

“The great unspoken shame of UK Higher Education”: Addressing inequalities of attainment

Authors:

Prof Fiona Mary Ross¹
Mr John Christian Tatam¹
Dr Annie Livingstone
Hughes¹
Mr Owen Paul Beacock¹
Ms Nona McDuff¹

Affiliation:

¹ Kingston University,
London, United Kingdom

Correspondence to:

Prof Fiona Mary Ross,
Faculty of Health, Social
Care and Education,
Kingston University/
St George's, University
of London

Tel:

+44 791 707 3301

E-mail:

f.ross@sgul.kingston.ac.uk
j.tatam@kingston.ac.uk
a.hughes@kingston.ac.uk
owen.beacock@kingston.
ac.uk
n.mcduff@kingston.ac.uk

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Abstract

UK universities are achieving some success in attracting increasingly diverse undergraduate cohorts, although distributed unevenly across different types of institutions. It is therefore a concern that once at university, students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds perform less well in their final degree classifications, even when entry qualifications, subject of study and student characteristics are taken into account. This paper firstly, reviews the research on what is understood about the BME attainment gap, described by an independent university governor as “the great unspoken shame of higher education” and secondly tells the story of institutional change initiated by Kingston University, which is a large, “modern” and widening participation institution in South West London. The multifaceted change involved: defining the problem; establishing an institutional key performance indicator; engaging the university leadership and academy; using a value added metric; and measuring attainment outcomes over a four-year period. Results show significant improvement in attainment and qualitative evidence of improved staff awareness. The paper discusses the ethical challenges of complex and institutional change, including the importance of committed leadership, the value of data as a vehicle for initiating engagement when staff are reluctant to discuss race, equality and social justice, and the implications for moving away from a student deficit to an institutional deficit model through developing inclusive cultures and an inclusive curriculum. It reflects on the parallels with higher education chances of success for young black South Africans and concludes with describing Kingston University’s role in influencing change across the sector.

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that the purpose of higher education is for the public good, and through a shared commitment to education, that progress in social justice and equality will be achieved (Nixon, 2011). However, many argue these values are increasingly under threat through the advancement of the neoliberal agenda with deregulation, marketisation and the growth of alternative providers, league table positioning and competition for students (Hazelkorn, 2017). Any higher education system has to be understood within its political, social and economic context and some argue the UK is becoming more, not less, unequal (Dorling, 2015). The Institute of Fiscal Studies reports that inequality is lower than before the recession of 2008-2010, but this masks the fact that absolute child poverty is projected to rise, and stark and growing inequalities exist between young and old, as living standards for younger people have dropped (Belfield, 2016).

As this paper was first given at a conference in Stellenbosch, we reflect on estimates from the World Bank that South Africa is among the most unequal countries in terms of income distribution in the world. The history of South Africa and the legacy of apartheid mean that segregation and racial disadvantage are structural and entrenched, and explain the existence of educational inequality at all levels in South African higher education with a concentration of black and coloured students at historically disadvantaged universities (Van Broekhuizen *et al.*, 2016). The discourse around the attainment gap in South Africa is expressed and measured in terms of failures in progression. Of the 60% of black African students who survive their first year, only 15% graduate, with a resulting loss to the knowledge economy (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014). We argue in this paper that racial inequality in higher education is an ethical and social justice concern. It is not good enough for differences to exist below the radar, to be avoided as being too uncomfortable, or explained away as an individual rather than an institutional or systems deficit. We explore these themes by drawing from our experience of trying to reduce inequalities in attainment for black and minority students at Kingston University. Kingston is a modern comprehensive (post-1992) university located in South West London, UK. It has a history of successful and innovative widening participation policies and successive leadership committed to tackling inequalities through systemic change.

We begin by discussing the racial inequalities, which are prevalent within UK higher education, and the role that an ethical and social justice approach can play in influencing change. Secondly, we review the literature on the progress made in the UK in terms of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups within UK schools (primary and secondary education) and successful widening participation policies in higher education. The literature reveals a paradox in that while BME groups are doing better than many of their white counterparts in primary and secondary education, and widening participation is a success story in UK higher education (Offa, 2017), there has been a manifest failure in ensuring the attainment of BME students in higher education. The evidence is stark: BME (domestic) students are much less likely to complete a degree course; obtain a 'good' degree (under the UK's rather archaic classification of a first or upper second class honours) (Universities UK [UUK], 2016); take up postgraduate research; obtain a

graduate level job (ECU, 2015); and, not surprisingly, are less likely to view their degree courses as good value for money (Neves & Hillman, 2017). This is clearly an ethical issue as it has an impact on individuals, but it also has important consequences for the wider economy and business because of the failure to fully realise the potential of a large and growing section of the future workforce. Having explained the theoretical context, we describe our institutional approach to narrowing the gap of inequality of attainment for all our students, the progress that has been made, and the next steps.

1.1 A note on terminology – BME

The term BME is widely applied in publicly available data and used in the UK to describe all non-white ethnic groups. People are not externally classified but self-classify, voluntarily, into a particular category. The collection of this data is justified as a means of monitoring outcomes for different ethnicities and promoting equality of opportunity. Very few students refuse to self-classify. However, the term is problematic as it groups together people from very different backgrounds (Singh, 2009) and may disguise issues of intersectionality or super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007). Despite its limitations, in this paper we use the term, as it is widely recognised and describes patterns of marginalisation and segregation caused by attitudes toward an individual's ethnicity (UUK, 2016). This is a very different approach from some other European countries such as France where the collection of such data would be illegal. This paper focuses on “home” rather than international BME students.

2. The context: widening participation and BME student under-attainment

Widening participation in higher education has been a feature of government policy in the UK and Europe for the last twenty years and in post-apartheid South Africa. Social justice arguments have been used to promote the increase of numbers of young people entering education and the proportion from under-represented groups (Preece, 2006; Burke, 2012). Higher Education Funding Council (Hefce) (2015) data shows 28% of all entrants are from BME groups in England and UK-wide data shows that over the ten-year period from 2003/4 to 2013/14, the total proportion of BME students increased from 14.9% to 20.2% (ECU, 2015), although this increase is not the case for all ethnic groups or at all universities (Runnymede, 2015). Whilst ethnic minorities now constitute a higher proportion at the most selective institutions than they did six years ago, there is still significant under-representation of some groups. Black British Caribbean and Other Black home students, for example, are still significantly less likely to attend a selective institution than their White British counterparts (Department of Business Innovation and Science, 2015:13).

As noted earlier, while the number and diversity of young people entering university has expanded, the evidence on outcomes is much less positive. Of all UK domiciled (as opposed to international) BME students graduating in 2015 across the UK, 24% more of

the white student cohort received a first or upper second class degree (1st or 2:1) than the BME student cohort (78.4% of white students achieved a 1st or 2:1, but only 63.4% of BME students) (Equality Challenge Unit [ECU], 2017).

Nationally there is variation in attainment across the broad ethnic groups, with Chinese heritage students doing best followed by those of Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage, with those with Black Caribbean and Black African backgrounds doing least well (ECU, 2016). This hierarchy is very similar in the compulsory education sector in England. However, the major difference between schools and universities is that in schools Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi and Black African students all outperform White British pupils but in UK universities all these groups attain less well than white students (Department for Education, 2015).

Despite the scale and persistence of the attainment gap in the UK, it has until recently received relatively little attention in higher education and has tended to be explained in terms of student characteristics, the 'student deficit' model, rather than by any shortcomings in institutional practices.

2.1 What accounts for the BME attainment gap?

The literature reveals there is growing awareness across the sector that the causes of the attainment gap are complex and multi-causal. As we argue elsewhere (McDuff *et al.*, 2018), initial explanations tended to be on the 'deficiency' of the student in relation to factors such as entry qualifications, socio-economic status, work and family commitments or cultural differences. However, some large and well-controlled studies, for example Broecke and Nicholls (2007) and, more recently, Hefce (2015) have convincingly challenged this view. The Hefce report compared results of over 280 000 students graduating from English universities in 2013-2014. It showed that the attainment gap of 16 percentage points in those obtaining a first or upper second class degree (76% White vs 60% BME) was only reduced to 15 percentage points when controlling for entry qualifications, age, disability, a participation of local areas measure, sex, subject studied, previous school type and institution attended.

Based on this evidence, at Kingston we have sought to move the emphasis away from 'fixing' the student to 'fixing the institution', or more precisely, fixing the 'fit' between our increasingly diverse student body and our institutional processes and practices, taking a systematic institution-wide approach (Berry & Loke, 2011; Stevenson, 2012). This approach is challenging when the initial response by academic staff is to see the problems of BME students 'fitting in' and attainment to be the result of wider societal issues rather than the institution (Stevenson, 2012). This paper therefore builds on the evidence of differential degree outcomes and the various attempts to understand and explain (and in some cases explain away) the causes. It sets out the objectives adopted by Kingston University in London and the social justice and institutional-wide approach taken to address the issue, and shares our efforts to spread this approach across the Higher Education sector in the UK.

3. Aims, approach and methods

Given the initial reticence of staff to accept that the role of the institution should be the key focus of our improvement/change programme and the belief that we were only likely to make progress with systemic change, the aims were to:

- Introduce systemic change in staff attitudes and practice to shape a common commitment to equality of opportunity. With commitment from the top of the organisation, this expectation extended to all functions and levels across the university
- Build upon local commitment to ethical practice to promote a co-ordinated social justice and transformational change effort across the university
- Make things easy for staff, by introducing and explaining a new institutional KPI and value added metric, so that they were able to spend their energies on innovation and developing positive relationships.

The key elements of our approach, methods and institutional action are described below in terms of their contribution to redistributive justice and stimulating system-wide change to reduce inequalities and enable student success. As this paper reports an institutional improvement programme rather than a conventional research study, we did not require ethics committee approval.

3.1 Initiating an institution-wide conversation

An ethical approach to change requires shared values and leadership commitment. With impetus from new leadership on the Equalities Committee and support from the Vice Chancellor, we initiated a year-long conversation using attainment data and a map of the student journey, asking the question: ‘If all students follow this journey, why do some do better than others?’ We had meticulous and supported conversations to help academic staff make sense of the impact of inequalities on their students’ performance, which they often experienced as difficult and uncomfortable. This was important for raising awareness, developing relationships and building institutional ownership of the change. It was vital for staff to recognise that higher education aims to be a transformative experience, but for too many of our students this was not the case.

3.2 Adopting an institutional key performance indicator

In the UK, universities are the responsibility of a Board or Council. With appointed lay membership, they oversee and call the executive to account. They are responsible for the rules, policies and financial decisions. Commonly, governing Boards monitor progress of institutional performance indicators, which are considered to be of strategic importance. As we note earlier, it was our view that the attainment gap at Kingston, while typical of many universities, had to be confronted and tackled – not by a few people in the Equalities Directorate, but by the whole institution. Working through the Vice Chancellor, the Board was persuaded to make improving the attainment of our BME students one of twelve institutional KPIs – to redress what one of the governors described as “the

great unspoken shame of higher education” – and borrowing from Jeremy Bentham, the founder of modern utilitarianism who believed the measure of right and wrong was to achieve “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. Kingston is believed to be the only large university to have taken the step of adopting an institutional KPI and it has proved immensely helpful in driving the change programme and keeping the ethical issues highly visible.

3.3 Adopting a suitable metric

Another key component of the Kingston approach has been the development and use of Value Added (VA) data, as created for university league tables in the *The Guardian*, a national British newspaper. One of the ways in which academics have sought to explain away the differences in attainment has been to suggest that they are down to differences in entry qualifications, or subjects of study. The VA removes these issues from the equation and also allows us to isolate any impact of other measurable factors such as socio-economic status, gender and disability.

VA scores are calculated by taking actual degree outcomes for all graduates across the UK for the last five years, broken down by entry qualifications and subject of study, to arrive at a probability that a given student, with a given entry qualification, studying a particular subject will achieve a 1st/2:1 degree. Aggregating these probabilities produces an ‘expected’ percentage for a cohort of students who should achieve a 1st/2:1 degree. If the cohort achieves this percentage, the VA score is 1.0. For percentage attainment above or below the expectation, the VA score is proportionately greater or less than 1.0.

VA bar charts have been produced for the last eight years for the institution, the faculties and all courses. (Figure 1 shows the institution level chart.) By removing the influence of entry qualifications and subject of study the VA exposes the extent of the unexplained gap and has proved a very powerful way of engaging staff in first accepting that the student deficit model does not explain the gap and then seeking alternative explanations and solutions to address the issue.

The institutional KPI is to bring the VA score for our BME students to 1 by 2018/19 (i.e. that they should be achieving the same level of the average student nationally, irrespective of ethnicity, with the same entry qualifications and studying the same subject, over the last five years). Thus our focus is on improving the attainment of our BME students, and not just closing the gap, which could theoretically be achieved by lowering the attainment of our white students. The VA data allows academic and professional staff across the university to make sense of inequalities of outcomes in a non-threatening and non-judgemental way, and provides a baseline from which action can be taken at the academic front line.

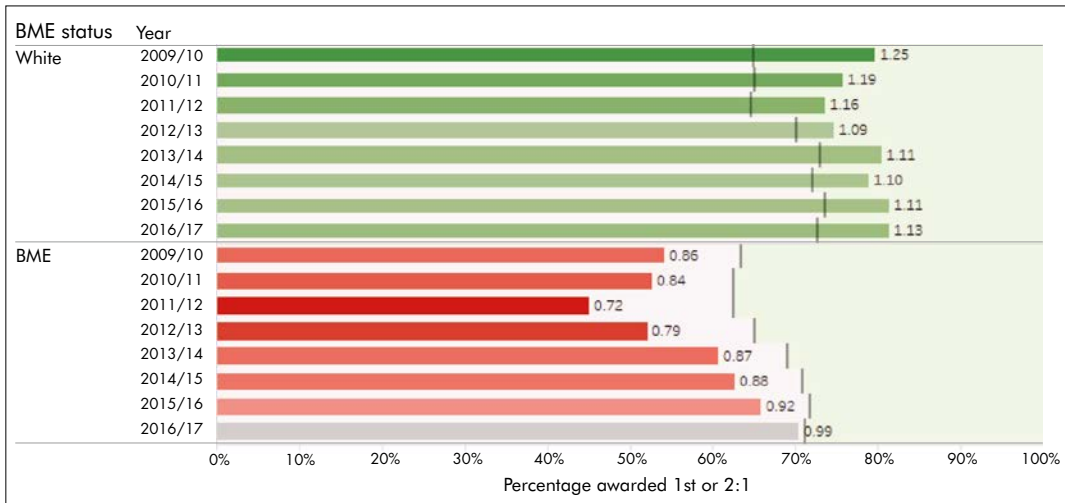


Figure 1: Institutional Value Added (VA) scores 2009/10 to 2016/17

The red and green colours depict a score of either above or below 1.0. The further away from 1.0 the score is, then the darker the red or green colour. Scores close to 1.0 lighten in shade and eventually go grey.

3.4 Targeting implementation at the institution and the individual

Our implementation plan has three streams:

3.4.1 Improving institutional processes

This includes embedding the KPI target and individual course metrics in university planning processes and equalities considerations as part of the university academic progression and promotion framework. A cross-institutional steering group has been established to ensure that this is not just seen as an equalities project.

3.4.2 Enhancing the knowledge and skills of staff

The approach to learning and teaching is clearly a key component and we have focused on a number of areas to improve staff knowledge, skills and confidence, firstly through face-to-face presentation of the VA data. Over 100 meetings have been held with staff across the institution and, though time-consuming, these have proved an invaluable way of engaging staff in productive discussions about the issues. Initial scepticism, or denial, usually quickly moves to acceptance and exploration of possible solutions. Many staff are uncomfortable talking about race including, quite often, concern about using the wrong terms. These meetings have given them a safe space to explore this. Secondly, we have offered a range of training and support, including unconscious bias workshops and training in our Inclusive Curriculum Framework. This helps staff to consider three issues:

- a) Is the curriculum accessible?
- b) Can students see themselves in the curriculum?
- c) How well does it equip all our students to work in a diverse world?

3.4.3 Raising knowledge and skills of students

We have seen it as essential to raise the awareness of students about the sector's struggle with the attainment gap, the approach their university was taking and the ways they can get involved in making change happen. For example, students have been trained as curriculum consultants to explore, with academic staff, the complex issues around inclusive curricula and how their learning and teaching can be made more meaningful and relevant to students from a range of backgrounds and experiences.

4. Results and discussion

The UK does not have the huge challenges of structurally embedded racial disadvantage that South Africa is having to grapple with. Although there has been growth in enrolment of young black students in South Africa's less selective and privileged institutions, outcomes are poor, with high attrition and low graduation rates (Council on Higher Education, 2013). We too have similar, but different, forms of racial disadvantage. For example, universities have a poor record of representation of BME staff in institutional and leadership positions (ECU, 2016) as well as the pervasive under-attainment of BME students at British universities. We suggest the apparent complacency around underachievement of home BME students, which is sector wide, longstanding and persistent, is wholly unacceptable and in our view represents significant moral and economic failure. There is progress. For example, widening access and participation of disadvantaged students in higher education has made great strides and the Office of Fair Access (Offa, 2017:2) notes that work should not "grind to a halt on enrolment" but universities should prioritise ensuring success throughout the student life cycle. This view is reinforced by Chris Husbands (2017), the Chair of the new national Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), on the publication of the first set of national results. He emphasises that universities need to change their systemic practices rather than focusing on singular and unconnected policies. We took this approach because we were convinced that it was only by taking a systemic approach to improvement that we would have a chance to make a difference to deep structural problems. We are in the fourth year of our programme so it is still relatively early days to fully evaluate, but we can point to a steady improvement in BME attainment over the last three years with the VA score for BME students improving steadily from 0.87 to 0.99 while the score for White students also increased from 1.11 to 1.13.

Given the caveats about not drawing premature conclusions, what can we say about the factors that can be attributed to this success? As an institutional-wide improvement programme we believe that it is only by changing the culture and conditions that reinforce current practice that the institution will face up to systemic disadvantage. This is important, as to do the morally right thing for all individuals, regardless of class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other 'protected characteristics',* should be the driving force of an ethically motivated university (Watson, 2014). It is also important as, by

* Protected characteristics are enshrined in British equalities legislation.

focusing on the conditions that support all students' success, we will enable marginalised and disadvantaged groups to do better along the lines of Bentham's fundamental axiom of benefit for the greatest number.

The second point of importance to this discussion is that BME groups in compulsory education are keeping pace with white children and in some areas, such as London, are outperforming their white counterparts. This raises the question: how is it that when they come to university they start to lose ground? Our own experience tells us that denial and resistance to facts around performance suggest a widespread reluctance and lack of confidence of staff to engage in debates about inequality and social justice or knowledge of how to address them in a meaningful way, given their own experience of HE or their own privilege. Too often, staff attend equality and diversity training or unconscious bias workshops without a real idea about how to translate this new insight into practice. Staff are therefore often left to deal with creating an inclusive learning environment after attending a few hours of generic training in isolation of a culture that fully supports and recognises the benefits of inclusivity. A rights-based and inclusive culture that is owned at the top and aligned to systems and processes including planning, promotions and the curriculum is beginning to make an impact. It is important that those conversations take place, that they are supportive and that they create a shared responsibility and commitment to change which avoids the individual deficit model.

This brings us to the third point in this discussion. David Watson's (2014) book, published shortly before he died, emphasised the moral purpose of the university and picked out the value of conversation to develop capability within systems for fairness and equity. He also argued that a "common framework should be created of learning opportunities, which should be available in any given area, giving people control over their lives" (Watson, 2014:68). These ideas underpin what we have set out to do at Kingston – where the inclusive curriculum framework brings together three key principles:

1. Create an accessible curriculum.
2. Enable students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum.
3. Equip students with the skills to positively contribute to and work in a global and diverse world.

Whilst other forms of curriculum frameworks accommodate diversity and difference, the inclusive curriculum framework recognises not only that diversity should be accommodated in the curriculum but that the curriculum must develop and build the diversity skills of students and staff (e.g. intercultural competencies, ability to work effectively with people from different socio-economic backgrounds etc.). In others words, the diversity of the student and staff population should be used as an asset to ensure future success for all our students in the global world (Brink, 2009).

Finally, what of the future? Our approach has attracted national attention with an award of £500 000 from the Higher Education Funding Council (England) to spread our work on Value Added and the inclusive curriculum to five other institutions. This match funded project means our five partners are committing their own resources to learning from

Kingston over an eighteen-month period. The aim is to determine the transferability and conditions for replication for further roll-out across the sector. Each institution will replicate the value added score and receive training on how to effectively disseminate this across the course teams of their choice. Alongside this, the institutions will also receive ‘train the trainer’ workshops enabling them to disseminate the ‘inclusive curriculum’ within the context of their own equality agendas and approach to inclusive pedagogy. We emphasise the importance of developing the skills to have the important discussions about privilege, social justice and fairness, because without these discussions and reflections on the changing role of the universities and equality practices, step change is unlikely. Making a step change is urgent.

We end with the words of David Blunkett, a former Minister in the Blair Labour Government, who said seventeen years ago that “in a knowledge-economy, higher education becomes a potentially powerful instrument of social justice, since it serves not only as a driver of wealth creation, but as a critical determinant of life chances” (Blunkett, 2000: para. 66).

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