The Diversity of Student Experience (DSE) Research Project

Student experience in HEIs: What does the evidence say about the ethnicity awarding gap?

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Original artwork created for this project by Ruthie Liu, 1st year undergraduate student at Ruskin School of Art, Feb 2023

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About

I completed my doctoral degree in Education at the University of Oxford. My current research interest is centred primarily on exploring the emotions and well-being of teachers and students in the classroom, as well as examining what schools can do to support teachers and engage students. My passion for understanding how to build a climate with happy learners and teachers at different stages in their educational journal, led me to join the Diversity of Student Experience Research Project (DSE) as a literature reviewer.

In this role, I have been especially interested in investigating the experiences of different groups of staff and students in higher education institutions, and the effect of proactive interventions by institutions on students' attainment in the UK. I thus focus on the institutional factors and interventions that might impact minority students in pursuing academic success.

This report reflects on the DSE project's aims to explore student experience and participation. It aims to identify the issues in the ethnicity awarding gap research that could identify effective methodology and interventions for conducting future research.

Highlights

The literature report provides a broad perspective on the ethnicity awarding gap, and synthesises research that is primarily from social science, education and psychology. This includes literature identified by SCOPUS, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and ERIC on the ethnicity awarding gap in the UK higher education sector. The analysis explores the implications of methods and interventions considered in previous empirical studies.

Section 1 explores the **historical development** of crucial concepts and methods in ethnicity awarding gap research, using them to examine the **language** and the **methodologies** used in previous studies. This provides a critical context to the recent research developments.

This section enhances awareness and sensitivities to the terminologies used to describe the ethnicity awarding gap and its impact on research and on research participants. Key points include discussions of:

- The early use of quantitative methods tended to use a **deficit** model and engage umbrella categories that obscure differences.
- Research shifted to a mixed method approach focusing **on institutional and structural factors.**

Section 2 focuses on the UK institutional factors that impact ethnic minority students, including students' perceptions as well as reflections on students' health and well-being in HE. Key points include:

- Institutional factors that impact the ethnicity awarding gap need to be investigated using participatory methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the underlying causes of ethnicity awarding gaps by focusing on **lived experiences**.
- Prioritising ethnic minority students' **well-being** and engaging students in **co-design** processes impacts change and decision-making in HE.

Section 3 examines the effectiveness of practical strategies and interventions to institutional barriers, inclusive practices and support for students. Key points include:

- Approaches that value student and staff involvement in co-developing effective interventions and strategies with under-represented groups enables the co-design of inclusive environments and reflection on how their teaching and learning experiences and individual needs are supported in parallel with community needs.

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Introduction

This report aims to identify the trends and issues explored in UK ethnicity awarding gap research. This report gathers information and evidence of the degree awarding gap related to ethnic minority students. The review of the literature begins with a broad overview of the historical development of the awarding gap research, and moves on to the empirical studies that aim to understand the causes of the ethnicity awarding gap and potential for interventions to mitigate the gap. Lastly, this report seeks to cast some light on the research and evidence of the importance of supporting higher education institutions in closing the ethnicity awarding gap.

The ethnicity awarding gap, the difference between the percentage of ethnic minority students and White students awarded a good degree, is the most significant awarding gap in the UK. The approach taken in this research is an institution-based/structure-based approach, focusing on the role of higher education institutions in addressing the awarding gap. Despite the endeavour of previous researchers of the degree awarding gap in the UK, additional research is still needed on this complex issue (Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 2022).

The first section aims to consider the UK ethnicity awarding gap research focusing on the development of concept and methodology. This section reflects on unique issues that developed and are embedded in the UK's specific higher education context. This section specifically problematises the terminologies and language used in ethnicity awarding gap research in the UK. Further, it introduces and discusses the different methodological approaches used in previous studies and reports on how this contributes to the methodology in this field.

The second section investigates the factors that impact the ethnicity awarding gap. In particular, the section focuses on the institutional and structural factors that impact ethnic minority students' degree classification outcomes to understand what positive roles higher education institutions can play in closing the ethnicity awarding gap in the UK. This section synthesises evidence on group structural factors in current studies and their implications for further research.

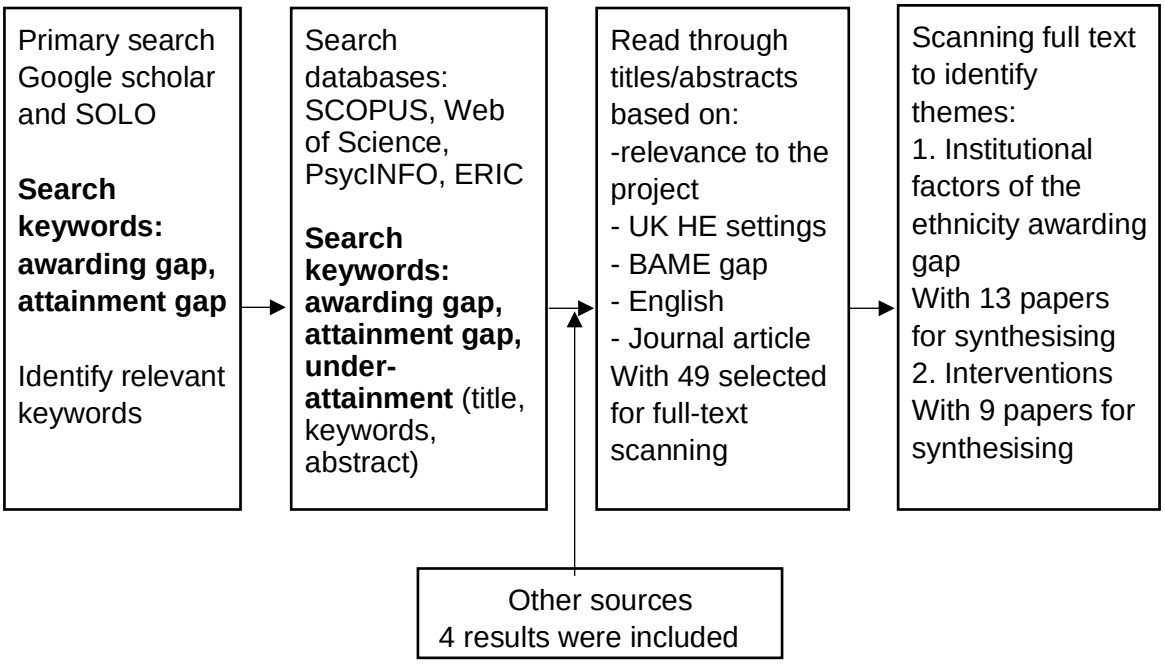
The third section focuses on synthesising the evidence of empirical interventions for closing the awarding gap in UK higher education institutions. This section discusses the implications of the previous empirical interventions to mitigate the UK awarding gap, with a focus on the ethnicity awarding gap.

The first section reviewed a wide range of existing reports and published papers to discuss the historical development of the concepts and methods in this research field. The second and third sections then narrowed the scope to factors and interventions investigated in published papers selected from the

search of academic databases, including SCOPUS, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and ERIC.

Figure 1 depicts the selection process for literature for Section 2 and Section 3 reports. The process included four primary steps to identify important themes. The selected themes are relevant to the ethnicity awarding gap and have been studied repeatedly in previous research. The first step used Google Scholar and SOLO to identify keywords for the search. SCOPUS, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and ERIC were also used to include education, psychology, and other fields to search for articles. To ensure the synthesis is meaningful, this report uses pre-set criteria to select literature. Literature was included for articles which discussed the ethnicity awarding gap in the UK higher education setting. Ultimately, this report selected literature on institutional factors of the ethnicity awarding gap and empirical interventions for tackling the ethnicity degree awarding gap.

Figure 1 Literature research for Section 2 and Section 3



The literature included in the report is primarily derived from education, psychology, and social science databases. Table 1 depicts the primary focus of each section. Overall, the report takes a critical stance to evaluate previous research on the UK ethnicity degree awarding gap to understand implications for practice and future research.

Table 1 Sections in the report.

	Primary focus

Section 1	Development of concepts and methodology of ethnicity degree awarding gap in the UK
Section 2	Structural factors of ethnicity degree awarding gap in the UK
Section 3	Empirical interventions of ethnicity degree awarding gap in the UK

Section 1: Historical development of concepts and methodologies in UK ethnicity awarding gap research

Introduction

The degree awarding gap, especially the ethnicity awarding gap, is seen as a global issue that researchers have been working on to understand the complex factors that cause the gap and how to close the gap. In different countries, the focus might be distinct due to the sociocultural context, historical factors, education systems, and the composition of society. For example, in the US, the awarding gap research often uses the term ‘degree attainment’ or ‘degree completion’ that primarily focuses on the degree completion rate and the time students spend on completing the degree (Eller & DiPrete, 2018; Kang & Garcia Torres, 2021; Smith & Stange, 2016). In the UK, as the degree classification system is different, the focus is primarily on the degree classification students are awarded (e.g., first-class honours, upper-second, lower-second, and third-class honours). The awarding gap research in the UK is specific to its context and leads to a specific set of discussions and developments of concepts and methods.

The degree awarding gap of ethnic minority students

The degree awarding gap, also known as the ‘attainment gap’, refers to the variation in the proportion of first-class honours (70%+) and upper-second class (also 2:1, 60-70%) degrees granted to different groups of students in the UK, based on factors like gender, socioeconomic status, disability, or ethnicity. Commonly, a first-class honours degree and an upper-second class degree would be regarded as a ‘good degree’, which is a frequently used term in relevant studies. Although there is an increase in the awarding of first and upper second-class degrees for certain students in recent years, these changes remain unexplained (Office for Students, 2022). There are disparities

between different groups of students, most significantly in relation to ethnicity, particularly the gap between Black domicile students and White students (UUK/NSS, 2019). It is worth noting that attainment differentials are not confined solely to higher education, but are evident at each educational level, reflecting broader racial inequalities in society. The current report thus focuses on synthesising evidence of the UK degree awarding gap based on ethnicity.

The disparity in the degree attainment between white students and ethnic minority students has existed for a long time, and it continues at the school or national level. HE has been seeking to understand the underlying factors and the corresponding methods to eliminate the persistent ethnicity awarding gap. Ideas recognised as having the potential to contribute to closing the awarding gap range from improving teaching pedagogy to providing an overall inclusive learning environment. In 2018, the Office for Students (2018), the higher education regulator, set the goals to eliminate most of the unexplained gap between White and Black students by 2024-25 and remove the absolute gap by 2030-31. Although a decreasing trend of the awarding gap was observed, the gap still exists. For example, at the national level, it was found that the ethnicity degree awarding gap was 10.8 percentage points in 2019/20, and nine percentage points in 2020/21 (Advance HE, 2022). UK-domiciled Black students are still the least likely to be granted a good degree compared to other ethnic groups.

Historically, there are two underlying terminology issues within the ethnicity degree awarding gap research in the UK. The first issue concerns the use of the term ‘attainment gap’ or ‘under-attainment’. The term ‘attainment gap’ has been widely used in this area across different countries and is still being used. However, the ‘attainment gap’ implies the idea of the student deficit model, which attributes the attainment gap to individual student factors, such as their background and personal ability (Sanders & Rose-Adams, 2014; Singh et al., 2023). In recent years, a preferred term called ‘degree awarding gap’ was introduced in response to the problems associated with the original term and switched focus to a more proactive lens. This shift in terminology used in the sector suggests the critical role of higher education institutions in understanding how inequality can be amended (Singh et al., 2023). In the current report, we thus use the term ‘the degree awarding gap’ or ‘awarding gap’.

Another terminology issue concerns the way different groups of students are described. In the ethnicity awarding gap studies, researchers usually use BME or BAME to represent non-white ethnic student groups (Ross et al., 2018; UUK/NSS, 2019). ‘BME’ refers to ‘Black and minority ethnic’ and ‘BAME’ means ‘Black, Asian, and minority ethnic.’ However, these terms could be problematic because they are umbrella or ‘all-encompassing’ (Sanders & Rose-Adams, 2014, p.7) and as such, might overlook the complexity and

diversity of different groups of students (Bale et al., 2020; Singh, 2011). Gillborn (1997) asserted that when considering the inequality in attainment, it is crucial to keep in mind that there are significant differences in relation to social class both within and between minority communities. Despite the challenges and problems with using the terms ‘BME’ or ‘BAME’ to discuss the ethnicity degree awarding gap issue, these terms are nonetheless frequently used in research as they are widely recognised (Ross et al., 2018). Thus, it is necessary to note that these terms should be used with awareness of the complexities of underlying diversity.

Methods used in studying awarding gaps in the UK

It is essential that the research methodologies utilised explain the researcher’s underlying approach and target the study objectives. Generally, research methodology includes quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods, and mixed-methods approaches. Although the history of awarding gap research in the UK is not long, it is useful to look back and understand the methods used in previous studies.

As some factors contributing to the awarding gap appear to be institution-based, researchers have been interested in identifying the existence of the ethnicity awarding gap between different higher education institutions or in a specific higher education institution. Studies have applied quantitative methods in this research area to confirm whether White students are more likely to be awarded a good degree compared to other ethnic groups (Connor et al., 2004; Richardson, 2008; Richardson, 2012). However, these studies usually adopted descriptive statistics, particularly percentages, to investigate whether the degree awarding gap exists in specific departments or more generally in higher education in the UK, which leads to a relatively narrow interpretation of the results.

Several studies have been concerned with the effect of student characteristics on their attainment and degree outcomes (e.g., Norris, et al., 2018). This applies a deficit methodology, which implicitly attributes degree outcomes to students’ characteristics. Some studies then go a step further to investigate whether the ethnicity gap exists continuously even after controlling other variables, such as student demographics or characteristics (e.g., gender, age, subject, disability, prior attainment) using the regression model (e.g., Broecke & Nicholls, 2007). Notably, studies evidence that even controlling for student demographics and personal variables, the ethnicity degree awarding gap is still significant, indicating the problems with a focus on the student deficit model and the need to expand to wider sociological perspectives that impact students and the context in which they learn (Mahmud & Gagnon, 2023).

Further to the understanding of what student factors impact students' degree awarding outcomes, previous research also aimed to predict who might receive lower levels of degree outcomes at the end of their study. Mathematical modelling has been used in this type of degree awarding gap research, aiming to find an effective way to predict student attainment in HEIs, and to identify students at risk of under-attainment earlier, in order to provide interventions or support. For example, Al-Sudani and Palaniappan (2019) designed an NN model (multi-layered neural network) using a combination of students' information, including demographic, psychological profile, and academic factors to predict students' degree award classification (good degree or basic degree). Although such work could help identify ethnic minority students' needs at an early stage, it is similar to the student deficit model in that it focuses on the weaknesses of individual students and ignores the necessity to create an inclusive environment for the community.

As more researchers indicated the need for studies to go beyond the deficit model to understand the awarding gap by refocusing on institutional/structural factors (Mountford-Zimdars, 2017; Sanders & Rose-Adams, 2014), research methodology also experienced a transition to a mixed-methods or qualitative research approach. Many researchers applied a mixed-methods approach combining student focus groups and/or staff interviews with a simple survey (e.g., Cotton et al., 2016; Quyoum et al., 2022; Greaves et al., 2022). For example, Cotton et al. (2016) used mixed methods, including a questionnaire, focus group, and interviews to investigate students' academic and social experiences, and considered the lecturers' perspectives regarding students' attainment. Nevertheless, in the mixed-methods studies, the quantitative surveys were limited, and only provided information about student demographic descriptors, and the existence of the awarding gap, with few of them comparing differences in survey questions between different groups of students (e.g., Cotton et al., 2016). A small number of studies have endeavoured to use quantitative methods to explore the structural or institutional factors of the ethnicity awarding gap.

Conclusion

Degree awarding gap research in the UK has evolved. With the development of the research field, awareness of the significance of language and terminology has grown, which may help to create a more inclusive research environment. In the development of research methodologies, research has contributed to identifying the existence and trends of the degree awarding gap, the potential factors that influence the degree awarding gap and identifying effective interventions using quantitative, qualitative, and mixed

methods. However, the underlying complex questions remain as to how we can better understand the contributing factors to the awarding gap and why it continues to persist in UK HE without significant improvement. Mixed and participatory methods that go beyond previous research are needed to support researchers in closing the awarding gap.

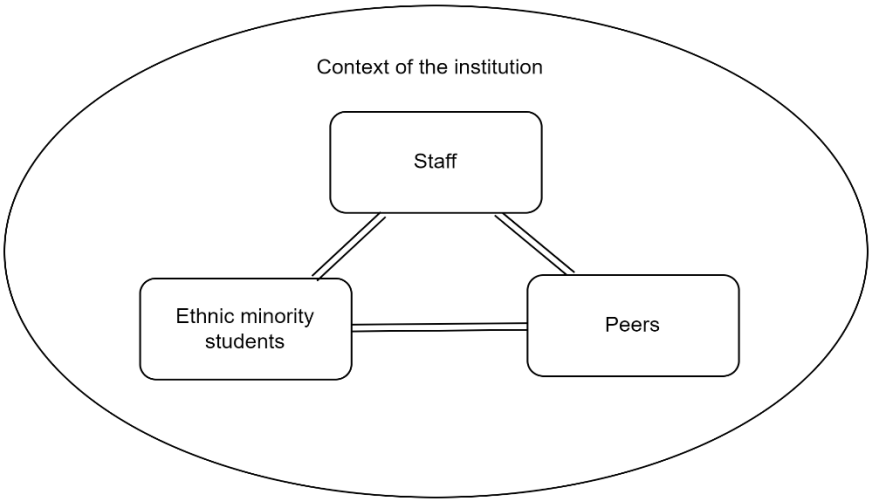
Section 2: Rethinking institutional perceptions of the awarding gap

Introduction

This section synthesises institutional factors that impact the degree awarding gaps between ethnic minority students and White students in higher education in the UK, drawing on student discourses and staff perspectives on awarding gaps. Specifically, it discusses the complex factors that concern what higher education institutions (HEIs) can do to better support students, and moves away from focusing on individual demographics and characteristics (the student deficit model).

Evidence has shown that awarding gaps exist even after controlling student factors such as prior qualifications and backgrounds. It is insightful to explore common factors from students' subjective experiences regardless of university or subject of study. Research has focused on 1) interactions with courses and institutions, and 2) interactions with peers and staff (see Figure 2). These dimensions are not independent but interact with each other, but which affect the well-being of students, and perceptions of lived experiences of learning environments by UK HEIs.

Figure 2. Student interactions in the context of the institution



The Learning Environment

Diversity or inclusivity of the learning environment

Lack of diversity or inclusivity in the HEI environments is one common factor in the research literature in discussions on awarding gaps from student and staff perspectives. Evidence suggests that university settings may not feel inclusive as they are structured around the majority and not students from diverse backgrounds (Claridge, 2018; Rana et al., 2022). Diversity or inclusivity can influence ethnic minority students' engagement and attendance. Studies have also shown that how the curriculum is structured matters to student outcomes. For example, Bunce et al.'s (2021) study about female undergraduate students' experiences based on self-determination theory (SDT) found that students reported that the curriculum was narrow, leading to a sense of disconnection with the curriculum and decreased self-autonomy. The content of the curriculum might contain negative depictions of ethnic minority students (Webb et al., 2022), which not only enhance mainstream stereotype perceptions but could make ethnic minority students internalise the content and increase self-doubt. As Bale et al. (2020) noted, because the majority of staff and students are White, it is little wonder that students perceived the curriculum as eurocentric. Therefore, it is important to critically review and co-create the curriculum with involvement from ethnic minority students.

Representation and role models also play a significant role. One common theme raised in the majority of the student focus groups was the lack of representation of ethnic minorities on the faculty and curricula in the university, according to a qualitative study to determine the potential causes of awarding gaps by Bale et al. (2020). In a later investigation on both final-year students and staff in STEM degree programmes, Rana et al. (2022) pointed out that students stated 'their disappointment concerning the lack of inclusivity

at an academic level' (Rana et al., 2002, p.8). Gathering a quantitative investigation of students' unauthorised absence rate and their qualitative data in STEM programmes, Greaves et al. (2022) further pointed out that the lack of representation demotivated Black students from attending courses or completing course tasks.

Importantly, from the perspectives of students, the inclusivity of the system could also reflect on the 'hidden curriculum' in their day-to-day experiences, such as student accommodation options or unaffordable food served at the university canteen (Greaves et al., 2022; Webb et al., 2022). Previous studies thus highlight that the inclusivity of the institution should be holistic, multi-faceted, from overt to covert, and from inside the classroom to beyond.

The influence of lectures and assessments

One theme emerging from the awarding gap literature concerning students' experiences and perspectives is the impact of lectures, feedback and assessments of their courses. Attending lectures and taking exams is common for every undergraduate student, and it directly impacts students' attainment and their learning experiences.

In a mixed-method study of potential factors that may impact students' attainments in a Russell Group University, Quyoum et al. (2002) pointed out that students may struggle with ineffective lectures and unhelpful feedback from course tasks or exams. In other words, although students attended lectures or received feedback from their lecturers, these lectures and feedback may not be constructive, which decreases students' engagement levels. Ineffective feedback perhaps could be further discussed in two ways: Is the feedback sometimes just a formality and not detailed enough? Are students from diverse educational backgrounds equipped with the skills to decode lecturers' feedback? Studies suggest that transparency and clarity on the assessment criteria will better support students from different educational backgrounds.

With the increasing population of international students in the UK, language barriers are a significant factor in students' perceptions of their lectures and assessment process as many assignments and assessments are essay-based. Census 2021 estimated 24% of the total student population was from overseas. Investigating ethnic minority undergraduates' experiences using a critical race approach, Webb et al. (2022) highlighted that ethnic minority students may feel that there is a gap between their expectations and the grades or feedback they received due to language barriers. Students perceived they are being treated unfairly in the assessment process because English is not their first language. Bunce et al. (2021) found that some ethnic minority students attributed their low exam grades to misunderstandings in

expression in the assessment as a consequence of cultural differences. Thus, the inclusivity of the learning environment and the assessment criteria could be a determinant of their degree award results. This is a complex issue as the international student population continues to grow in the UK. The question remains if HEIs admit students with different levels of language proficiency, how can students be better supported to succeed? Cultural differences are a separate, but related, factor.

Interactions with staff and peers in the university

Insensitivity and underlying assumptions

Underlying assumptions about people from diverse backgrounds, especially staff assumptions, put additional stress on ethnic minority students. These underlying assumptions could involve the personality, appearance, habits, and abilities of ethnic minority students. Additionally, assumptions based on ethnicity may be intertwined with student gender or religion and have a critical impact on students' experiences on a daily basis (Rai & Simpson, 2023).

In Rana et al.'s (2022) study, students in focus groups expressed that some staff pre-judge students on their social experience and academic attainment. Ethnic minority students must work harder to prove their capability to staff or others (Nightingale et al., 2022). Similarly, Wong et al. (2021) found that compared to their White peers, ethnic minority students usually have to work much harder for comparable results. These studies suggested there are other factors of degree awarding besides merely students' individual aptitudes. Subtle but detrimental pre-judgements by staff affect students' perceptions and behaviour.

Underlying assumptions and insensitive behaviours by other students also affect ethnic minority students' perceptions. Quyoum et al.'s (2022) study, which explores the awarding gaps between ethnic minorities and White students at a Russell Group University, investigates similar issues by using a mixed method approach. The research first identified the existence of awarding gaps at the university and investigated students' experiences that could be linked to the awarding gaps. The study found students raised the issue of 'unhelpful assumptions' made by other students, including assuming their socioeconomic status or using insensitive language about race and ethnicity. Minority students may need to work harder in the group to challenge these presumptions. Claridge et al. (2018) found medical and biomedical science ethnic minority students struggled with reacting to these assumptions. In addition, Black students mentioned they needed to take steps (e.g., not to stand up for themselves even if the reason was legitimate) to combat prior assumptions or stereotypes. Ethnic minority students have to spend extra time and effort removing barriers detrimental to their academic pursuits and mental health.

Staff may lack awareness of or be reluctant to discuss issues

Interacting with academic and administrative staff either in class or outside class could be a significant challenge for ethnic minority students in pursuit of a good degree. Prior research indicated that staff perceived some of their colleagues pay less attention to student issues regarding ethnicity, race, or gender (Cotton et al., 2016).

Although teaching and talking about diversity openly could help students explore their identities and develop their critical thinking ability (Bunce et al., 2021), academic staff may not have sufficient training and awareness to do so. Bale et al. (2020) found that students tend to feel that lecturers failed to facilitate the integration of students from diverse backgrounds or to address racial issues.

Claridge et al. (2018) conducted focus groups and semi-structured interviews to explore the potential causes of the awarding gap at a healthcare-based university in London. Staff may lack understanding of issues that influence ethnic minority students, and they may avoid ethnic minority issues because they feel uncomfortable or not confident enough to address problems that may arise. Additionally, staff may have a belief that ethnic issues are external rather than an institutional issue or are afraid of being politically incorrect (Bunce et al., 2021). As Davies and Garrett (2012) noted, ethnic minority students observed that lecturers or peers sometimes changed their behaviour due to a ‘fear of appearing racist’ (Davies & Garrett, 2012, p.6) towards ethnic minority students.

Studies show university staff, especially academic teaching staff, would benefit from diversity and inclusion training to raise cultural awareness and unconscious bias to better support students and create inclusive learning environments (Claridge et al., 2018; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2017). In addition, staff need to be better supported to openly discuss relevant issues with students or support students when facing difficulties.

A sense of belonging: networks and relationships matter

Previous studies have shown that belonging has emerged as a significant factor affecting students’ degree awarding outcomes. Research in this area has also highlighted differences between ethnic minority students’ networks and how they struggle with building relationships at university, which matters to students.

Importantly, the impact of student networks is not limited to their social lives, but also affects their academic work. The study of Claridge et al. (2018) suggested that students’ social networks could be ethnically defined. As the knowledge that has an impact on student academic outcomes is transferred between students in the inner network, ethnic minority students may be

excluded. Moreover, ethnic minority students may not have enough resources from their educational backgrounds to enhance or develop additional support networks (e.g., joining clubs).

Building relationships with peers is shown to be a major challenge, which could impede the academic development and well-being of ethnic minority students. For example, in the study conducted by Bunce et al. (2021), ethnic minority students reported they were sometimes being ignored by their peers who were not ethnic minority students, or overlooked by their lecturers, leading to a sense of alienation and unease. These issues further decrease students' confidence, and cause them to feel they cannot fully reach their potential.

In the UK, a factor that could hinder ethnic minority students from building relationships is the prevalence of 'drinking culture'. In a qualitative study examining ways to close the awarding gap, Rana et al. (2022) found that final-year undergraduate students perceived the drinking culture as a major part of social life at the university, which is not inclusive and impedes them from fitting in. This is not just a concern that is raised by ethnic minority students, white male undergraduate students also suggested that drinking culture has a negative impact on their academic work (Cotton et al., 2016). Evidence has shown that staff also consider that the drinking culture precludes ethnic minority students or students who don't drink from having equal social opportunities (Claridge et al., 2018).

Conclusion: The cost of getting a good degree

Research on the degree awarding gaps between ethnic minority students and their counterparts shows there is increasing interest in exploring the potential factors with students and staff in higher education. Encouragingly, studies conducted in the UK have transferred their focus from 'student deficit' as the primary factor to what institutions can do to better support ethnic minority students. However, further research using multiple methods is needed to investigate a clearer link between these factors with the existence of awarding gaps for designing effective interventions. In addition, student participants in different studies articulated their frustrations with HEIs and how they struggle to learn to navigate their complex institutional systems. Bunce (2021) suggests that some ethnic minority students have to compromise their health and well-being to get a good degree. The study questions, what is the cost of getting a good degree for ethnic minority students? An approach that makes ethnic minority students' well-being a priority to better understand their learning experiences may be needed.

Section 3: Strategies and Interventions

Introduction

This section explores the practical strategies or interventions at UK universities focused on UK-domicile students based on different factors (e.g., policy, pedagogy, assessment, and relationship) that have been used to mitigate ethnicity awarding gaps in the UK and how these interventions can shed light on the progress of closing the awarding gaps for higher education institutions in the future.

An increasing number of studies investigate the causes and factors of degree awarding gaps between White students and ethnic minority students. However, research about practical interventions and their effects in the UK is relatively scarce. Richardson (2018) suggested that awarding gaps may have the characteristics of institutional or course-specific factors due to the differences in teaching and assessment practices. Understanding various interventions based on multiple potential factors could provide evidence to researchers on the causes of awarding gaps in ethnic minority students and shed light on finding effective methodologies based on the nature of institutions or courses.

Identifying ethnicity awarding gap and curriculum intervention

A study that focused on the strategies and tools at the institutional level was conducted by Campion and Clark (2022). The study examined the effectiveness of the Race Equality Charter (REC), a policy practice introduced by the Advance HE in 2014 for UK universities, by combining the evidence of interviews and observations from seven higher education institutions (including universities and advanced HE) with, or working towards a REC Bronze award in 2019.

While initially REC aimed to support higher education institutions to recognise their institutional-specific issues and tackle those problems with other interventions, the findings indicated that instead of being a major tool, REC worked primarily as an additional framework that aids institutions in forming and sustaining current initiatives for race equality. It is worth noting that this study suggests that higher education institutions with larger populations of ethnic minority students had higher REC involvement, and those schools that received REC awards were already setting high standards for student attainment. According to evidence from this study, the REC's goal of illuminating race equality strategies planning for HEIs is yet unfulfilled. The results highlighted the importance of universities' awareness to commit themselves to fighting against inequality issues even if the proportion of ethnic

minority students is relatively low. The findings could shed light on rethinking the settings and use of the REC and the potential way to maximise its effectiveness.

At the institutional or department level, curriculum is another aspect that researchers have been working on in recent years. In an earlier study, Ross et al. (2018) presented the multifaceted strategies and results of Kingston University to promote institutional change regarding the degree awarding gap. Kingston University initiated an inclusive curriculum framework programme to enhance institutional procedures, staff knowledge and skills, and student knowledge and skills while utilising Value Added (VA) data. VA data provides quantitative evidence to understand the probability of a student with a certain entry qualification who studies in a certain subject, to achieve a good degree (first class or upper second degree). According to the data of Kingston University, from 2013/14 to 2016/17, ethnic minority student attainment had improved steadily. Similarly, the degree outcome of White students improved based on this inclusive curriculum framework. This adds to previous research findings that show how developing a holistic inclusive learning environment and curriculum that is not just targeted at individual students with ethnic minority backgrounds, could benefit all students.

Another successful intervention was a project that applied the Inclusive Curriculum Framework to a first-year chemistry module (Williams, 2022). In this project, the redevelopment of the curriculum was led by Kingston University's Inclusive Curriculum Framework tool (ICF), which primarily aims to help staff rethink the content and their teaching practices for students. The tool has proved to be effective at Kingston University in closing the ethnic minority awarding gap. In this study, project-based learning was incorporated with ICF to develop the curriculum. The findings of this curriculum intervention indicated that the module awarding gap decreased.

In the University of Central Lancashire's (UCLan) Law School in 2018/19, a three-pronged approach was adopted for designing a curriculum that could engage with ethnic minority students' experiences (Nir & Mackee, 2021). This approach reflects the idea of participatory enhanced approach interventions, which involve stakeholders (staff and students) in the process of discussing and creating an inclusive classroom. To mitigate the awarding gap, UCLan first organised a staff team that was responsible for focusing on students' experiences and rethinking the curriculum to enhance inclusive classrooms over one academic year. In addition, a co-design group including recent graduates and staff members was asked to take steps to better understand ethnic minority students' experiences. This collaborative process enhanced the voices of staff and students in the decision-making process on policy and practice at UCLan. Although comprehensive information on the effectiveness of the new design was not presented in this study, early benefits were

observed. The student co-design team gained insights into the collaborative process that students should be more proactive in their learning. By engaging in the design process, staff expressed the view that they were empowered by the process. This project generated a ripple effect across the whole institution leading to the creation of further inclusive programmes for all students. The participatory enhanced approach showed how the collaborative design approach created a more inclusive context for learning for all.

Interventions in pedagogy

Previous studies have shown that curriculum content, assessment criteria, and pedagogic practices in UK HEIs can be significant factors in the degree awarding gap among ethnic minority students. Researchers have started to initiate studies to explore the benefits of pedagogical (teaching and learning) interventions.

Berger and Wild (2017) used the Socratic method, a relatively common teaching method in Law schools, to design an inclusive extracurricular course that guides students to discuss important societal issues. Interestingly, the authors expected ethnic minority students to have a lower rate of participation and engagement as in previous studies, but ethnic minority students consisted of the highest proportion of participation in this study. Student participants reported a positive feeling about the course. The main reason that students decided to participate in this course was that they believed that it was an educational course that could help them to improve critical reasoning and public speaking skills. Moreover, approximately 70% of students rated their engagement level from ‘sometimes active’ to ‘highly active’. Although only 36% and 44% of students indicated that the course had a positive impact on their academic results and social life, students would like to have this type of active participatory teaching/learning in their formal degree programmes. Further implementation of the course as a part of a departmental course showed that compared to the entire cohort (Law, Criminology, and Political Science), students who had participated in this course were more likely to achieve a good degree (around 94% compared to 65% of the entire cohort). The study suggests that WoW-style teaching in the university could enhance ethnic minority students’ engagement level and may have a positive effect on both ethnic minority students and general students in their degree outcomes.

In another initiative, Nortcliffe et al. (2017) examined the effectiveness of the peer-assisted learning method (PAL) on ethnic minority students’ (BAME) attainment using a longitudinal approach. The primary aim of PAL is to enhance student peer support to help them develop a sense of belonging and increase student engagement at universities. Students from two engineering-based courses were compared, where one has high ethnic minority awarding gaps and another has similar student demographic profiles. One course

(mechanical systems) with the 2014 cohort did not receive the PAL intervention, while another course with the 2013 cohort (computer electronic and electrical engineering) received the PAL intervention. When examining the academic performance pattern of the non-PAL intervention course and the PAL intervention course, the results showed that the two courses have inverse patterns. PAL intervention seemed to address ethnicity and low SES attainment and to support ethnic minority (BME) students in attaining a placement within their course. However, no significant differences in final degree classification (e.g., 70% or less) were found between students in non-intervention and intervention courses. Although this research did not find a significant impact of PAL intervention on ethnic minority students' degree outcomes, it indicated the potential effectiveness of PAL intervention on securing a placement.

Assessment intervention and student attainment

Assessment methodologies are seen as a critical factor that impact students' outcomes and their degree awards. However, research evaluating the effectiveness of various assessment types for ethnic minority students is still scarce. As assessment types are quite diverse, it may be challenging to include all the assessment methods into intervention studies within a short period of time. Existing research, however, could provide insight into the decision-making process of HEIs about the potential assessment interventions that could be brought to mitigate the ethnicity awarding gap effectively.

Hill et al. (2016) investigated the role of group assessment to understand its potential effect on the minority ethnic awarding gap in the School of Life Sciences, Pharmacy and Chemistry and the School of Computer Science using the data from six modules at Kingston University. There were various combinations of the student grouping method (i.e., random selection from course cohorts, random within tutor groups, and student self-selection) and the method of assigning marks (i.e., group mark with individual component, single group mark, group mark scaled by % contribution, and group mark scaled by % contribution and individual component) in modules. Hill et al. (2016) found that ethnic minority students are not negatively impacted by group work assessments. At the same time, no enduring difference was found between ethnic minority students (BME) and their counterparts. Thus, there is no evidence showing that group work assessments are an effective intervention to mitigate the awarding gap. However, according to students' perceptions, how a group is formed influences their perceptions of fairness. For example, students perceived random selection of group members as the preferred method compared to tutor selection and self-selection.

Shaw and Tranter (2021) investigated the impact of the change of assessment methods on students' attainment during the COVID-19 lockdown.

They compared the attainment of ethnic minority students using a traditional assessment method before the lockdown and an online assessment method during the lockdown of six modules. Interestingly, they found that different assessment methods could contribute to widening or closing the awarding gap for ethnic minority students based on their quantitative analysis. Closed-book exams were shown to be a significant cause of widening the gap for ethnic minority students (BME students), while for the students of widening participation programmes (particularly students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds), both closed-book exams and 24-hour take-home, open-book assessments widened the awarding gap. The findings of Shaw and Tranter (2021) suggest some students may experience difficulties in accessing computers when learning online, indicating that the assessment methods used are also linked to the learning environment for students. Overall, this study provides evidence that assessment types at universities could make a difference to students' degree outcomes and elucidates the probability that applying an appropriate assessment method or using multiple assessments might help HEIs in closing the degree awarding gap of ethnic minority students in HEIs.

Relationships related interventions

Interactions between ethnic minority students and their peers and university staff could be an important factor that impacts ethnic minority students' degree outcomes in the UK, but very limited research has been done in this area.

Interventions aiming to support students' networks with peers and staff could benefit both parties. Peterson and Ramsay (2021) launched an intervention project of reciprocal mentoring at the University of Gloucestershire, including a pilot and a full roll-out. They paired volunteer ethnic minority students (BAME) with senior leaders, including the University Executive Committee members. This intervention aimed to create a space for students to share their learning experiences and enhance their awareness of cultural diversity in the University's decision-making processes. Students also received guidance about careers, employability skills, and building self-confidence. Using semi-structured interviews and facilitated feedback sessions, this research evaluated the pilot focusing on three aspects: how the scheme was run, whether there was any immediate impact on students, and whether senior leaders gained insights from ethnic minority students. The results showed that participants reported benefits from the intervention programme. Ethnic minority students reported personally gaining particular insights from the project, such as academic advice and employability skills. They also had the chance to reflect on their behaviour and attitudes. On the other hand, senior leaders perceived they gained an understanding of the issues and experiences of ethnic minority students, which enhances the student voice in the policy-making process. However, deeper knowledge of the direct

connections between relationship-based interventions and students' degree outcomes is needed.

Conclusion

An increasing number of intervention studies contribute to the sector's understanding of the effectiveness of empirical interventions that aim to mitigate the awarding gap in the UK (Campion & Clark, 2022; Hill et al., 2016; Berger & Wild, 2017). Researchers have focused on interventions concerning various aspects, such as curriculum, relationships, and assessment. Inevitably, the complexity of the real-world situation and the under-representation of ethnic minority students and staff in HEIs impact the methods used in intervention research in ethnicity awarding gap research. The challenge of linking students' degree awarding results with the strategies or interventions adopted by the institution since students' learning is an ever-evolving process through time. A longitudinal approach considering students' learning experiences through time, with a holistic evaluation of the learning environment and assessment criteria, may be needed.

Whilst research on empirical institutional interventions for the degree awarding gap of ethnic minority students in the UK is still under development, there have been some interesting intervention studies in recent years. Through synthesising previous research, meaningful themes for future research and institutional implementation at HEIs have emerged. First, evidence from intervention research indicated that the change of assessment types and criteria might benefit ethnic minority students, but further research is needed to ensure the effectiveness of these assessment methods. Second, exploring different pedagogic practices (e.g., the Socratic method) could support students to improve their critical thinking skills and enhance their engagement in the university, which may further impact students' attainment and minimise the awarding gap. Third, methods that help build connections between staff and students could challenge stereotypes related to ethnicity (including white and ethnic minorities) and provide helpful feedback and student experiences directly to the university leaders. Finally, it is worth noting that multifaceted interventions or strategies, such as policy-related, assessment types, and relationships with others might be necessary to tackle different factors that influence the ethnic minority students' awarding gap. A common thread in all the intervention studies seems to be an aim to create a space for students and staff to bring about change. Participatory collaborative approaches to better understand students' experiences will help universities gain a deeper insight into the complex factors that influence awarding gaps and how to design effective interventions in the future.

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Introduction

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