Closing the attainment gap for students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds through institutional change

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Abstract English universities are achieving some success in attracting increasingly diverse undergraduate cohorts. However, there is compelling evidence that students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds do much less well in their final degree classifications than their white counterparts, even when entry qualifications are taken into account. Known as the BME attainment gap,: too little attention has been given to interventions to try to address it . This paper describes how Kingston University has substantially narrowed the gap through an outcome focused institutional change programme. Drawing on race theory, the institutional programme used a multifaceted approach to change that involved: defining the scale of the problem; adopting a value added (VA) metric; engaging the university leadership and academic community; agreeing goals, interventions and outcomes/targets. Over a five-year period of collecting VA data on BME attainment, there is evidence of significant year on year improvement. We discuss the challenges of complex cultural change and the initial reluctance of staff to discuss issues around racial disadvantage, and highlight implications for higher education institutions, especially those in the UK seeking a sustained way to close differentials in attainment.

Key words: black and minority ethnic (BME); attainment gap; value added; institutional and cultural change; inclusive curriculum

Introduction

English universities can point to some success in widening the participation of black and minority ethnic (BME) students: a slightly higher proportion of UK domiciled BME school leavers now attend English universities than their white counterparts. However, where higher education has failed is in ensuring that those BME students are successful. The national picture shows BME

students are much less likely to achieve a degree, to gain a first or upper second, to move on to graduate employment or study, or to obtain any employment (Higher Education Funding Council 2013). Yet this is an area which until recently has received relatively little attention.

This paper describes how Kingston University (Kingston) has set about raising awareness of the attainment gap and reducing it through an innovative institutional change programme that measures outcomes using value added (VA) data. Our approach is included as an illustrative example in a recent Universities UK report (UUK 2016). We begin with a review of the literature that highlights the range of explanations for the attainment gap and outlines the race theories that grounded our approach to strategic organisational change. To ensure there was cultural change that sustained improvements to the attainment gap, our focus was on the whole institution rather than local and marginal interventions. We describe the change interventions, the value added outcomes, the greater reluctance of staff to discuss attainment in relation to ethnicity as opposed to gender or class, and end by identifying some propositions that have implications for policy development and higher education institutions.

The BME attainment gap

In 2003/4, BME students made up 14.9% of the total number of students in UK Higher Education, but by 2014/15 this had increased to 21.8% of the total (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017). However, this increase is not the case for all ethnic groups or at all universities (Runnymede 2015). Whilst ethnic minorities now constitute a higher proportion of participants at the most selective institutions than they did six years ago, there is still significant underrepresentation of some groups. Black Caribbean and other Black pupils, for example, are still significantly less likely to attend a selective institution than their White British counterparts (Crawford and Greaves, 2015: 13). Employment outcomes, influenced by degree outcomes, are also poor for BME students across all groups; with the biggest gaps for Chinese and Black African graduates (UUK 2016:19). The term BME is therefore problematic (Singh 2011) 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).

Widening participation in higher education has been a feature of government policy in the UK and Europe for the last fifteen years. It promotes

not only the increase of numbers of young people entering higher education, but also the proportion from under-represented groups (Burke 2012). There has been success in increasing both the number and diversity of young people entering university and this has contributed to the fact that Chinese, Indian and Black African groups living in the UK are now more likely to have a degree level qualification than the White population, although migration policies which have encouraged highly qualified migrants have clearly also been a factor (Finney and Lymperopoulou 2014).

The story on outcomes for BME students once they get to university is much less positive. In this paper we focus on the difference between the proportion of White and BME students who achieve a first or upper second degree, widely described as the BME attainment gap. Of all UK domiciled students graduating in 2016 across the UK, 78.4% of White students achieved a 1st or 2:1, compared to only 63.4% of BME students – a gap of 15 percentage points (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). Or, to put it another way, 24% more of the White student cohort received a 1st or 2:1 than the BME student cohort.

Nationally there is variation in attainment across the broad ethnic groups, with Chinese students doing best, followed by those of Indian heritage, Bangladeshi students, and Pakistani students, with Black Caribbean and Black African students doing least well (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017). This hierarchy is very similar in the compulsory education sector in England. Again, Chinese pupils do best, followed by Indian and Bangladeshi pupils, although in schools Black African pupils achieve more highly than Pakistani or Black Caribbean pupils (DfE 2015, Burgess 2014). However, the major difference between schools and universities is that in schools Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi and Black African students all out perform White British pupils (in 2014 74.4% of Chinese and 56.8% of Black African pupils achieved 5 A*-C GCSEs, compared with 56.4% White British pupils), whilst in UK universities all these groups achieve lower attainment than White students (of 2016 UK domiciled graduates, 78.4% of White British students were awarded a 1st or 2:1 degree as against 72.2% of Chinese and 52.4% of Black African students).

Despite the scale and persistence of the attainment gap in the UK, and although there has been some research evaluating small-scale interventions in higher education, to our knowledge there are no examples of systematic or institution wide interventions that aim to achieve cultural change in addressing inequalities of attainment. The existing evidence explaining the attainment gap is mostly at the level of student characteristics, and seen in

terms as the 'student deficit', rather than institutional shortcomings. This paper is a contribution to shifting the debate away from the student and towards a consideration of the system and institutional culture.

What accounts for the BME attainment gap?

The literature reveals there is growing awareness across the higher education sector that the causes of the attainment gap are complex and multi-causal. As noted above, initial explanations tended to focus 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 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2015), have convincingly challenged this view. The 2015 HEFCE report compared results of over 280,000 students graduating from English universities in 2013/14. 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, gender, subject studied, previous school type and institution attended. The gaps ranged from five percentage points for graduates with four As at A-level, to 18 percentage points for graduates with non-A-level entry qualifications (HEFCE 2015).

The growing and cumulative evidence confirming that young people from BME backgrounds are doing much less well at universities raises important issues relating to institutional context and culture. Firstly, the effect of the university environment on identity and feelings of belonging on students from BME backgrounds, when institutional culture is traditionally geared for young White students and the middle classes (Stuart et al 2009b). Secondly, the existence of exclusionary practices for example, drinking alcohol, which excludes Muslim students (Singh 2009; Stuart, et al., 2009a), and perceptions of bias in the reporting of racism on campus (NUS 2011, Cousin and Cuerton, 2012). Perhaps it is not surprising that challenging racism is difficult where academic staff see the problems of BME students ''fitting in'' and attainment to be the result of wider societal issues rather than the institution and its culture (Stevenson, 2012). It is for these reasons we concluded that a systematic institution-wide approach was essential to effect change (Berry & Loke 2011, Stevenson, 2012).

Drawing upon race theories to shape our approach

The literature on race, inequality and education is extensive, complex and contested. We drew from three main theoretical perspectives to inform our approach to change: 1) deficiency theories, 2) bias theories, and 3) structural theories. Deficiency theories focus on the minority group and claim that racial inequalities stem from biological or cultural differences (Conyers 2002). Although criticised for victim blaming, we argue these ideas underpin many established attitudes in higher education, in particular, as described above, the student deficit model, which we challenge in this paper as being insufficient in explaining the attainment gap.

Bias theories rest on the belief that racial inequality is the result of bias or prejudice held by the dominant group. Studies that have related the concept of bias to universities have highlighted intergroup bias, for example the systematic tendency to evaluate one's own membership group (the in-group) or its members, more favourably than a non-membership group (the out-group) or its members (Hewstone et al., 2002: 576). Intergroup bias, which results in discrimination, incorporates three different components: prejudice, stereotypes and attitudes (Mackie & Smith, 1998). Each produce cognitive (thoughts and beliefs) and affective (feelings and emotions) reactions (Dovidio & Hebi, 2005:12-13). However, bias theories have been criticised as structurally and historically incomplete, limiting their importance as explanations of racial inequality (Conyers 2002: 251). Racism can continue to operate in a higher education setting, even when overt prejudices and discriminatory practices are no longer legally or socially permissible, through unconscious or implicit bias (Cornish & Jones 2013). We therefore took the view that highlighting unconscious bias and the way it can affect student success was essential. Our approach to change was aligned with the university's commitment to addressing race inequality and increasing BME students' aspirations and sense of belonging.

The third set of theoretical ideas that informed our thinking were structural perspectives. These focus on claims that racism is maintained by racist economic, educational and institutional factors. Critical race theorists have long argued that a number of features cause racial inequality and that they endeavour to expose the way in which race inequality is maintained through the operation of structures and assumptions that appear normal (Rollock and Gillborn 2011: 1). Ladson-Billings and Tate proposed that Critical Race Theory (CRT), a framework developed by legal scholars, 'could be employed to examine the role of race and racism in education' (Dixson & Rousseau,

2005: 8), suggesting therefore that if race matters so does racism. CRT highlights the importance of understanding racism within its social, economic and historical context, thus challenging the assumptions held about meritocracy and neutrality which have been presented as arguments against the widening participation agenda (Brinks, 2009). CRT proposes that Whiteness is socially constructed and refers to a set of assumptions, beliefs and practices which make the interests, behaviours and perspectives of White people normative.

Other approaches and views on race have challenged the efficacy of CRT. Multicultural education is a paradigm, which intended to ensure that students from diverse ethnic and social class backgrounds, and more recently those of different gender and sexual orientation, experienced educational equality. Whilst the aim may have been far reaching, in practice examples of multiculturalism are too often expressed in terms of food or music or folktales. Ladson-Billings and Tate purport that this paradigm 'attempts to be everything to everyone and consequently becomes nothing for any one, allowing the status quo to prevail' (1995: 62). Notwithstanding the benefits of multiculturalism, which is a core tenant of university diversity work, we, like CRT scholars, argue this paradigm lends itself to superficiality, distracts from the need for systemic change and prevents the real discourse about race and racism, which is key to the step change that is needed to remove the attainment gap.

The role of social class in explaining differences in performance and success has challenged CRT's focus on Whiteness. Hill (2009), while welcoming the anti-racism that CRT promulgates, is critical of its over emphasis on 'white supremacy'. He suggests that statistical analysis which shows that race trumps class in terms of underachievement at 16+ exams in England and Wales is in fact misleading. Hill argues that working class underachievement as well as underachievement by some minority ethnic groups is well documented.

The concept of intersectionality has provided a more sophisticated look at student performance in higher education than the single focus on class, race, or gender, for example. Gillborn (2015) draws upon work with the African American Policy forum to provide a helpful interpretation of the impact of intersectionality. In short the forum states that perceived membership of a group exposed members to bias. Given that people are members of multiple groups this exposes them to a variety of biases. However, Gillborn, in his exploration of the utility of intersectionality as an aspect of CRT, argues that

though intersectionality is important in understanding race inequality, racism itself retains its centrality in terms of differential experiences.

We remained convinced of the currency of CRT in exploring and addressing the BME attainment gap. Whilst CRT is a framework which helps us to move away from the student deficit model, we concluded that it was also important to bring to the surface the other perspectives on race inequality and manage these conversations carefully.

In summary, our strategies to tackle the attainment gap were informed by the critical literature on race equality with particular attention to cultural assumptions (including colour blindness and racial climate), institutional structures, barriers, knowledge and skills.

The approach to change

Kingston University is a widening participation university on the outskirts of London, and more than 50% of its student population is from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. We aim to ensure success for all students, but in this context the focus is on improving the academic attainment of BME students. We have set out to do this through institutional and sustainable cultural change, including establishing the reduction of the attainment gap as an institutional priority with a Board level Key Performance Indicator (KPI) measured by a aalue added score, explained below. We adopted a multifaceted longitudinal approach to institutional change that took account of cultural complexity as described by Van de Ven et al. (1999), and Scott Poole and Van de Ven (2004). We describe below a systematic and planned effort to change that was appropriate for the Kingston context (Gilbert et al. 1999) in terms of initiation, development, implementation and impact.
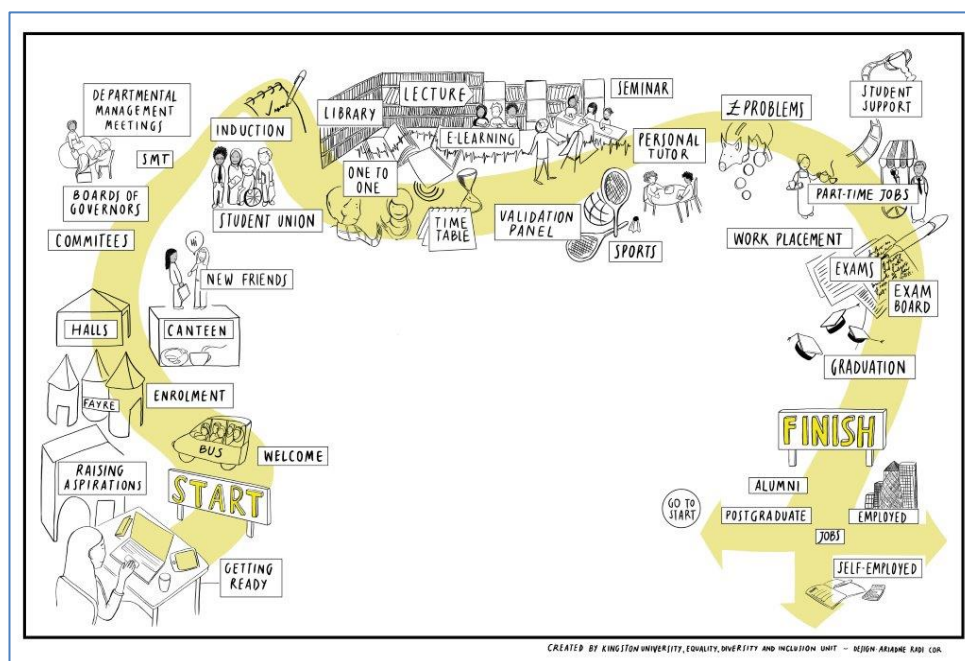
Initiation – getting started

The initiation period of change is often, according to Van de Ven et al. (1999), an extended gestation of disconnected activities that coalesce following a trigger/shock. Kingston had positioned itself since the turn of the century as a widening participation university, and there had been regular reports on the extent of the gap in attainment outcomes for students from BME backgrounds. These included an external and independent review, which caused disquiet and demonstrated differing levels of awareness of the attainment gap (Leathwood et al., 2011), but was not acted on at the time. New institutional leadership was the 'trigger' initiating momentum for change with support from the governors in early 2012. A mandate was given

to develop a robust metric and an institutional level achievement plan. The Vice-Chancellor consistently communicated this across the university.

Development – getting the metric right – using Value Added data

An immediate challenge was supporting institutional readiness for change by using student outcome data for changing the culture by raising awareness of the attainment gap. We did this in a variety of ways, but began by using imagery of the student journey (Figure 1). Using Higher Education Statistical Authority (HESA) attainment gap data for Kingston, our comparator group and the sector, we designed a map of the student journey to promote conversations with senior staff, asking the question: 'If the journey is the same, why is the outcome so different?'

Figure 1: Map of the student journey used at senior staff away-day to promote discussion

For some staff it was clear that the measurement of the attainment gap used in the sector was problematic because it allowed for the rationalisation, or explaining away, of the gap through differentials in entry grades, subject of study and socio-economic backgrounds. To counter this tendency, a key component of the Kingston approach has been the development and use of value added (VA) data, as created for The Guardian newspaper league tables. We see the VA data as part of the intervention or implementation of change.

The key to the VA approach is that it enables the institution to highlight individual or relative progression for each student by taking account of prior entry qualifications and subject of study when assessing each student's degree attainment. It has proven to be both a very powerful way of presenting the attainment gap and communicating this to staff. The use of VA is gaining increasing interest, possibly due to the stronger policy focus on the whole student life cycle. Fair outcomes are written into the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (32 (5)) which extends equality of opportunity to include not only access to but also participation once in an HE provider. The mechanism for oversight of the Access and Participation statement has been mainstreamed into the new Office for Students with the requirement of providers to hold an approved Access and Participation statement incorporated in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF framework specification 3.9, October 2017).

VA scores are calculated by taking into account actual degree outcomes for all graduates across higher education 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 will achieve a 1st/2:1 degree. Aggregating these probabilities produces an 'expected' percentage for a given 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 data has been made available for eight years broken down to University, Faculty, Department and Course levels.
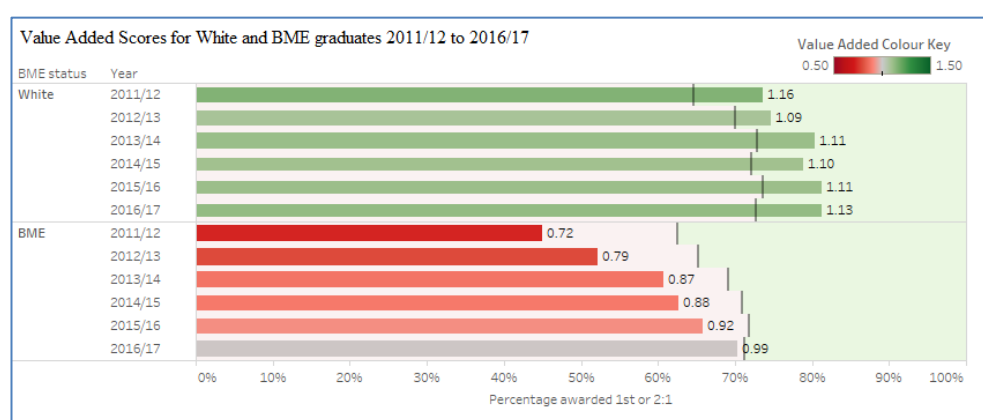
For Kingston as a whole in 2011/12, given their entry qualifications and subjects of study and based on the previous five years results across higher education, 63% of BME students would have been expected to get a 1st/2:1 degree. Ultimately, only 45% did, giving a VA score of 0.72. In contrast, while 65% of our White students were 'expected' to get a 1st/2:1 degree, 74% actually achieved this, giving a VA score of 1.16 and a difference in attainment between White and BME students of 29 percentage points. This is shown in Figure 2. Over the five years from 2011/12 to 2016/17 the VA score for BME students has risen year on year from 0.72 to 0.99, while the score for White students has changed little from 1.16 to 1.13. In 2016/17 70% of BME students achieved a first or 2:1 as against 81% for White students, a gap of 11 percentage points, down from 29 in 2011/12.

The University's KPI is to achieve a VA of 1.0 for BME students graduating in 2018/19, i.e. BME students should achieve the same percentage

of 1st/2:1 degrees as the national average for all students (irrespective of ethnicity) with the same entry qualifications studying the same subjects. This has almost been achieved by 2016/17 (Figure 2).
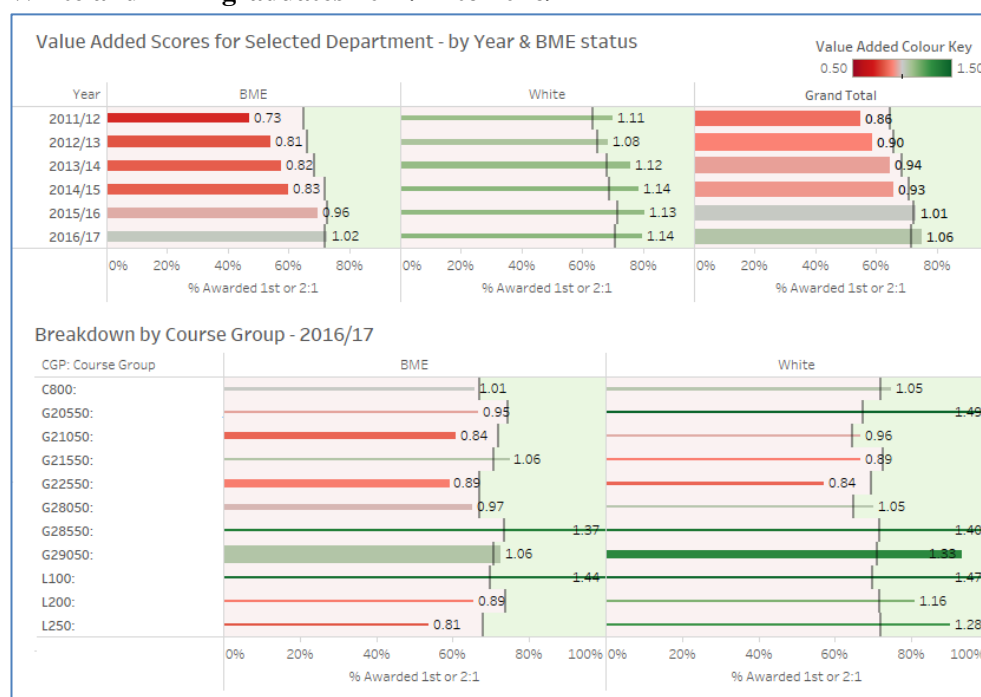
Figure 2: Kingston University Value Added scores for White and BME graduates 2011/12 to 2016/17.

(The vertical bar shows the proportion of the cohort who are statistically 'expected' to achieve a 1st or 2.1. Scores above this have a VA score proportionately over 1 and those below a VA score below 1)

The VA data is available at Faculty, departmental and course level. Figure 3 is an example of this data for a given department and related courses. The data is presented on interactive dashboards.
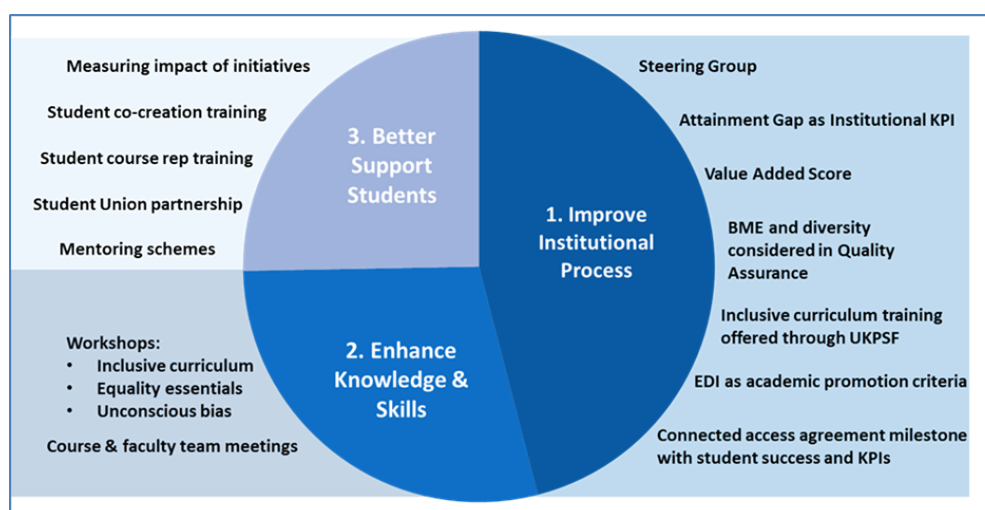
Figure 3: VA data for a selected department and its associated pathways by White and BME graduates 2011/12 to 2016/17

Implementation

The implementation was multifaceted and targeted at the level of the institution and the individual. Our achievement plan had three streams (Figure 4), targeted at: improving institutional culture, systems and processes, enhancing knowledge and skills by engaging academic and professional communities, and providing better support by involving students.

Figure 4: The three elements of Kingston University's approach to closing the attainment gap

1. *Improve institutional processes*

In March 2014 the Board of Governors agreed to adopt an institutional target, a KPI, an achievement plan and a process of calling the whole institution to account on progress. This made Kingston the first large higher education institution in the UK to have the attainment gap as an institutional KPI and triggered radical changes to systems and processes.

Firstly, we embedded the KPI target and individual course metrics in university planning processes. Secondly, equalities considerations became part of the university academic progression and promotion framework and the processes of recruitment and promotion. Thirdly, to avoid marginalisation of the activity and a perception that it was just the 'baby' of the equality and diversity team we ensured accountability for outcomes was 'everyone's business' by establishing a cross-institutional steering group. Finally, and aligned to these changes, the development of Kingston's Inclusive Curriculum Framework means that course teams and panels involved in validation, course monitoring and internal subject reviews must use the framework to demonstrate and assess how inclusivity is built into every level of learning and teaching.

2. *Strategies to enhance knowledge and skills of staff and students*

Learning and teaching is clearly central to the institution's relationship with BME students. Enhancing the knowledge and skills of staff with sensitivity, context and 'what next' resources has therefore been a primary focus. Powerful though the VA data is, we did not believe that on its own it would

create engagement and discussion. Face to face presentation of the data to over ninety meetings of targeted course leads, schools and departmental away days has allowed us to provide bespoke feedback and demonstrate the facts of under-attainment. It has also provided academics with the opportunity to question and discuss the validity and significance of the data. Emails can be ignored, but through conversations in the safe environment provided by these meetings, we have been able to support academics to come to a shared level of engagement. This has enabled initial scepticism, sometimes shock and disbelief, to be heard and addressed, for the research evidence to be explored, and the support available to be explained. While this approach is labour intensive and requires skill, sensitivity, and a familiarity with the data and the research, it is unlikely we would have moved beyond the stage of denial and reached the level of academic engagement across the institution needed to effect change without it.

Our principal interventions, in addition to these course team meetings around the VA data, were: sustained communications by the Vice-Chancellor about the importance of acknowledging race inequality; collegiate discussions, through workshops on the inclusive curriculum, around improving the racial climate and creating a sense of belonging and expectation to succeed for BME students and staff; and group workshops that explore unconscious bias and how its negative impacts can be mitigated. Priority was given to those course teams with the largest attainment gap, and the Vice-Chancellor wrote to all these teams making clear his expectation that they would take part in the workshops. While providing a menu of actions, as outlined above, is necessary, it was also recognised that leaving the opportunity for academics to create and decide upon their own actions based on their learning from the conversations around the data and its significance was also important.

3. *Raising knowledge and skills of students*

We felt it was critical 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. Activities have included working closely with the student union, holding briefing and discussion sessions with over 400 course representatives and training students to co-deliver training and engage in co-curriculum development.

Our strategic approach to supporting BME students has been to align the university's Access Agreement to the KPI. There are two things to note: firstly, the KPI has driven us to invest in activities that are more relevant and

targeted to our BME students; and secondly to evaluate all activities to understand their impact on BME students and to help us to make decisions about continued funding. Principal initiatives (some of which were already running and folded into our institutional improvement programme) included:

- *Student Academic Development and Research Associate Scheme (SADRAS)* – in which students are funded to collaborate with staff on academic research projects that develop their skills and confidence. During the 2015/16 academic year eight new research projects focussed on the BME attainment gap.

- *Taking Race Live (TRL)* – which promotes collaboration with staff and students across Sociology and Music (and previously with Drama) to promote and support discussions about race. The success of this event in raising assessment scores is evidenced by Minors et al (2017).

- *Academic Multi-cultural and Diversity Programme* - which aims to build students' strong awareness of how culture and experiences shape perceptions of self and others, and shapes their worldviews. As a result of positive evaluation these workshops have now been embedded in a range of modules across three of five university Faculties for the 2016/17 academic year.

- *Compact Scheme* – which delivers a programme of activities designed to support students' transition into higher education. Of the 1000 students in the 2015 scheme, 80% of BME compact students were eligible to progress to the next year compared to 76% of BME students from the wider UG student cohort.

- *Beyond Barriers student equality mentoring schemes* - BME students are matched with mainly external mentors who work with them to increase their confidence, self-belief, aspirations and attainment. Following the completion of the mentoring scheme, the 66 level five students that participated saw a 4% increase in their average module results compared to level five students who did not participate.

Discussion: closing the gap - engaging staff and promoting constructive discussion around race

We have argued that the BME attainment gap is a major challenge for higher education across the UK. At Kingston, we can point to real progress over the last five years with the VA score for BME students improving year on year from 0.72 to 0.99, and the gap between White and BME students achieving a first or 2:1 falling from 29 to 11 percentage points.

We believe that our success so far, and the distinctive nature of our approach is because: (a) we have adopted a systematic institution-wide approach and culture change that ensures sustainability beyond the life of a project or the priority or interest of an individual or group by embedding the KPI in institutional processes; and (b) we have developed the VA metric, which, properly applied, has been a very powerful contributor, raising staff awareness about the reality of the gap and engaging them in constructive discussions about how to address it. We have recently received HEFCE Catalyst funding to share our VA methodology and Inclusive Curriculum Framework with five other universities and a Further Education College.

Staff engagement is key. In this section, we discuss our successes but also the barriers created by a focus on a 'colour blind' approach and a reluctance to discuss race.

While staff have had a general awareness of an attainment gap, it is seeing clear evidence that it is affecting their courses and their students that has proved critical. Follow up with course and module teams who had received a presentation on the VA shows that 92% of those responding to an evaluation questionnaire indicated that the VA score was either helpful or very helpful in demonstrating the attainment gap, and 54% of respondents would utilise the support options available to them. Following the first round of these academic support meetings, many course teams have shown a commitment to increasing their skills and knowledge of diversity issues by attending the workshops provided. To date 308 academics have attended workshops at a capacity of 78%. 104 staff have been to a session on the Inclusive Curriculum and 146 have attended unconscious bias workshops.

However, the work to engage staff has to be maintained. As reported in the wider literature some academics believe that lower levels of attainment of minority ethnic students were 'perhaps not so important to them' (Mountford-Zimdars 2015: 42). We had to make sure our strategies aligned staff behaviour with the university's core value of diversity. Our key message,

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driven by the University Strategy, was that when a student does fail or drop out, we will treat this as a failure of the university.

Our conversations with course teams and staff across the university revealed a reluctance to talk about race and racism. Conversations about gender appear to be easier than those about race, even though the gender attainment gap is very much smaller than the ethnic gap (at least at Kingston). There was also very little research to draw upon and to support the need to discuss race and its implications for higher education. Harper's (2010) review of 225 academic papers asked how higher education scholars discuss and make sense of race-related findings that emerge in their studies. He reflected that instead of viewing racial differences as by-products of institutionalised racism that requires systemic organisational change, authors routinely suggested approaches that had little to do with investigating and responding to the realities of race on campus. This is a view reinforced by Rollock (2015) and Loke (2015). Race is a more difficult, controversial and uncomfortable subject to discuss than gender, and academics fear saying the wrong thing. (Rollock notes the criticism of the actor Benedict Cumberbatch for using the term 'coloured' which drowned out the fact that he was making a bold statement about injustices in his own industry.) Universities tend to view themselves as highly liberal spaces, and are, therefore, reluctant to see the cause of the 'race problem' as lying, even to some extent, with the institution. Rather they point to student or staff deficits in terms of the right grades or mix of subjects, or the lack of confidence of BME staff to go for promotion.

It can also be argued that, at least until recently, the equality agenda in universities has focused more on advancing female staff and supporting female students in science and engineering than addressing the clear deficits in terms of ethnicity. Only in the last two years has the well-established Athena Swan Charter, which focuses on gender and is linked to research funding opportunities, been matched by the Race Equality Charter (http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan; http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter).

At Kingston where BME students are the majority, we needed to invest efforts to encourage staff and ultimately students to discuss issues around race. During our conversations, the term 'colour blind' was used by staff to describe their well-meaning relationships with students. Apfelbaum et al. (2008) describe strategic colour blindness as the pattern of behaviours used by White people toward people of colour to minimise differences, to appear unbiased, to avoid interactions with people of colour, to not acknowledge

race-related topics, and even to pretend not to see the person's race. However, fear of appearing racist can result in unintended consequences with those who attempt to appear unbiased often appearing inauthentic, distant and perceived as more racist.

Sue (2013) argues that race talk has the potential to open a 'can of worms' as it moves White staff beyond their fear of appearing racist to actually being a racist. The values of democracy, equity, and equal access and opportunity which White people profess to hold can be seriously challenged in race talk. It was our experience that to avoid this 'can of worms', the actual avoidance of race talk in a situation where it is deemed important and appropriate tends to make people of colour feel silenced and invalidated (Shelton et al., 2005). Therefore, when creating our approach we knew that if we wanted our staff to have the knowledge and skills to create an environment where BME students felt they mattered, then in addition to accepting the concept of bias, we had to systematically create an institutional dialogue on race without being divisive and without substituting the student deficit model for a staff one.

More recently, the inclusive curriculum workshops include a debate about the role of the academic in addressing social issues particularly in subjects that do not automatically lend themselves to such discussion. Staff are also steered towards other dimensions of the Inclusive Curriculum Framework such as assessment and delivery. Cousin and Cureton's (2012) study suggests that students perform better when the assessment types conform to their prior experience. We argue this suggests that staff need to make sure students learn new skills prior to taking their formal assessment. We stress that delivery is also a key aspect of the lecturer's role, and that, whilst content is important, it needs to be accompanied with activities that encourage students to reflect on their relative as well as absolute progress.

The role of positive or targeted action continues to be a point of debate at Kingston, for race more than for gender. We found three main viewpoints. Firstly, targeted action can contribute to building a divide between communities and may be detrimental to efforts to create an inclusive environment. Secondly, targeted action may confirm stereotypes, and there is evidence that students do not want it (Stevenson, 2012). Thirdly, there is the view that targeted action is necessary when resources and time are limited. Our approach seeks to strike a balance between universal and targeted approaches, as we outlined in Kingston's Race Equality Charter Mark application (2015).

A holistic approach to the attainment gap has quite rightly also focused Kingston's discussions on the lack of BME representation in both academic and professional staff groups. In addition to equity considerations for staff, there is a growing interest in the role of BME staff in the success of BME students and the importance of a more diverse academy for the preparation of students in a pluralistic society (Umbach, 2006). One of the actions to address this was to use the new Academic Progression and Promotion procedure to address the lack of diversity in senior academic roles.

Conclusions and key messages

This paper reports on the process and positive outcomes from an institutional change programme. We conclude that there are four important factors that have contributed to change and deserve to be explored and tested further in future research. While student performance has improved considerably, as measured through the value added data, we recognise we do not know much about the interrelationships and which of these factors was most influential in the change.

Ensuring an institution-wide approach

Our first point and a prominent factor in change was the institution-wide approach driven by an institutional KPI. Senior leadership from the Vice-Chancellor and the governing body demonstrating commitment has been key to the change process. However, leading from the top is not sufficient on its own, as any effective organisational and cultural change is dependent on people, their relationship with the wider university, with their students and with each other. Here the important lesson is not to underestimate the time needed to gain both understanding and engagement of academic and non-academic staff at all levels, and of students, not as a one-off exercise, but as a continuous process.

Using value added data to highlight the problem and engage course teams

A second key message is that data is a powerful tool, when used in a conversation to make sense of a 'wicked problem'. It allowed us to move the argument on, beyond the differences in attainment due to different entry qualifications and the variation of performance across courses. As value added data was available at course level, it has proved a powerful way of presenting the evidence and engaging course teams. Staff who may have had a general awareness of the relative under attainment of BME students are frequently shocked and surprised when they see the data, which shows how

much better their BME students should have been doing. Where data on relative attainment is presented, which does not take such clear account of entry qualifications, there is a risk of prolonged debate about the data and requests for ever more data rather than a focus on addressing the gap.

Powerful though it is, the data is principally a tool for developing conversations and resetting expectations. It needs clarity of presentation and opportunities for explanation. At the same time as presenting the data, it was important to discuss the evidence on the causes of the gap; to deal with initial reactions of denial or reluctance to discuss race; and to explore supportive solutions, such as unconscious bias and inclusive curriculum workshops. We learned it is vital to avoid any suggestions of apportioning blame. Presenting data through narrative in this way can help staff make sense of troubling performance outcomes. It needs time and skill.

Ensuring a multifaceted approach based on evidence

We argue through this paper that the causes of the attainment gap are complex, multifaceted and not fully understood. We argue that solutions need to address the complexity and take a systems wide approach and, furthermore, interventions are more likely to be effective if they are evidence-based and multifaceted. The next stage is to evaluate success, not just in terms of student outcomes, but also in terms of institutional and board level commitment, staff knowledge and skills and organisational and cultural change.

Capturing and disseminating notable practice

Once universities and staff have become convinced that there is a problem and are moved to take action, they need suggestions and examples of successful initiatives. Kingston were asked to lead in a part Higher Education Agency funded project to share the approach to the BME attainment gap with two other post-1992 universities but this is an area where we need to do more to capture and share notable practice both within Kingston, across the sector, and internationally. As noted above we have recently received funding for a large collaborative project involving five universities across the sector and a further education college. The aim is to test the use of the VA methodology and the institutional change approach, in order to produce a methodology for use across the sector and some generalisable lessons which will inform university boards of governors, policy development and higher education institutions.

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