TASO — Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

Theory of Change Project: Departmental Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap (EDAG) Framework
Organisation: University of York

1. Situation

There is a persistent ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG) between white and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students at the University of York. Specifically, there is a 13.7 percentage points gap between white students and Black students, and a 10.5 percentage point difference between white students and Asian students. These gaps are also present amongst mature students and students from IMD quintiles 1/2, both individually and intersectionally (e.g., the ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG) is widening for the most disadvantaged BAME students compared with the most advantaged white students). These awarding gaps are fuelled by: A lack of embedding the need to address the EDAG within existing accountabilities and processes, support which is best practice oriented for which take up is optional and the support is located across different teams, too few incentives/drivers to change practice on a systematic basis, a culture that is rooted in existing traditional research cultures and Western culture. Some of these drivers have been uncovered through feedback across the annual review process. There is a need to join-up processes, define accountabilities and provide support aspart of a formal process and to systematically draw-on and enhance knowledge at departmental level.

2. Aims

To close the EDAG by delivering interventions/activities that recognise students' unique experiences and backgrounds (i.e., the interventions appreciate nuances in ethnicity degree awarding gaps and the factors contributing to these differences). To increase awareness of EDAGs in academic departments and embed solutions and enhancement activities within these. To produce a cultural shift around inclusive practice and an appreciation for its inherent value, particularly amongst senior leadership (i.e., their buy-in). To provide outstanding education for all students and in subjects that students recognise as important to them. To enable all staff across the institution to take action and to develop a shared understanding of team boundaries and key synergies. To improve students' opportunities to actively contribute to designing and implementing enhancement activities and evaluating their success.

Process

7. Inputs

- Academic and Professional Services time (factored into workloading to devote to activities)
- Buy-in (leadership and departments)
- Data curation for department 'health checks'
- Funding for student partners
- Student time and payment
- Learning and Teaching (L&T) Fund – streamlined administration
- AR framework
- Leaders/champions
- Monitoring/accountability systems (for AR, timely completion of reporting to AR, etc.)

5. Activities

- EDAG awareness raising with key stakeholders.
- Developing curated data dashboards and disseminating/training for using them.
- Upskilling colleagues on data literacy and evaluation methods.
- Communication strategy – the plan, the issue, the outputs.
- Develop supportive toolkits based on UoY contextual insights.
- Develop a framework to support departments re: gaps (exploring options, about monitoring and implementing actions, etc. – i.e., develop a ToC and eval plan for each).
- Incentivise participation in activities for staff/students.
- Developing AR and health checks frameworks/terms of reference.
- L&T fund applications (review and awarding).
- Running and advertising dissemination and best-practice sharing events.
- Formalisation of health checks and Access and Participation Plan (APP) work (such as EDAG) through systems (e.g.; promotion, PDRs etc.)

6. Outputs

- # of departments submitting/successful for the L&T fund
- # of evaluation and impact projects
- # of departments with APP-specific actions
- # APP-specific actions per department
- # of check-in points with departments throughout the AR process
- # of ToCs developed for projects/initiatives
- # of projects/initiatives (planned, delivered, evaluated, and disseminated)
- # of training sessions
- # of practice-sharing events and # of attendees

Impact

3. Outcomes

Short-term:
- Data health checks introduce and build staff knowledge and awareness of the ethnicity degree awarding gaps.
- Increased staff skills and confidence to take a proactive stance in addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gaps.
- Initial building of students' institutional trust that the University sees eradicating the ethnicity degree awarding gap as a main priority.
- Increased departmental awareness and understanding of awarding gaps at the department level.
- Increased engagement of academic departments with the enhancement activities/interventions that address the ethnicity degree awarding gaps.
- Developing and involving high status allies (not just senior leaders, but individuals that staff look to, champions) to support enhancement activities (from across the institution).

Intermediate-term:
- Increased staff knowledge and quality of 'solution thinking' and thought leadership.
- A structured and embedded approach to addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap that is more effective and contributes to strategic action planning.
- Change in working culture, shifting from siloed approach to embracing collaborative, cross-team working to improve efficiency and be more 'joined up' in their activities.
- Increased institutional focus on APP/ ethnicity degree awarding gaps as part of the core quality/review process.
- Increased frequency of data monitoring to identify potential gaps amongst current students' attainment and experiences ('live' instead of 'retrospective' in terms of when data are reviewed and used to inform change in practice).
- Increased skills of staff in academic departments to address barriers, working collaboratively with professional services and drawing on student perspectives.

4. Impact

Overarching long-term impact: Closing the EDAG that currently exist at the University of York.

Impact on students:
- Enhanced experience for all students. Improved student experience that recognises starting points/lived experiences and allows students to succeed by being their authentic selves.
- Students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds have the same opportunity as white students to be awarded a 'good' degree.
- Students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds have the same opportunity as white students to attain positive graduate outcomes.

Impact on staff:
- Enhanced and enriched job satisfaction for staff contributing to enhancement activities.
- Increased sense of agency amongst staff (i.e., feel they understand their part of the bigger picture and how they contribute to initiatives that align with their values).
- Increased confidence of staff to be able to take a data informed, proactive and reflective approach to address the issue.

Impact on the University:
- Positive change in institutional culture around learning and teaching (e.g., inherent value of inclusive practice, being part of the solution, etc).
- Positive change in institutional culture around embracing diversity.
- Whole institution approach to addressing awarding gaps embedded into 'business as usual'.
- Improved reputation for providing relevant and high-quality education to diverse populations of students.
- More students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds applying to the University of York.
- Programmes designed and delivered to meet the needs / starting points of different groups of students.

8. Rationale & Assumptions

- Departments more aware ☐ can develop activities to address gap.
- Departments will be more engaged if they have the data.
- Collaboration between departments and teams will create more activity.
- Assuming policy impacts practice - that embedding the reviews will generate actions.
- Capacity and time for department staff to engage in the process and the resulting activities addressing the gap.
- EDAG is a priority for the university and has the support behind it for initiatives to be successful and that departments/SLT will have the space / buy-in / willingness to create capacity to address the EDAG by removing or deprioritising something else (no new resource, no new money – but moving resource).
- New ways of working with departments will make work more efficient and streamlined, therefore freeing up capacity.
- That narrowing the gap will not happen unless they take a whole institution approach with specific groups of staff and students involved.
- Assume students are experts in their own experience.
- Assume that this addresses more than just academic issues and actually touches upon other elements of the student experience ("psychosocial cocktail of experiences).
- Assumption that there won't be pushback from the departments – not just say it and it will be so.