



THEME: SUPPORTING DISADVANTAGED AND UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS

ELIMINATING THE AWARD GAP THROUGH SUSTAINED PANEL DISCUSSIONS FORUM- A REGIONAL COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

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The award gap is a deeply rooted inequality issue within higher education institutions (HEIs) (Mowat, 2018) and there has been an increased call for HEIs to pick up the pace of eliminating this gap (UUK, 2019, OfS, 2020). Successful interventions exist but these are ad hoc rather than systematic and tied to specific programmes within individual HEIs. Therefore, there is a need to scale these up across HEIs to meet the ambitious target set by universities (OfS, 2020). To achieve this, collaboration between HEIs is essential where meaningful dialogues can occur, and best practices can be shared. Currently, there are not many forums or opportunities for doing this. To meet this need, the Northwest Award Gap Group (NWAGG), a collective of academics from across north-west business and law schools (with similar demographic profiles), was set up with the aim of working towards eliminating the award gaps for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) student groups.

Methodology

With the focus on interventions within individual universities (Sequeira, 2019), not much attention has been directed at cross-university collaborative interventions. It stands to reason that cooperation between universities would increase resources and strengthen interventions to reduce the gap (AdvanceHE, n.d.). Therefore, the NWAGG collaborative model will provide the scale needed to make significant movement towards the elimination of the award gap by adapting a region wide approach to the problem.

The NWAGG model is based on the reported evidence that the award gap problem exists (UUK, 2019). Therefore, the focus is not on belabouring the existence of the issue but on sharing successful actions at a range of institutions through our events to support ideas and activities in the wider sector.

Using a series of panel presentations (or panels), NWAGG aims to increase visibility of successful award gap interventions across HEIs; create a multi-perspective forum to discuss scaling up opportunities; and offer a platform for sharing what works. Panel presentations has been described as useful mechanism for engaging in meaningful dialogues and scholarly exchange of perspectives between multiple parties (Allen, 2017). Four separate panel events were organised by member institutions on the following topics:

- Minding the Gaps through Learning and Teaching (University of Central Lancashire, UCLAN)
- Bridging the Graduate Outcome Divide for Underrepresented Groups (Liverpool John Moores University, LJMU)

- Valuing staff diversity and inclusivity (Manchester Metropolitan University, MMU)
- Reflections/Future Steps (University of Salford, USAL)

Each event consists of four national speakers (or panellists) carefully selected based on their expertise on the topic and lasts for one and half hours. To generate meaningful conversations, and since the award gap is a multifaceted issue (Godbold and Brathwaite, 2021), members of different stakeholder groups are invited to these events through targeted advertising at stakeholder groups such as Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS), Higher Education Race Action Groups (HERAG) as well as through HEI faculties. Questions, comments, and examples of what works are invited from the different stakeholder groups in attendance after the panellists have finished their presentations.

The first panel event, organised by UCLAN, was held in February 2021 with 95 participants from across 37 HEIs. Notable speakers from MMU, University of Kent, University of Winchester and UCLAN presented their respective interventions. Based on chat comments during the event, the participants found the event very useful. The second event (organised by LJMU) is scheduled for the end of March 2021 and already 120 participants have signed up for it, showing increased popularity and reach of the NWAGG model. This event has drawn speakers from wider stakeholder groups such as Business in the Community (BITC), large-scale employers such as the Co-op, professional services, and student representatives.

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Contribution

Historically, in HEIs, the attainment gap between Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students compared to their white counterpart has been very wide. The gap has consistently been at two digits percentage point and it currently stands at 13.2%, and the gap for black students in particular is higher at 23.4% (AdvanceHE, 2019). It is expected that the series of panel events will help to increase visibility of successful approaches to reducing the award gap so others can learn from such best practices in the sector and benchmark their own internal approaches against these. The issue has been that many universities do not communicate on issues like this and there is not as much collaboration on this subject as is necessary. To our knowledge, many of the existing collaborations has not been beyond the dyad. The required scale is simply lacking. As an open forum where dialogue and scholarly discussions can take place, these panel events will also inform scaling up opportunities across the sector. This will help HEIs increase the current pace and scale of interventions and the associated benefits towards reducing the award gap.

Conclusion

While effort is being made to reduce this gap, the pace of progress has been very slow owing to 'lack of visibility' of ongoing projects/research on the topic, 'inadequate sharing' of successful interventions and the 'muted scaling up' opportunities. Addressing these three factors in a collaborative way will help the higher education sector to address the award gap quicker. Going beyond the dyad, the NWAGG model purports to address these issues in a timely and effective manner. Being regional in scope, the collaborative is large enough to achieve significant impact but not too large creating further complexities associated with large systems (Canbäck et al., 2006). We argue that this regional collaborative model needs to be replicated across the country to achieve the momentum required to eliminate the award gap.