

Preface

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The BME attainment gap is a longstanding sector issue and, whilst the passage of time has brought with it advancements, there is still a long way to go. In 2016/17, for qualifiers in undergraduate degrees, the BME attainment gap was 13.6% and a shocking 24.1% for black students.

When the BME attainment gap came to my attention over a decade ago, I was surprised that little was being done to address this systemic failure of the United Kingdom (UK) higher-education system.

But it was almost as if the gap was being 'ghosted'.

There was pervasive sector resistance to: producing data analysed by demographics; acknowledging that the institution could itself be contributing significantly to causing differentials; taking active steps to identify and address possible shortcomings of the institution (the more likely action being to respond by focusing on the characteristics of students – a.k.a. the 'student-deficit' approach).

Thankfully, though, various reports have convincingly challenged the student-deficit approach. The most notable of these large-scale reports were conducted by Broecke and Nicolls in 2007 and by HEFCE in 2013. The latter demonstrated that, when controlling for a number of variables (such as entry qualifications, the 'participation of local areas' measure, the subject of study, the previous school type and the current institution), the attainment gap was reduced by only one per cent, from 16% to 15%.

Consequently, there has been a call to move away from focusing solely on student interventions and instead to take into account all aspects influencing the student life cycle. Many – including Singh (2009), Stevenson (2012), McDuff *et al.* (2018) – advocate a whole-institution approach to addressing the attainment gap, so as to create a sense of direction and purpose for staff and an environment for students that is truly inclusive and in which they sense that they belong, matter and have appropriate conditions to thrive.

At Kingston, the whole-institution, whole-student-life-cycle approach to the BME attainment gap has been facilitated primarily through detailed work to engage staff in discussions and actions using the 'Value Added' metric and 'Inclusive Curriculum Framework' (ICF), both developed at Kingston.

The 'Value Added' metric takes into account entry qualifications and subject of study to arrive at a probability that a given student will achieve a first or upper-second degree. Aggregating these probabilities produces an 'expected' percentage for a given cohort of students who should achieve a first or upper-second classification and this can be analysed by ethnicity. Simply put, if BME students as a group on a course do not achieve their expected value-added score of 1 then this becomes a pressing issue for the programme team.

The strategic ICF at Kingston is a user-friendly mechanism for embedding equality, diversity and inclusion in all aspects of the academic life cycle, from 'concept to review'. Whether staff operate at a teaching-session, module, programme or institutional level, the ICF challenges all stakeholders to assess systematically the extent to which their practices and curricula a) are accessible, b) enable students to see themselves in the curriculum and c) prepare students to contribute positively to a diverse world.

For Kingston students, the outcome of this work to reduce the BME attainment gap has been positive: the gap has narrowed over the last six years from twenty-nine to thirteen percentage points.

We wanted to explore whether our approach at Kingston could be transferred to other institutions and, as part of the Office for Students' 'Catalyst Student Success' project, we were delighted to join up with the University of Hertfordshire, the University of Greenwich, University College London, De Montfort University and Wolverhampton University. We have learnt – and are continuing to learn – from each other about what works and we share that understanding with the sector. This special issue of *Compass* is part of that process and I am very pleased to note that it offers such a range of ideas, activities and reflections, each with the potential – with appropriate implementation – to reduce the attainment gap at your institution.

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Reference list

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