

Black Attainment Gap

Black Attainment Gap Research in HE 2017

Attainment for black students at higher education institutions continues to be an area where there is racial inequality, with non-white students overall less likely to receive higher classifications for their degrees. These stark differences persist after adjustment for entry grades, age, institution and socioeconomic background.

The issue

Our institutions present barriers to and disadvantage those from African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean backgrounds. This has been experienced and understood by students within the NUS Black Students' Campaign since its inception. These disadvantages are institutional and structural, consisting of indirect forms of exclusion and discrimination as much as direct, and are multi-faceted.

The Black Attainment Gap has been evidenced since at least 2007 as being a persistent, sector wide issue in higher education institutions. It is referred to by different names at different institutions, including the BME Attainment Gap. It impacts on groups of students with different ethnicities differently, including the largest gap, with black African students 27.4% less likely to receive a first or 2:1 at undergraduate level in 2016¹.

Different groups of students have very different experiences in Higher Education, and nationally there are very different outcomes on average for different groups likely to self-identify into our Black Students Campaign.

Differences in degree attainment for your institution's "BME population" by contrast to white students, for example, might mask more significant issues for specific groups and in specific departments.

The research – combatting institutions blaming students

The research indicates that the Black Attainment Gap cannot be related solely to the capability of the students themselves. As an organisation, NUS reject a deficit student model for black students, and the research since 2007 reflects this – different outcomes for black students still persist once you have accounted for socioeconomic background, entry grades, and other factors. As such we need to explore what institutions can change of themselves to improve attainment outcomes for students.

Causes of differences in student outcomes, 2015 – Report to HEFCE by KCL, ARC Network and the University of Manchester

This explores some of the causal factors of attainment gaps, and provides an update on earlier research around the policy and

¹ Equality in higher education: students statistical report 2016, Equality Challenge Unit

institutional context to recognise new funding models in place.

Aiming Higher – Race, Inequality and Diversity in the Academy, 2015 – The Runnymede Trust

Aiming Higher is a collection of perspectives on race, ethnicity and equality in the Higher Education sector. It highlights the need for frameworks for transformation and change that recognise privilege.

Race for Equality, 2011 – National Union of Students

NUS' Black Students' Campaign and the wider organization have had an ongoing focus on liberation within the curriculum. This piece of research brought a qualitative understanding and real black student voices to the existing data. It covers both Further Education and Higher Education and fully explores the reality of black student experiences.

What Works? Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change, 2017 – The Higher Education Academy

This report is part of a five year programme of research examining the root causes of students leaving their courses in Higher Education. It covers actions Universities can take to support students from widening participation backgrounds complete – and excel – on their courses.

HEA also provides BME specific reports.

Topic Briefing on BME Students – the Office for Fair Access

Access Agreements, or Access and Participation Plans as they will be known in the future, are a key aspect of driving positive change in your institution. Beyond entry to your institution they can also help direct action on helping students succeed on their courses, regardless of their background. This topic briefing details ways BME student needs can be reflected in your access agreement.

Student engagement and experience in UK universities (multilevel analyses), 2016 – The Higher Education Academy

This report analyses how students actively engage with their learning. This can help you add more to your debates around attainment issues, and access to education. It may also help to illuminate discussions around the deficit model of black student success.

Tackling the Black Attainment Gap – some approaches

Educational race inequality is complex and multi-faceted, and this is reflected in the research on and approaches suggested to address inequality of black student attainment. It is important to note that your local context and how your institution functions is key to addressing the black attainment gap.

There are a variety of approaches students can take, both through their Union's structures and complementary to them:

- Ensuring the conversation is about race equality and the attainment gap – activism and campaigning
- A black student led audit of the institution's approaches and actions – lobbying for change, whether it's at institutional level, school or department level, or within your courses
- Building student led interventions – making changes (incremental or radical) to how your institution works, and improve the courses

NUS will continue to support and enable student action on race inequality, and the black attainment gap in higher education.