

Executive summary:

The impact of curriculum reform on the ethnicity degree awarding gap

November 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Among the inequalities in British higher education (HE), the degree awarding gap between Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students and their White peers is one of the most persistent and longstanding (HEA and ECA 2008; UUK 2022). Addressing it has become an increasing commitment within the sector, and the Office for Students (OfS), as the HE regulator, has a Key Performance Measure to address it (OfS, 2022). The gap varies by ethnic group, with Black students having the largest gap, and data shows that it cannot be explained by entry qualification, course of study, or age.

While there is a clear focus on and commitment to addressing this gap, there is still little evidence on what works in closing it. The pace of change is also very slow: according to one estimate, on current trends the White-Black degree awarding gap will not close until 2086 (Loke, 2020). To build this evidence, TASO partnered with two HE providers to analyse whether their existing interventions designed to address the degree awarding gap were effectively doing so.¹

Overview of report

This report summarises the evaluation of two curriculum reform interventions that aimed to narrow the degree awarding gap between BAME students and their White peers. It comprises summaries of

the Impact Evaluation (the full analysis reports are published separately [here](#)), and the Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE). The Impact Evaluation (IE) allows us to assess whether the intervention had an effect on module award and degree outcomes for BAME and White students respectively, while the IPE involved interviews, focus groups and other qualitative evidence to further assess how the intervention was implemented and its impact.

Intervention 1 is the University of Kent's 'Diversity Mark' initiative and was focused on creating a more inclusive and 'culturally sensitive' curriculum, such as through detailing plans to diversify reading lists. Intervention 2 is the University of Leicester's 'Decolonising the Curriculum Toolkit' (DCT) and is a two-page resource for staff that provides guidelines on how to make module content, assessment and practice more inclusive and relatable for all students.

For both interventions we set to test a key aim: whether they had an impact on the attainment of BAME and White students and addressed the ethnicity degree awarding gap. For the IE, a matched difference-in-differences approach was used, comparing attainment in modules that had been reformed with those that had not. The IPE then offered further evidence on the implementation of the reformed modules in both interventions. Both interventions had other aims – for example to provide students with greater knowledge of a subject – but this report did not assess those aims.

¹ The full report referred to in this summary is available here: <https://taso.org.uk/research/publications/>

Key Findings

- Across the two interventions, we found limited evidence of an impact on the ethnicity degree awarding gap.
- The findings are somewhat complex and do not decisively indicate whether curriculum reform interventions address the degree awarding gap.
- The evaluation reveals some important findings on implementation, which are relevant for both curriculum interventions and for non-curriculum initiatives aimed at tackling the ethnicity degree awarding gap.

Impact Evaluation findings

The impact evaluation for the 'Diversity Mark' revealed:

- Attainment in BAME and White students was marginally higher in reformed compared to comparator modules indicating a positive effect of the intervention. However, the analysis revealed that the results are also consistent with null and negative effects – we can't conclude the intervention had a positive impact.

The impact evaluation for the 'DCT' revealed:

- Attainment was lower for BAME students in reformed modules and based on the analysis we can be confident in these results; the reform likely had a negative effect on BAME student attainment. Attainment was also lower for White students in reformed modules, but the analysis revealed that these results are also consistent with null and positive effects.

Implementation and Process Evaluation findings

For both interventions, the IPE revealed that neither initiative was implemented as expected in the reformed modules. As the intervention was not implemented consistently, we cannot reliably know whether changes were made throughout the reformed modules, and there is, therefore, insufficient evidence to understand whether this type of reform has a positive or negative impact on the ethnicity degree awarding gap.

Conclusion

The findings from both evaluations do not offer decisive conclusions. They suggest that curriculum reform interventions *as they were implemented* do not affect the ethnicity degree awarding gap. Caution in interpreting the findings is due to observed issues across both interventions in terms of how far they were implemented, as well as the analysis showing that results were also consistent with null and counter effects of the interventions. This raises questions about whether a more effective implementation of curriculum reform might have different results. HE providers considering curriculum reform or indeed any intervention to address the ethnicity degree awarding gap need to ensure that they monitor how effectively those interventions are being implemented, how well staff engage, the levels and quality of guidance and training provided, and the commitment of the institution as a whole to bring about change.



Recommendations

1. HE providers (HEPs) considering curriculum reform need to ensure that such interventions are implemented as planned in order to effectively evaluate them.
2. HEPs considering curriculum reform as a way to address the ethnicity degree awarding gap should develop a clear [Theory of Change \(ToC\)](#), outlining any intermediate outcomes and the rationale for how they address this gap.
3. In considering the implementation challenges we uncovered in this project, HEPs will need to consider different reasons why interventions are not implemented as planned – lack of resources or time, lack of support, lack of knowledge or agreement with project aims, lack of monitoring or oversight – and design and implement appropriate interventions in response.
4. Effectively implementing interventions where lecturers and professors are the key community of practice requires greater investment in training and support.
5. Given the evidence suggests that purely ‘top down’ approaches can lack buy-in and so may not lead to better or more consistent implementation in other areas of curriculum design, there may be a need to combine a ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approach, or to adopt a more shared and distributed approach to leadership.
6. Curriculum reform to address the ethnicity degree awarding gap should learn from the wider evidence on curriculum and strategic change in higher education and other institutions, which outlines the importance of leadership, as well as the need for effective communication, clear planning, motivating and inspiring those involved, and understanding specific institutional and socio-cultural contexts.
7. Other interventions, not just those focused on the curriculum, should be piloted and evaluated to assess their impact on the ethnicity degree awarding gap. To support this, TASO has commissioned further research to explore and collate current practice on what HEPs are currently doing to address the degree awarding gap.
8. Quasi-experimental designs are a useful tool for HEPs to evaluate their interventions to address inequalities, and should be deployed more widely, especially where institutions have long term data to establish trends over time.
9. While various factors can affect implementation, poor implementation could pose a reputational risk for HEPs (or any institution). Public commitments to address racial inequalities need to be matched by the implementation and evaluation of measures that effectively address those inequalities.
10. Across HE there is increasing commitment to ‘whole institution’ approaches to tackling race and other inequalities. Such commitments need to be properly scrutinised and evaluated, to determine whether they make an impact on the ethnicity degree awarding gap, or the other longstanding inequalities in HE.
11. Impact evaluation needs to better assess how far and in what ways the student experience – including satisfaction and belonging – impacts on student outcomes, including on degree awarding.

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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. TASO is an affiliate ‘What Works’ centre and is part of the UK Government’s What Works Movement.