022). The work also aimed to understand whether reforming the curriculum improves the experience of students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds, in terms of their engagement with module content and overall satisfaction, as well as degree outcomes. The findings from this work indicated that these approaches had limited success, but also that they were implemented inconsistently. Based on these findings, TASO commissioned this research to map and better understand the different approaches being undertaken by the sector.

This report is relevant to four major stakeholder groups:

- Policymakers within HEPs who are responsible for securing effective strategic change concerning the EDAG;
- Practitioners working within HEPs to implement approaches to addressing the EDAG;
- TASO, in consideration of taking forward further work gleaned from the findings and recommendations which also build on a prior corpus of work in this domain;
- Researchers, who will be interested in further exploring the data presented within an interactive dashboard. It should be noted that the information within the dashboard records approaches taken currently rather than implying good practice quotients (provider-specific approaches are included in Section 7 of this report).

1.4 Findings

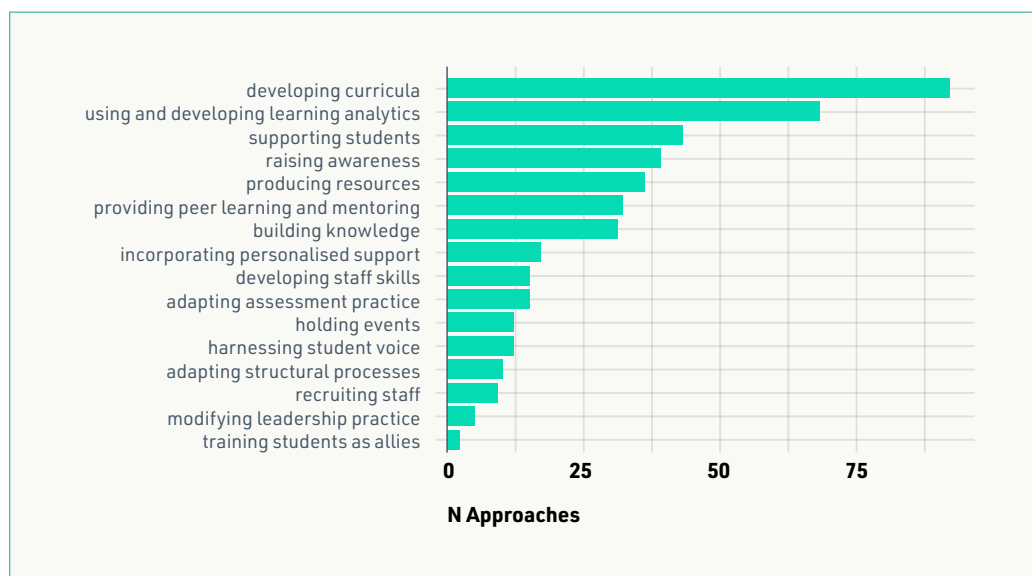
Key findings from the APP review:

The analysis of APPs found 16 different types of approaches to addressing the EDAG. These are defined as follows:

- **Adapting Assessment Practice:** reforming the assessment format or assessment processes.
- **Raising Awareness:** workshops and sessions to develop staff understanding of the awarding gaps and/or aspects of inequality faced by students.
- **Developing Curricula:** reforming the curriculum, including inclusive curricula and decolonised reading lists.
- **Running Events:** extra-curricular events for students.
- **Modifying Leadership Practice:** senior leadership teams adapting leadership structures and/or culture.
- **Using and Developing Learning Analytics:** collecting, interrogating and/or presenting quantitative data on the nature and extent of the awarding gap.
- **Providing Peer Learning and Mentoring:** students supporting students as mentors or learning from each other.
- **Incorporating Personalised Support:** staff supporting students through one-to-one activities, including coaching, mentoring or tutoring.
- **Recruiting Staff:** staff recruitment drives, typically to recruit staff from a greater diversity of ethnic backgrounds.
- **Building Knowledge:** undertaking research, evaluation or other activities to build providers' knowledge and understanding around the EDAG (distinct from learning analytics).
- **Producing Resources:** developing guides for staff and/or students.
- **Developing Staff Skills:** events and activities to support staff skill development.
- **Adapting Structural Processes:** developing the physical and policy structure of the provider.
- **Supporting Students:** making specific sessions or staff available to support students (e.g. workshops, tutorials, as distinct from personalised support as they are not tailored to specific students).
- **Training Students as Allies:** raising awareness in the student population, including training.
- **Harnessing the student voice:** seeking and using student feedback in organisational discussions and/or decisions.

Developing curricula (typically inclusive curricula; N=92) and developing and using learning analytics (N=68) were the most prevalent approaches to addressing the EDAG, accounting for 37% of all approaches described across the sector (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Types of approaches used to address the EDAG



The similarity of approaches between providers is notable and may indicate a tendency among HEPs to adopt popular approaches undertaken elsewhere. This could result in less focus being given to how specific interventions may be beneficial within a provider's particular context.

The resulting typology highlights the diversity of approaches adopted by HEPs to address the EDAG. Many of the same types of approaches are used to effect different changes, and many different approaches are used to effect the same change type.

The most common (modal) target by the end of the APP period (2024-25) was that providers would have eradicated the EDAG (N=77). This is unsurprising given the key performance target set by the OfS at the time to 'eliminate the unexplained gap in degree

outcomes between White students and Black students by 2024-25' (OfS, 2018). The highest specified target was 39%, while the average target across all HEPs was 5% (mean=4.9%, median=5.0%). There was no significant relationship between a provider's 2020-21 gap and provider target.

Evaluation strategies varied between providers (see Figure 2), with the majority detailing plans for up to Type 2 (empirical) evidence in their evaluation plans. A surprising number did not include a specific strategy for their own evaluation but, rather, provided an overview of how such an evaluation would be developed.

ToC models showed a similar degree of variability between providers (see Figure 3), although over 40 HEPs did not include a ToC model in their APP.

Figure 2: Standards of evidence demonstrated in APP evaluation strategies

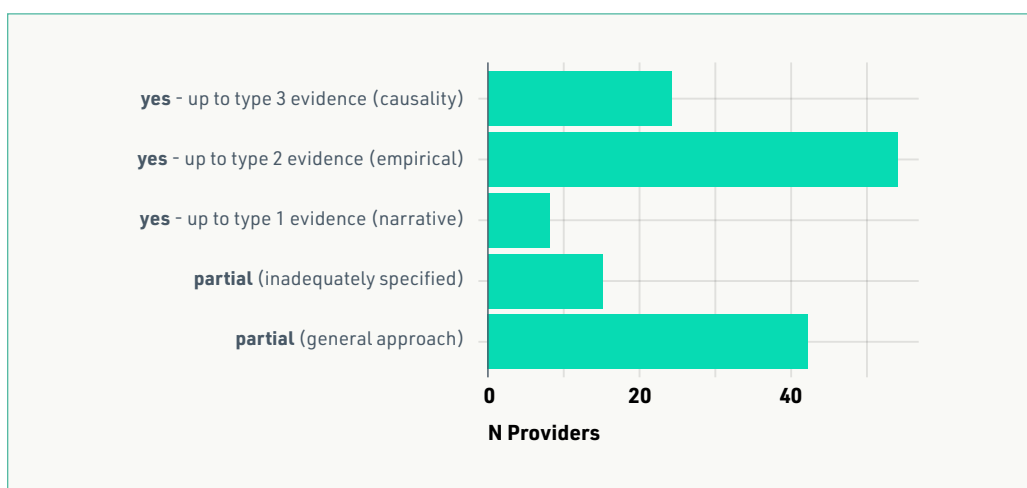
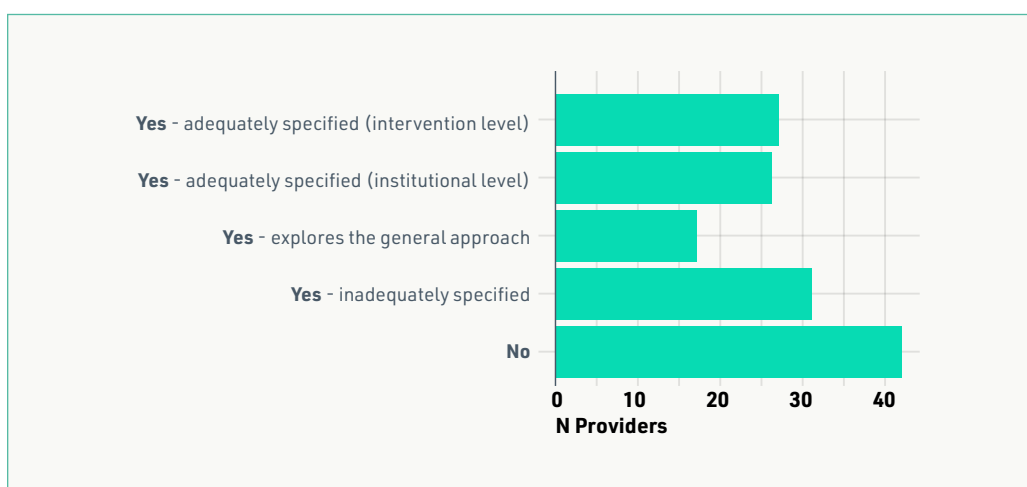


Figure 3: ToC specificity included in APPs



Key Themes from Stakeholder Interviews:

- **The role of people:** Across the sector, we found a real recognition of and enthusiasm for the need to address the EDAG and an understanding that a range of roles across a provider is crucial in embedding and carrying out this work. The collective staff body is important in creating a whole-provider approach; however, one-of-a-kind individuals were hailed as catalysts for effective progress. There was some concern that meaningful work may stagnate or cease if these individuals were to move roles. Successes and frustrations were both attributed to senior leadership approaches. However, this sits alongside a recognition that sustained progress requires buy-in and effort from everyone.
- **Identifying what is needed:** Providers have different levels of knowledge and understanding, depending on their own journeys, but the sector is broadly aware of the EDAG. Despite this awareness, however, the sector lacks confidence about how to address the gap. Having understood the scale of the issue and the 'wicked' nature of the gap, the task may feel overwhelming. There is also a feeling that there are very few 'safe spaces' to talk, share and learn, without fear of blame or reputational consequence for 'getting things wrong'. There is a clear desire for such a space.
- **Addressing inequality as a long-term endeavour:** Part of the challenge in addressing the EDAG is that sustainable change takes a long time to implement, embed and materially impact student outcomes. In HE, however, there is often a desire to fit work into an annual academic calendar. For those working in this space, it can be easy to lose motivation if change is not observed. Some approaches are designed to fit into a short period; however, the nature of these approaches may not result in sustainable change.
- **Integrating evaluation work:** The sector has a good awareness of the need for evidence-informed practice, and the need to evaluate approaches to addressing the EDAG. However, capacity and capability for evaluation vary greatly between HEPs. While some providers use shorter-term proxy measures, they are not confident that these

short- and medium-term outcomes will lead to a sustained reduction in the EDAG. Furthermore, the desire to address racial inequalities leads HEPs to try multiple approaches at the same time, making it more challenging to determine which interventions – if any – were effective.

- **Provider-specific approaches:** Providers are keen to learn from their neighbours, but do recognise that what is needed depends on unique contextual factors. That is, providers need to understand their own local context and needs in order to develop approaches that will address specific challenges to equality. This is a challenge in a space where providers look to learn from one another and lack confidence in addressing the gap, as it means there is no blueprint to follow.
- **Centring students:** Students are central to addressing the EDAG, and there is a need for HEPs to consider how student voices are sought and valued. For effective progress to be made, students from representative ethnic and cultural backgrounds need to be involved not only in 'rubber stamping' plans, but rather in developing and implementing approaches themselves.

1.5 Conclusions

Many of the findings in this report reiterate concepts and factors that have been highlighted in research into inequalities in HE over the past decade (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2018; Equality Challenge Unit, 2014; HEFCE, 2018; Pilkington, 2013; Singh, 2011; Thomas et al., 2017). Various sources have highlighted a focus on data, students as change agents, stages of the provider's approach and the role of individuals leading organisational change (e.g. Equality Challenge Unit, 2017; HEFCE, 2018; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Oloyede, Christoffersen & Cornish, 2021). The significance of differentiated resources and student demographics reiterates similar findings from Boliver (2015). The long and cyclical nature of the discourse reflects the inertia, lack of innovation, and repetition/recycling of 'drag and drop' interventions identified in the report.

1.6 Recommendations

The sector lacks confidence in successfully addressing the EDAG and is seeking toolkits, guidance and advice about *what* to do. This project was intended to explore the current landscape of approaches to addressing the EDAG and does not, therefore, provide such guidance. Rather, the following recommendations are based on evidence of current practice in developing approaches and evaluations, framed particularly within the context of ToC and evaluation design.

1.6.1 Develop Robust ToC and Evaluation Plans

By considering the nuances of different approaches, providers will be better placed to develop interventions that are tailored to their own organisational context, and which consider both barriers and facilitators in order to improve their efficacy. ToC and evaluation plans should be developed while planning interventions to maximise the likelihood of success. The key recommendations for planning interventions based on the findings from this project are:

- **Focus on clarity:** Of APPs which had targets to reduce the ethnicity degree awarding gap, approximately two thirds (N=43) did not include a ToC within their APP. Of those that did, a large proportion (N=30) were inadequately detailed - it was unclear how the intervention would ultimately lead to a reduction in the gap.

Providers must develop robust ToCs with clearly articulated mechanisms of change linking activities to desired outcomes. In doing this, providers must focus on measurable intermediate outcomes which they theorise are linked to the gap, for example, a sense of belonging.

Plan for long-term sustained change: Long-term approaches are harder to plan and implement, given the varied and sometimes unpredictable challenges facing the sector. Effective plans need to recognise that eradicating the EDAG is a long-term undertaking and to identify those factors which risk distracting from the awarding gap and mitigate against them. In doing so, HEPs can explicitly plan for the different stages required for change and set concrete, short and medium-term interim outcomes.

- **Integrate bottom-up and top-down activities within organisational approaches:** HEPs and regulators should recognise the value of both top-down and bottom-up approaches. A range of bottom-up activities exist, from local or regional student activism to contextualised events or small-scale campaigns and conversations with individual colleagues. For example, students at one provider developed and ran an event celebrating Black cultures for students in the city. At other providers, staff are trying new ways to support their students in and beyond the classroom, which may be promising ways of tackling the EDAG. Instead of aiming for a 'silver bullet' organisational approach that will close the gap, recognise that sustained change relies on a combination of bottom-up grassroots and top-down organisational approaches. Targeting many approaches for small but sustainable change through holistic mechanisms may yield more effective outcomes.
- **Be clear on accountability and responsibility:** When embarking on approaches to address the EDAG, be clear about who has responsibility for undertaking the work, who will be accountable, who needs to be consulted and who needs to be informed. Through the stakeholder consultations and APPs, we found strong evidence of where students were included in developing approaches. In providers without a strong existing relationship or community with marginalised ethnicity groups, the foundational step here may be to develop trust with students, recognising that trust is earned. Where staff and students feel that their contributions are tokenised or ignored, this may create mistrust and make subsequent student engagement more challenging.
- **Develop multi-stage approaches:** Where the ultimate change is to reduce gaps in student success outcomes, the approach may include multiple stages, for example, securing buy-in, adapting the organisational structure, training staff, updating the curriculum and re-engaging students. This requires multiple layers of intervention, and systematic engagement and evaluation, to join up discrete areas of activity with continuous processes to conduct and support the entire chain of causality. Too often, the web is broken by an inability to stay on task and/or poor resourcing and coordination.

- **Articulate foundations and prerequisites for change:** A large amount of work conducted is not an 'intervention' but, rather, foundational work to support future changes. Within APPs, the foremost preliminary approach was to develop an infrastructure for using learning analytics or student data to develop organisational knowledge and understanding of the EDAG context. Such examples still fit within a logic model but providers need to consider what the 'success' of this stage of the approach would look like. To ensure preliminary activities are linked to meaningful interventions, they should be mapped to a ToC.
- **Consider the mechanisms of change:** Recognise that the success of an approach is as much about *how* it is undertaken as *what* is undertaken. When implementing approaches, effective recruitment, leadership and support are required to ensure that the people who are responsible for undertaking the work have a genuine interest in it, the skills to make measurable progress, and the support and resources to do so. Consider how and why an approach will effect change and the factors that may impact the efficacy of an approach, and recognise the barriers and facilitators to achieving change. These should all be mapped out in a ToC.
- **Reflect on and address ethical aspects:** Ensure that approaches consider the potential harms they may cause to staff and students from marginalised ethnicity groups and take into consideration how they will be perceived. Consider that tokenistic consultation might harm relationships with student groups, and consultation which requires students to relive experiences of discrimination and harassment may be retraumatising.
- **Incorporate continuous evaluation:** Apply an iterative approach to evaluation (see [TASO's Monitoring and Evaluation Framework](#)) to monitor whether approaches are leading to the desired outcomes or whether changes are needed to adapt interventions to the factors identified in the planning and design phases. These could be discipline-specific applications or dimensions designed to foster sociocultural factors, such as a sense of belonging or inclusion.

1.6.2 Recognise and Support Key People Who Effect Change

Providers typically have one or two 'key' staff who 'carry' the provider's approach to addressing inequalities in student outcomes. In some cases, these staff are not formally responsible or accountable for this role, but may be valued by the provider. The role of these key people is typically not recognised within plans to address the EDAG, and there is typically no indication of which individuals or roles are accountable for change.

Unless these staff are recognised, supported and resourced, they may face burn-out and feel unable to continue in the role. Concerns were expressed that if key staff were to leave the provider, the work they were leading would stagnate, or even deteriorate.

The challenge for authentic leaders is that sustained change requires authenticity, but the current landscape does not facilitate shared authentic responsibility. By reflecting on organisational structures and explicitly allocating accountability and responsibility for addressing inequalities, providers can best determine what systemic changes can be implemented to support these challenges.

1.6.3 Use Data to Inform Action

Developing organisational knowledge and understanding of the EDAG is one of the most common approaches used by HEPs. It is indeed necessary to develop an awareness of the specific organisational context and needs, which can then be used to develop tailored approaches. However, against a backdrop of organisational diffidence, there is a potential for HEPs to become comfortable simply discussing and developing knowledge, in an ongoing pursuit to secure more data.

Within this context, there is a balance to be found between developing knowledge and understanding from research, evaluations and learning analytics, and taking bold, decisive action to develop approaches to addressing inequality. Ongoing evaluation enables providers to use their own evidence of efficacy and challenges to adopt and adapt approaches in near real time.

By including data analysis as a stage in the organisational ToC, providers can recognise the importance of this stage and use their findings to inform later stages of the approach.

1.6.4 Work With Students to Address the Gap

Acknowledge that students are experts in their student experience, and that their experiences are not homogenous. By including students, providers can recognise how different approaches may address different barriers to equality.

A key element in this is to move away from a model that only consults students on plans to address inequality, and instead develop models for student co-creation. Such models should avoid tokenism and offer students the flexibility to influence the changes that matter to them. They should also consider and address barriers to students engaging in this work – including the ability to give time to unpaid extra-curricular work.

Providers may experience initial challenges in securing the engagement of students from diverse backgrounds, due to general mistrust. Before embarking on effective co-creation with students, providers may need to spend time earning the trust of marginalised ethnicity student groups.

1.6.5 Be Uncomfortable

Low levels of confidence in addressing inequality, and high levels of discomfort in discussing issues of race and ethnicity, are barriers to progress for many HEPs. This is particularly evident with White staff, who may feel that they lack the expertise or lived experience to effect change. Additionally, the scale of the causal roots of the EDAG can feel overwhelming and this can, in turn, contribute to inertia in taking decisive action. A concern about blame or reputational consequences for saying or doing 'the wrong thing' can block progress. Nurturing 'safe' environments where providers can discuss plans and experiences with others without fear of blame or reputational damage will enable more effective conversations and more deliberate action to address these inequalities.



2 EXPERT REFERENCE GROUP

Cross-sector experts were recruited from across England to provide critical reflections on the methodology and findings and to support the development of recommendations. The typology of approaches and themes from the stakeholder consultation were discussed over two meetings. These discussions included informed debate on sociocultural and political contributing factors as well as organisational structure and transformation as factors impacting the EDAG. This ensured that the resulting findings are contextualised within the wider narrative of HE and structural inequalities.

The membership of this group was as follows:

- **Dr Amanda Aldercotte** – Head of Knowledge and Research, Advance HE
- **Amandip Bisel** – Academic Skills and Student Success Lead, Hertfordshire University
- **Dr Tamsin Bowers-Brown** – Head of Postgraduate Courses, Department of Education, Leeds Trinity University
- **Alan Donnelly** – Researcher in Student Experience and Engagement, Sheffield Hallam University
- **Nasser Latif** – Head of Student Retention and Achievement, University of Central Lancashire
- **Dr Karen Lipsedge** – Associate Professor in English Literature, Kingston University
- **Jo MacDonnell** – Director of Education and Students, University of Brighton
- **Dr Gurnam Singh** – Associate Professor at the University of Warwick, Visiting Professor at the University of Chester, Visiting Fellow (Race & Education) at University of the Arts, London
- **Dr Duna Sabri** – Associate Director of Interdisciplinary Education, King's College London
- **Dr Iwi Ugiagbe-Green** – Reader at Manchester Business School, Manchester Metropolitan University

3 TERMINOLOGIES FOR ETHNICALLY DIVERSE GROUPS

We preface this report with some considerations on terminology. Language use was discussed throughout this project with the project team and the expert reference group. One particular focus concerned how to refer collectively to students from diverse ethnic backgrounds who are less likely to graduate from their studies with a 2:1 or 1st class honours degree than their White peers. Based on these discussions, we outline our considerations, conclusions and recommendations for using collective terminologies to describe those from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

It is worth reflecting on the recent origins of ethnicity and race terminology in the UK. Although there is a longer history of migration and diversity in Britain, this terminology has developed in three main ways in the post-war period. The first was through collective organising among those who experienced racial discrimination. This organising led to the second main development informing today's terminology: the passage of legislation outlawing racial discrimination, first in 'places of public resort' in 1965, and then extending to housing and employment in 1968. This legislation brought a need for data collection to

test whether people were being unlawfully racially discriminated against in accessing housing or applying for jobs. Without data, we cannot estimate the extent and nature of discrimination, nor map whether and how outcomes are unequal. This ultimately resulted in the third and final source of terminology on race and ethnicity in the UK: the census, and wider government data collection. The ethnicity question was first introduced in the 1991 census, and despite changes in the question with each successive decennial census (in particular the introduction of the 'Mixed' group in 2001), the broad categories (White, Black, Asian and Other) have remained consistent ever since.

Data collection on race and ethnicity needs to balance two considerations. On the one hand, terminology should reflect the experience of those whom it seeks to describe while, on the other, it should seek to monitor, and thus provide public authorities with a means to respond to the inequalities experienced by particular groups. For example, the different ethnic group categories within the 'Asian' and 'Black' headings describe groups with different experiences or identities, but also seek to track their different social

outcomes. At the same time, collective terms have not just been placed on communities or individuals, but affirmed by them to organise collectively (and politically) against racial discrimination, including against racism perpetrated by state institutions. The term 'politically Black' has now fallen out of fashion, but it was promulgated by communities as an umbrella term to bring people together to challenge racism, not invented by academics or state officials for the purposes of data collection. This consideration – that people experiencing racism employ a joint term to organise collectively to challenge it – remains, although there is no settled usage among activists in the UK.

We recommend that terminologies be used with conscious consideration when referring to people from diverse, underrepresented and/or marginalised groups, and that broad-brush collective terms should be avoided where possible. For the purposes of this research, we have used the term 'EDAG' to refer to the issue we are investigating, and 'ethnic minorities' or 'marginalised ethnicity groups' to refer to the people who experience this gap. To assess whether interventions have an impact on the EDAG, we also need to refer to groups for which we have sufficient and robust data, and this informs which groups the sector can target in its approaches.

Whatever their origins, however, terminologies run the risk of misdescribing particular individuals or groups, and may even dehumanise those whom the terms seek to identify. The more homogenising a term, the more it is likely to over- or under-represent certain demographic groups, be considered pejorative, or exacerbate 'Othering'. Collective terminologies obscure and flatten the diversity of people with a variety of social and cultural experiences. As one example, a student from a Bangladeshi background is likely to experience 'ethnicity' differently from a student from a Chinese background; such differences can be flattened when using broader collective terms, including when identifying these students by their broad geographical background (e.g. Asian).

For those who are discussing, working on, or researching topics where race or ethnicity is a focus we, therefore, encourage using the terminology preferred by the populations they are working with and, in particular, avoiding terminologies that are rejected by these populations. However, we recognise that in some instances this is impractical, and this current topic on the EDAG is one example. Where there is a broad recognition that students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds face inequality in their student experiences, there is a need to discuss this collectively. However, there is no current consensus

on terminology preferences among those to whom the terminology refers. Language use was discussed throughout this project with the project team and the expert reference group.

In determining which collective term is most appropriate for this project, we aimed to identify a term that met the following three criteria: 1) that it is accessible and readily understood by a wide audience across the sector, 2) that it is sensitive and inclusive to the broad range of racially and ethnically diverse staff and students within UK HE and 3) that it is responsive to the existing data collected on the topic of the degree awarding gap, and can therefore inform the design and evaluation of interventions to address that gap.

While we recognise that the Department for Education (DfE) and OfS use the commonly used acronym BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), the term implicitly emphasises Black and Asian groups and may obscure other groups under the 'minoritised ethnicity' umbrella. This may particularly be the case for people of mixed or multiple ethnicities, of whom there has been a 40% increase between the last two UK censuses (i.e. between 2011 and 2021). The terms 'racialised' and 'Global Majority' are used by many experts working on and researching this topic but may not be well understood by the general population, while 'ethnicity' is increasingly used across the HE sector and by government agencies.

Of all of these collective terminologies, ethnicity was accepted by the group as the 'least bad' collective term. It was favoured as it centres the conversation on ethnicity (including race and ethnicity factors) rather than any specific racial or ethnic group. It also aligns with legal definitions of racial discrimination. We, therefore, refer to the *EDAG* to explain the inequality explored in this research and use the terms 'marginalised ethnicity' and 'ethnic minorities' to collectively denote staff and students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Where we include quotes from participant interviews (Section 6.4) or excerpts from APPs (Section 7), we retain the terminologies used verbatim.

When using collective terms, we emphasise the need to centre and humanise the people being described. One way of doing this is to understand contextually who is – and is not – considered under a given term. Relevant to this project, we note that APPs use the terms BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicity) and ABMO (Asian, Black, Mixed and Other) to refer to groups of people from ethnically marginalised groups. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they collectively refer to slightly different ethnic groups. According to government guidance, BAME refers to 'all ethnic groups except the White British

group', which includes 'White minorities, such as Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller groups' (GOV.UK, 2021). In contrast, ABMO refers to all ethnic groups except those classified as White, which therefore excludes White minorities (OfS, 2019, 2021).

These distinctions highlight an important point; while ethnicity as a category refers to a group of people with a common background and cultural practices, some ethnic groups experience discrimination or inequalities. These may vary between societies: an ethnic group can be a dominant majority in one country and a disadvantaged or marginalised minority (or even a marginalised majority) in another. In the UK context, there is evidence that Black, Asian, Mixed and Other groups experience racism or discrimination (see CV studies such as Zwysen, Di Stasio and Heath, 2021); there is also evidence that some White minority groups (e.g. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people) experience discrimination.

In this context, research on ethnicity and other equality grounds increasingly refers to 'marginalisation' and 'marginalised groups'. A 'marginalised group' is one that experiences exclusion from or discrimination in practices and cultures, and within social, economic or political institutions. Marginalisation can be a process or a condition and is both a cause and consequence of exclusion and discrimination (UK Aid Match, 2020).

We appreciate that researchers make different decisions about terminology on race and ethnicity, that consensus on the topic is uncertain and shifting, and that different research questions may suggest different usage. As a sector, we encourage these conversations and encourage staff and students to discuss racial and ethnic inequality without fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. Instead, staff and students should approach these conversations openly, and be receptive to students and colleagues who suggest different terminologies or approaches.



4 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

This report provides evidence for understanding interventions designed to tackle the persistent EDAG. An awareness of racial inequality in HE has been developing over the last twenty years (Singh, 2011; Wong et al., 2021) prompting further action in this area.

The purpose of the project is to produce a typology that maps the various approaches and interventions being undertaken by HEPs to reduce the EDAG, enabling us to better understand:

1. The current landscape in terms of approaches to closing the EDAG
2. The specific interventions that HEPs are currently delivering to reduce the EDAG
3. Approaches to evaluation, including the presence of a ToC that links interventions to reducing the EDAG, the extent to which interventions have been evaluated, and the quality of this evaluation.

4.1 Background

Broecke and Nicholls (2008) provided detailed evidence for what was then known as a final attainment gap, demonstrating that – after controlling for most known factors (including socioeconomic status, prior attainment, and commuting students) – students of marginalised ethnicity were awarded significantly lower classifications. Subsequently, the Equality Act of 2010 led to a sharpened focus on the need for public authorities (including universities and colleges) to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity across what are now nine protected characteristics, including race, disability, sex, gender reassignment and age (Herbaut & Geven, 2020; Mishra, 2019).

Over the last decade, interventions across the sector have sought to tackle inequalities with respect to race or ethnicity, in part as a response to increased regulatory oversight. A range of instruments and toolkits identified factors such as a sense of belonging, lack of mentors or role models, and non-inclusive assessment models (Universities UK & NUS, 2019). The persistence of the gap has revealed myriad complexities and challenges for diverse providers; hence, little progress has been made (Codioli-McMaster, 2021).

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA), which was established with the introduction of variable tuition

fees, was the first regulatory body to introduce a framework for monitoring the access, success (achievement) and progression of specific categories of students from underrepresented groups (OfS, n.d.-a). OFFA monitored HEPs' Access Statements, which outlined the interventions and cultures designed to support inclusion and equity, and penalised those who breached their responsibilities.

APPs replaced Access Statements when the OfS took over the regulatory role of monitoring HE Quality and Fair Access. APPs (OfS, n.d.-b) impose on HEPs a responsibility to set out:

- The risks to equality of opportunity that the provider has identified as relevant to their context, as informed by the OfS Access and Participation Data Dashboard (OfS, n.d.-c) and the recently introduced Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (OfS, n.d.-d)
- Intervention strategies, which detail the actions providers will take to challenge risks to equality of opportunity and the outcomes they expect to achieve
- How the provider plans to evaluate the impact of their work
- The investment that providers plan to make in access and participation work.

Among other objectives, APPs aim to prompt awarding providers into developing strategic plans to address the EDAG. Although regulatory practice has raised awareness, APPs revealed that few HEPs understand the underlying causes of the gap and are able to take measures to address the root problems. Furthermore, a wide variation exists in how providers perceive and tackle the gap; this variance is observed across disciplines, courses (Jankowski, 2020; Thomas et al., 2017) and attitudes of staff and students (Arday, Belluigi & Thomas, 2020). It is widely observed that, due to the systemic nature of racial inequality in society, efforts to address the causes of the EDAG in HE may only be fully realised decades hence (Hubbard, 2021, Thomas, 2020). The OfS states that HEPs have a duty of care to learners, including a responsibility to enhance their life chances through the quality of education provided. Specific attention is paid to those students who have weaker social networks, social capital and social support, and those with a history of exclusion from participation in HE. The OfS is changing how data in APPs will be captured – a new approach to monitoring the requirements and expectations of HEPs to ensure that the quality of

provision will be captured in Equality of Opportunity Risk Registers (EORRs) in which all providers will no longer have to follow a standardised template.

Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting (2022) recognise the EDAG as a 'wicked problem', owing to varying degrees of systemic racism within the HE sector. It occurs at all levels of the sector in the form of racial inequalities, sociocultural nativism within curricula, assessment design, support structures and organisational structures and, in wider society, through stereotyping, a lack of inclusive and relevant opportunities, and systemic racism. These racial barriers intersect with other prevalent inequalities such as gender, class, sexuality and disability. Despite repeated efforts to address these inequalities over successive decades, there has been minimal success in addressing the outcomes of systemic racism in a sustained and meaningful way. Thus, in addition to exploring the measurable interventions presented within APPs, a more holistic understanding of the organisational infrastructure (Austen et al., 2017), attitudes and approaches are needed, to sit alongside a typology of interventions.

Students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds face barriers that may be naively or deliberately overlooked through a White-privileged lens (Wong et al., 2020) with evidence also outlining factors including a lack of representation within the staff (Universities UK, 2019) or in the curriculum (Arday, Branchu & Boliver, 2022), a non-representative reading list (Schucan, Bird & Pitman, 2020), a lack of belonging on campus (Osbourne, Blackwood & Barnett, 2021) and direct or indirect racism and microaggressions (Wong et al., 2020). These barriers impact the student experience of marginalised ethnicity students in UK HEPs. Race and ethnicity are typically discussed and addressed in UK HE by comparing the 'other' (marginalised ethnicity) groups with White British groups. This White-centric

positionality has historically been facilitated through a predominantly White senior leadership (Franklin, Lloyd & Matthias, 2021). Furthermore, the role of race alone is not enough to fully understand – and therefore address – the EDAG. The role of intersectionality (Richardson, Mittelmeier & Rienties, 2020) means that – as a single example – Black female students will face additional barriers to succeeding during or after their degree in ways that cannot be addressed by interventions aimed at race or gender independently (Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 2022). Considering intersectionality is therefore important within any typology of interventions. For example, a Black African student with a disability may not benefit in the same ways from activities aimed at Black African students with no disabilities, or from activities aimed at students with disabilities in general.

The marginalised ethnicity umbrella may obscure the nature and drivers of the EDAG. The OfS data dashboard highlights that, across the sector, 86.7% of White undergraduate students graduate with a 2:1 or 1st class degree, compared with 69.3% of Black students. In comparison, 81% of Asian students graduate with a 2:1 or 1st-class degree. Furthermore, there are also differences in experience and outcome within the headline 'Black' and 'Asian' categories. Given the differential experiences reported by people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the UK (Equality Hub & Race Disparity Unit, 2021), it is important to consider students from diverse backgrounds as more than just 'marginalised ethnicities' and, further, to include ethnicity targeting. HEPs are a small, though powerful, part of a society where many of the challenges affecting students from traditional low-participation groups emanate. As such, HEPs need to work collaboratively with wider society and civic/public organisations to tackle inequalities more broadly.



5 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Typology

APPs were accessed through the OfS' Register (OfS, n.d.-e). At the time of this project, the 2020-21 APPs were available for all providers, while only 26 were available from 2021-22 or 2022-23. This project therefore retrieved the APPs covering the 2020-21 to 2024-25 period (N=249) and did not use any subsequent APP submission. All providers who produced APPs for 2021-22 or 2022-23 also had an APP for 2020-21.

These were coded based on each provider's approach to understanding and contextualising their EDAG, alongside their target EDAG by the end of the plan (2024-25), their approach to student consultation, evaluation strategy and ToC (TASO, n.d.). Of these, 147 HEPs had targets to reduce the EDAG. These resulting plans were subsequently coded according to their proposed approaches to reduce the EDAG. Based on pilot testing, the following deductive codes were agreed:

- **What are HEPs doing?** Modifying assessment practice; developing curricula; awareness raising; mentoring; employing advocates; recruiting staff
- **What is the nature of the change being targeted?** Improved structures, governance and monitoring; greater staff skills (awareness, practice); representative curricula; sense of community; and student development (up-skilling, aspiration raising)
- **Are the approaches targeted (provided only for specific groups of students) or universal (provided for all students)?**
- **Which group(s) of students are hoped to be impacted by the intervention?** Specific ethnicities (e.g. Black students); marginalised ethnicity students; multiple groups (e.g. low socioeconomic status, mature students and marginalised ethnicity students); intersectional groups (e.g. female Asian students)
- **Is there any consideration of intersectionality?** e.g. deprivation, prior attainment, age, gender or disability, in addition to ethnicity or race
- **How clear was the description of how the approach would reduce the EDAG?**

Areas of good practice in approaching the EDAG were captured, alongside any additional notes for future analysis. The fields not captured under deductive codes were captured using descriptive inductive codes. These were discussed and refined following the completion of coding.

Following coding, the data was combined with the demographic data of providers, which included student numbers and the ethnic diversity of the student population (HESA, 2022), provider mission group, 2020-21 EDAG, and year 1 to year 5 changes in EDAG statistics (OfS, n.d.-c). Demographic data was not available for all HEPs due to HESA/OfS suppression on courses with low student numbers in these cells. This data was used to determine the prevalence of different types of approach and to explore patterns of approaches across different providers.

The clarity of the intervention was coded, using the categories 'extremely unclear', 'somewhat unclear', 'somewhat clear' and 'extremely clear'. The clarity of the intervention refers to how well the activity aligns with the aim of the intervention, i.e. how clear it is that the intervention will impact the EDAG. The spectrum of clarity ranged from no indication of how the activity would lead to the aim, to an explicitly and theoretically clear (using a ToC) account of how the activity would lead to the intended aim.

The maturity of the intervention was also coded using ratings of high, medium and low. The maturity reflects the extent to which the intervention is aimed at addressing the provider's own gaps: *low maturity* refers to interventions that were developing, and using learning analytics to understand the nature of the EDAG; *medium maturity* refers to interventions broadly targeting known gaps (whether in the sector or the provider itself), while *high maturity* refers to interventions which were designed based on a clear and nuanced understanding of the provider's own gaps. Although financial aid was considered within the initial typology coding, this was not pursued as finance appeared to be a separate section, mostly unrelated to other sections within the APP.

Race Equality Charter Action Plans were retrieved from provider websites where available (N=15), using the Advance HE (n.d.) member database, and compared with approaches detailed in the APPs.

5.2 Stakeholder Consultation

The consultation was conducted with representatives from a range of roles and professional backgrounds in diverse HEPs across England, who offered perspectives on the current landscape of approaches addressing the EDAG.

5.2.1 Identifying a Representative Sample of HEPs

Participants (N=12) were recruited from HEPs (N=9) through targeted contact, an open call on social media (Twitter and LinkedIn), and a TASO newsletter to sector members.

The resulting participants represented a range of roles within providers, from 'grassroots' roles with responsibilities for developing projects to address inequality in student outcomes (N=2), to Pro Vice Chancellors with student-directed portfolios (N=2). Other participants included leads for EDI/student inclusivity (N=2), school/faculty-level academics with responsibilities for student success/inclusivity (N=3), and organisational teaching and learning leads (N=2). Specific role descriptions are deliberately withheld to protect the participants' identities. The participants have experience at a range of HEPs across England,

representing different sizes, geographic regions, types of provider (including those with Further Education (FE) provision), levels of ethnic diversity in the student population, and levels or size of EDAG based on the 2020–21 OfS data dashboard.

One participant described their ethnicity as Black British (female), one as Black African British (female) and one as British-Bangladeshi (female). The remaining participants described their ethnicity as White British (N=9; female = 4, male = 5). The grassroots roles were both held by participants from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds.

5.2.2 Semi-Structured Interview

The 12 participants attended a 1.5-hour semi-structured interview held online via the Microsoft Teams platform. Participants were asked about their own experiences as well as their organisation's approach to the EDAG and the interviews included questions about barriers and facilitators to reducing the EDAG. The full interview schedule can be found in Appendix A. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Following the interview, transcripts were pseudonymised to remove any information that might identify the individual or organisation.



6 FINDINGS

6.1 Typology

APPs were written to cover the period from 2020-21 until 2024-25. They were written for the purposes of articulating organisational plans to address inequalities of opportunity for underrepresented groups, with regards to access, continuation, and success. As such, there is a need to recognise that these documents are not an exhaustive account of work to approach inequalities in student outcomes, but rather give an indication of HEPs' general approaches to addressing inequalities. Additionally, APPs are written as a regulatory requirement, with their content reflecting the extent that HEPs are able and willing to publicly comment on approaches and interventions, and the need for regulatory approval.

APPs differed greatly between providers in terms of scope, depth of analysis and description, and articulation of approaches to addressing inequality. The project team therefore coded approaches according to what was explicitly detailed in the document or was implicitly apparent from related text. This allowed for the approaches to be coded in as much depth as possible. When referring to specific ethnic groups in this section, we use the exact terminologies defined by the OfS and used within the APPs.

6.1.1 Typology of Approaches

The primary aim of this project was to develop a typology of approaches used across HEPs to address the EDAG. Alongside the type of approach undertaken, we also include the type of change targeted, the target group, and whether the approach was universal (available to all students) or targeted at particular student groups.

A total of 249 APPs were coded. Of these, 146 reported targets to address the EDAG, although three did not outline any approaches that specifically aimed to address the EDAG. This resulted in 143 APPs with specified approaches. However, 114 providers outlined more than one approach, which resulted in a total of 438 approaches to address the EDAG.

6.1.2 Approach Types

Types of approach are defined as the methods used to address the EDAG. Sixteen different types of approach were identified from APPs. While some approaches may span multiple categories, the typology codes are

the most prominent of these. The types of approaches identified are as follows:

- **Adapting Assessment Practice:** reforming the assessment format or assessment processes
- **Raising Awareness:** typically aimed at staff, these are workshops and sessions aimed at developing an understanding of the awarding gaps and/or other aspects of inequality faced by students
- **Developing Curricula:** reforming the curriculum, typically involving inclusive curricula or decolonising reading lists
- **Running Events:** extra-curricular (rather than within curricula) events provided for students
- **Modifying Leadership Practice:** Senior leadership teams adapting leadership structures and/or culture
- **Using and Developing Learning Analytics:** collecting, interrogating, and/or presenting quantitative data on the nature and extent of the awarding gap – this may include student grades, submissions and attendance, in addition to demographic data on students and their courses
- **Providing Peer Learning and Mentoring:** fellow students (from the same or different courses) supporting students as mentors, or learning from each other
- **Incorporating Personalised Support:** supporting students through one-to-one activities – including coaching, mentoring or tutoring – by existing staff or external consultancies
- **Recruiting Staff:** staff recruitment drives, typically to recruit staff from more ethnically diverse backgrounds
- **Building Knowledge:** undertaking research, evaluation or other activities to build providers' knowledge and understanding around the EDAG (distinct from learning analytics)
- **Producing Resources:** developing guides for staff and/or students, such as guidance on ways to reduce the EDAG (e.g. resources on how to develop an inclusive curriculum)
- **Developing Staff Skills:** events and activities to support the development of staff knowledge and understanding (e.g. continuing professional development workshops)

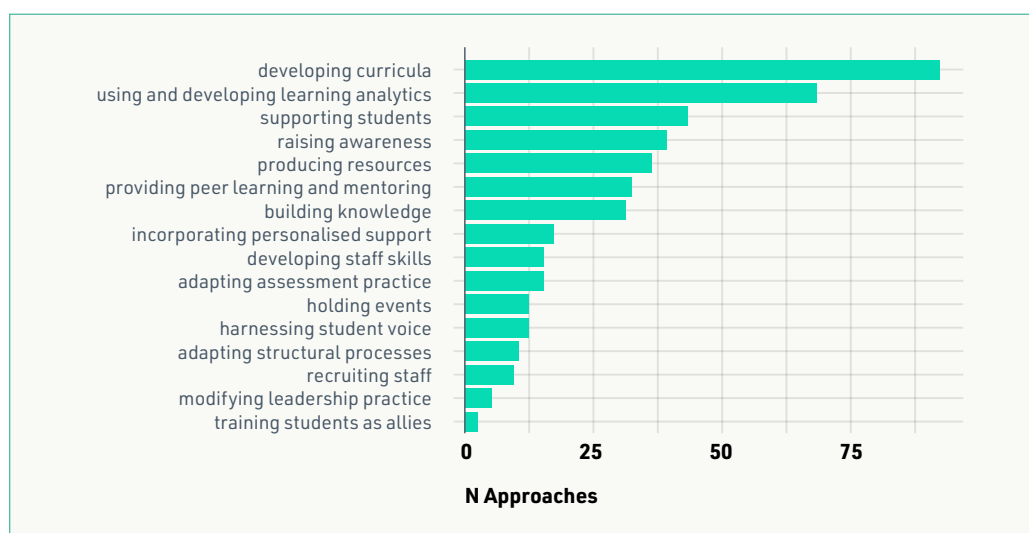
- **Adapting Structural Processes:** developing the physical and policy structure of the provider – this may include the development of estates, revising the organisational structure or adapting the curriculum structure
- **Supporting Students:** specific sessions (e.g. workshops or tutorials) or staff made available to support students (distinct from personalised support as not tailored to specific student needs)
- **Training Students as Allies:** awareness raising in the student population, including training (e.g. training students to be aware of inequalities and speak up when discriminatory behaviour is observed)
- **Harnessing the student voice:** seeking and using student feedback in organisational discussions and/or decisions (this may be through targeted routes or course/module evaluation).

These approaches are different to focus groups with students, which would be categorised under research or evaluation, as appropriate, to reflect the more research-focused route to data collection. The student voice in some instances also includes co-creation and approaches where students are consulted about proposed changes.

As shown in Figure 4, developing curricula (typically inclusive curricula; N=92) and developing and using learning analytics (N=68) were the most prevalent approaches, accounting for 37% of all approaches described across the sector.

The similarity of approaches between providers is notable and indicates HEPs' tendencies to adopt popular approaches already undertaken elsewhere. This could result in less focus being given to how specific interventions may be beneficial within the provider's particular context.

Figure 4: types of approaches used to address the EDAG



6.1.2.1 Approach Elements

Alongside the type of approach, we coded the type of change that the approach aimed to effect, whether it was targeted (available only to specific groups of students) or universal (available to all students), which groups of students the approach was designed to support, and whether the approach considered intersectional characteristics. Given the brevity of the APPs, this detail was not always explicitly stated, but is included where explicit or implicit within the context of the plan.

Types of Change

Types of change were developed alongside findings from the stakeholder consultation (Section 6.4). Broadly, these include the 'three Cs' of Curricula, Culture and Community that were described in participant interviews, resulting in the categories of representative curricula, culture change and sense of community. Two additional categories were added: greater organisational knowledge and student development. These broadly reflect the aspect of HE that the approach aims to change.

Student Development (N=157): these approaches aim to develop students, in the broadest definition, through changing students' attitudes, behaviours or skills (a combination of academic, personal and professional factors).

Revising Curricula (N=87): these approaches aim to reduce inequality through challenging and changing curricula and/or assessments so that they are more equitable for students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Greater Organisational Knowledge (N=82): these approaches tend to be focused on developing knowledge and understanding around the EDAG. Where discussed, providers aim to use their increased knowledge as a precursor to deciding where to focus attention, or what approaches to use.

Culture Change (N=72): these approaches aim to change the culture of the provider, for example, staff understanding and awareness of the scale of the EDAG, or the senior leadership's approach to racial equality.

Sense of Community (N=40): these approaches aim to increase the sense of community for culturally and ethnically diverse student groups at the provider.

Student Development

The most prevalent approaches were those that aimed to 'develop students' (N=157). This category includes any approaches where the aim is to support students' success at university in some way. Examples of approaches that focused on student development were a '*resource to support student study skills*' and '*tutors providing academic support for students*'. The most common student development areas were:

- academic skills (N=43)
- increasing student engagement (N=27)
- course expectations (N=15)
- wellbeing and life skills (N=12)
- aspiration raising (N=9)

An additional 36 approaches aimed to support students in multiple areas or did not specify how the approach would impact students' development. Student development is the most commonly used approach for students with intersectional characteristics, although these approaches may still be targeted or universal, even within APPs which specify which group(s) of students they hope will be impacted by the intervention.

Revising Curricula

Approaches aimed at revising curricula were the second most common type of intervention within the APPs (N=87). They mostly involved work to develop curricula

which are inclusive of diverse sociocultural groups, with an emphasis on changing or adapting the curriculum to reflect inclusivity and diversity. These types of approach included adapting assessment practices.

Examples of these interventions included '*implementing opportunities for teaching staff to create a diverse curriculum*' or '*representative reading lists*'. This type of approach was mainly targeted towards multiple characteristics (N=36), such as students identified as being from marginalised ethnicity groups, students with a declared disability and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Other approaches aimed at revising curricula included raising awareness (N=3), adapting assessment practices (N=7), developing resources (N=5) and staff development (N=4). This highlights the many different ways in which HEPs approach representation within the curriculum.

Greater Organisational Knowledge

Developing a greater organisational knowledge of the nature and extent of the EDAG was a common approach described within APPs (N=82).

Developing organisational knowledge often refers to learning analytics (N=38); some providers use it to develop descriptive data on the nature of the gap at the provider, and others use it for predictive analysis (for example of final degree classifications). Greater organisational knowledge was also achieved through primary research and evaluation (N=29) to better understand the nature and causes of the gap, and to develop evidence of what works. A small number of approaches also aimed to develop organisational knowledge through harnessing the student voice (N=10).

Culture Change

Instilling a culture change (N=71) within the provider focused on attitudes, beliefs and raising knowledge and awareness. Examples include '*developing an awareness for staff to then implement conversations around race*' or '*delivery of implicit bias training for all staff and raising awareness of culture barriers*'. The intended changes under the broad category of culture change included:

- raising awareness (N=26)
- modifying leadership practice (N=5)
- using and developing learning analytics (N=16)
- producing resources (N=7)
- developing staff skills (N=7)

Culture change approaches were primarily aimed at the broad collective category of students from marginalised ethnicity groups (N=31). However, most interventions targeting culture change were unclear on how the intervention would ultimately impact the EDAG (N=36).

Sense of Community

Embedding a sense of community was the approach used least commonly to address the EDAG within APPs (N=40).

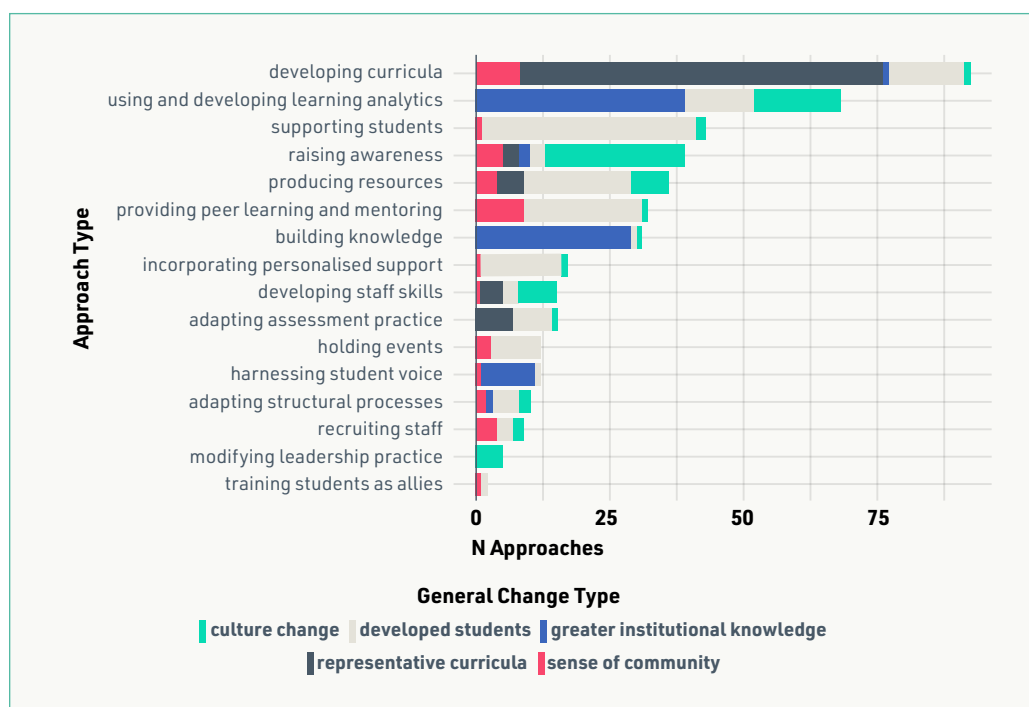
Examples of interventions which focused on a sense of community include 'BAME specific events which are aimed at increasing a sense of belongingness for targeted students' and 'students to develop social capital and sense of belonging through targeted leadership summer school'. This approach mainly targeted students identified as of marginalised

ethnicity (N=23). Notably, these approaches were of higher maturity than many other types of change, although it was unclear how many of them would impact the EDAG (N=16).

Most approaches aimed at developing a sense of community through developing curricula (N=8) or providing peer learning and mentoring (N=9). Relatively few approaches included raising awareness (N=5), holding events (N=3), recruiting staff (N=4) or producing resources (N=4).

The types of change targeted by each approach are shown in Figure 5. This highlights how the same approach is used to target different types of change, and how the same change is targeted through different approaches. This may indicate that providers are using approaches in innovative ways for multiple uses or may signify that approaches are being used with no clear understanding of the mechanisms through which they will effect change.

Figure 5: Types of change targeted by each approach type



Universal vs Targeted Approaches

Universal approaches – those available to all students – were most common (N=135). This may reflect uncertainty in the sector about using targeted approaches, as indicated by a participant in the stakeholder consultation:

I think there was a long time when one of the big issues was the uncertainty about targeting support, rather than doing things that were seen as general good practice for education.

(Participant 1)

Participant 1's HEP had begun to use targeted approaches; however, many remain hesitant.

Groups

Most approaches were intended to support multiple groups of students; that is, multiple populations with different demographic backgrounds. These backgrounds either included specific 'underrepresented groups', such as students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, or referred to all 'underrepresented' student groups considered under the remit of Access and Participation.

Intersectionality

Where intersectionality was considered, these groups mostly comprised mature students, students from low-participation neighbourhoods (LPNs), or those from deprived backgrounds.



6.1.3 EDAG Targets

HEPs with a target to address the EDAG specified a numerical target for the size of the EDAG at the end of the APP period (2024–25). Sixty specified the proportion that would achieve 2:1 and 1st class degree awards or had different targets for specific ethnic groups; these were not included in further analysis. Of the remaining targets, the most common (modal) was that providers would have eradicated the EDAG by the end of this period (N=77). This is unsurprising given the key performance target set by the OfS at the time to 'eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes between White students and Black students by 2024-25' (OfS, 2018). The highest specified target was 39%, while the average target across all HEPs was 5% (mean = 4.9%, median = 5.0%). There was no significant relationship between a provider's 2020–21 gap and their target.

6.1.4 Evaluation Strategies

Providers were asked to include an evaluation strategy in their APPs, to enable the impacts of their approaches to be observed. The OfS includes a guide of standards of evidence to use in evaluation,¹ to better assess the causal impact of interventions. Findings from APPs which contained targets to reduce the EDAG suggest that 25 providers included evaluation strategies with plans to conduct casual evaluations (Type 3). Conversely, 44 HEPs only provided an outline of how they would approach *planning* their evaluation strategy, and 18 gave a brief overview which did not contain sufficient detail to determine standards of evidence. Of the remaining APPs, 54 outlined plans to gather empirical evidence (Type 2), while eight outlined plans

for evaluation which involved narrative standards of evidence (Type 1), as illustrated in Figure 6.

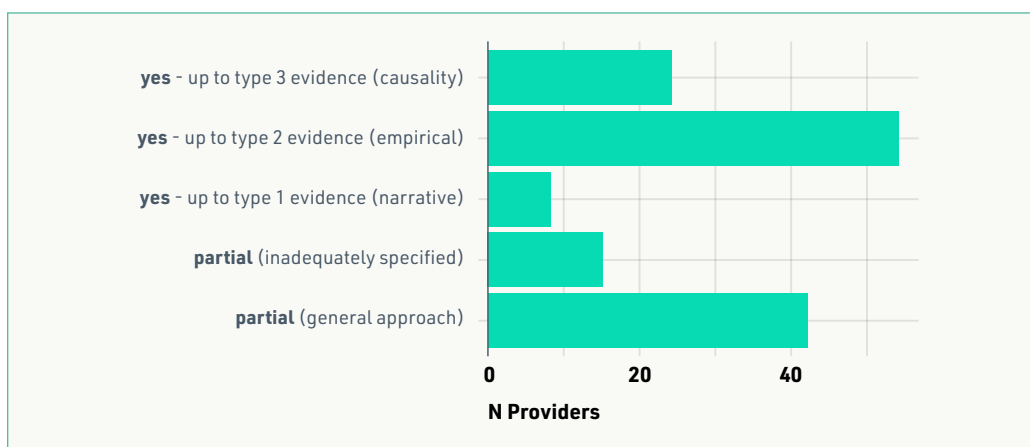
Where approaches designated accountability for overseeing evaluation strategies, some strategies were to be conducted as part of existing roles within the provider, some as part of a larger research/evaluation project; some included a plan to recruit a specific evaluation role to the provider, and others proposed to recruit an external consultancy agency.

The nature of the evaluation plans varied across HEPs. However, we noted particularly where providers acknowledged their current levels of knowledge and confidence to undertake evaluations.

As these evaluation strategies were pitched at the provider level, not the intervention level, they are not specific to those working to address the EDAG but, rather, are relevant across the remit of the APPs. However, some providers included a logic model showing their evaluation strategy, which in some cases offered greater clarity as to how these evaluations were to be operationalised. Logic models are in many ways comparable to ToCs and are often operationalised in similar ways. The differences in the APPs appear largely nominal. Logic models focus more on the nature of the anticipated change, whereas a ToC is more concerned with the causes of change. In other words, a logic model identifies *what* we expect to happen, whereas a ToC identifies *why*.

Many HEPs stipulated that evaluation plans were already underway. As these stemmed from APPs produced in 2020–21, this may suggest that many providers have resulting data that could be shared to develop sector learning.

Figure 6: Standards of evidence demonstrated in APP evaluation strategies

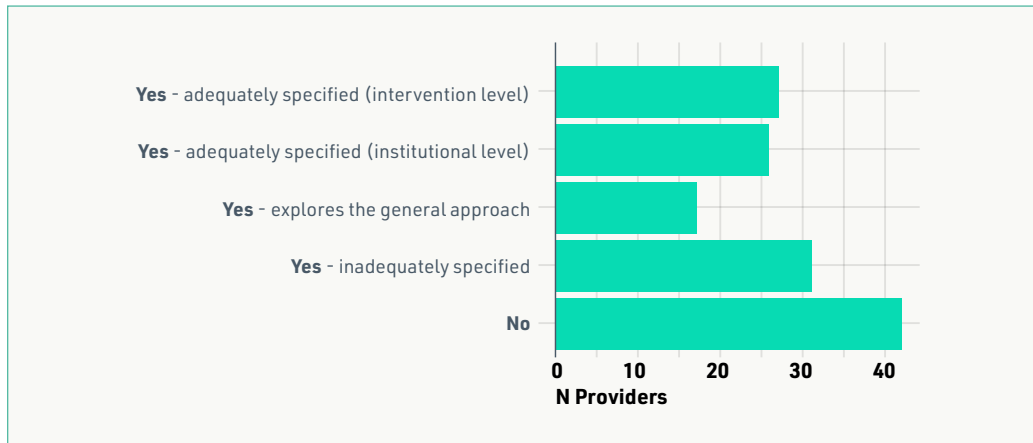


¹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/>

6.1.5 ToC

The review of APPs revealed a vast disparity in the ToC models included (Figure 7).

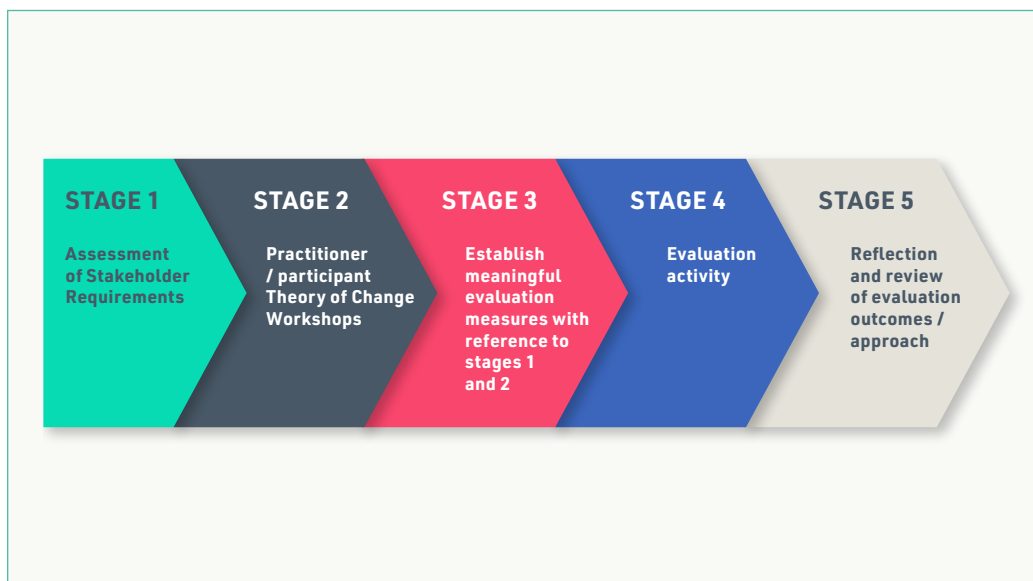
Figure 7: ToC specificity included in APPs



Of the APPs which had targets to reduce the EDAG, approximately two-thirds (N=43) did not include a ToC or logic model, and a further 17 included a general approach (example shown in Figure 8). Of those that included a well-specified ToC, half were produced at the organisational or strategic level and covered all target areas of access, continuation, success and outcomes for the target student groups (N=27). That is, the ToC was produced at the strategic level, rather than considering how specific

interventions would be operationalised, and without consideration for concrete inputs, outputs or outcomes. The remaining 28 HEPs produced ToCs at the intervention level, and included considerations of inputs, outputs, outcomes, assumptions and evaluation strategies to various degrees. Many of these included only a single ToC for one specific approach, although several included various degrees of ToC for some or all of their proposed interventions.

Figure 8: Example of a general approach to ToC development



We note that at the time of these APPs being produced, ToC and logic models were relatively new concepts in the HE Sector. OfS guidance for the 2020-21 to 2024-25 APPs (OfS, 2019, p.19) was to include an overarching ToC, which may be assumed to be developed at an organisational, rather than intervention level. Furthermore, a Google Scholar search of ToC in UK HE² revealed that 64 papers have been published since 2020, while only 45 were published between the years of 2010-2019. While Advance HE (formerly the Higher Education academy) held a residential ToC Event in 2012 (Advance HE, 2020), the concept only started to become ubiquitous in HE around 2019, coinciding with the OfS requirement for HEPs to include models in APPs and the establishment of TASO. In 2023, ToC is a term familiar to those working in HE policy and research, particularly in evaluation, but those working in different areas of HE may still be less familiar with ToCs and their implementation.

Multiple resources offer providers guidance on how to create ToCs. TASO describes a ToC as 'the underlying assumptions about how planned activities will lead to intended outcomes' (TASO, 2022). Within its guidance, it states that a well-designed ToC should help to distinguish where the challenge may lie when a null or negative result has been recorded from the intervention (for example, whether the intervention was implemented as intended). TASO further specifies that a ToC allows the provider to critically assess an intervention and clarify how the change will happen. Ultimately a ToC will enable a provider to understand whether they are delivering the most appropriate intervention, whether the intervention is achievable, and whether it is testable. It is important to be able to assess whether short and medium-term outcomes are being met and how these will lead to the long-term goal.

TASO also refers to the life stage of the initiative, placing an emphasis on 'measuring impact versus understanding process', which will result in a wide variety of ToCs. For instance, a new initiative may be classified as a 'pilot', as little is known about how the intervention will run and what impact it will have. In this case, emphasis may be placed on understanding

and developing the process of the initiative. However, an established intervention may require greater focus on impact, and thus place greater emphasis on measuring this. For complex interventions containing multiple elements, emphasis may be placed on understanding these different elements and how they fit together to bring about the desired outcomes.

Few APPs focused on the challenges or barriers to, or harm from, proposed approaches to addressing the EDAG. There was little transparency in ToCs in the APPs and, more generally, a lack of detail. Most ToCs appeared to follow a similar structure and did not tailor the model to the organisational life stage; as a result, some interventions appeared generic and it was unclear *how* they would ultimately impact the EDAG. The degree of flexibility within the ToCs was also unclear: many have one short-term intervention leading to an intended outcome, leaving no room for adaptation or flexibility. Few APPs considered the feasibility or plausibility of activities, with many aiming to eradicate the EDAG completely, without defining any realistic way of accomplishing this aim.

6.2 Data Dashboard

The landscape of approaches to address the EDAG is extensive, and the data on these interventions offer great potential to better assess their impact on addressing the EDAG, both now and in the future. For this reason, this report is accompanied by a data dashboard and open access data from the typology.

We anticipate that the open nature of this data will help develop the knowledge and understanding of the current landscape of interventions addressing the EDAG in HEPs across England. This data may encourage further gathering of evidence on which interventions are most effective on a national scale.

This data dashboard has been created primarily for those conducting research to understand the nature and impact of interventions to address the EDAG. The data shows the interventions currently outlined within APPs and does not indicate their efficacy. The dashboard should, therefore, not be used as a toolkit or resource to guide decisions on approaching the EDAG.

2 The search term used was in title: "theory of change" "higher education" "UK" to return articles that related to ToCs and were relevant to a UK HE context. While this search term is unlikely to return an exhaustive list of publications, it offers an indication of the prevalence of the use of ToC in UK HE.

6.3 Race Equality Charter Applications

We further reviewed 15 Race Equality Charter (REC) applications. The structure of these REC applications differed from the APPs, as REC applications are data-driven, with a large proportion of the applications referring to statistics alone. There was a greater emphasis on staff compared to students, with many REC applications detailing objectives concerning staff development or support. For example, one provider had 24 objectives centred around staff and six focused on students. Therefore, REC applications contained more information concerning staff structures, responsibilities and timeframes. This is likely related to the nature of REC applications, as staff structures, meetings and responsibilities were part of the REC-suggested format, which the majority followed.

HEPs that had REC action plans appeared to focus less on data analytics within their APPs than other providers, but placed more focus on these elements within the REC. The focus of these applications also appeared to be different, with a greater emphasis on culture change than was evident in corresponding APPs. RECs also had more objectives specifically related to the EDAG than the APPs. For example, one provider included four interventions in their APP related to addressing the EDAG, while their REC outlined an additional five objectives. This may reflect the REC's specific focus on race and ethnicity, whereas APPs explore inequalities in student access and outcomes more broadly.

Interventions in both APPs and RECs addressed the EDAG through explicit targets and activities. For example, one REC action plan's objectives included bringing about culture change through diverse staff recruitment and diverse representation at senior levels.

Although REC applications contributed information that was regularly absent within APPs, such as staff structures and responsibility for interventions, this was not directly focused on tackling the EDAG. This reflects the RECs' primary focus on staff development, statistics and structures, resulting in less focus on the student.

6.4 Stakeholder Consultation

Stakeholder consultations were conducted to contextualise the typology. Interviews with representatives from HEPs in England identified the following five core themes:

1. People are at the core of addressing the EDAG.
2. The sector is trying to find out what works.
3. Addressing the EDAG is a long-term undertaking.
4. There is a need for a context-specific, whole-provider approach.
5. Authentic student voices should be at the centre.

6.4.1 The Role of People

This theme highlighted the role of individuals and the collective staff body in addressing the EDAG. While the decision-making capacity of senior leadership is recognised as directing the focus and culture of approaches, people in many different roles across a provider are crucial to embedding and carrying out the requisite work to reduce unequal student outcomes. The collective staff body is important in creating a whole-provider approach; however, one-of-a-kind individuals were regularly hailed as catalysts for effective progress. There was some concern that meaningful work might stagnate or cease if these individuals were to move roles.

- **Senior leaders have the power to shape approaches**

Senior leaders have an enormous influence over the direction, resources and culture of addressing the EDAG, but how this was experienced differed among the participants. Some described their successes as partly due to the leadership of senior teams, while others expressed frustration that addressing the EDAG did not appear to be a genuine priority for leadership teams amid many competing priorities:

So yes, they made bold statements and plans, and sometimes they are rolled out to echo those bold plans. But I don't see the [...] authentic investment. And that sounds really harsh. But amongst the other 400 things which are on a list that they've got priorities to deliver on, it feels like just another one of those things.

(Participant 2)

Some felt that the need to address the EDAG was a 'requirement' rather than a move driven by a moral recognition of the need for change. In these situations, approaches to address the EDAG may appear 'shallow' and 'tokenistic':

The liberating the curriculum is, kind of, a bit of a buzzword, and, yes, it then feeds into APP as a bit of a tick box, you know, to mean 'Oh, look on how we did this as well'. So, it's almost like they see it as an extra added bit of work which will then feed into the other strategic stuff and all the other bits and pieces that they need to put together.

(Participant 11)

That's right. And then it becomes a bit of a Vice Chancellor's folly. What you're having is, they're gonna say is... and you know. How many times is the intervention really to change student outcomes, or how much is it as a marketing tool?

(Participant 3)

Decision-making power for the strategic direction of approaches to address the EDAG is consistently ascribed to senior leaders, although this was often delegated to committees and groups, who feed recommendations back to senior leadership teams for approval.

While it is important to have staff from diverse ethnic backgrounds, leaders need to bring people along with them, and to be able to navigate leadership in a complex space, suggesting the combined importance of authentic passion and leadership expertise:

Our institutional lead happens to be a professor who identifies as Black, who's one of our Deans of College. I heard him speak several times and he's got some really authentic, genuine stories about his own past, but I'm not convinced he's the best person for the strategic overview of this. So, the wrong person leading the group doesn't really help, in my opinion.

(Participant 2)

- **Addressing the gap is everyone's responsibility**

Responsibility for addressing the EDAG falls to everyone working in HE, across academic and professional services and senior leadership teams. How this is implemented remains a challenge. HEPs distribute accountability across various groups and committees and recognise the importance that everyone at the provider is aware of addressing inequalities for students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds. However, this accountability is not typically a formal component of staff workloads, job descriptions or objectives, and in some cases may not be an explicit expectation. Formal accountability may not be effective in developing a whole-provider approach, as those who are not truly 'on board' may adopt a 'tokenistic' approach to addressing inequality. This can result in a dissonance between the need for genuine buy-in and a desire for compulsory action, for example, through Key Performance Indicators in staff objectives.

At present, few staff working in HE are tasked with formal objectives to reduce the EDAG. This means that buy-in is necessary to facilitate a whole-provider responsibility for addressing the gap. Presenting data to highlight the nature and extent of inequalities in student outcomes was seen as effective in raising staff awareness and a recognition of the need to act. Indeed, there is across the sector a real recognition of and enthusiasm for the need to address the EDAG:

I think the vast majority of staff want their students to have an amazing time at university and be successful. And we should not lose sight of that. And while they have that desire, they don't always have the skills that are needed to enable that. So, as a sector, we need to make sure we give our staff the resources and the support they need to be able to then offer a fully inclusive environment for our students.

(Participant 4)

Nevertheless, it is challenging to engage staff across the provider with the process, with colleagues citing workload challenges and feeling the issue is not their responsibility as reasons for not engaging with work addressing the EDAG. Staff prioritise their time in the face of workload challenges, and work to address the EDAG is often seen as 'yet another thing to do' or an 'optional extra'. Participants 1 and 11 describe the workload challenges faced:

...ultimately the show has to go on, and what happens is [addressing disparities in progression, attainment, and engagement] is one of those things that is an addition, that seems like additional. So, if you're faced with doing a lecture in front of 200 people or developing some work within [inequalities in student outcomes], it's never going to be [inequalities in student outcomes]; you've got to face the audience. So, in terms of priorities, there were some fairly urgent, short-term immediate responses that have time priority that we can't put on the back burner.

(Participant 1)

[There's a] lack of historical communication, making people quite defensive and, absolutely, academics just being quite under-resourced. I mean, as I said, I'm not even supposed to be in that role any more. But I kind of still am, you know, working my weekends marking papers ... And I know what it's like, so it's difficult to say 'This is also now your priority, go and do it' when there's no time or budget in there.

(Participant 11)

Another challenge to achieving staff buy-in is the issue of staff retention and replacement. One participant noted:

So, because the staff turnover is quite significant, you get people engaged on the debate, and then there's movement, and then it's quite a steep learning curve for people when they first enter. Looking at this work to get to a position where they're very functional and then people move on for career reasons, or they move jobs, so that's a problem.

(Participant 1)

In this scenario, there are resource requirements in developing staff awareness and understanding of the EDAG. When existing staff leave and are replaced by new people, awareness and understanding need to be re-established, which requires additional resource. With staff retention and recruitment a core activity for many providers, this may present a challenge to progressing work beyond the stage of raising awareness.

Finally, many roles within HE come with autonomous portfolios to some degree, which is often seen as a benefit of working in the sector. This may then affect staff engagement with activities to address the EDAG, as they are under pressure to dedicate time to areas of work for which they have responsibility. Participant 1 describes this as *'project we vs project me'*.

• **Authentic passion**

There is a high degree of authentic passion across HE, with staff showing enthusiasm for trying new approaches and demonstrating a real willingness to become involved. This enthusiasm should be understood within HEPs as a sign that a critical mass of staff is willing to actively support approaches to addressing the EDAG:

And as a result of that, actually, colleagues started wanting to create their own co-creation projects and were, actually, you know, reaching out to me to be able to offer any advice on how to best approach that.

(Participant 10)

Decolonising the curriculum is a particular favourite for a lot of people. I mean, there's a myriad, I can't list them all. You know, people have lots of goodwill and they like to try things.

(Participant 4)

Amongst those who truly engage are those with authentic passion; those who are leading organisational progress. These people are cited as leading factors associated with organisational progress in addressing the EDAG: they 'bring others along', challenge senior leadership and often 'push against a closed door'.

Operating within a space where only a small number of roles have specific accountability for addressing inequalities in student outcomes, some of these people may have formal responsibility for this area but, for many, their involvement is not a formal part of their job description. They may also work without support or resource from the provider.

That was championed by one of our academic librarians who did that proactively, with no support. An incredibly talented person who genuinely cares about the issues. Rolled that out at the institutional level. Had all the flack that you can imagine from reading lists conversations.

(Participant 2)

Regardless of whether staff have specific portfolios to address inequalities in student outcomes, it is very likely that their work in bringing people along – and together, in challenging decisions and progressing activities – would cease if these key actors left the organisation, leading to stagnation throughout the provider.

Participants hope that things will improve:

I wouldn't do this job if I didn't believe that change was possible, because it would be awful. I'd just be another cog in some horrible institution, spinning awful reports that nobody would read.

(Participant 3)

HEPs need to recognise the risk of overburdening those with genuine passion. That is, these leaders may receive recognition and praise for effecting change, but may also become organisational vessels, in that their efficacy is noted and further responsibility is given to them. It involves a high degree of emotional labour to persistently challenge inequality. To this end, there is a need not only for HEPs to identify and value these people, but also to support and resource these organisational champions so that they can continue to effect change. This includes the provision of professional development opportunities to enable these leaders to embed their work into policy, processes and organisational practice.

6.4.2 Identifying What is Needed

The HE sector is now broadly aware of the nature of the EDAG. This is a relatively new position; five years ago, there was much less awareness within providers, and especially within departments and faculties within a provider. The sector is becoming far more familiar with data, and the role of data, in understanding the nature of the gap and raising awareness of it among stakeholders within providers. This is due in part to data provision from the OfS, and in part to providers developing their own data capabilities:

But anyway, we got the APP data dashboard release from the OfS and, I think, realised the scale of the problem, which hadn't been ... our internal data management wasn't great at that point ... so it hadn't been obvious internally.

(Participant 5)

Providers are at different stages of knowledge and understanding, depending on their own particular journeys. While some are confidently exploring learning analytics and using predictive analyses to determine where and why students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds are less likely to graduate with a 2:1 or 1st-class degree, others are still developing data capacity and capabilities. These may be providers who have fewer resources, or for whom the EDAG has not been a core organisational priority. Regardless of the stage of journey, providers are now recognising the importance of data in developing an understanding of the scale and nature of the EDAG:

It starts with data; data of what inhibits academic potential, data of who uses services, and then obviously the challenge is how do you connect the two.

(Participant 3)

This confidence in working with data to develop knowledge and understanding may result in organisations conducting primary research – including focus groups with students, using existing available data or developing new data capabilities. This may, however, unintentionally result in inertia because organisations feel that they need more data, or need to understand the data better before feeling confident in how to proceed. In essence, it can create paralysis by analysis:

It's been so long since we've started having these conversations and we're still having the same conversations. When I say patience,

I say Patience within Action. I think that's also another really important part – action. So, let me backtrack actually, so it will be firstly action: get out of having conversations. Stop talking! Stop. Just stop talking about things and actually just act. The reluctance to act, I think, is something I've witnessed, and I've witnessed it time and time again.

(Participant 10)

Despite increased awareness, the sector lacks confidence about how to address the gap once its nature and scale have been understood. Having understood the scale of the issue and the 'wicked' nature of the gap, it may feel like an overwhelming task for those with responsibility for addressing it:

I just think this is really, really hard and I no longer see it as a discrete event, which is what I came into it thinking – that I was just going to put together a toolkit, put together a policy for how we look at our reading list or, it was going to be that kind of tick box thing. And I really don't think it is.

(Participant 11)

Part of this concern stems from a feeling that an organisational solution is required from those with organisational roles; those who are responsible for leading approaches. However, targeting attention on one top-down 'silver bullet' approach may mean missing the potential of 'bottom-up' small change approaches. Multiple smaller approaches, each driven by a different individual or group, can address different causes of the EDAG.

Such approaches may not make a difference to the whole cohort of students but have the potential to help a small group of students. Supporting this approach on a large scale recognises that these approaches have an impact which is more than the sum of their parts. Whether top-down or bottom-up, approaches need to be aimed at identified gaps, where the mechanisms of change are understood:

People try stuff out and that's fine. And we have trialled various things in particular departments, or where an academic is really excited by wanting to do something differently – I try not to stop people doing that. If they want to, that's fine. But I think sometimes we invent solutions for the sake of it.

(Participant 5)

Approaches need to apply to the whole provider; however, a small change in one aspect of a student's university experience may not have a positive material impact on how the rest of their university experiences unroll. For example, creating one culturally sensitive module may support students' sense of belonging in that module, but if they face inequality of opportunity in other modules or other areas of their university experience, then the impact of that one module is less likely to materially shape the student's overall experience. Without systemic change at a provider, and a holistic approach, the overall student experience is likely to remain largely unchanged:

At the moment, I don't think we're making a real impact. Let's just say a student does the module and they really enjoyed it and were allowed to bring their culture into it. But the other seven modules they take that year, that doesn't exist. Or you got a nice student representative group, but then they have gone on placement and suffer some terrible racist views or they're not getting the support. Then I don't think it's going to make a difference. They may feel supported by a member of staff or a couple of members of staff, but the systematic issues still prevail over the individual efforts we're trying to do, eventually chipping around at the edges.

(Participant 2)



- **Worrying about getting it wrong**

People who feel that they have no relevant lived experience or professional expertise often feel uncomfortable in discussions on how to address the EDAG and, more generally, on race equality in HE. For some people, this lack of confidence can become a barrier:

And I think I really feel privileged to be in a position to be able to advise other people. I still feel like I'm not an expert to be able to be giving people this advice. But nonetheless, I'm providing it where I can.

(Participant 10)

Those with privilege³ may recognise that people without lived experience can use their privilege to carry greater weight to effect change:

I'm a White male professor, so with that privilege, you know? And with everybody else in the group, you know, people automatically assume, and I recognise that my voice carries some weight. So, I've tried to use that to help push things.

(Participant 2)

There is also a feeling that there are very few 'safe spaces' to talk and share and learn without fear of blame or reputational consequence for 'getting things wrong'. There is a clear desire for such a space, with stakeholders commenting on the benefit of participating in the interview as a means of discussing plans:

It's amazing just talking. It has been valuable to just crystallise my thinking around a lot of this stuff. And actually, it's always boosting my confidence a little bit in that I haven't had this conversation with somebody in this much detail around all the thinking I have been doing around it.

(Participant 11)

³ We use the term 'privilege' to recognise the positionality that some people have which, in this case, results in greater ability to influence, or effect change. We do not use this term in a negative way.

People worry about making mistakes, and fear being labelled 'racist' or receiving blame if they say or do something wrong. While these people are well-intentioned, their worries may be a driver of inertia in approaching the EDAG:

People are desperate about not saying the wrong thing. They're worried they're going to say something offensive and be labelled racist, I think. I think we make it much worse by not talking about it and I think we have to admit that we're racist. I spend a lot of time, because if you've grown up predominantly in a White community, you cannot understand the lived experience of someone of colour and your views are necessarily informed by your history, your knowledge, your values that you bring with you to your conversations. And I think accepting that you will make mistakes, but considering yourself a work in progress and accepting that the only way to make things better is by having difficult conversations is possibly where we need to be.

(Participant 4)

A lack of confidence in what works and what is needed leads providers to look around for evidence, good practice and toolkits to guide their approach. As there is a perceived dearth of evidence on 'what works' in the sector, this may mean that any approaches that have been evaluated as effective in addressing the EDAG are seen as 'the right thing to do' by other providers. However, providers may neglect to consider the conditions required for the intervention to be effective, or the contexts in which a particular intervention may be relevant. Participant 2 talks about this from a local level with regard to changes implemented within a module:

You know, if I've done something in my module and it's got some evaluation, people suddenly think that's the right thing to do.

(Participant 2)



6.4.3 Addressing Inequality as a Long-Term Undertaking

Part of the challenge in addressing the EDAG is that sustainable change takes time to implement, embed and have a material impact on long-term student outcomes. In HE, however, there is often a desire to fit work into an annual academic calendar. For those working to address the EDAG and related inequalities, it can be easy to lose motivation if change is not rapidly observed.

Some approaches are designed to fit into a short period; however, the nature of these approaches may not lead to sustainable change. One participant describes them as 'helicopter' interventions:

A point of failure is helicopter interventions ... Everyone gets hysterical that continuation's dropped or that the gap's magnified on a course. And literally, a helicopter lands, academic developers turn up, a planning team will turn up, and the Vice Chancellor might open his wallet and throw some money at this particular course. And we'll look at everything. Six months later, we've all left and we've all gone to the next one. And a short-term drop-in is no use. Historically, that has been the form.

(Participant 3)

Part of the challenge here is identifying the ultimate goal and the proxy measurements most useful in determining the impact of approaches addressing inequalities. For example, a focus on 'reducing the gap' in degree classifications may lead to a narrow focus on increasing grades, rather than recognising the holistic impact that inequalities have on students as people. A crude analogy can be made with the goal of weight loss: for someone wishing to lose weight to be healthier, a long-term lifestyle change is required for sustained good health. For someone wishing to lose weight for the summer beach season, a short-term 'crash diet' might work but will not lead to sustained weight loss. In both cases, the measure or goal is the amount of weight lost; however, the impact of the weight loss on the individual differs in each scenario.

When long-term change takes years to realise, it is useful to aim for interim outcomes and outputs. For example, in the early stages of addressing the EDAG, a provider may choose to target outcomes to understand their organisational context, create an environment where staff can engage in discussion and action, and earn the trust of students as co-creators. These outcomes can then be built on in later approaches

to achieve outcomes more directly connected to the degree awarding gap. That is, these are the stages of progress that will lead to long-term, sustainable changes that address inequalities in student outcomes. They may be small, discrete aims, but they form part of an overarching holistic strategic plan. For those early on the journey to addressing inequalities, this may be as simple as 'getting a foot in the door' with key stakeholders:

The success so far is that I have a foot in the door in various different places to start to raise the profile of the project, and that that's the first stepping stone really.

(Participant 11)

Recognising how the longer-term goal fits within an annual review cycle is also important:

The fact that needs to be acknowledged, we probably need to do this good work for five years before we really see a change in our KPIs. Rather than blaming people when there is no immediate uptick, we're obsessed with an annual cycle in universities, which quite surprises me because, you know, we have a lot of people who do research in universities and a lot of that research is longitudinal.

(Participant 4)

The long-term nature of change presents distinct challenges to the sector, in particular, that the EDAG struggles to remain a long-term priority. For context, the EDAG was not well understood as recently as three to five years ago. The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd resulted in an increased focus on racial inequalities in HE, among other sectors in the UK. There is also the wider context of the ubiquitous impacts of Covid, the Teaching Excellence Framework, a persistent need to focus on student recruitment and staff retention and recruitment in HE, and the APPs themselves. While there remains a moral imperative to address inequalities in student outcomes, these challenges mean that, operationally, the EDAG is not the highest priority for many providers:

Even if lots of other people are then involved in it, and it's how you then do that in a way that's actually sustained and doesn't get side-lined when the next big political project comes along, and my big worry with this work is that because the way APPs work is changing, and because it looks like – we'll see – but it looks like the metrics are gonna

change and it won't be about difference – about gaps in performance anymore, or at least not as explicitly. We'll probably see this work becoming slightly lower on the priority list.

(Participant 3)

Regulators here can have both positive and negative effects on the sector's prioritisation of this work. Regulatory pressure encourages providers to prioritise attention on work to address inequalities. However, when regulators change their focus, or their requirements of HEPs, or when providers report to multiple regulators, this can bring a sharp pivot in priorities. This may be felt particularly by smaller providers, who may not have the same levels of resources for producing reports and addressing the requirements of the regulator, and by complex providers who report to several providers (for example, those with FE provision who report to Ofsted, the OfS, Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), and combined authorities). Within this context, regulatory reporting may not accurately reflect the range of activities taken within a provider:

Oh, they're mostly performative documents. So, we write things down to tell you that we did. We just retrospectively justify... A lot of what's in ours is quite fictional. Not for any bad reason, but just because the world moves on and APPs are very set in a particular moment in time.

(Participant 5)

6.4.4 Integrating Evaluation Work

The sector has a good awareness of the need for evidence-informed practice, and the need to evaluate approaches to addressing the EDAG. The requirement to include an evaluation strategy in the APP is credited with sector-wide developments in this area. However, the capacity and capability for evaluation remain wide-ranging between HEPs. One challenge is that the long-term effectiveness of approaches will often not be observable for several years. While providers use shorter-term proxy measures, they may not be confident that these short- and medium-term outcomes will lead to a sustained reduction in the EDAG:

The evaluation was incredibly positive. But in terms of seeing a direct impact on outcomes and attainment targets, I think that's much harder to justify at the moment.

(Participant 1)

You see very clearly students increasing their scores on 'I feel more confident', 'I feel I've got a greater sense of belonging at the university', 'I feel my social or my professional networks have increased', 'I feel like I know where to go to get help'. All those indicators improved through the programme. What is much harder to demonstrate is whether it is actually making a difference in terms of student outcomes. And we might look at retention, degree outcome, and post-graduation so GOSH survey outcomes would be the things we look at. And that is a piece of work we're trying to do but has to be quite long-term because it's going to take a few years to see that. And secondly, it's a really difficult thing to look at how you can properly analyse that because it's, yeah, there's not... It's not like there's an easy control group that you can measure against.

(Participant 6)

The desire to address inequality means that HEPs try multiple different approaches at the same time; thus, understanding which – if any – were effective becomes more challenging. HEPs should consider whether to introduce a small number of approaches that can be evaluated clearly, or whether to introduce many approaches which make the impact more challenging to understand:

We did have a big debate at the very beginning, when we were starting to do a lot of this work, about do we try one or two things and measure them really carefully or do we chuck everything at it and know that it won't be measurable. And in the end, we thought the gap was so big we needed to chuck everything at it because the problem was too big. As I said, some things were measurable, but I'm never gonna be able to prove that they were the things that worked.

(Participant 5)

Evaluation practices ensure that interventions are effective. Challenges in implementation only become evident through clear ongoing evaluation methods:

Answering your question about making sustained changes - you only do it if you actually have a system. And you keep going back to it. So, this is what we did. Just putting something in place and just skipping along, thinking it will work, rather than interrogating it, means you've actually got no evidence of impact.

(Participant 3)

'Oh, I haven't got a clue', 'Why would I look at that?', 'Oh I haven't got permission', 'We haven't got ethics for that', 'Why are you asking that question?'. And actually that's the first barrier that you come to. Once you then have that understanding of who uses the service then it's a question of putting those percentages in relation to the wider group. If, as an example in Centre A, 50% of our students who were ethnically minoritised used our service, but 80% of our student body was ethnically minoritised, then don't celebrate the 50% usage. If we understand who's using the service and we understand who's not using the service, then we can make sure that there's an awareness of the service.

(Participant 3)

6.4.5 Provider-Specific Approaches

While providers are keen to learn from their neighbours, there is a recognition that what is needed depends on unique contextual factors. That is, providers need to understand their own local needs and make up to develop approaches that will address specific challenges to equality. This is a challenge in a space where providers are looking to learn from one another and lack the confidence to address the gap, as it means there is no blueprint to follow. This need for contextualised approaches is replicated at macro-, meso- and micro-levels of HE. One frustration in HE is caused by strategic decisions being made which are perceived to be ignorant of the unique contexts of specific groups.

Many providers are now at the stage of developing a more nuanced understanding of their organisational context, and how this may affect differential approaches to addressing the EDAG:

I was speaking to somebody whose budget was also very different – they were looking at £100K per year. For this work, there was a lot of tech infrastructure behind it, as well as experts brought in, while we have nothing. We are a young small university and, actually, the drivers to do this work are also different because of the demographics of the population. We know our students are local, they're immobile, they are largely White, you know. So, harnessing the motivation to do this work where other institutions have almost been forced to do it because they have to represent their student body and their staff body. It's much less for us because we don't have representation amongst staff groups, nor necessarily among students, so the co-production bit is kind of more difficult as well.

(Participant 11)

Data analytics may also indicate where differential experiences are evident, which may aid in directing attention to priority areas:

Two things that strongly correlated with the subject having a bigger gap were, if there was a clear majority of White students on the course, and particularly if it was about 70% White or above, then any BAME students – in particular any Black students – on the course nearly always got 2:2. We're quite small but it was really stark.

(Participant 5)

In addressing the EDAG, providers are looking for *which* approaches to implement in effecting change. The efficacy of different approaches also depends on *how* interventions are developed and implemented. While strategic oversight and accountability in addressing the EDAG is required from senior leadership, allocating power and resource at lower levels can facilitate the local grassroots implementation of the strategic vision within a specific context. Providers may thus enable the development of grassroots approaches tailored to the specific needs of students.

It is also important that staff see themselves as sharing responsibility for effecting change while being protected against blame for any perceived lack of progress. This may require a culture change not only in understanding and awareness of the EDAG, but also in whether staff feel that this work is their responsibility:

It's now kind of struck me as something which is much more about an institutional culture shift rather than me putting together a toolkit for academics to use to check box whether their curricula are actually inclusive or not.

(Participant 11)

I think we need to build it into, you know, our promotional activities so that our academics, when we're looking at promoting people to senior lecturer, or we're thinking about inclusivity in what they're doing at that point, you know, not just, you know, the bits that we're doing directly with our curriculum, but actually, you know, how as an institution and how we bring inclusivity into everything that we do, and that's harder because that's everybody. It then tips into APP and it tips into other projects that other people are doing. So that overlap is also massive and where the boundaries lie on some of this stuff, I think, is going to be hard to negotiate.

(Participant 11)

Communication forms a crucial element of this process. Many providers have clear communication channels to share learning, experiences and reflections with each other and with senior management. Examples include committee structures, festivals of learning and teaching, and organisational structures with clear two-way communication channels:

We invite all senior faculty to come in and we disseminate what we're doing in professional services. Faculty is so important – I see a messy middle. Real innovation actually comes from the middle. People who are teaching. So, if we set up meetings and we do newsletters, that information we send down... This is the awarding gap, this is the trends, this is the officer for student data ... And then that goes to their Dean, and then it goes to Head of School, and it actually goes all the way down to module leader. But the module leader says, actually, do you know what? That's fascinating. We did A, B and C and it had a positive impact. Then that goes back up the chain again so there's that communication, a two-way relationship both between professional services and academic.

(Participant 3)

However, some providers' routes for sharing learning and experiences may be less clear. This can result in individuals being omitted from groups or committees whose experience and expertise would be valuable. Moreover, a lack of clarity in this area can contribute to an 'unawareness' of the strategic approaches and interventions being conducted at the organisational level. In many instances, colleagues in different parts of an organisational structure have little or no awareness of the existence of an organisational strategy or plan to address inequalities in student success:

So, for instance, I can tell you how that would have looked as a senior lecturer from a year ago and I didn't really know what the institution's APP plan was. Hands up, I didn't. I hadn't really thought about it, or it hadn't been discussed with me. So, I think we probably need to do a better, a better job of that. If I'm completely honest, I think the discussions would normally have happened at a level with the Dean or the Associate Dean, probably at school exec.

(Participant 11)

The process is as relevant as the intervention when considering approaches to the EDAG, and communication channels are one element of the process.

In developing a whole-provider approach, it is crucial to understand how and where approaches are most effectively implemented. The failure to consider how interventions are implemented may, at best, restrict the efficacy of an approach and, at worst, may be harmful – to students or to the goal of eliminating the EDAG:

It's also not just what's being taught; it's who is teaching it and how it is being taught.

(Participant 10)

We'll do success coaches. Great. We know that, anecdotally, success coaches will support students and that students are grateful for that relationship. So that's a point of positivity of their student journey. However, if only White students use success coaches, then actually we've just spent millions of pounds creating further disadvantage.

(Participant 3)

Finally, interventions need to consider the mechanisms through which students are impacted, and any barriers that hinder an intervention's efficacy:

There was some sign of an improvement for students who took up the 1-to-1 academic skills stuff, but it wasn't huge. And we didn't have enough doing the coaching for it to make a difference. So, it appears that it was the session with their tutor. Precisely what they were doing in that session, I'm not sure. We do know that their average dissertation score was higher than you might have otherwise expected. But what the mechanism was, I don't know.

(Participant 5)

By understanding the mechanisms of an intervention, providers can make deliberate decisions about what actions to take and can more accurately understand how and when these interventions are likely to have a positive impact. Without this understanding, HEPs will continue to adopt approaches without fully understanding them, and risk incorporating only the superficial elements of an intervention. One example is the decolonisation of reading lists: without fully understanding the mechanisms and contexts through which these interventions are intended to work, HEPs may simply seek to include authors from more diverse backgrounds without interrogating when and how a limited reading list may be detrimental for students from ethnically marginalised backgrounds (Ahmed-Landeryou, 2023; Liyanage, 2020).

6.4.6 Centring Students

Students are central to addressing the EDAG, and HEPs need to consider how student voices are sought and valued. For effective progress to be made, students from representative ethnic and cultural backgrounds need to be involved not only in 'rubber stamping' plans, but in developing and implementing approaches themselves.

The rationale for student involvement is that while most students will not have pedagogic training, they are experts in their own experience of being students and knowing what changes they would value. In offering students the space to determine the direction of efforts to address inequalities in student experience, providers avoid making assumptions about what matters most to students, and this facilitates organic growth:

So, I initially thought students would really want to focus on the curriculum and then maybe deal with the cultural aspects of things. And then have some little fragments of community in there. But it was the complete opposite. And I think the main thing being, for example, curriculum – the content is not necessarily too different from what students are already used to. I feel like a White curriculum or an ethno-centric curriculum is not new to students, and just because they're at university, that's not really what's affecting their experience. It's also not just what's being taught; it's who is teaching it and how it is being taught.

(Participant 10)

Recognising and supporting students to influence change means granting the power, resources and support needed to effect change. This empowers students who want to contribute to addressing inequality:

So, their initial idea was to create a cultural gala. And they really wanted to emphasise celebrating not only their cultures, so the like, the diversity within the cultures of those who are from Black ethnic backgrounds, but also to celebrate the successes of the students because they felt that a lot of the time when they're talking about race or, you know, matters that pertain to kind of the Black experience, it's always very like, you know, it's almost like trauma dumping – you're having to talk about discrimination, when you've experienced racism. You're having to really focus on a lot of negatives. And for them, it was really important to actually celebrate the things that they

love so much about themselves and also celebrate kind of the successes. Yes, there is an awarding gap, but there are so many students who are doing amazing work. Who are actually succeeding by, you know, basically defining their own ideas of success. Who is defining success for them?

(Participant 10)

Effective conversations need students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The current processes for harnessing student voices are often built from privileged positions; they involve students who can volunteer time, those who feel that they belong, and those who have time to dedicate to the role beyond the hours asked from the course. Those students who commute, or who have responsibilities beyond their course, may not be able to volunteer their time, and so HEPs are likely to miss their contributions. To redress this, HEPs need to rethink how to facilitate engagement from students who lack these privileges:

Just to pick something, student representation, student voice. You know, our student reps, student representation is a very privileged position because it requires coming in or being online at a time when you're not involved within your courses. Normally. Yeah, yeah... and plus, there are cultural barriers to being a student rep; you have to interact with other students, etcetera, etcetera. So that seems like something where the Students' Union in this case probably with the help and the student, the university could come up with something structural which could make change. But they haven't yet, or can't, or whatever...

(Participant 2)

Earning students' trust is a crucial and foundational precursor to working more closely with diverse and underrepresented groups. Many students from marginalised diverse ethnic backgrounds may mistrust HE – or society in general – concerning efforts to address inequalities. Perceived tokenism can contribute to this mistrust – feeling that efforts are inauthentic or shallow. Often students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds have had similar previous experiences, and are hesitant to be involved again. Furthermore, students who contribute may suffer harm, for example, through reliving traumatic experiences of harassment and discrimination. HEPs may experience this reticence as a 'lack of engagement'; instead, they should recognise that earning trust requires time, consistency and authenticity:

We put out marketing for a paid Black student panel and we received only eight applications out of a cohort of probably about 300, and they were all female. That was really interesting at the time. But, at the same time, I wasn't too concerned because I understood that there was always going to be #1 a lack of trust from students within institutions.

(Participant 10)

There has to be an honesty and going into that, and I think fundamental for any project to be successful is a key to building trust with your student partners. Now trust is earned. You don't just step into that because of the experiences of those students and the microaggressions and difficulties they face on a regular basis. So, I think if you want sustained change, you've got to be in it for the long run and accept that you'll only be able to make real change when you've got that trust.

(Participant 4)



7 GOOD PRACTICE IN DEVELOPING APPROACHES

The findings from the current landscape of approaches to addressing the EDAG were synthesised with themes from the stakeholder consultation and used to extrapolate areas of good practice when developing organisational plans to address the EDAG.

The approaches identified in the APPs were coded according to HEPs' approaches towards ToC, evaluation strategy, student co-creation and the mechanisms of change for individual interventions. APPs with more comprehensive approaches to developing plans were coded and synthesised with findings from the stakeholder consultation to identify areas of good practice in developing plans for the EDAG. As the 2020–21 APPs do not include the evaluation findings from their interventions, it is impossible to outline good practice in the interventions themselves. As such, the findings from this project explore the processes of developing interventions to address the EDAG, and not the impact of these interventions. The following are therefore examples of good practice within the process, and not good practice of any specific intervention.

7.1 Multi-stage Approach

Arts University Bournemouth

The Arts University of Bournemouth has a logic model (rather than a ToC, as the causes of change are not interrogated) which shows the step-by-step process it is following to help eliminate the EDAG. The logic model is identified as a multi-stage approach which outlines how it aims to achieve its proposed outcome. The text supporting the logic chain model refers to a pre-intervention including internal analytics and research. The pre-intervention furthered understanding of the composition of the student body and found that relevant role models, the availability and promotion of clubs and societies, and decolonisation were of particular importance to their students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds. From this understanding, the initial phase of the multi-stage intervention focused on staff development to raise awareness and a deeper appreciation of assumptions and biases. This was then embedded into the curriculum, leading to a curriculum change,

which aimed to enable students to feel represented. The hypothesis was that this would improve the attainment of marginalised ethnicity students. The provider gave a timescale for the implementation of the interventions, beginning with implicit bias training during 2019–20. Curriculum changes would go forward in 2020–21, allowing time for due reflection and discussion with student groups, while not overly extending the implementation period. Following these changes, the university is hoping for additional positive impacts, such as students feeling represented. This demonstrates the short-, medium- and long-term implementation of the multi-stage intervention and also shows continual reflection throughout the intervention.

7.2 Understanding Provider's Own Context

The University of Wolverhampton

The University of Wolverhampton demonstrated an informed understanding of their organisational makeup after conducting internal analysis. From this, it found that within the previous four years, 30% of its Black students studied business management, creative arts and design, computing or education. They found that the differential attainment within these subject areas over the past four years was over 30%, which was disproportionately impacting overall provider levels. This information guided which areas would be prioritised. The subject areas highlighted were then the focus of interventions in 2020–21, with the remaining subject areas subsequently targeted from 2021–22. From the findings, the university concluded that Black students are disproportionately represented in cases of academic misconduct. From this, they used a logic chain model which demonstrated a multi-stage approach to decrease academic misconduct for targeted students in the prioritised subjects and subsequently aimed to increase the attainment of students from marginalised ethnicity groups. By understanding their own student composition, the provider was able to implement a multi-stage intervention, tailored to its contextualised needs and priorities.

7.3 Addressing/Acknowledging Barriers and Challenges

University of Winchester

The University of Winchester recognised its own challenges and barriers when conducting internal research. Through student consultation, it was established that Afro-Caribbean and Asian students were more reluctant to voice their opinions, ideas and concerns with administrators and that this was leading to a 'White representation' of the student voice. The acknowledgement of these barriers led to research into the experiences of Afro-Caribbean students. The findings of the report led to activities to address the EDAG. The university invited student representatives from different backgrounds to a new working group, where they could provide a student voice and monitor progress on the EDAG. Positions for 'belonging consultants' were also created to work with academic and professional services departments to identify areas for improvement that would enhance student inclusivity and sense of belonging.

7.4 Students As Co-Creators

University of Westminster

The University of Westminster detailed how it had embedded student co-creation into its structures through a 'students as co-creators' programme. This programme enabled students to be involved with curriculum design, teaching and learning collaborations and disciplinary research collaborations. The university reported that the programme represents a diverse student body. It provides students with the opportunity to share their perspectives and ideas, shape their learning experiences, build networks, and develop skills in team building, leadership, communication research, giving presentations and managing projects. These experiences support students' academic careers and help them to gain important skills to enhance employability.

7.5 ToC

The University of Kent

The University of Kent provided greater detail in their ToC, particularly in accounting for how specific aims would be achieved. The ToC looked at medium- and long-term targets, according to the provider's context, allowing reflection on practice and ensuring continual improvement throughout the life cycle.

The ToC is particularly detailed and shows the input, resources and enablers needed to approach targets and the activities they will implement. Additionally, it includes aims, objectives and targets, along with strategic measures, outputs, outcomes and indicators of outcomes. The outcomes include short-term, medium-term and long-term assumptions and change mechanisms, which need to be met for attitudes, knowledge, behaviour and skills outcomes to be achieved. The indicators of outcomes are subject to ongoing evaluation through the course of the intervention and aim to produce narrative (Type 1), empirical (Type 2) and causal (Type 3) evidence. Within this model, the level of detail depicts the thought process behind the university's aims and activities.

7.6 Evaluation Strategy

Bloomsbury Institute Ltd

Bloomsbury Institute had a robust and well-articulated evaluation strategy. It identified current and future data sources that would be used to evaluate the different targets in its APP, and stated dates by when these would be undertaken. The plan recognised that the impacts of four-year programmes would not be seen for at least four years, and so highlighted 'less ambitious' realistic targets for the first three years of the intervention. The APP included the detailed information needed to complete evaluations of programmes and activities. The evaluation strategy refers to specific primary data sources (collected by the provider specifically for the evaluation) including surveys, interviews, learning analytics, and secondary data sources (collected separately from the evaluation data), such as from HESA and the OfS and internal monitoring data (e.g. course feedback). This HEP provides a detailed interim and final evaluation plan, which highlights the need and intention to use the emerging findings to adapt interventions where necessary, including decommissioning (i.e. stopping an activity) where findings suggest inefficacy or detriment to students. The university notes where interim evaluation has already impacted its provision:

Through this evaluation process, for the second year of delivery (2017–18) we redesigned one of the two Semester 1 modules to provide more effective 'scaffolding' of learning and assessment. We included a low-stake task in Week 3, followed by progressively longer and more difficult tasks. This was successful and it was then rolled out across other modules in 2018–19.

Bloomsbury Institute identifies who has responsibility for undertaking the evaluations. Throughout its plan, this provider also indicates how the findings will be used and disseminated to a wider audience, both

internally and externally, reflecting both a desire to share knowledge and an intention to seek out opportunities.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Many of the findings in this report reiterate concepts and factors that have been highlighted in the discourse around inequalities in the HE landscape over the past decade (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2018; Equality Challenge Unit, 2014; HEFCE, 2018; Pilkington 2013; Singh, 2011; Thomas et al., 2017). The focus on data, students as change agents, stages of the provider's approach and the role of individuals leading organisational change are highlighted by various sources (e.g. Equality Challenge Unit, 2017; HEFCE, 2018; Mountford-Zimdars, et al., 2015; Oloyede, Christoffersen, & Cornish, 2021). The significance of differentiated resources and student demographics reiterates similar findings from Boliver (2015). The long and cyclical nature of the discourse reflects the inertia, lack of innovation, and repetition and recycling of almost 'drag and drop' interventions identified in the report.

The Current Landscape

There is considerable diversity in apparent progress in thinking through approaches to the EDAG, which is reflective of the maturity of the methodologies and the extent to which these reflect the specific organisational context.

Providers set targets of eliminating the EDAG by the end of the 2024-25 APP period, likely following regulatory guidance provided by the OfS (OfS, 2018). There appears to have been a somewhat mechanical reference to the OfS target, with limited variation in how it was discussed, and very few APPs reflecting on the OfS's reference to 'unexplained' reasons for the gap. Given the findings of this review, and national data showing the gap is not reducing, it is clear that the gap will not be eliminated by 2024-25. This raises a number of questions for HEPs but also for the regulator in terms of how best to ensure that the EDAG is prioritised and effectively tackled by the sector. While targets by themselves do not appear to effectively drive change and improve outcomes, it is important to recognise that the medium- to longer-term aim remains to reduce and ultimately eliminate the gap.

Strategic plans are accompanied by a staff population who are typically highly engaged once they have

been made aware of the nature of the EDAG, but who may not feel that working to address the gap is their responsibility, or who may feel unable to take on additional work due to an already high workload. Many staff feel uncomfortable and lack confidence to know 'what to do', or how to talk about issues pertaining to racial and ethnic inequalities. Those with organisational accountability may feel overwhelmed when faced with the reality of the challenge to eradicate the EDAG. Within this context, one or two change makers charged with authentic passion may lead a provider.

Organisational progress is affected by the type of provider, as demographics affect the resources – human and financial – that can be used specifically to address the EDAG. The amount of resources available can dramatically shape the extent to which the EDAG is a consistent priority for a provider.

Finally, student consultation is described within strategic plans to various degrees, and there is increasing recognition that change must involve students as collaborators, with the accompanying need for recognition, power and resources. This may be a challenge for many providers facing 'disengagement' from marginalised ethnicity students, which may reflect a cautious mistrust.

Specific Interventions

Approaches were aimed at supporting the students' own development, developing the provider's knowledge and understanding of its own context, developing curricula, changing culture and developing a sense of community. The methods through which providers targeted these changes were diverse and included a combination of targeted and universal interventions.

The types of organisational approach used do not depend on the type of provider or their general demographics. Instead, much similarity was seen in approaches across HEPs, with the same approach used regardless of the specific organisational context. With many providers omitting detail about why certain approaches are being undertaken, or why they are

relevant for their organisational context, this may indicate a propensity to adopt approaches which have been publicised and shown to be effective elsewhere.

However, some providers – especially those whose APP data is suppressed due to low student numbers – have only recently begun to access data to highlight the extent of their gap. Larger providers have become proficient with data over several years, and this is often reflected in the maturity of their approaches. Across the sector, there is a broad recognition of the need to understand the nature of the EDAG through learning analytics, and the need to raise awareness throughout the provider.

While providers typically describe their approaches, less attention is given to how the approach will be implemented, or to how it will help to reduce the EDAG. Nevertheless, there is recognition of the need to address these aspects of planning, as its implementation will determine the efficacy of the intervention, and poorly implemented approaches can cause further harm to students and the provider's relationship with students.

Approaches to Evaluation

The variability between providers extends to evaluation and ToC development, although most providers have considered each to some degree. In smaller providers,

a lack of resources may limit the scope of evaluations, although there was no relationship between the size of the provider and their evaluation strategy.

Providers are currently considering plans which vary in the levels of evidence that they are aiming to produce through evaluation, with only a small number (17%) describing plans that included causal (Type 3) evaluation methods. Most providers describe plans for empirical evaluation (37%), and a small number (5%) describe plans that only include narrative (Type 1) evidence.

Providers are becoming more proficient in meeting the need for evidence and ongoing evaluation, and in recognising the different strengths and types of evidence. However, some uncertainty remains about how to implement evaluation, which some providers address by recognising a need to develop expertise, recruit staff or employ external consultancies. The current progress in conducting evaluations is also varied. Of those providers who have made progress with evaluation data, many feed these findings into successive plans.

ToC progress is slightly less developed than for evaluation plans, with only 37% producing well-articulated plans at the organisational (18%) or intervention (19%) level. This was reflected in the nature of the approaches planned. Models targeted at organisational level were harder to articulate, as these typically addressed a strategic approach, rather than a tangible intervention.



9 RECOMMENDATIONS

The sector lacks confidence in successfully addressing the EDAG and is seeking toolkits, guidance and advice about *what* to do. This project was intended to explore the current landscape of approaches to addressing the EDAG and does not, therefore, provide such guidance. Rather, the following recommendations are based on evidence of current practice in developing approaches and evaluations, framed particularly within the context of ToC and evaluation design.

9.1 Develop Robust ToC and Evaluation Plans

By considering the nuances of different approaches, providers will be better placed to develop interventions that are tailored to their own organisational context, and which consider both barriers and facilitators in order to improve their efficacy. ToC and evaluation plans should be developed while planning interventions to maximise the likelihood of success. The key recommendations for planning interventions based on the findings from this project are:

- **Focus on clarity:** Of APPs which had targets to reduce the ethnicity degree awarding gap, approximately two thirds (N=43) did not include a ToC within their APP. Of those that did, a large proportion (N=30) were inadequately detailed - it was unclear how the intervention would ultimately lead to a reduction in the gap.

Providers must develop robust ToCs with clearly articulated mechanisms of change linking activities to desired outcomes. In doing this, providers must focus on measurable intermediate outcomes which they theorise are linked to the gap, for example, a sense of belonging.
- **Plan for long-term sustained change:** Long-term approaches are harder to plan and implement, given the varied and sometimes unpredictable challenges facing the sector. Effective plans need to recognise that eradicating the EDAG is a long-term undertaking and to identify those factors which risk distracting from the awarding gap and mitigate against them. In doing so, HEPs can explicitly plan for the different stages required for change and set concrete, short and medium-term interim outcomes.

- **Integrate bottom-up and top-down activities within organisational approaches:** HEPs and regulators should recognise the value of both top-down and bottom-up approaches. A range of bottom-up activities exist, from local or regional student activism to contextualised events or small-scale campaigns and conversations with individual colleagues. For example, students at one provider developed and ran an event celebrating Black cultures for students in the city. At other providers, staff are trying new ways to support their students in and beyond the classroom, which may be promising ways of tackling the EDAG. Instead of aiming for a 'silver bullet' organisational approach that will close the gap, recognise that sustained change relies on a combination of bottom-up grassroots and top-down organisational approaches. Targeting many approaches for small but sustainable change through holistic mechanisms may yield more effective outcomes.
- **Be clear on accountability and responsibility:** When embarking on approaches to address the EDAG, be clear about who has responsibility for undertaking the work, who will be accountable, who needs to be consulted and who needs to be informed. Through the stakeholder consultations and APPs, we found strong evidence of where students were included in developing approaches. In providers without a strong existing relationship or community with marginalised ethnicity groups, the foundational step here may be to develop trust with students, recognising that trust is earned. Where staff and students feel that their contributions are tokenised or ignored, this may create mistrust and make subsequent student engagement more challenging.
- **Develop multi-stage approaches:** Where the ultimate change is to reduce gaps in student success outcomes, the approach may include multiple stages, for example, securing buy-in, adapting the organisational structure, training staff, updating the curriculum and re-engaging students. This requires multiple layers of intervention, and systematic engagement and evaluation, to join up discrete areas of activity with continuous processes to conduct and support the entire chain of causality. Too often, the web is broken by an inability to stay on task and/or poor resourcing and coordination.

- **Articulate foundations and prerequisites for change:** A large amount of work conducted is not an 'intervention' but, rather, foundational work to support future changes. Within APPs, the foremost preliminary approach was to develop an infrastructure for using learning analytics or student data to develop organisational knowledge and understanding of the EDAG context. Such examples still fit within a logic model but providers need to consider what the 'success' of this stage of the approach would look like. To ensure preliminary activities are linked to meaningful interventions, they should be mapped to a ToC.
- **Consider the mechanisms of change:** Recognise that the success of an approach is as much about *how* it is undertaken as *what* is undertaken. When implementing approaches, effective recruitment, leadership and support are required to ensure that the people who are responsible for undertaking the work have a genuine interest in it, the skills to make measurable progress, and the support and resources to do so. Consider how and why an approach will effect change and the factors that may impact the efficacy of an approach, and recognise the barriers and facilitators to achieving change. These should all be mapped out in a ToC.
- **Reflect on and address ethical aspects:** Ensure that approaches consider the potential harms they may cause to staff and students from marginalised ethnicity groups and take into consideration how they will be perceived. Consider that tokenistic consultation might harm relationships with student groups, and consultation which requires students to relive experiences of discrimination and harassment may be retraumatising.
- **Incorporate continuous evaluation:** Apply an iterative approach to evaluation (see TASSO's [Monitoring and Evaluation Framework](#)) to monitor whether approaches are leading to the desired outcomes or whether changes are needed to adapt interventions to the factors identified in the planning and design phases. These could be discipline-specific applications or dimensions designed to foster sociocultural factors, such as a sense of belonging or inclusion.

9.2 Recognise and Support Key People Who Effect Change

Providers typically have one or two 'key' staff who 'carry' the provider's approach to addressing inequalities in student outcomes. In some cases, these staff are not formally responsible or accountable for this role, but may be valued by the provider. The role of these key people is typically not recognised within plans to address the EDAG, and there is typically no indication of which individuals or roles are accountable for change.

Unless these staff are recognised, supported and resourced, they may face burn-out and feel unable to continue in the role. Concerns were expressed that if key staff were to leave the provider, the work they were leading would stagnate, or even deteriorate.

The challenge for authentic leaders is that sustained change requires authenticity, but the current landscape does not facilitate shared authentic responsibility. By reflecting on organisational structures and explicitly allocating accountability and responsibility for addressing inequalities, providers can best determine what systemic changes can be implemented to support these challenges.

9.3 Use Data to Inform Action

Developing organisational knowledge and understanding of the EDAG is one of the most common approaches used by HEPs. It is indeed necessary to develop an awareness of the specific organisational context and needs, which can then be used to develop tailored approaches. However, against a backdrop of organisational diffidence, there is a potential for HEPs to become comfortable simply discussing and developing knowledge, in an ongoing pursuit to secure more data.

Within this context, there is a balance to be found between developing knowledge and understanding from research, evaluations and learning analytics, and taking bold, decisive action to develop approaches to addressing inequality. Ongoing evaluation enables providers to use their own evidence of efficacy and challenges to adopt and adapt approaches in near real time.

By including data analysis as a stage in the organisational ToC, providers can recognise the importance of this stage and use their findings to inform later stages of the approach.

9.4 Work With Students to Address the Gap

Acknowledge that students are experts in their student experience, and that their experiences are not homogenous. By including students, providers can recognise how different approaches may address different barriers to equality.

A key element in this is to move away from a model that only consults students on plans to address inequality, and instead develop models for student co-creation. Such models should avoid tokenism and offer students the flexibility to influence the changes that matter to them. They should also consider and address barriers to students engaging in this work – including the ability to give time to unpaid extra-curricular work.

Providers may experience initial challenges in securing the engagement of students from diverse backgrounds, due to general mistrust. Before embarking on effective co-creation with students, providers may need to spend time earning the trust of marginalised ethnicity student groups.

9.5 Be Uncomfortable

Low levels of confidence in addressing inequality, and high levels of discomfort in discussing issues of race and ethnicity, are barriers to progress for many HEPs. This is particularly evident with White staff, who may feel that they lack the expertise or lived experience to effect change. Additionally, the scale of the causal roots of the EDAG can feel overwhelming and this can, in turn, contribute to inertia in taking decisive action. A concern about blame or reputational consequences for saying or doing 'the wrong thing' can block progress. Nurturing 'safe' environments where providers can discuss plans and experiences with others without fear of blame or reputational damage will enable more effective conversations and more deliberate action to address these inequalities.



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11 APPENDICES

11.1 Appendix A

Stakeholder Interview Schedule

1. *Opener*: can you describe your role within your provider?
2. What is your understanding of the ethnicity degree awarding gap, and how, if at all, has this shifted?
3. What involvement have you had with work to address the ethnicity awarding gap?
 - We are aware that there are often significant challenges with addressing the ethnicity awarding gap. How have you approached such challenges in your role?
 - Thinking about successes that you've experienced with regards to addressing the ethnicity awarding gap – what underlies these?
4. Universities currently face several different challenges. Within this context, where does the ethnicity awarding gap sit in your organisation, relative to other pressures?
 - How high on people's agendas?
 - How has this changed over time?
5. To what extent do you think current approaches will work to reduce the ethnicity awarding gap?
 - What makes you say this?
 - What do you think *would* work?
 - What do you think makes for an effective approach to reducing the ethnicity awarding gap?
 - What is your understanding on approaches that are *targeted* (e.g. available only for specific ethnicity groups)?
6. Who has responsibility for developing strategy and approaches to racial inequality (especially with regards to the ethnicity awarding gap) within your institution?
7. How is the approach to the ethnicity awarding gap managed between the organisation (whole provider) and schools and departments?
8. Are you aware of any approaches to the ethnicity awarding gap that originate at a local (department/school) level?
9. What is your awareness of plans to address the ethnicity awarding gap within your organisation?
 - How are these plans communicated by your institution?
 - Which types of stakeholders would know about these plans and which types of stakeholders might have limited information?
 - Are these plans formally governed? What does that look like in your institution?
10. Based on your experience and understanding, to what extent will your organisation's *policies* effect change?
 - What are the mechanisms through which these will reduce the degree awarding gap?
11. Based on your experience and understanding, to what extent will your organisation's *activities / interventions* effect change?
 - What are the mechanisms through which the interventions will reduce the degree awarding gap?

12. How is the effectiveness of these approaches being evaluated / measured?

- E.g. progression / attainment / self-efficacy / belongingness / employability
- Prompts:
 - i. Current / in progress / planned
 - ii. Short-term / medium-term / long-term
- What are the enablers for robust evaluation in your institution?
- What are the barriers?

13. What affects engagement with approaches to reduce the ethnicity degree awarding gap (small and big)?

- How can the sector learn from your experiences?
- Things that others can implement, and external opportunities outside your control that you benefitted from
 - i. Barriers
 - ii. Enablers
 - iii. Is there anything else that you want to tell us about your experience of the ethnicity awarding gap? Are there things that you think we should know, that we've not asked about?



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TASO is an independent charity that aims to improve lives through evidence-based practice in higher education (HE). We support HE professionals through research, toolkits and evaluation guidance on what works best to eliminate equality gaps. We inform practitioners of the best available evidence and produce new evidence on the most effective approaches. TASO is an affiliate 'What Works' centre and is part of the UK Government's What Works Movement.