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Shafi, Adeela ORCID logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6265-5024>, Copland, Samuel ORCID logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7469-8320> and Afriyie, Charles ORCID logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0632-0809> (2026) Deliberate institutional approaches to closing the ethnicity degree awarding gap. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. pp. 1-26. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2026.2710226 (In Press)

Official URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2026.2710226>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2026.2710226>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/16507>

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To cite this article: Adeela ahmed Shafi, Sam Copland & Charles Acheampong Afriyie (25 Aug 2026): Deliberate institutional approaches to closing the ethnicity degree awarding gap, Journal of Further and Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2026.2710226](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2026.2710226)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2026.2710226>



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Deliberate institutional approaches to closing the ethnicity degree awarding gap

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ABSTRACT

Across the United Kingdom, there continues to be a considerable gap between the proportion of White, British students receiving 'good' degrees, and Minority Ethnic students. This research reports on the findings from one case study university which, like many other UK universities, is looking to close this awarding gap. The research explored what can be done at individual institutional level to narrow and, ultimately, close this gap. Phase 1 examined one institution's degree awarding data which informed Phase 2, a qualitative exploration of the experience of Minority Ethnic students. Phase 1 found that although the population of Minority Ethnic students at the case study university was small, students were not achieving 'good' degrees as frequently as White students. This directed Phase 2 resulting in several complex themes, such as not feeling part of the learning environment, having to work harder than their White counterparts to achieve the same results, not having a voice or sense of belonging, and their own culture not reflected in their learning. A list of evidence-based recommendations, reflecting the voices of Minority Ethnic students at the case study university emerged. These included (in order of importance) decolonising the curriculum; self-reflection of staff; use of language; challenging stereotypes, bias and racism; cultural understanding; inclusivity in the learning environment; and support outside the classroom. It is suggested that efforts to closing the awarding gap should be deliberate and multifaceted and consider the nature of individual universities for more targeted efforts to close the awarding gap.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 November 2024
Accepted 21 July 2026

KEYWORDS

Decolonising the curriculum;
degree awarding gap;
attainment gap; ethnicity;
higher education

Introduction

The overall proportions of students receiving 'good degrees' - a First or 2:1 - have increased over the past decade, however, there continues to be a considerable gap between the proportion of White British students receiving these degree classifications compared to students from Minority Ethnic groups (Advance Higher Education, 2020).

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According to the Advance HE Statistical Report (2020), the sector average awarding gap was 13.3% (academic year 2018/19), remaining at the same level as the previous academic year. Early work in this space referred to the ‘attainment gap’, which presented a deficit model within the student population, however, this is now termed the awarding gap in recognition that it is the structures and institutions of society that lead to this gap rather than deficits in students (Arday, Branchu, and Boliver 2022).

Previous research exploring the educational experiences of minoritised students have highlighted a lack of ‘belonging’ and inclusion regarding processes which directly affect their educational experiences (Hammond et al. 2019; Peters 2015; Wong and Copsey 2021). Therefore, it is important to explore this by including students actively and asking directly for their ideas on how changing current practices or implementing new ideas within university would better support them to achieve their potential. This study focuses on understanding the issues from the perspectives of students from minoritised backgrounds. The findings formed the basis of specific recommendations for the university at a range of levels with the aim of narrowing and closing this awarding gap, recognising the specific idiosyncrasies of the case study university, and which represents a new contribution to the field.

Literature review

The ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG) remains the most significant of awarding gaps and the search for the reasons for its persistence has witnessed a shift in methodology from purely quantitative to mixed methods approaches examining the lived experience of minoritised groups in higher education (HE). This review reflects on both theoretical and empirical evidence alongside each other to emphasise the complexity of the causal underpinnings of EDAG.

Variations in the gap

The evidence reveals a significant, persistent gap that differs across minoritised sub-groups, time, institutions, and subject disciplines. This is confirmed by the latest comprehensive data (AdvanceHE 2023), summarised in Table 1, which shows the highest gap remains for Black graduates (22.6% for Black Caribbean and Other Black students) compared to White graduates in the 2022/23 academic year. Disaggregating the data reveals significant differences in outcomes for the different minoritised sub-groups across the four-year period.

EDAG tends to be comparatively higher in non Science, Engineering, and Technology (SET) subjects than in SET subjects (AdvanceHE 2023). The non-SET category includes disciplines such as Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Business, and Law. Table 1 shows that such broad categorisations obscure differences within disciplines. For example, although Architecture, Building, and Planning is typically reported as a SET discipline, its EDAG is higher than that of Education and Teaching (non-SET). EDAG also exhibits considerable institutional variations. Within the 2021/22 dataset (Table 1), the EDAG at some HE institutions was as low as 5% but reached over 30% at others. Also, institutional performance is not static; while the long-term trend showed a decreasing gap, a reported

Table 1. Participant demographics showing age, gender, religion, dependents and level of study.

Age Range		
	N	%
18–24	7	28%
25–35	6	24%
35–44	9	36%
45–54	1	4%
55–64	2	8%
Gender		
	N	%
Male	9	36%
Female	16	64%
Level of Study		
	N	%
4	4	16%
5	3	12%
6	5	20%
7	10	40%
Missing	3	12%

increase followed the decrease experienced during the pandemic years, thereby highlighting the difference in and between discipline categories and which are context based.

Searching for causal factors – a pluralistic theoretical lens

The search for the causes of EDAG has been ongoing. More than a decade ago, Richardson (2015) noted the issue’s complexity, stating: ‘we do not know what aspects of teaching and assessment practices are responsible for variations in the attainment gap’ (p. 278). Since then, numerous studies have suggested systemic factors within the HE environment that significantly drive EDAG. This study contributes to the literature on the institutional and contextual factors of EDAG and the search for effective interventions drawing on a range of theoretical foundations, illustrative of its complexity.

The EDAG metric has been challenged for being a simplistic measure that risks reductionism. This echoes the caution of Nussbaum (2011), who recognised that the complex events and successes in people’s lives ‘cannot without distortion be reduced to a single scale’ (p. 19). To move toward a holistic understanding of EDAG, we analyse its significant, persistent, and contextual evidence through a pluralistic theoretical perspective. We outline how Systems theory, Institutional theory, Critical race theory, Social reproduction theory, and Intersectionality provide the basis for a multifaceted lens for understanding EDAG. The discussion concludes with the view that decolonisation must form the backdrop for finding effective ways to reduce (if not eliminate) EDAG.

Systems theory

Systems theory posits that HE institutions are complex systems nested within larger social systems. The theory views EDAG not as a result of individual deficits, but as an emergent property (a ‘wicked problem’; Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting 2022), that stems from

interactions between multiple factors related to learners and the university. These factors are, therefore, both internal and external to the university system (Banerjee 2024). Many external factors have been linked with EDAG, such as socioeconomic background (Wyse et al. 2025), prior attainment (Boero et al. 2025), and year in industry (Traynor et al. 2024). These interact with internal factors (e.g. institutional White privilege (Enumah 2021), the Eurocentric canon (Bacchilega 2019; Peters 2015), and overt/covert forms of racism (Gutman and Younas 2025; Wong and Copsey 2021), which diminish the sense of belonging for minoritised groups and devalue their knowledge and dispositions, with detrimental effects on their attainment levels. Contextual individuality applies across universities, disciplines, and learners, meaning that interventions successful in one space or time may not translate effectively to others. This theoretical understanding is useful in recognising the broader ecosystem which students journey through and are situated within.

Institutional theory

Institutional theory deepens our understanding of EDAG by describing isomorphisms (coercive, mimetic, and normative) that privilege dominant groups and their culture in HE (Banerjee 2024; DiMaggio and Powell 2000). The disadvantage that minoritised groups experience is not a result of individual deficits and actions. Rather, inequalities result from a host of social structures, formal and informal rules, and norms created and sustained by organisations and fields of practice (De La Torre et al. 2024). Across HE sectors, institutional culture tends to converge in response to similar legislative and policy directives (e.g. on funding, fair access, and increased participation in HE). HE institutions may uncritically adopt norms and practices touted as 'best practice' to earn legitimacy and end up embedding and perpetuating disadvantage in sections of its community.

Ceremonial conformity occurs in organisational contexts when adopted policies signal good intent but are not matched by the actual deployment of resources and responsibilities that address the deep-seated cultural and structural drivers of inequalities, in this case EDAG (Hewlin 2003; Scheid-Cook 1990). To achieve real change, institutional theory calls for concrete cultural shifts requiring critical assessments leading to changes in institutional and disciplinary norms, true coupling of resources with accountability, and reflexive audits for EDAG policy efficacy (Larvor and Ahlberg 2021; Bradbury 2014). This theoretical lens enables a focusing in on institutional practices as well as the broader ecosystem within which they are also situated.

Critical race theory (CRT)

Critical race theory (CRT) argues that systemic racism continually shapes curricula, pedagogy, and daily judgements in HE, undermining the assumptions of fairness and meritocracy (Hensby and Adewumi 2024; Mawdsley, Magola-Makina, and Willis 2024). To bring about needed changes, CRT advocates for proactive measures to prevent and address all forms of racialised disadvantage endemic in the academy, rather than reacting only to overt discrimination (Kishimoto 2018). The continuing presence of factors such as lack of representation (in the curriculum and among staff; Seuwou et al. 2023), repeated microaggressions, and racial stereotypes are potent obstacles diminishing the sense of belonging and hindering the ability of minoritised groups to excel (Marandure, Hall, and

Noreen 2024; Thomas 2012). But appropriately addressing these triggers of racialised disadvantage may not receive the necessary priority because of interest convergence.

Interest convergence occurs when racial progress for marginalised groups is accommodated only when it converges with, or serves, the interests of the dominant (typically White) group (Bell 1980). Consequently, remedial actions are structured to be palatable to White students and staff, rather than in ways that address the issue. Such power imbalance means the dominant (White) group determines what are the necessary organisational and personal changes and if it is worth the costs (Klots and Ogwude 2025).

So, even when EDAG is rising or its reduction is stagnating, HE institutions tend not to designate sufficient, ring-fenced resources (time, budget, and personnel) for institution-wide interventions focusing on what works to reduce it. University of Huddersfield's Differential Attainment Project deserves the accolades it has received (Stoker 2023) as one of few exceptions. But why are there not many such institution-wide well-resourced interventions (UUK 2022)? We know that organisational commitment coupled with appropriate actions make a difference in reducing EDAG. There is no reason why this should not include explicit performance reviews, reward and promotion criteria for staff across HE institutions including accountability for senior leaders. Therefore, CRT offers some yet deeper explanations as to why efforts to reduce EDAG only ever go so far.

Social reproduction theory (SRT)

In the context of EDAG, Social reproduction theory (SRT) postulates that HE maintains and reflects the unequal distribution of social and cultural capital rather than acting as a catalyst for social mobility (Bourdieu 2018). The cultural capital of dominant groups (who are mostly White) is privileged, while the knowledge, language, disposition, and credentials of minoritised groups are devalued (Sekhon 2015). Minoritised groups often lack the appropriate social capital, representing access to contacts and networks that offer privileges such as mentorship, work shadowing, and advice on professional etiquette. This reproduction of inequalities is perpetuated by the continuing mismatch between the *habitus* of minorities and the recognised, valued, and rewarded dispositions of the dominant group. This often leads to internalised feelings of being inadequate, as they lack the practical skills to navigate the unwritten rules of the field (Strayhorn 2018).

SRT has been extended to recognise the Community Cultural Wealth (Acevedo and Solorzano 2023) possessed by minoritised groups. The positive implication of this is the recognition of hitherto overlooked dispositions, including linguistic (bilingual/multilingual skills), navigational (resilience and skills to manoeuvre complexities), family (aptitude to value genuine partnerships), and resistant (perspectives on social justice) capital. This assets-based view presents opportunities for creating and delivering an engaging curriculum, pedagogy and institutional environment for minoritised groups (Denton, Borrego, and Boklage 2020) and can contribute to closing EDAG.

Intersectionality theory

Intersectionality theory holds that social identities combine and interact to create uniquely compounded forms of disadvantage and privilege (Lukkien, Chauhan, and Otaye-Ebede 2025). As such, race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, and other demographic factors intersect and overlap to predispose members of minoritised

and dominant groups to negative and positive degree outcomes, hence the existence of EDAG and the disparities for different subgroups (Brophy 2025). For example, intersectionality provides a theoretical explanation of how a Black woman experiences a distinct and compounded form of oppression rather than separately experiencing racism and sexism (*misogynoir*; Bailey 2016).

Studies have found multiple demographic and socio-economic characteristics such as gender, nationality, immigration status, educational background, language (accent), and income levels interact to create compounded instead of additive disadvantage (Gutman and Younas 2025). As a result, minoritised students experience the pressure to work harder than their White peers – a phenomenon called ‘over-efforting’ (Steele 2011). This burden to prove the system and bearers of negative stereotypes wrong affects their perception of fairness and sense of belonging. Therefore, EDAG interventions will not be effective if they fail to recognise the entangled nature of the challenges that unique members of minoritised groups experience in HE.

Decolonisation as redress

The theoretical and empirical evidence on EDAG has revealed systemic, intergenerational, entangled, and pervasive factors with power dynamics that can be described as the symptoms of colonisation. In essence, it brings the entire HE system into the analytical space for the search for sustainable solutions. It thus seems logical that decolonisation offers explanations and redress mechanisms for closing EDAG (Choak 2022; Takhar 2024). Decolonising can lead to a dismantling of the systemic, entangled, and pervasive mechanisms which have led to EDAG to enable inclusive spaces for knowledge creation, dissemination, and practice where everyone (especially minoritised groups) can authentically belong and thrive. Decolonising the curriculum is an ongoing endeavour in many UK universities (Choak 2022; Gopal 2021). As a word, decolonising attracts many different definitions, for example, Grosfoguel (2011) describes it as a ‘global colonial power matrix’ that privileges knowledge from certain cultures above others (p.10), whereas Choak (2020) refers to decolonising as a way to address injustice and inequalities in higher education. Much of the earlier and dominant debates on decolonising focus on decolonising as an abstract and theoretical context of power and privilege. However, works by e.g. Morreira et al. (2020) have contributed to moving the debate forward from theoretical and abstract to something more concrete and to operationalising the term. In this context we take Choak’s (2020) and Morreira et al.’s (2020) approach and refer to decolonising the curriculum as a practical and pedagogical approach designed to create and foster a more inclusive learning environment for students to experience more directly.

However, the implications of decolonisation must be contextualised to the unique needs of institutions, disciplines, and cohorts to address the curriculum, pedagogy, and the wider institutional structure germane as discussed within each of the theoretical lenses in order for uninhibited academic attainment to be realised. Furthermore, Choat, Wolf, and O’Neill (2024), in their study of decolonising politics and economics curricula, emphasise that decolonising initiatives must recognise discipline-specific epistemological and ideological differences. This is further reinforced by Ahmed Shafi et al. (2025) in their recent book on multidisciplinary perspectives on decolonising, emphasising how the

different ontological bases of disciplines can shape the journey of decolonising to different extents.

The Knowledge Generation Wheel (Afriyie and Copland 2025) (Figure 1) provides an overview of the multiple aspects of HE curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture that impinge on the incidence and scale of EDAG. This calls for through-and-through decentred interventions inside and outside the classroom. It goes beyond colonised description of inclusivity whereby a minoritised group are moulded into beings that do not represent them. Rather, where and how knowledge is created, assessed, and disseminated, as well as the structures that support them, must challenge dogma and desist from privileging dominant groups, cultures, ways of knowing (epistemologies) and being (ontologies).

It is clear that EDAG results from several entrenched factors interacting at various levels. Solutions must be holistic, integrated, and applied contextually (Critchlow 2022; Duh 2019). This involves recognising individual learner experiences alongside the institutional structures and cultural variables that reinforce injustice and disadvantage for minoritized groups.

To further interrogate the institutional and structural dynamics underpinning the ethnicity degree awarding gap, this study examines the experiences of minoritised students within a post-1992 university in England. By situating these experiences within the theoretical frameworks outlined above, the research seeks to illuminate how

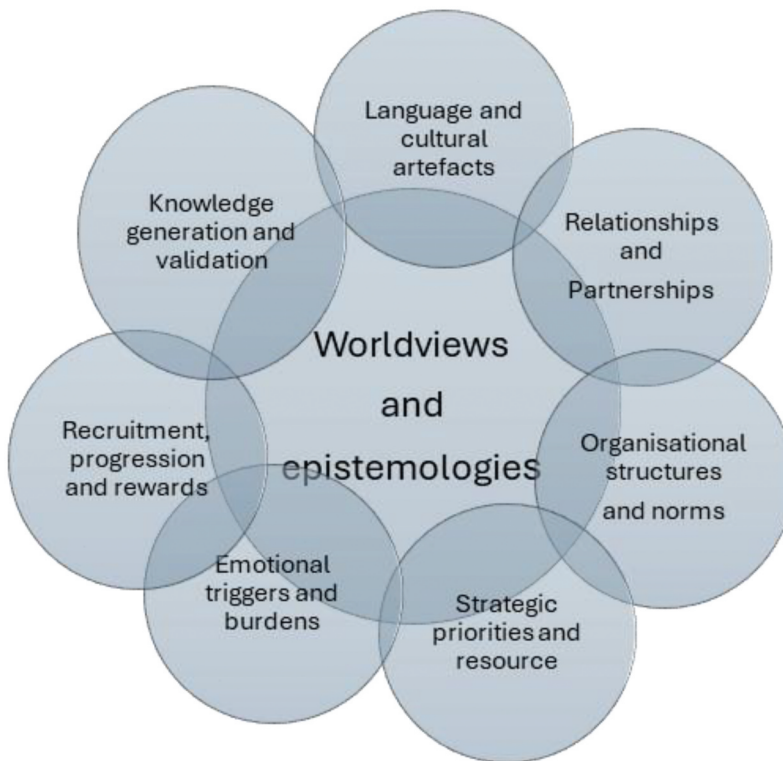


Figure 1. Knowledge generation wheel for decolonisation.

institutional practices and cultures contribute to the persistence of differential attainment. The aim was to develop tangible recommendations for closing EDAG at the specific institution and the following specific research questions were devised:

- (1) What are the lived experiences of Minority Ethnic students at the case study university?
- (2) To what extent do these students believe their experiences are related to an EDAG?
- (3) What do these students believe would better enable them to reach their academic potential at university?
- (4) What can the university do to reduce its EDAG?

Methodology

This research employs a primarily qualitative case study research design, informed by quantitative benchmarking. The design aligns with the conceptualisation of the awarding gap as both a structural and experiential phenomenon which benefits from quantitative benchmarking, but prioritising qualitative depth (Dawadi, Shrestha, and Giri 2021).

The case study university is a post-1992 institution located in Southwest England. This classification is significant given the historical trend of larger ethnicity degree awarding gaps in such universities compared to other institutional types, such as those in the Russell Group. This context underscores the importance of investigating the specific institutional dynamics that may contribute to this persistent inequality.

The university is situated in a region with a demographic profile that is significantly less ethnically diverse than the UK average (92.5% White in the county vs. 81.7% for England & Wales). This regional context provides a critical backdrop for understanding the experiences of Minority Ethnic students at the institution, who must navigate a predominantly White environment both on and off campus. This dynamic potentially compounds feelings of isolation and 'otherness', themes that are central to the qualitative findings of this study.

The case study university student population is one of the less diverse HE institutions, with an awarding gap of 36% for the academic year 2022/23.

To add statistical rigour to this time-series analysis, 95% confidence intervals were calculated for the awarding rates of each group (see Figure 2). These intervals are crucial for accurately interpreting the data, as they account for the statistical uncertainty associated with varying cohort sizes. The intervals for the Asian and Black student cohorts are visibly wider than for the White student cohort. This illustrates that the annual data points for the Minority Ethnic groups are subject to greater variability due to their smaller population sizes. Therefore, while the trend lines indicate the overall trajectory, year-on-year fluctuations for these cohorts should be interpreted with a degree of caution. In contrast, the narrow confidence interval for the White student cohort reflects its large size and provides a more statistically stable measure of awarding rates over this period.

The study had two phases with Phase 1 serving as background to the main Phase 2 qualitative exploration. Phase 1 examined quantitative data, published by the university on awarding outcomes for academic years between 2017 and 2023 to provide an understanding of the current picture of awarding outcomes across schools and subject areas. This approach is in line with recommendations from

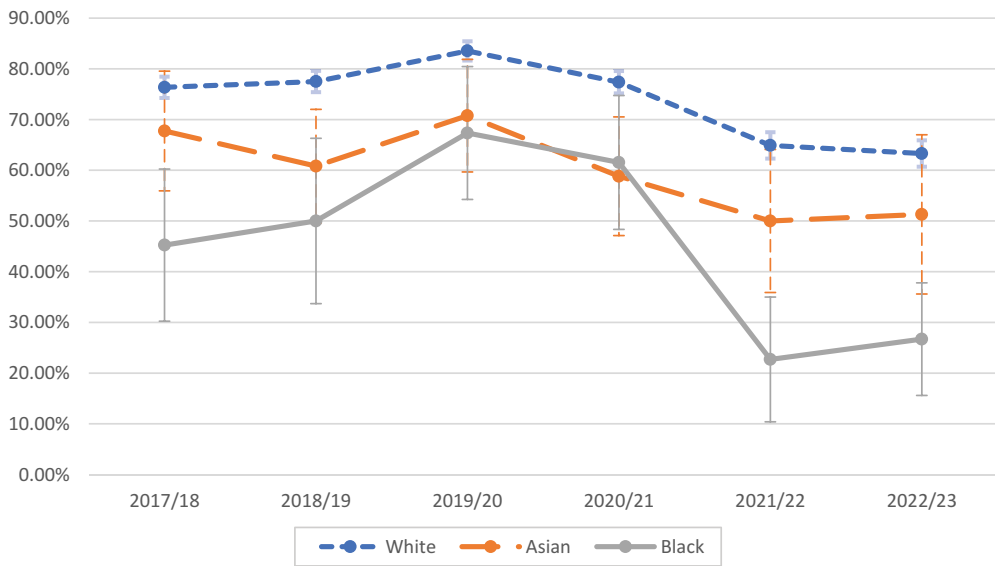


Figure 2. Percentage of students at the university awarded 'good' degrees by ethnicity, from 2017 to 2023, including 95% confidence intervals for each data series, illustrating the range of statistical uncertainty.

Universities UK (UUK) and National Union of Students (NUS), who, within their five-stepped basis to developing a framework to reduce awarding gaps suggest it is important to understand the 'lived experiences' of students, and for it to be integral when developing action points and recommendations (Universities UK, and National Union of Students 2019).

Preliminary phase

This study employed a preliminary quantitative phase for a descriptive statistical analysis to investigate attainment patterns at the university between 2017 and 2023. The data, sourced from the university's attainment awarding reports, contained student achievement across various schools and subject areas. Demographic details were incorporated to provide a comprehensive overview of recent awarding trends.

An initial benchmarking analysis was conducted using national data from the Office for Students (OfS), comparing degree classifications (2017–2023) across various demographics including sex, ethnicity, disability, age, socioeconomic background (POLAR4 and IMD), and prior attainment (Office for Students 2021). This national comparison was followed by an in-depth investigation into first-class degree awarding patterns across different academic schools within the university to identify potential disparities requiring further investigation and targeted recommendations. Figure 3 compares the degree awarding of the case study institution against national data.

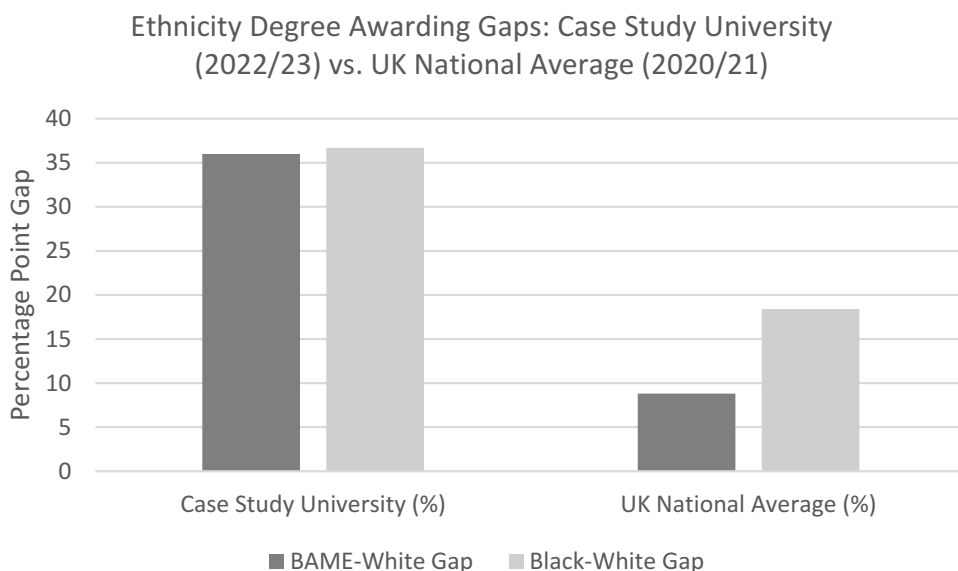


Figure 3. Comparative degree awarding gap (institution vs national).

Main phase

This main phase of the research adopted a phenomenological approach, linking the commonalities in participants' experiences of the awarding gap (Creswell 2007). The aim was to capture the individual experiences of participants, empowering them to share their perspectives and contribute to a deeper understanding of their realities. This knowledge could then be used to develop tangible actions to help narrow the awarding gap.

Participant recruitment

Over a six-month period, 25 participants were recruited through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Initially, the research team released adverts through social media channels, the student's union and by distributing adverts throughout the university via email. However, there were significant challenges in getting participants to take part, which is a significant factor to consider because it could suggest that participants may have had reservations in speaking about this topic. A pragmatic approach was thus adopted in the latter stages of recruitment and purposive sampling was utilised reaching out to previous students who had graduated post 2019/20. There was also a more deliberate lobbying of course leaders and other academics to help promote participation in research to students of Minority Ethnic backgrounds. This eventually led to the above target number of 25 participants – however, nine participants were international rather than UK domiciled. Participant demographics are detailed in Table 1.

Sixty per- cent or 15 participants were UK domiciled, which is considered a good sample size for a primarily qualitative study (Boddy 2016). Usually, EDAG is specific to UK domiciled undergraduate students and 15 participants were UK domiciled, however,

the remaining 40% of participants had dependents, were on postgraduate courses and international students. Since, these students had come forward to participate, it was decided that they should be included because they could likely provide additional insights and provide voice to their experiences, providing richer, phenomenological data.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the institution's Ethics Committee. This was particularly crucial due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and its potential impact on participants. Following careful consideration, in order to minimise the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship, interviewees with postgraduate research student status and Minority Ethnic background were recruited. Measures were implemented to ensure participants' well-being, with signposting to appropriate support services in case discussions during the interviews triggered emotional distress.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, conducted online, consisted of nine questions exploring the barriers and enablers faced by Black and Minority Ethnic students in HE. The questions included awareness of the national awarding gap, perceived obstacles in their educational journeys, strategies for success, the concept of community, specific instances of missed opportunities at university, experiences with social support, and suggestions for improving the experiences of Minority Ethnic students. By employing open-ended questions, the intention was to encourage participants to share detailed narratives.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify and construct themes within the interview data. Recognising the potential influence of researcher bias on data interpretation, the researchers adopted Braun and Clarke's (2022) perspective, conceptualising theme development as a process of construction rather than discovery, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage framework for thematic analysis. Data between UK domiciled and international students were found to concur and become saturated (Hennink and Kaiser 2022) and therefore the data were not treated separately beyond this.

This process culminated in the identification of three core themes as follows, providing a richer understanding of the entire dataset.

Preliminary phase quantitative analysis

The preliminary phase quantitative analysis confirmed a significant and acute ethnicity degree awarding gap at the case study university, mirroring national trends but at a far more severe level. For the 2022/23 academic year, the gap between White students and Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic students receiving a 'good' degree (First or 2:1) stood at 36%. This figure is exceptionally high when benchmarked against the most recent available national data for UK universities (2020/21), where the equivalent sector-wide gap was 8.8%. Furthermore, the gap for Black students at the institution was a figure substantially

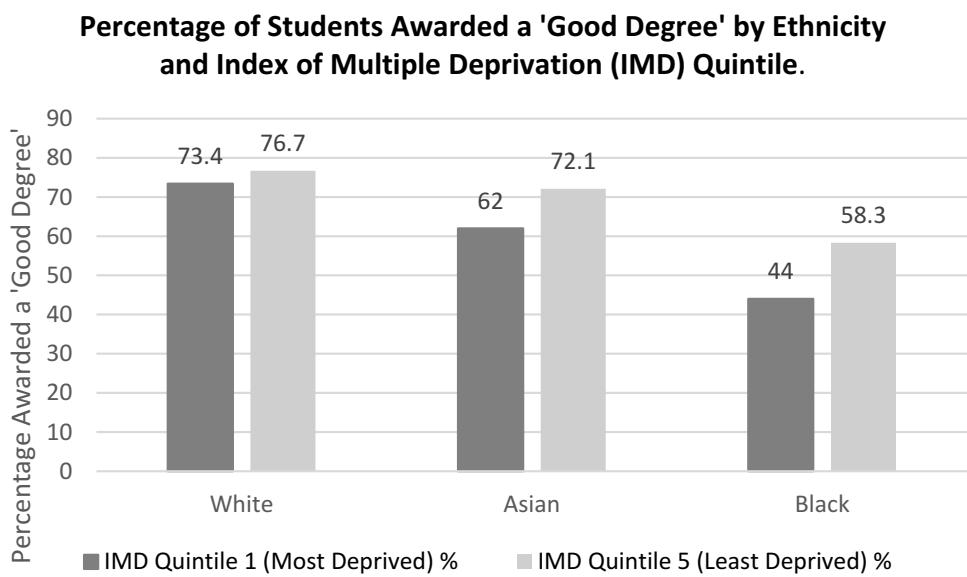


Figure 4. Intersectional analysis of ‘good degree’ attainment by ethnicity and socioeconomic deprivation (IMD).

larger than the national Black-White gap of 18.4% . This positions the university as a critical case for examining the institutional factors that may be contributing to such profound and outlying disparities in student outcomes.

While intersectional analysis considering factors like deprivation and disability reduced the disparity to some extent, a persistent gap remained between White and Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic students across various demographics. White students’ first-class degree attainment aligned with current literature (Hubble, Bolton, and Lewis 2022), showing an upward trend linked to prior academic achievement. However, this trend did not hold for Black and Asian students.

This awarding gap appears to go beyond factors traditionally associated with lower performance, such as socioeconomic status and prior achievement, suggesting institutional influences on outcomes for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic students (Berger and Wild 2017; Claridge, Stone, and Ussher 2018; Cotton et al. 2016; Mcduff et al. 2018). Intersectional analysis (presented in Figures 4 and 5), while mitigating the gap somewhat, highlighted its persistence across various demographics, particularly for Black students. Overall, the current trajectory of minoritised student attainment appears distinct from all other student groups at the case study university.

Main phase qualitative themes

Three themes relating to the barriers and enablers faced by minoritised students at the university emerged: cultural and linguistic difference, having to work harder, and the lack of voice.

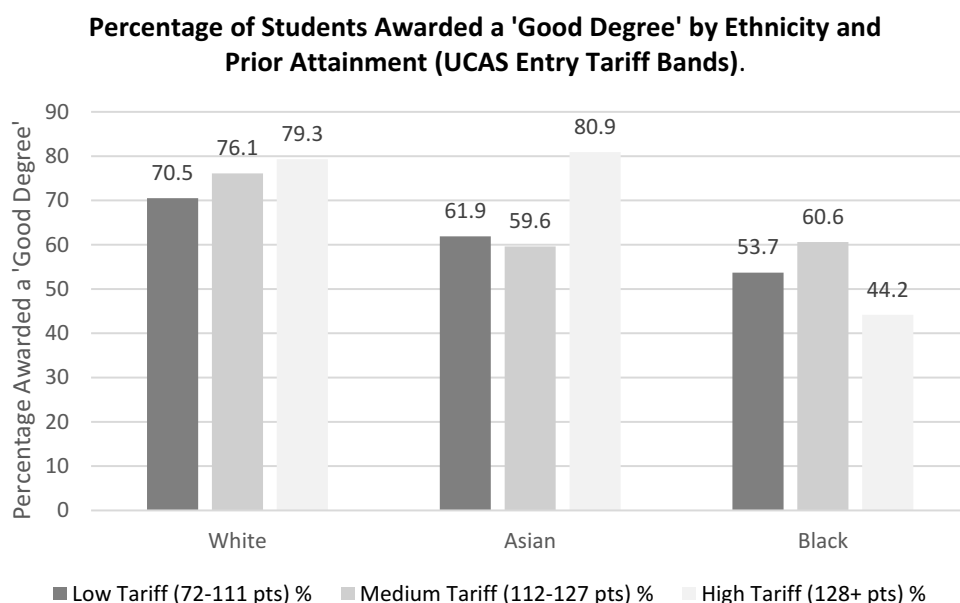


Figure 5. Intersectional analysis of 'good degree' attainment by ethnicity and prior attainment (entry tariff).

Culture, language and learning

'and if it was well explained, I believe I could have gotten like a first-class degree'

Culture and differences in backgrounds when accessing the curriculum was something participants indicated as important. Participants noted it was sometimes hard for them to understand or relate to teaching, or that they felt did not represent them:

It's more like white dominance, where they introduce theories, white theories ... I think they need to include other theories, like from other minority backgrounds, such as Black, Asians, you know [...] but specifically, for theorists, I think they need to bring up other minority backgrounds. (Esther)

Some participants felt that being unable to relate to material had a direct effect on their ability to understand assignment work as well as the way assignments are framed by the academic staff. This view reiterates questions about the lack of meaningful diversity and representation in the curriculum that has been asked elsewhere (Howard 2016; Johnson, Rich, and Castelan Cargile 2008; Peters 2015). They felt this put them at a disadvantage before even starting the work:

I encountered a problem in one of my modules, where everybody else who had a different background (White), understood what we were asked to do. But from my background, from the Black-African, Black-Jamaican/Caribbean, you know ... we all thought one line of thinking. So that's already a downfall for us, you know, and we were penalised for the way we think, which wasn't represented, I thought, so ... And, you know, if it wasn't for that, and if it was well explained, I believe I could have gotten like a first class degree. (RM)

This account illustrates the direct impact teaching may have on the awarding gap. By comparison, participants also talked about the positive impact they experienced when

lecturers made the effort to decolonise the curriculum and could use their diversity as a strength within assignments. Participants spoke about the impact this had and how they thought it would make learning accessible for minoritised students. There was also reference to different *types* of cultural thinking which impacts on learning:

the other one this decolonising the curriculum the staff are doing is so important, but it's not being spoken about why is it not being spoken about ... why? [...] Whether it's a whole room of White students and a White lecture or not, it should be said it shouldn't just be when an ethnic student is there you know, it should be spoken about outside of that to show that we are doing something and it's important because it teaches the majority about the minority, so they aren't the minority anymore. (Anchal)

And when you are given assignments to do and things to do, I feel like people think ... they think in one way, which is one cultural way. I know it's silly, but these, I believe these, there is Caucasian type of thinking, and then there is a Black type of thinking. (RM)

Participants described language as one of the biggest barriers in achieving academic success. However, this was not because of their grasp of English as an additional language. Participants felt this was down to interpretation from lecturers and because they were unable to look beyond perfect spelling and grammar. One participant framed this in the context of inclusivity:

Inclusivity should not just be accepting other people's way of life ... But when it has to do with university assessment writing it is a different ballgame. Because that sort of creativity, that sort of allowance, you know, to be free to express yourself in your writing, the way you would want to is not encouraged. (MP)

One participant described the help they had received from lecturers, who understood the extra barriers students faced when English was their additional language and that this related directly to the outcome of their assignments. Supportive and understanding staff were mentioned often by participants, who felt when academic staff took the time to break down the barriers students face and ensure they felt included, that this impacted positively on their academic success:

I feel like these people are sort of rooting for me [...]. And I think it does help that one of those is also a Black woman, because I can strongly identify with her, and her with me; with the challenges that I might face. (Metis)

Participants also described difficulties they face within the learning environment itself, i.e. lectures and seminars. Participants spoke about feeling their style of communication, which was appropriate within their cultural background, was often perceived as 'confrontational' or 'aggressive':

because of the fact that you know that if you really, you know, express yourself the way you want to, you will be seen as being aggressive and confrontational. You then tend to internalise whatever it is you're feeling. And that's not really the best thing, and can leave you with feelings of resentment, and all that. (MP)

Other participants felt that although they liked their white lecturers, that they still were unable to be themselves when talking for fear of not being understood.

Working hard to achieve the same

'more is expected of us, but with minimal help'

When describing their experiences in HE, participants talked about their cultural and familial backgrounds, and for many, they are the first person in their families to attend university. Participants described the sacrifices and emphasised the hard work their grandparents and parents had made in immigrating to the UK, and in their accounts, there was a sense of responsibility to ensure they were making the most of their education:

Back when my grandparents came to this country, they did a lot of manual stuff, and there wasn't that education behind them so that they could earn a better salary. So, it was kind of like, I don't know it ... It makes you ... it makes me want to do better for kind of my family. Legacy, I suppose. (Summer)

This narrative reflects on the cultural values of some students and their families. Academics from Africa speak about the importance the role of 'hard work' plays in communal circles, and how one has a social and moral responsibility to work hard, which will in turn reap positive results for the individual and family alike (Igboin 2011). Participants also spoke about the strong academic focus within families from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds:

I have a lot of pressure on my back because people are watching me, you know, like is she gonna do this ... this ... this or not. She's got to do really well ... And parents and family members just constantly watching like over your shoulder, or like asking about your grades and stuff ... That's the pressure I feel. (Three)

This demonstrates the pressure minoritised students may potentially feel regarding fulfilling their educational potential; however, they often find that hard work alone (as they have been led to believe) is not all it takes to succeed academically. This realisation can have quite an impact on participants. A participant commented on this from the perspective of being a mature student who had gone through this realisation as a young adult:

But that fallacy of growing up and thinking, just work hard and you're going to get to where you want, is not true. If you're not coming from an already ... privileged sort of position [...] it's really not just down to you, it's about your environment as well, and the people that are governing your success. (Casie)

Participants spoke passionately about achieving their goals in HE and this was often reflected in the recognition that to do this, rightly or wrongly, they would need to work harder than white students to achieve the same outcomes.

it's like, psychologically draining. I really got to be strong, extremely intelligent, just not to you know, I've got to be well read, on top of your game, even more than average White British student. (Blue)

Minority Ethnic student voice

'You have to scream about it for you to be heard'

Participants were asked about their experiences within the learning environment. Some participants described positive and supportive environments and made mention of individual members of staff and students who had made them feel welcome, listened to, and supported. When recounting these experiences, there was a sense that overall, this made it easier to access the curriculum:

she (lecturer) always was just very encouraging. And yeah, my personal tutor now, he's just been absolutely amazing. You know, and it yeah, there's a lot of self-motivation, but also the motivation from my favourite lectures. (Casie)

One participant stated that when they felt listened to, and their lecturers communicated well with them, this had a direct effect on their ability to understand the academic expectations:

Some of them, I feel that some of the teachers prefer to communicate with certain races of people, maybe they are more fluent English learners. But in this course, I don't have that problem. I think the teachers and tutors, they are quite patient and understanding what they are looking for in assignments in order to score well, so they are really explicit, and trying to encourage students to do better by communicating quite patiently. (Barbican)

During interviews, there was a general sentiment that minoritised students were far more likely to be active members of group work and take part in discussions with peers and academic staff, if they felt that lectures/seminars were set up to nurture an inclusive environment. Unfortunately, this was not always experienced by the participants in this study:

So, like, on my course they have like modules that are, like decolonising the curriculum, and I think they are good. But in some cases, it just doesn't feel like a safe space for minorities. [...] That makes me, like, a bit wary of can I fully say what I actually want to say without feeling I'd get, not, maybe like backlash or just ... they'll think I'm like a radical or something. (Three)

This description demonstrates quite powerfully, that even if the university is taking important steps like decolonising the curriculum, the types of conversations that will happen around this, must be appropriately facilitated by the lecturer. Opinions from students which are embedded with internalised or even overt racism must be actively challenged by lecturers (Garcia and Guerra 2004). Lecturers must make it clear at the outset, when having sensitive discussions around decolonising the curriculum and racism, that students must challenge their own internalised racism.

Participants described experiences where they felt an undertone of systemic racism, both in and out of the learning environment:

'This is the UK, I don't know about other countries. But this is what we do in the UK.' You're asking for revision, and you get that response. A reminder of where you are, when you're already know where you are, we are in England, we are in Britain. It has nothing to do with my request for revision with our lecturer. (RM)

This participant said that the lecturer had no idea if they had been born in the UK or not, and therefore this comment was based on their name, accent, and colour of their skin. They felt it was inappropriate and irrelevant to decline a request based on a comparison to education in other countries. This exhibits the extra challenges minoritised students face in education and indicates how academic staff need to actively challenge stereotypes

and racism within the learning environment, promote and demonstrate cultural understanding, and create an inclusive environment within lectures, seminars, and office hours.

Across many interviews the need to have a voice and be heard was strongly prevalent:

Just the accessibility of the lecturers, it's different. Like any concerns, from any concerns from, say, a (White) British student, feels like he carries more weight. (MP)

Discussion

The project aimed to explore the barriers and enablers in the educational experiences of minoritised students at the case study university, so that realistic and tangible recommendations could be made to help close the current awarding gap. This discussion will be structured around the key recommendations that were developed from the data and labelled in order of emphasis emerging from the dataset. These were: Decolonising the curriculum; Self-reflection of staff; the Issue of language; Challenging stereotypes and biases; Inclusivity in the learning environment; and Support outside the lecture hall, and each of these will be discussed with reference to the literature.

Decolonising the curriculum

The data in this case study institution suggests that there is still some way to go before the benefits of any such decolonising efforts are fully felt. Participants discussed coming to terms with being a minority in a predominantly White learning environment, how assignments were often not representative of other ethnic backgrounds or voices. That the discussing of sensitive topics around decolonising and racism in education could, at times, be uncomfortable for them, reflecting the findings of Enumah (2021) and that of Klots and Ogwude (2025). Given the widespread evidence behind divergent cultural cognitive processing styles (Han 2010), it is understandable that learning environments not recognising this disadvantage students. The calls for change, specifically for HE institutions to promote cross-cultural exchange, cannot be overemphasised (Ash et al. 2020; Zhao 2022). All actors in the learning space, learners, educators, and other professionals alike need to embrace increased cross-cultural awareness.

As suggested by Bell (1980) and Grosfoguel (2011) and found in this study, attempts to decolonise the curriculum can often be met with barriers due to push-back from staff, who do not understand the importance (Begum and Saini 2019). In this sense, universities in similar positions would benefit from specific steps to ensure the decolonisation of the curriculum across courses, as well as at policy and procedural level as per Institutional theory. Further, that such steps need to be discipline specific in the light of evidence provided by Choat, Wolf, and O'Neill (2024) and Ahmed Shafi et al. (2025). This will play a pivotal role in mitigating implicit and explicit racism, ensuring students are represented within their learning and fostering an inclusive culture that fits with a university's strategic and unique characteristics and context (Critchlow 2022) and that which recognises the discipline-specific nature of decolonising journeys. These steps are vital in ensuring minoritised students can access the curriculum effectively through a recognition of its compounded complexity as pointed out by McDuff et al. (2018); Ghann (2021) and Bayer et al. (2024) and Intersectionality theory.

It is accepted that the link between curriculum decolonisation and improved academic outcomes is not linear and it would be naive to assume or claim that content diversification alone will lead to enhanced performance (Choat 2021). As Choat, Wolf, and O'Neill (2024) note, attempts to decolonise curricula must take account of the discipline-specific epistemological traditions and institutional contexts that shape what knowledge is considered legitimate. Consequently, decolonising initiatives are unlikely to succeed through uniform institutional policies alone, and must instead be adapted to the particular characteristics of individual disciplines.

However, when combined with a suite of interventions such as the recommendations within this paper, there is a greater opportunity for the issues raised by students in this study to be addressed and create the conditions necessary for successful learning. Indeed, the UK Office for Students (OfS) made it an obligation in 2018 for higher education providers to close ethnicity awarding gaps, resulting in universities developing fair access and participation plans to address awarding gaps as one of their aims (Office for Students 2021). Ultimately the most effective interventions for EDAG are those construed through the lens of decolonisation. In doing so, it is possible to address the complexity as discussed in the literature review.

Self-reflection of academics

Clear from the data in this study was the role of academics, reflecting the points made by Richardson (2015). Ultimately, as the people designing and marking assessments, it is their responsibility to understand the impact of self-reflection and how understanding the experiences of minoritised students will benefit everyone. This has been regularly echoed in other work around closing the awarding gap where researchers have interviewed the minoritised populations within their institutions (e.g. Davies and Garrett 2013; UUK, 2022; Advance HE, 2020). By challenging their own unconscious biases, particularly in teaching and marking, it would demonstrate an understanding of the additional struggles that minoritised students have to go through to achieve their goals in HE, as well as validating their place at university. This would enable a dismantling of the perpetuation of White hegemonic ideas (Enumah 2021) permeating, for at least the university itself. This contributes to the overall call for decolonising the university itself (Woldegiorgis 2021) and contributes to good reflexive practice (Hayes, Lockett, and Misiaszek 2021).

Language

For many minoritised students, language was a factor in determining their access to the curriculum and this was the case for UK domiciled students as well as international students, reflecting the findings of Sekhon (2015). Participants' experiences suggested that language reflected biases and ineffective communication, resulting in several issues. Firstly, minoritised students felt that if they had an accent, it influenced the way they were perceived by their peers and academic staff. They described how this could make them withdraw from wanting to contribute to group work, give up in trying to put their views across, or ask for help. Secondly, participants felt that even if English was their first language, they may be perceived as aggressive or combative when speaking in lectures

or seminars, despite this being an effort to convey passion or interest in the topic. These findings reflect those of Banaji, Fiske, and Massey (2021), Banerjee (2024), and Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting (2022), emphasising the efforts that academics must make in consciously peeling away biases and preconceptions they, and White students may have by deliberate listening to minoritised students' voices more in the learning environment. Importantly, this should be applied to assignment work (Campbell 2024), markers should focus feedback on content of the work, rather than criticism on issues such as fixed standards of spelling and grammar, which negatively impacts on students' confidence. The issue of language should not be limited to international students but also for home students coming from non-traditional backgrounds, with different levels of cultural capital, for example, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (McKay and Devlin 2014).

Challenging stereotypes, bias, and racism and exhibiting cultural understanding

Participants did not disclose experiences of overt racism at the university. However, many did describe an 'undertone' of unconscious bias and systemic racism on their courses, which is well documented in other literature (Banaji, Fiske, and Massey 2021; Marandure, Hall, and Noreen 2024). Instances such as this further enforce the idea that HE is part of 'The White Space' (Anderson 2015). What was a new and distinct finding was how the minoritised students emphasised the need for academic staff to challenge stereotypes, biases, and racism actively within the learning environment to show support and solidarity. In relating this to the other recommendations in this project, the researchers feel there is an interconnection between all the themes and recommendations. For example, if academics are shown to challenge stereotypes, minoritised students will feel more welcome and supported, which will improve relationships with lecturers and tutors. In turn, they may feel more comfortable in taking part in group work, discussion, and debates, as well as in asking for help and clarification with assignment work. This could have a positive impact on assignment grades, and ultimately, the awarding gap. This evidences the positive implications set out by Denton, Borrego, and Boklage (2020) of Community Cultural Wealth (Acevedo and Solorzano 2023).

Inclusivity in the learning environment and support outside the lecture hall

Based on the results of the study the researchers recommend academic staff should make efforts to provide an environment where minoritised students feel as valued as their White peers. After analysis, it is suggested that there is a lack of confidence among some minoritised students. As such, academic staff can counteract this by trying to actively include minoritised students in debates and discussions. This may help counteract the disproportionate interactions with White students. Additionally, staff should ensure student names are pronounced and spelt correctly. Furthermore, the participants showed a willingness and desire to have the kind of relationships with the academic staff that their White peers do. Therefore, outside of lectures, staff should ensure minoritised students are aware of their availability, and where they can be contacted for additional support with assignments. If staff try to get to know their students, they will be better placed to help them fulfil their academic interests and goals. This may result in an increased level of

engagement, confidence, and a sense of belonging; all factors which could contribute to closing the awarding gap.

Additionally, there should be efforts to improve the overall sense of community felt by minoritised students through university support and professional services. Participants were often confused about what was available to them, or they believed what was available would not meet their needs as someone within an ethnic minority. Communicating what is available to students and encouraging them to access services would contribute to an increased sense of community, which is an important contribution to the successes and experiences of minoritised students (Chang et al. 2011). Whilst it is not possible to ignore the complexity of the EDAG, making efforts at an individual institutional level can make tangible contributions to narrowing it. This is because in reflecting on one's own institution, it is possible to make those changes that are not only multifaceted but reflect the idiosyncrasies of the individual university.

The findings of this study also serve to illuminate and extend the theoretical understandings discussed earlier regarding the persistence of EDAG. The experiences of participants reaffirm that structural inequalities within higher education, which are manifested through curriculum design, assessment practices, and institutional culture, continue to reproduce the effects of privilege and marginalisation described by Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus. The students' accounts of exclusion, linguistic bias, and the need to 'work harder' than their White peers challenge the deficit narratives critiqued by Valencia (1997) and others from almost 30 years ago, illustrating instead how institutional processes sustain inequitable outcomes.

At the same time, the positive accounts of inclusive teaching and decolonised curricula demonstrate that agency can be exercised within these structural constraints, supporting Critchlow's (2022) notion of 'joined-up thinking' in complex systems. In this sense, the study empirically advances decolonial and anti-racist theories of education (Begum and Saini 2019; Gopal 2021) by evidencing how students' sense of belonging and academic success are contingent on the extent to which institutions acknowledge and reconfigure the cultural assumptions embedded in teaching and assessment. Thus, the findings move beyond documenting disparities to expose the mechanisms through which they are reproduced and how deliberate, multifaceted institutional change can begin to disrupt them.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that closing the ethnicity degree awarding gap requires deliberate, multifaceted approaches that recognise the distinct contexts of individual universities. The lived experiences of Minority Ethnic students revealed persistent inequities linked to institutional practices and culture, underscoring the need for targeted interventions. The recommendations combined, form a suite of potential interventions that a university could use as a set of deliberate and multifaceted approaches to closing their awarding gap. Each of the recommendations would need a set of principles and a strategy to enable it to have impact and would need to be monitored and assessed in relation to all the recommendations. Given universities have a fair access and participation plan as part of their OfS obligations, this plan may be a suitable place to 'house' and monitor the initiatives.

In recognising some of the limitations of this research with regards to methodology, the final sample was skewed towards postgraduate (Level 7) students. As the ethnicity degree awarding gap is primarily a measure of UK-domiciled undergraduate outcomes, the participation composition could be seen to limit the direct applicability of some findings to that specific cohort. However, this recruitment outcome may itself be a salient point for reflection. The higher propensity of postgraduate students to volunteer for this study could indicate different levels of engagement with, or trust in, institutional research on racial equity across student levels. In any case, data from both groups were not as distinct as might have initially been considered, given new arrival into the country, adjustment, language and other adaptations. Ultimately, the PG international group's greater willingness to speak reflected the UK domiciled participants' experiences in many ways and thereby amplified the UK participant voice, strengthening the data. Further, the noted difficulty in recruiting Minority Ethnic participants for such research is a known challenge in research (Bonisteel et al. 2021). It suggests an important avenue for future work on developing more effective student engagement strategies. Turning this around, the number of students who were UK domiciled still represented a majority of the sample which is considered a sound sample size for qualitative research (Hennink and Kaiser 2022). Having both UK domiciled and international students enriched the dataset providing additional insights.

Similarly, the literature highlights disciplinary variation in EDAG which was not apparent nor explored directly within the scope of this study. We would recommend that this is an area worthy of further exploration in ongoing research. The field would also benefit from large-scale primary quantitative research to triangulate the qualitative findings and test the prevalence of the themes identified in the interviews across the wider student body.

In conclusion, this paper reframes EDAG as an institutionally embedded, multifactorial 'wicked problem', explicitly rejecting deficit models of student underperformance. In doing so, the study contributes to theoretical debates on institutional inequality in higher education by demonstrating how curriculum structures, institutional cultures, and everyday academic practices interact to reproduce differential educational outcomes for minoritised students. This theoretical repositioning of linking structural inequalities, institutional habitus, and curriculum hegemony, is our distinctive contribution. The paper illustrates that monitoring of the data alone will not close EDAG. This research demonstrates the need for a proactive and deliberate, multifaceted approach to closing EDAG. Doing so over a sustained period with authenticity and genuine intent, the structural conditions that sustain the awarding gap can begin to be disrupted.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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