TASO — Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

Theory of Change Project: Dissertation Retreats and Student Panels
Organisation: University of Southampton

1 Situation

There is a persistent ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG) between white students and students from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic backgrounds at the University of Southampton. This gap between Black and white students was 18.1% in 2021/22. Overall, the internal and external evidence points to the following factors underpinning the gaps: (i) A lack of accountability and clear governance around the EDAGs; (ii) a perception of the University as a predominantly white institution; (iii) a lack of trust amongst Black students in terms of the accessibility of student resources and that the University can provide, engage and deliver culturally competent support effectively; (iv) staff reluctance to engage with EDI issues due to limited awareness and confidence to engage in changing practices; (v) an overrepresentation of Black students in technical programmes of study (e.g., BTEC); (vi) accessibility of the current curriculum (assume that most students come in with A-levels); (vii) issues with the curriculum being Eurocentric and the assessment methods currently in place; (viii)overall low representation of staff from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic backgrounds, which contributes to reduced understanding of the unique experiences of diverse students amongst staff and a lack of role models that 'look like me' to Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic students; (ix) staff feeling ill-equipped to have conversations with students from diverse backgrounds, or able to build effective, quality relationships with them.

2 Aims

To address current ethnicity degree awarding gaps through effective and embedded interventions that:
• Build students' confidence in the University and the services that it provides.
• Increase trust amongst racially minoritised students.
• Improve students' engagement with their studies and their confidence in academic skills related to attainment.

7 Inputs	5 Activities	6 Outputs	3 Outcomes	4 Impact

Process / Impact

Inputs

All:
• Student and senior leadership buy-in
• Budget / money for activities
• Risk assessments
• Pre-existing Theories of Change
• Pre-intervention research and evidence
• Communication strategies for targeted activities
• Input from related strategic work like the Race Equality Charter (REC) and Access and Participation Plans
• Good relationships across teams

Dissertation Retreats:
• Eligibility criteria for the dissertation retreats and the Awarding Gap Project
• Expertise of delivery staff
• Digital and physical spaces

Awarding Gap Project (AGP):
• Students' time for Awarding Gap Project and dissertation retreat
• Terms of Reference and physical/digital spaces for panels
• Expertise of delivery staff
• Digital and physical spaces

Activities

All:
• Monitoring the transformation for staff and students in all activities
• Data collection to monitor and evaluate the outcomes, dissemination of reports
• Engage with necessary teams (e.g.; Centre for Higher Education Practice, Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice; Equality, Diversity & Inclusion)

Dissertation Retreats:
• Running retreats and associated events
• Student recruitment to the programme
• Determining eligibility criteria and recruitment protocol
• Develop and implement communication strategy
• Gathering feedback on the programme and reporting this back to delivery colleague
• Contact PATs of students participating to ensure colleagues are equipped to supervise a dissertation (e.g., how to encourage students to develop their research questions and embark on academic writing).
• Conducting research on impact of retreats on degree award.

AGP:
• Recruiting and training AGP members
• Running the student panel
• Development and dissemination of resources (e.g. about EDAG, Black Fresher's Guide, etc.)
• Student-focused events (e.g., Black History Month)
• Staff and students creating visible resources and opportunities (these are dictated by the staff and students as part of the intervention, not predetermined by the delivery team)
• Awarding Gap Project research activities

Outputs

All:
• Recommendations for change
• External reports/papers
• Increased number of activities aimed at enhancing Black students' experiences and outcomes

AGP:
• Student-led panel currently employee 27 students
• Delivery of 4 interventions/events by students on that panel, generated through their activities
• Awarding Gap Project report(s)
• Reporting to WPSC, REC, governing committees
• Annually revised Black Fresher's Guide

Dissertation Retreats:
• Three dissertation retreats with 20 students attending
• DIY writing toolkit
• 20 appointments between students and officers in the Post-Entry Academic Skills team
• Professional development for staff running the dissertation retreats
• Connections/shared space for students on the dissertation retreats
• Connections/shared space for staff running the dissertation retreats

Outcomes

Dissertation retreats:
• Students more likely to complete their dissertation and do well in their dissertation
• Build relationships with other students
• Increased knowledge of academic writing
• Increased self-confidence and efficacy in writing
• Increased sense of belonging to university and feeling part of community

AGP:
• Students are confident change makers
• Students feel valued for their contributions to change / the value of their input is recognised and appreciated
• Student voice is amplified and embedded in AGP panels, processes and evaluation.

Impact

Closure of the EDAG
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All students graduate feeling empowered, equipped and able to go through university without differential experiences

Ability to pinpoint why they were able to close the gap which will be disseminated and looped back in an iterative process into future activities

Equality in academic experience

Students trust the institution

Increasing number of Black students recruited to the University (makes the institution more attractive to a diverse population of prospective students)

Students do not leave their degrees due to adverse experiences (e.g., lack of sense of belonging, poor academic trajectories etc)

8 Rationale & Assumptions

- Assume they will know what works in closing awarding gaps
- Engagement of students
- 3rd/final year students are an engaged audience for the retreats
- Completing a dissertation and an enhanced grade will translate into an enhanced overall grade and change their approach to learning
- Assuming that Black students are less likely to be awarded a good outcome in their dissertation.
- That students want or need dissertation guidance or accountability
- Interventions are viewed as worthwhile
- Students have time to work with staff (e.g., on the student-led panels)
- Closing the awarding gap is a distinct indicator of impact
- Anecdotal evidence is sufficient to inform their activities
- Impact of the dissertation retreats improving student outcomes (internal evidence)

- Dissertation retreats being offered at the right time in their academic journey / right time of the year for those students (and at the right time for their subject area)
- Extended project qualification (EPQ) evidence
- HESA and NSS data evidence are accurate, free from selection bias and reliable
- The research into retreats for postgraduates and staff as being beneficial adapted to undergraduates
- That staff engaged in this work will reflect on their contributions and their accountability and change their behaviour as a result
- That the data used to inform the interventions' design is representative of the student body
- That the retreats are accessible to a wide range of students
- That students will have the motivation and capacity to engage in the student panel
- Opportunity cost in participating in the retreats (time off work, childcare, etc)