

# Closing ethnicity degree awarding gaps: three years on

#ClosingTheGap



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## **Foreword by Hillary Gyebi-Ababio, former Vice President Higher Education, National Union of Students**

The release of the [initial report](#) into the awarding gap for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students was a real defining moment for students and the sector. For students in the BAME community, it was validation of an experience that hadn't been materialised until this research was done. And for the sector, it was a wake-up call that there was and still is an issue that it needs to address and eradicate. This has not just been about assessment results and outcomes, but about the full experience that students in the BAME community have in education. Three years later, institutions have had the opportunity to act, and students and their representatives have done much to push for approaches that address the issues contributing to the ethnicity degree awarding gap.

Throughout my time in the student movement, I've seen the highs and lows of what it has looked like for the sector to come to terms with the real-life impact of this research. There have been students who have found the courage and confidence to come forward to speak honestly and openly about their experiences of racism and discrimination. Many have gone on to create campaigning groups and taskforces, taking student-led approaches to really tackle some of the issues so core to the findings of this report. I've seen this make such a powerful impact on their peers and to steer the sector into a different type of relationship with students and staff, a relationship that in certain instances is much more open to collaborative work, and that understands the importance of resourcing, championing and caring.

Despite the strides made, it has not been perfect. Staff and students, especially from BAME communities, are still struggling. It's clear that more needs to be done. Intentionality, transparency and vulnerability are even more important going forward. Universities must take the initiative in making the space for communities of students to come together, and for allowing those spaces to thrive without fear of being co-opted. They must be forthcoming and honest about the state of play at their institutions and the cultures that contribute to it. Most importantly, they must commit to go above and beyond: to centre BAME staff and students over metrics, and take a thorough approach to embedding care and anti-racist practice into their institutional cultures.

I hope that this update to the [Closing the gap](#) report is met with humility and an openness to do more and to do better. Students, I hope you're encouraged and emboldened to be outspoken in bringing forth the action needed to eradicate this issue. Staff, I hope you're supported to work with students to better their experiences. Institutional leads, I hope this affirms and challenges you to be both more transparent and more proactive in the hard, critical work that needs to be done. Only then will it be possible to close awarding gaps, and what reproduces them, for good.

**Hillary Gyebi-Ababio**

Former Vice President Higher Education,  
National Union of Students (NUS)

# Executive summary

In May 2019, we published our report, [Closing the gap](#), calling on the UK higher education sector to accelerate progress in removing ethnicity degree awarding gaps,<sup>1</sup> and highlighting the stark disparity that existed between white students and BAME students in their First and 2:1 degree outcomes.

We created a framework for universities to use to remove ethnicity degree awarding gaps, and over 100 institutions signed a pledge to follow this approach.

We promised to review the sector's progress one year later in 2020. Although delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic, with this new report we hope to galvanise the sector to push forward with progress, drawing on the latest evidence to remove ethnicity degree awarding gaps.

This new report does not replace our [2019 report](#). Our engagement with students and staff suggests that the framework and recommendations still stand. Instead, this report provides a helpful foundation from which institutions can develop their own approach to removing degree awarding gaps.

## What's changed since 2019?

The latest data shows that progress is being made: the gap between the percentage of white students and students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds awarded a First or a 2:1 in their degree has reduced by 4.4%, from 13.2% in 2017/18 graduates to 8.8% in 2020/21.

# 8.8%

The gap between the percentage of white students and BAME students awarded a First or a 2:1 in their degree (2020/21).

<sup>1</sup> We are now using the term 'degree awarding gaps' instead of 'degree attainment gaps'. This acknowledges that grade disparities are the result of institutional action or inaction, rather than being caused by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students as individuals.

Universities' significant efforts are making a difference, even during the disruption of the pandemic, when resources were extremely stretched. This unfortunately impacted efforts to remove degree awarding gaps for many institutions. However, flexible changes in assessment practices, such as 'no detriment' policies, introduced by most universities during the pandemic, may have helped to counteract the impact of this disruption to some extent. The sector should continue to explore the potential impact of these policies and practices on degree awarding gaps.

The continued existence of any unexplained gap is an indisputable inequality for BAME students. Breaking down the data by individual ethnic groups also continues to reveal larger disparities, especially for Black students. The gap between white and BAME students awarded a First specifically is especially concerning at 9.5%, rising to 19.3% for Black students in 2020-21. This huge disparity shows why it is of critical importance that universities step up efforts to remove ethnicity degree awarding gaps.

## How can universities close the gap?

University leaders have already committed to removing ethnicity degree awarding gaps, particularly since the 2019 report.

However, to drive forward further action from these commitments, they now need to:

- prioritise genuine co-production with students, jointly developing and implementing a strategic, whole-university approach to removing the gap
- embed institutional approaches to removing degree awarding gaps, ensuring there is accountability for all staff within every academic faculty and every professional services department
- develop evaluation expertise, building an understanding of what success looks like and how it can be maintained.

All universities have a role to play in removing ethnicity degree awarding gaps for their students wherever these exist, and regardless of where they are based in the UK, what size they are, or the makeup of their student and staff populations. At their heart, universities welcome anyone with the potential to succeed in higher education. However, it is still the case that, once through the door, institutions' culture, practices and processes remain as contributors to differential learning experiences and outcomes.

Universities have an opportunity to adopt allyship as a core cultural value, building on the more compassionate and individualised approaches taken during the pandemic that students want to see adopted long term. Our pool of resources, case studies and understanding of what works to remove ethnicity degree awarding gaps is better than ever before. There is no excuse to avoid action.

## Our research

Our latest engagement with the sector on ethnicity degree awarding gaps took place from October 2021 to February 2022 through:

- an online survey of universities to examine what progress had been made since our first report was published in 2019, with 57 institutional responses from senior leaders in learning, teaching and student experience roles
- three focus groups with 26 students' union representatives, facilitated by NUS
- three focus groups with 25 university staff representatives
- input from a group of senior university leaders.

We also took feedback from a [conference](#) on ethnicity degree awarding gaps hosted by UUK in April 2022 and attended by 117 individuals from across the sector, including staff and students.

## Our work on racial harassment

Much of the work that universities are doing to remove ethnicity degree awarding gaps will intersect with their broader work to ensure race equality and to tackle racism. While some of our recommendations relate to tackling wider discrimination in higher education, universities should refer to the following UUK resources for comprehensive practical guidance:

- [Tackling racial harassment in higher education](#)
- [Tackling antisemitism](#)
- [Tackling Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred](#)

## Our recommendations

As a result of our engagement, we have updated our five core recommendations to close degree awarding gaps, which we ask universities to consider as they further their work in this area.

We recognise that every university is at a different stage when it comes to each recommendation, but the framework below is informed by evidence from across the sector:

### **Recommendation 1: Providing strong leadership**

University leaders should go further in their efforts to embed commitments to removing ethnicity degree awarding gaps, working in partnership with students. This includes setting clear expectations for the roles and responsibilities of all students and staff, measures of success and ongoing accountability for a whole-university approach. University leaders should evaluate what resources are required for this, develop their own understanding of racial inequality to help drive genuine change and ensure their board of governors have oversight of progress.

### **Recommendation 2: Having conversations about race and changing the culture**

Universities should go further in co-producing initiatives and approaches to removing ethnicity degree awarding gaps with their students. University staff should be supported to develop the appropriate skills and knowledge to thoughtfully facilitate conversations about racial inequality with all students and learn from their lived experiences.

### **Recommendation 3: Developing racially diverse and inclusive communities**

A greater push to implement university-wide change is needed so that the work that universities are doing to create inclusive communities is fully reflected in students' experiences. Universities should go further to ensure there is accountability for all staff to actively create inclusive cultures. While long-term actions to improve staff diversity are under way, more needs to be done in the immediate term to improve students' access to diverse role models, for example in encouraging BAME students into postgraduate study, thereby improving the diversity of academic pipelines.





## **Recommendation 4: Getting the evidence and analysing the data**

Awarding gap data needs to be a key institutional metric. Universities need to give staff access to the data they need to remove ethnicity degree awarding gaps. For many universities, implementing a data dashboard has been key to building awareness and a nuanced understanding of awarding gaps. Universities should be more transparent about awarding gaps, and share information with students in an accessible way.

## **Recommendation 5: Understanding what works**

Appropriately resourced evaluation expertise is needed to build institutional understanding of what works to remove degree awarding gaps. Evaluation should be planned into institutional and local approaches to removing awarding gaps at inception. Universities should use existing resources, such as those provided by [Transforming Access and Students Outcomes in Higher Education \(TASO\)](#).

**"In order to get a real conversation going around race and anti-racism, it's important that we have an environment of honesty, an environment of transparency, the opportunity for people to feel safe in terms of those conversations. And that's a culture that is started from the level of the senior leader."**

**Professor Martin Stringer**

Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education,  
Swansea University



# Report outline

Our report provides an overview of the latest UK degree awarding gap data, followed by five short chapters focused on each of our five core recommendations for the sector to remove ethnicity degree awarding gaps.

These are:

- providing strong leadership
- having conversations about race and changing the culture
- developing racially diverse and inclusive communities
- getting the evidence and understanding the data
- understanding what works.

Each chapter contains a description of the progress that has been made by the sector since our 2019 report and the ongoing barriers to removing ethnicity degree awarding gaps. You will also find practical recommendations for universities and links to case studies. Our findings, including the recommendations and examples of current practice, have been informed by our university survey and six focus groups with staff and students' unions.

## Definitions

Unless otherwise stated, this report and accompanying data apply to UK-domiciled undergraduate students. However, we encourage universities to consider how our recommendations may be relevant to other groups of students, including postgraduate and international students, where appropriate for individual university contexts.

We acknowledge the challenges in using homogenising language, such as 'BAME', and, where possible, ethnicities have been disaggregated into smaller groups. We recommend that universities disaggregate student ethnicity data, where student populations allow for this.



## Sampling

We have engaged with a diverse range of universities and students' union officers, representing the diversity of higher education providers and UK regions. We are very grateful to the stakeholders who took part in our research for their candid and open responses. However, we would also like to recognise the biases that can arise from self-selected engagement in research of this kind, which does not include evidence from across the whole sector.

Similarly, we acknowledge the potential gaps in perspectives from our research with students, by engaging with students' union officers as elected representatives for their peers.

We will continue to work across our membership and with students following the publication of this report in evaluating progress and challenges.

# UK ethnicity degree awarding gap data

## UK student qualifiers

The most recent data for UK-domiciled students shows that, of those who completed their undergraduate (first) degree in 2020/21, 85.9% of UK-domiciled white students were awarded a First or a 2:1 in their degree, compared with 77% of BAME students. This means the awarding gap is 8.8%, down from 13.2% in 2017/18.

While the awarding gap as typically defined has reduced overall, there are still substantial differences between ethnic groups (see Figure 1). The largest gaps are between Black and white students, where an 18.4% gap is evident.

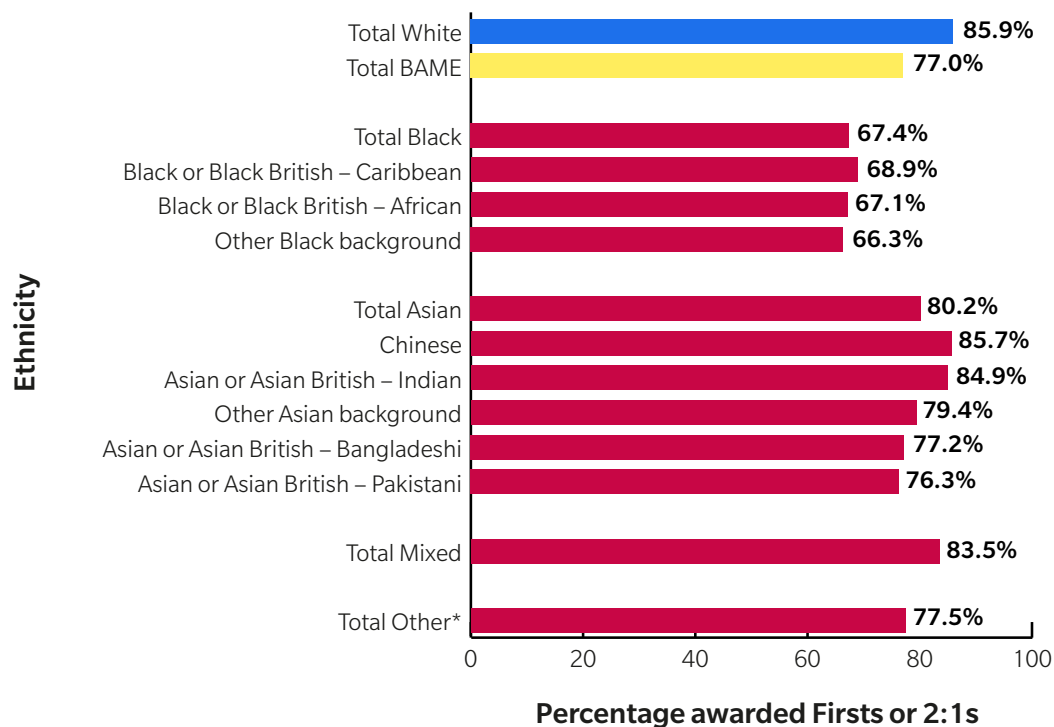
We acknowledge the limitations of existing sector-wide data when representing Jewish students, and will continue to work with universities on developing best practice in this area as part of our wider anti-racist commitments.

# 18.4%

The gap between the percentage of white students and Black students awarded a First or a 2:1 in their degree (2020/21).



**Figure 1: Proportion of UK-domiciled qualifiers at UK higher education institutions who were awarded a First or a 2:1 in their degree by ethnicity (2020/21)**



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), [Student Qualifiers \(2020/21\)](#)

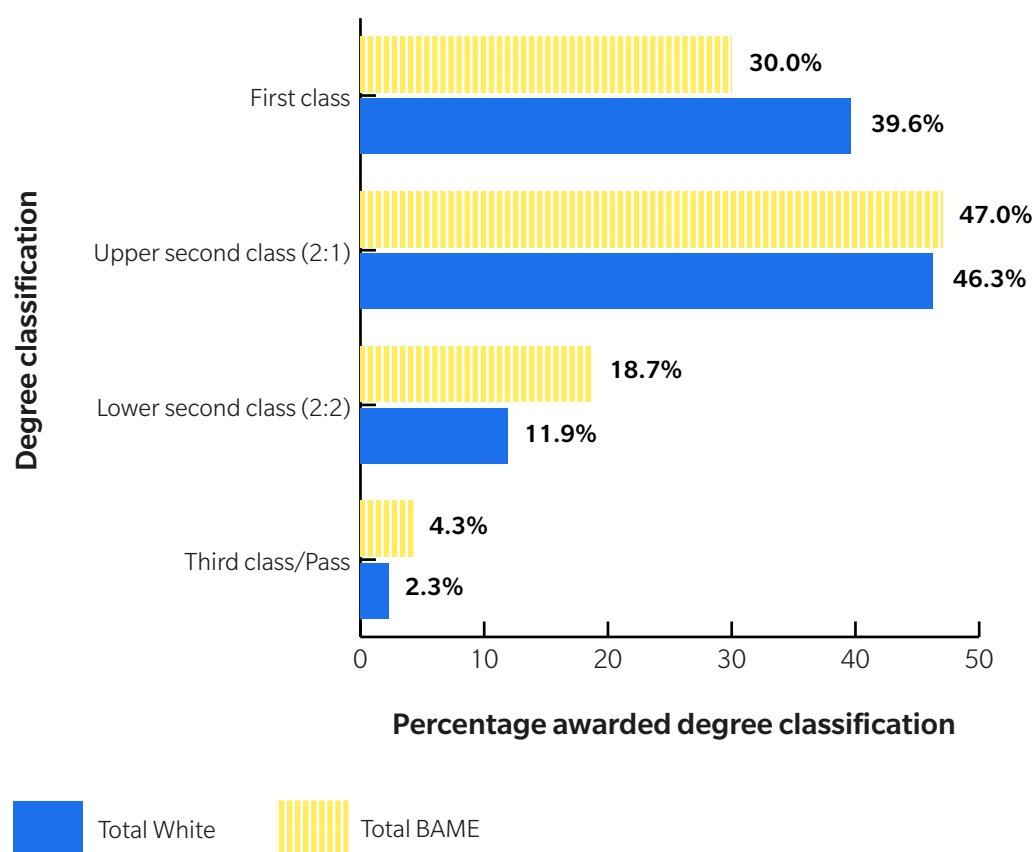
## Notes to figures

Unless otherwise specified, the HESA student data used relates to first-degree (BA, BSc etc) classifications of UK-domiciled qualifiers at UK higher education institutions who obtained first degrees in 2020/21. Unclassified degrees (eg for medicine and aegrotat degrees) are excluded. 'Unknown' ethnic groups are also excluded. Numbers within this report have been rounded to one decimal place, so figures may not always sum.

\*HESA data on ethnicity is in line with 2011 census groups, where 'Other' refers to students who identify as 'Arab' or 'Any other ethnic group'. Since the 2011 census, Gypsy and Traveller have been included in the white group, and Roma was added in the 2021 census.<sup>2</sup>

Awarding gaps are largely driven by differential rates of first-class degrees. While similar proportions (approximately half) of white and BAME students were awarded a 2:1 in their degree in 2020/21, substantially more white students were awarded a First (39.6% of white students compared with 30% of BAME students; see Figure 2). Notably, the gaps between the rate of Firsts awarded to white students compared with Black students have increased since our 2019 [Closing the gap](#) report. This is explored in more detail below.

**Figure 2: Degree classifications awarded to UK-domiciled qualifiers by ethnicity (2020/21)**



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), [Student Qualifiers \(2020/21\)](#)

The awarding gap was larger between white and BAME students in various demographic groups:

- There was a larger awarding gap between BAME part-time students and white part-time students, than between their full-time counterparts (23% for part-time students, 8.5% for full-time students).
- Larger awarding gaps were evident among students in the West Midlands (10.1%), North West (9.6%), Yorkshire and the Humber (9.5%), and London (9.2%), and smaller among those in the North East (4.5%) and Northern Ireland (4.4%).
- White students are more likely to leave university with a First or a 2:1 regardless of their previous attainment. There are ethnicity awarding gaps evident at every tariff band.
- The awarding gaps between white and BAME students are larger for those who enter university with fewer tariff points. There is a 13.5% gap between white and BAME students who entered with fewer than 48 points (the equivalent of EEE or DD at A level, or just over DDD in Scottish Highers), compared to a 7.7% gap for those with 144 or more points (the equivalent of AAA at A level, or AAABB in Scottish Highers). This means white students are more likely to be awarded a First or a 2:1 than BAME students who enter with the same prior attainment.
- Our [2019 report](#) showed that white students are awarded higher grades in their degrees than students of all other ethnicities even when prior attainment is controlled for. Evidence from the Office for Students (OfS) showed that at English universities, once other factors are accounted for, there remains an unexplained difference in attainment between white and Black students of 17%.
- Using the common aggregated hierarchy for subject groupings, subjects with the largest awarding gap include Architecture, building and planning (15.9%), Combined and general studies (14%), and Education and teaching (13.4%). Those with the smallest gap include Medicine and dentistry (0.8%) and Mathematical sciences (1.7%).

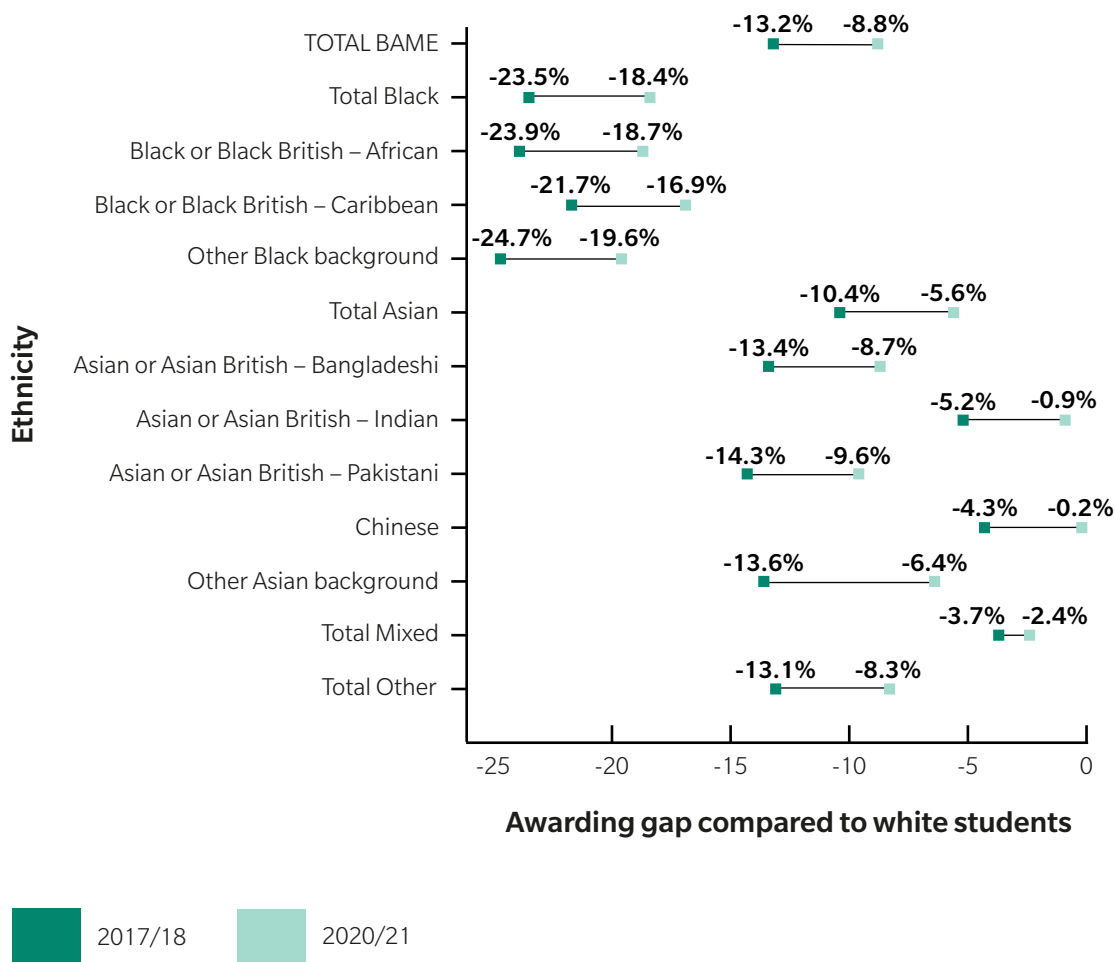
# 23%

The gap between the percentage of white part-time students and BAME part-time students awarded a First or a 2:1 in their degree (2020/21).

Since our [2019 report](#), progress has been made on reducing awarding gaps. While the rate of good honours degrees has increased for all students (in 2020/21, 83.6% of students were awarded a First or a 2:1, compared with 77.9% in 2017/18), they have increased more substantially for BAME students, leading to a reduced gap.

Reduced awarding gaps are evident across all ethnic groups (see Figure 3). The gap between white and Black students has seen the most substantial reduction (from 23.5% to 18.4%), although this group still has the largest awarding gap. The awarding gap for Chinese and Indian students is now less than 1%.

**Figure 3: Awarding gaps in the rates of Firsts and 2:1s between white students and students of other ethnicities (2017/18–2020/21)**



(In order above, from left to right)

Source: HESA, [Student Qualifiers \(2017/18, 2020/21\)](#)

Worryingly, though, if looking solely at the rates of first-class degrees, progress is less evident. In 2017/18, there was a 10.2% gap between the proportion of white and BAME students being awarded Firsts, and in 2020/21 this had barely moved (9.5%). This particular awarding gap has also got worse for Black students specifically: in 2017/18 there was a 16.9% gap in the proportion of white and Black students being awarded Firsts, and this increased to 19.3% in 2020/21.

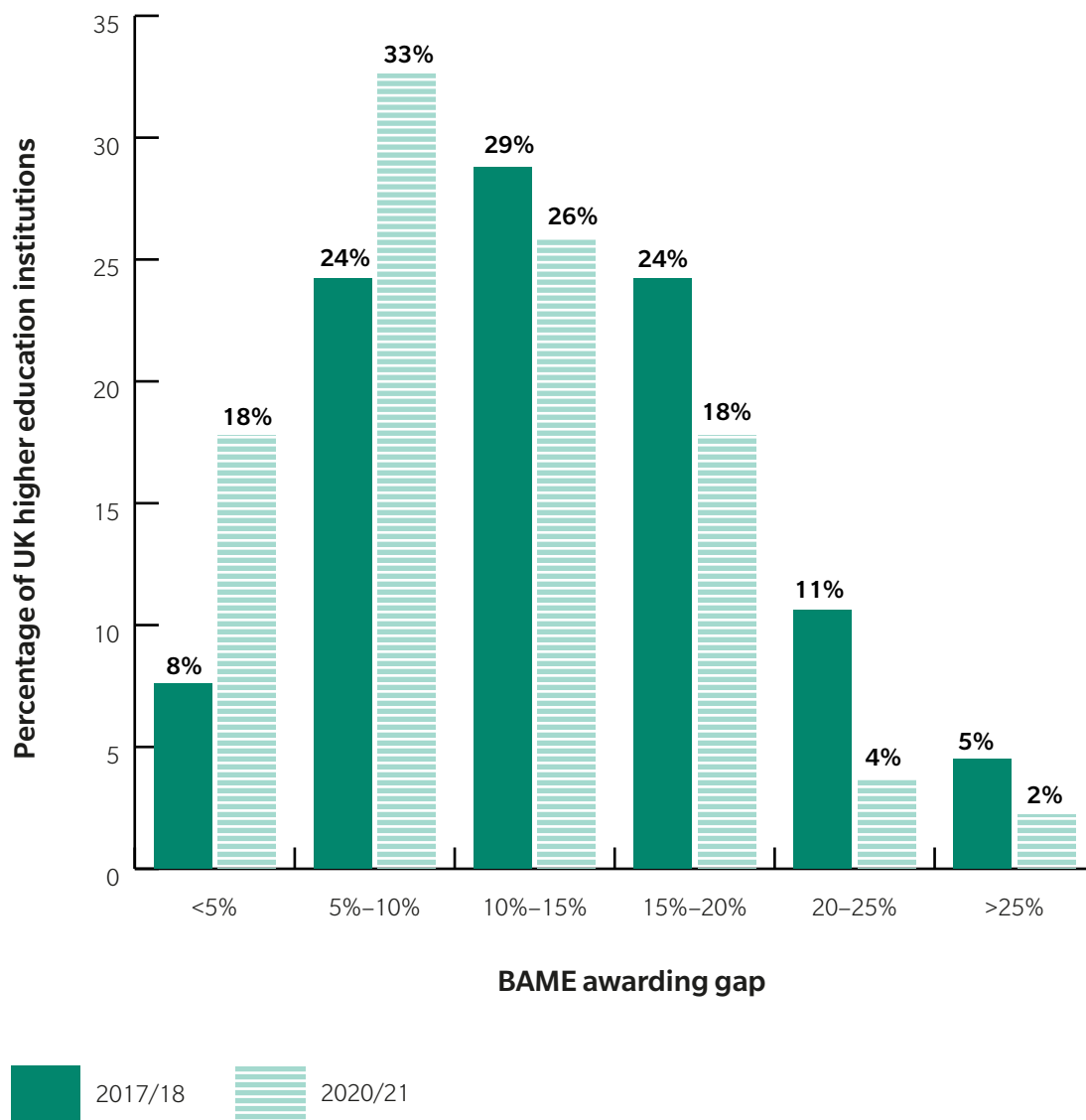
More positively, comparing gaps at providers overall shows the progress that has been made since our 2019 [Closing the gap](#) report. In 2020/21, nearly a fifth of UK higher education providers (18%) had an awarding gap of less than 5%, compared with 8% in 2017/18 (see Figure 4).

**9.5%**

The gap between the percentage of white students and BAME students awarded a First in their degree (2020/21).



**Figure 4: BAME awarding gap across higher education institutions  
(2017/18–2020/21)**

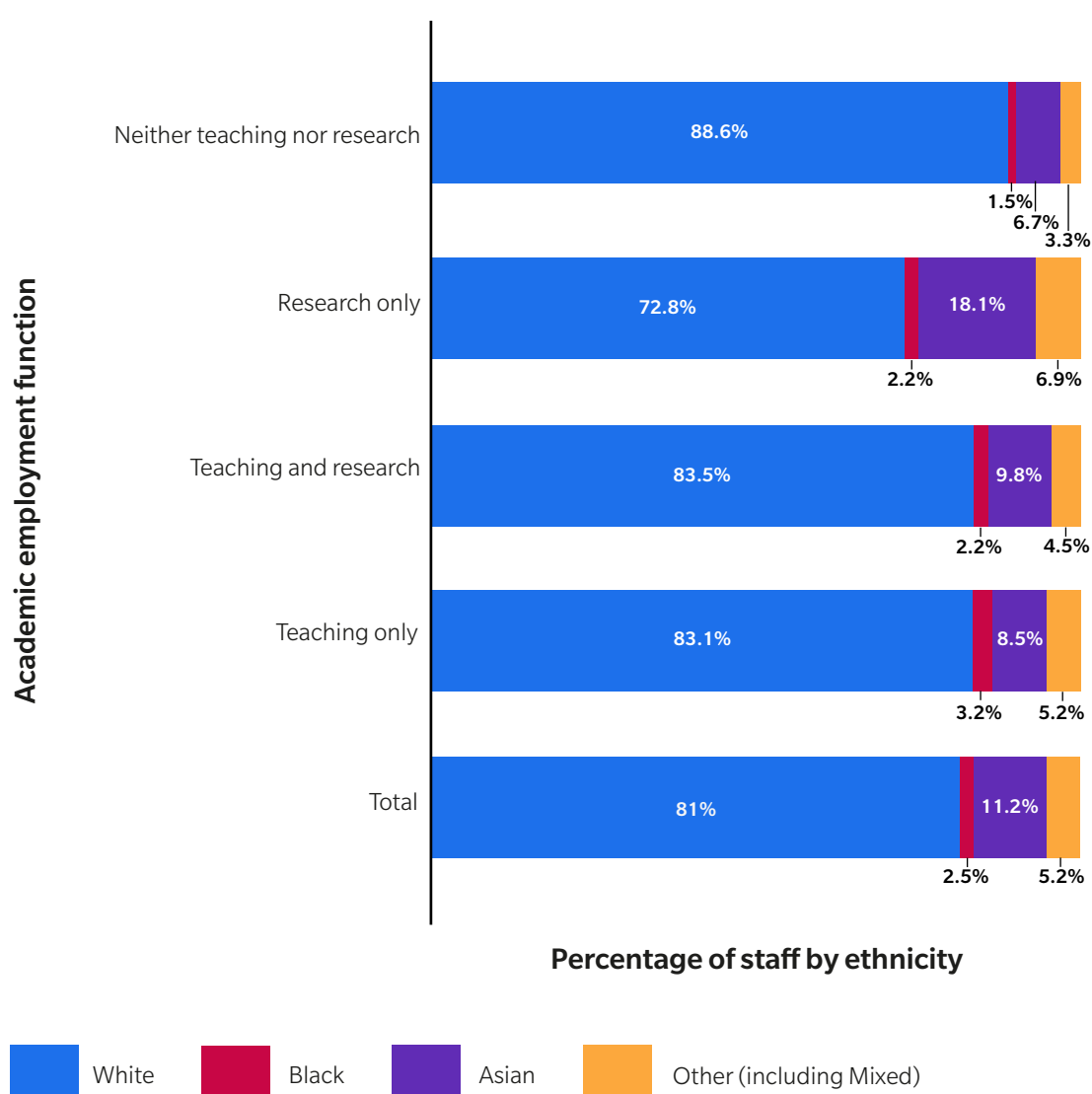


Source: HESA, [Student Qualifiers \(2017/18, 2020/21\)](#)

## Staff at UK higher education institutions

The latest data on staff at UK higher education institutions shows that, in 2020/21, 19% of all academic staff with a known ethnicity were BAME.<sup>3</sup> In comparison, in 2020/21, 25.9% of students were BAME.

**Figure 5: Proportion of academic staff by ethnicity and employment function (2020/21)**



(In order above, from left to right)

Source: HESA, [Staff Record \(2020/21\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> Data relating to staff is from the HESA staff record. Staff data includes staff of all nationalities, unlike the student data used elsewhere which relates only to UK-domiciled students.

Staff whose role covers 'research only' were more likely to be BAME (27.2% of 'research only' staff) compared to other role groupings, with nearly a fifth of staff in these roles being from Asian backgrounds (18%). Staff with a teaching function, however, (that is, those more likely to be student facing) were less likely to be BAME – in 2020/21, 16.7% of staff with a 'teaching only' or 'teaching and research' function were BAME (see Figure 5).

There has been some progress in increasing the proportion of BAME staff, when looking at the contract level of staff since the previous [Closing the gap](#) report. All contract levels have seen some, albeit limited progress since 2017/18.

However, BAME individuals continue to be highly underrepresented across all levels, and especially at senior level (see Figure 6). This underrepresentation is more evident when focusing on UK nationals, where 12% of academic staff were BAME in 2020/21 and Black staff remain particularly underrepresented. In 2020/21 there were just 160 Black professors (out of over 21,000) and 60 Black senior managers in total (105 and 50 of these respectively were UK nationals).

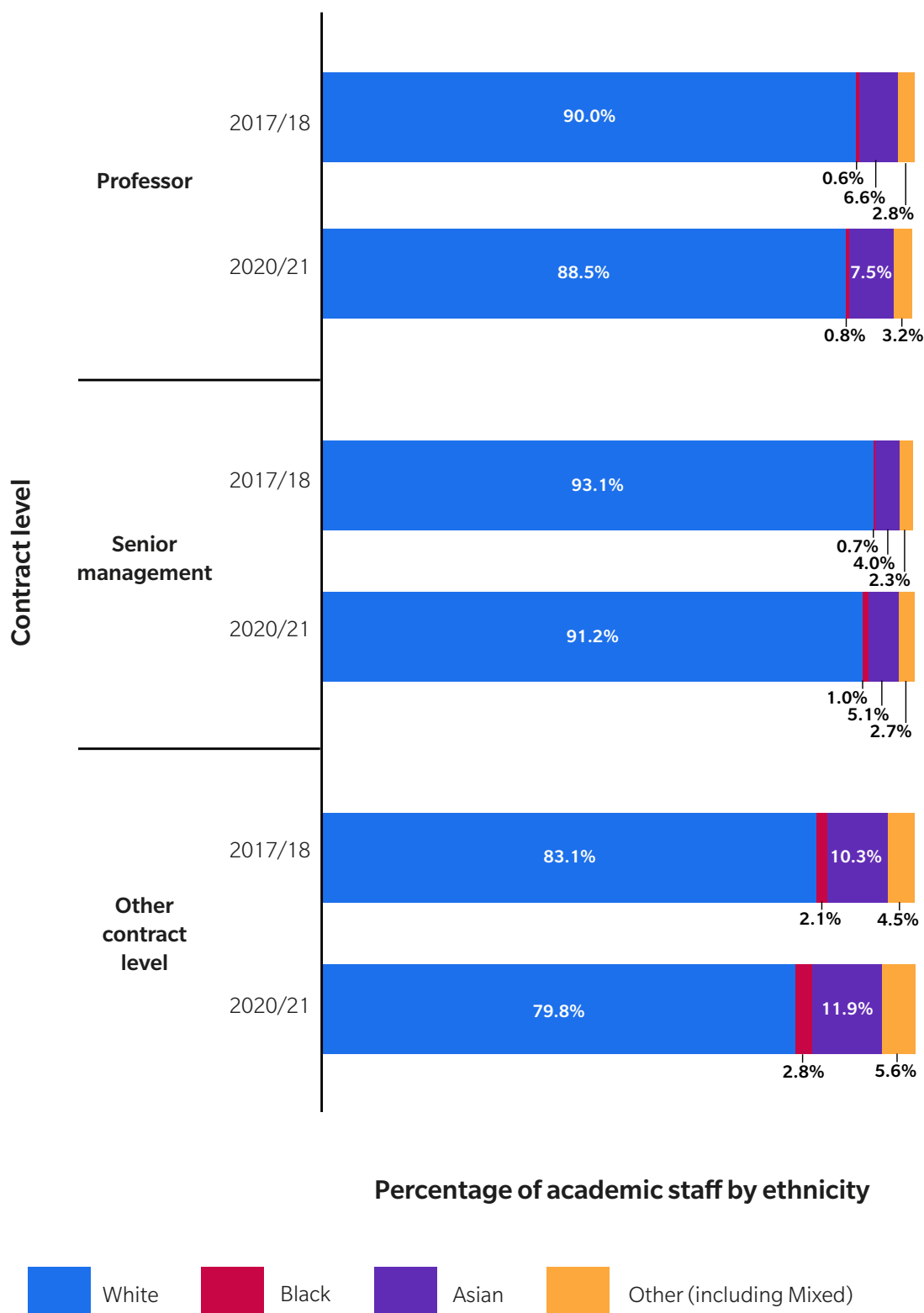
**"At Swansea University we're looking to create a Race Action Plan, and in doing that we have launched consultations with our students to hear directly from them, not only on their experiences but also on their suggestions on what we can do moving forward."**

**Theresa Ogbekhiulu**

MSc Social Research Methods and  
Senior Project Advisor for Race Equality,  
Swansea University



**Figure 6: Academic staff at UK higher education institutions by ethnicity and contract level (2017/18, 2020/21)**

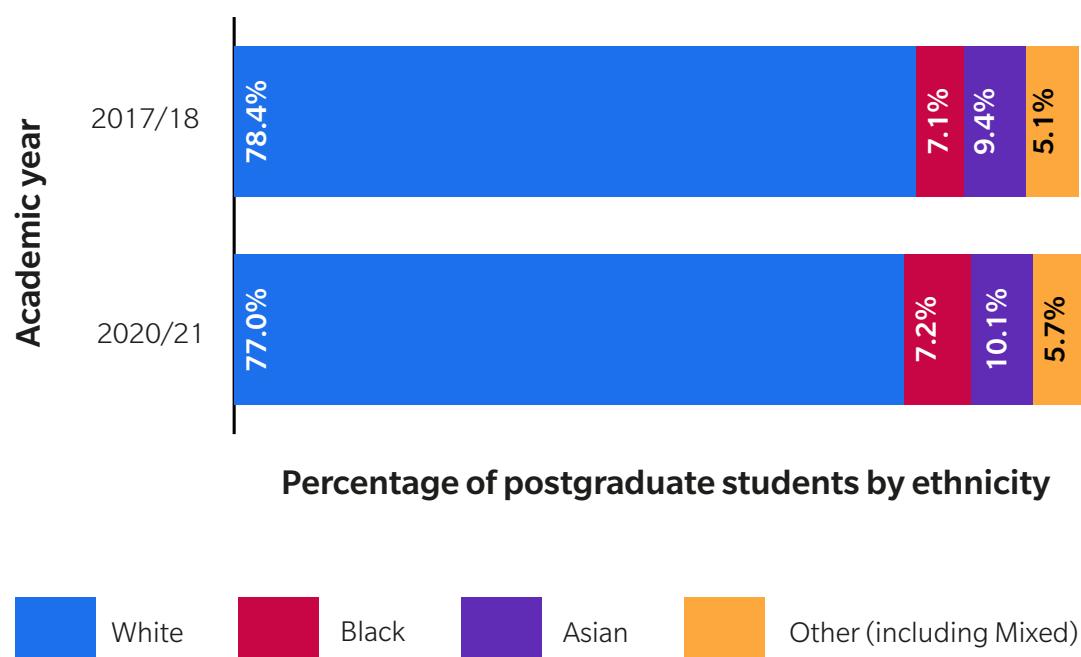


(In order above, from left to right)

Source: HESA, [Staff Record \(2017/18, 2020/21\)](#)

The proportion of all postgraduate students – the most obvious pipeline for academic posts – who identify as BAME has only seen a slight increase since 2017/18, from 21.6% of postgraduate students, to 23% (see Figure 7). Within this, postgraduate research (PGR) students were even less likely to be BAME. In 2020/21, just 19.9% of PGR students were BAME.

**Figure 7: Postgraduate students by ethnicity (2017/18, 2020/21)**



(In order above, from left to right)

Source: HESA, [Student Record \(2017/18, 2020/21\)](#)

# Recommendation 1: Providing strong leadership



## In our 2019 report, we recommended:

'University leaders and senior managers need to demonstrate a commitment to removing the BAME attainment (awarding) gap and lead by example. UUK and NUS have created a checklist for university leaders to draw upon when considering how to address their institution's attainment (awarding) gap.'

## Findings related to 'Providing strong leadership'

- Over 96% of respondents to our survey told us that their university board or executive has made a formal commitment to remove ethnicity degree awarding gaps, with nearly half (46%) implementing this change within the last three years.
- Almost all respondents said that a member of their senior leadership team, most commonly the Pro- or Deputy-Pro-Vice Chancellor, was accountable for leading ethnicity degree awarding gap work.
- While 75% of respondents share, or plan to share, ethnicity degree awarding gap data with students, there are still some concerns about how this is communicated without having a negative impact on students.
- 75% described their approach to removing ethnicity degree awarding gaps as either fully or mostly embedded across the whole institution.

Our survey results suggest that, since 2019, many university leaders have made clear progress in formalising their commitment to removing ethnicity degree awarding gaps. Senior leaders and their management teams have taken ownership of, and accountability for, closing the gap.

However, it is vitally important that this commitment at senior level is embedded as a whole-institution approach, ensuring there is consistent engagement and accountability at all levels. Co-production with students is vital in ensuring that the work universities and senior leaders are doing to create inclusive communities is fully reflected in the student experience.

**Senior leaders and their management teams have taken ownership of, and accountability for, closing the gap.**

## Ongoing barriers affecting 'Providing strong leadership'

### Getting it right for students

Our focus groups with students' union officers highlighted the need for greater co-production between staff and students, to make sure that a whole-institution approach to tackling ethnicity degree awarding gaps sincerely engages with the lived experiences of BAME students. Without co-production, institutional approaches to removing awarding gaps may appear disingenuous or as a box-ticking exercise to students, particularly if they are not seeing genuine change on the ground.

### Translating top-level commitment into university-wide change

For racial equality to be embedded rather than being just an initiative, senior leaders need to translate top-level commitment into institution-wide change, sending a clear message that every member of the university community, both staff and students, has a role to play. A lack of appropriate resourcing, accountability mechanisms and measures of success for all staff can lead to inconsistent engagement across departments. This undermines the significant work that universities are doing to create fully inclusive environments.

### Developing senior leadership capabilities

University boards and governance structures might lack diverse representation, which limits their understanding of BAME student and staff experiences. Boards have a role to play in ensuring university leaders are accountable for improving racial equality and removing ethnicity degree awarding gaps. Senior leadership teams also need to develop their understanding of racial inequality, drawing on a range of sources, so they can be confident in their understanding of ethnicity awarding gaps and authentically endorse this work.

**For racial equality to be embedded rather than being just an initiative, senior leaders need to translate top-level commitment into institution-wide change.**



## Taking action on 'Providing strong leadership'

University leaders should go further in their efforts to embed commitments to removing ethnicity degree awarding gaps, working in partnership with students. This includes setting clear expectations for the roles and responsibilities of all students and staff, measures of success, and ongoing accountability for a whole-institution approach. University leaders should identify the resources that are required for this, develop their own understanding of racial inequality and its impacts to help drive genuine change, and ensure the board of governors has oversight of progress.

Practical suggestions are to:

- consider applying for the [Race Equality Charter](#), which universities told us provides a useful framework to assess current activities and progress
- place racial equality as a standing item at board and committee meetings, within a wider equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) frame, in order to ensure buy-in from board and committee chairs and to embed it within institutional structures, rather than being a 'box-ticking' exercise
- diversify university board and governance structures, using for example the [Advance HE Diversity and Inclusion toolkit](#), or consulting London Higher universities' [work with Board Apprentice](#)
- implement reverse mentoring for senior leaders and managers with BAME students.
- consider additional training and development for senior leaders and governors, alongside opportunities for colleagues to discuss racial inequality in a supported space where they can ask questions without the risks associated with 'saying the wrong thing'
- take a strategic approach to equality impact assessment.

### Case studies

- London Metropolitan University, [Race equity strategic plan 2020/21 to 2024/25](#)
- University of Brighton, [Race equality](#)
- University of Hertfordshire, [Reverse mentoring \(p15\)](#)
- Swansea University Students' Union, [Reciprocal mentoring](#)

## **Recommendation 2:**

# **Conversations about race and changing the culture**



## In our 2019 report, we recommended:

'Universities and students need to create more opportunities to talk directly about race, racism and the attainment (awarding) gap and to identify what students think is causing it. A change in culture is needed alongside a clear institutional message that issues of race are embedded within wider strategic goals.'

## Findings related to 'Conversations about race and changing the culture'

- All respondents to our survey said their university has opportunities and mechanisms in place, often both university- and student-led, that allow for open and honest conversations about race between students.
- 95% of respondents said they have opportunities and mechanisms in place for open and honest conversations about race between staff and students.
- The most commonly used methods for gathering students' insights about these opportunities were focus groups, interviews and surveys (84%), students' union involvement (81%), and co-production with students (77%).

Universities have responded to our 2019 call to provide more opportunities for students to have conversations about race, racism and ethnicity degree awarding gaps. However, while the survey results may look positive, creating these spaces alone is not enough to shift the dial. Conversations about race and racism can be frustrating and emotionally demanding for BAME students if they don't feel listened to or can't see conversations leading to positive change. Discussions about race, racism and ethnicity degree awarding gaps need to be facilitated thoughtfully and appropriately.

**While the survey results may look positive, creating these spaces alone is not enough to shift the dial.**

## Ongoing barriers affecting 'Conversations about race and changing the culture'

### Developing staff capabilities to facilitate conversations about race

Our conversations with students' union officers revealed that university staff do not always facilitate discussions in a way that is responsive to students' feedback, including accounts of their lived experiences. It is imperative that BAME students feel listened to and understood when sharing their experiences with university staff and students.

### Spaces may be experienced as intimidating by some BAME students

Students reported feeling uncomfortable and intimidated in formal committee settings, for example, particularly where there is a lack of diversity.

### BAME individuals reported being regarded as the sole representatives of BAME student populations

There can be a lot of pressure on a small number of students and staff to, often voluntarily, manage and facilitate these spaces. This problem was highlighted in our [2019 report](#) and continues to be an ongoing issue.

## Taking action on 'Conversations about race and changing the culture'

Universities should go further in co-producing initiatives and approaches to removing ethnicity awarding gaps with their students. University staff should be supported to develop the appropriate skills and knowledge to thoughtfully facilitate conversations about racial inequality with all students and to learn from their lived experiences.

Examples of co-production opportunities or mechanisms are to:

- ensure students have a seat on relevant committees tasked with removing awarding gaps and racial inequities, and that their contributions are valued, and making particular effort to chair and facilitate committees inclusively
- create paid ambassadorial roles or advocate schemes for BAME students

- encourage allyship<sup>4</sup> among non-BAME students through ongoing training and development opportunities, such as EDI champions.

Staff skills and knowledge could be developed through:

- using training to build in-house expertise
- developing spaces for staff to practise talking about race and racism, to build confidence and put training into action
- sharing good practice in facilitating conversations about race, drawing on resources such as the Business in the Community toolkit, Let's talk about race.

**Universities should go further in co-producing initiatives and approaches to removing ethnicity awarding gaps with their students.**

## Case studies

- King's College London, Facilitated race-based conversations between students and staff
- University of Birmingham, EDI student ambassadors

**"For me it is important for everybody to realise that there is a problem. There is a situation, and even if those conversations are very uncomfortable, you have to face them, because without facing them, you're ignoring them, and there's no change."**

### Denise Morrison

Full-time Officer for School of Social Sciences and Social Professions, London Metropolitan University Students' Union



HEAR FROM STAFF AND STUDENTS AT [UNIVERSITIESUK.AC.UK/CLOSINGTHEGAP](https://universitiesuk.ac.uk/closingthegap)

<sup>4</sup> Allyship is the activity of proactively supporting the rights of minority or marginalised group(s), without being a member of the group(s) oneself (see University of Kent Allyship tips).



# **Recommendation 3:**

## **Developing racially diverse and inclusive communities**



## In our 2019 report, we recommended:

'University leadership teams are not representative of the student body and some curriculums do not reflect minority groups' experiences. A greater focus is needed from universities, working with their students, on ensuring that BAME students have a good sense of belonging at their university, and on understanding how a poor sense of belonging might be contributing to low levels of engagement and progression to postgraduate study.'

## Findings related to 'Developing racially diverse and inclusive communities'

- All respondents to our survey said they are reviewing or changing aspects of their recruitment practices to improve the diversity of staff.
- Only a third (33%) of respondents said their institutions have made student equality issues, such as ethnicity degree awarding gaps, a formalised part of relevant staff performance reviews or development conversations, although 25% are planning to do this.
- Most respondents have mandatory anti-racism training for all staff on appointment, including training on unconscious bias, EDI literacy, cultural awareness, allyship and inclusive teaching.
- Additional staff training in leadership, wellbeing and recruitment roles is also common. Anti-racism training for students is less common and is more likely to be optional.
- 97% of respondents are reviewing the impact of their curriculums on the belonging and learning experiences of BAME students, with 72% making changes to personal tutoring or student support methods.
- There is some activity under way to encourage BAME students into postgraduate study or academia, most commonly through offering fee reductions (54%) and targeted information, promotion or guidance (53%), followed by employability initiatives in the curriculum (44%) and mentoring (40%).

Universities are undertaking a range of activities to develop more diverse and inclusive environments. Anti-racism training for university staff, changes in recruitment practices to enhance diversity, and activities to develop inclusive learning environments are now common practices within many institutions.

However, for this work to truly resonate with the lived experiences of BAME students, the next step is making sure such inclusive practices are consistently embedded across institutions. Our survey results show that there has been limited progress in ensuring that all staff have accountability for contributing towards the creation of an inclusive culture through formal performance reviews or development conversations. This holistic approach to developing inclusive environments requires as much focus on the culture outside the classroom as in it, for example by providing accommodation, catering services and social events that factor in the needs of diverse groups.

**This holistic approach to developing inclusive environments requires as much focus on the culture outside the classroom as in it.**

There is also more work to do on increasing students' access to diverse role models in the immediate term, as well as in supporting BAME students' progression into postgraduate study and academia.

## **Ongoing barriers affecting 'Developing racially diverse and inclusive communities'**

### **Students' access to diverse role models**

Our conversations with students' union officers highlighted that, although many universities are making (or considering making) changes to their recruitment practices to enhance staff diversity, these have not yet translated into a recognisable increase in diverse role models for students. Institutions located in less ethnically diverse areas face particular challenges when recruiting locally.

### **Implementing university-wide change**

Universities have done excellent work developing initiatives to create inclusive learning and teaching environments, but too often, these are piecemeal interventions, rather than being embedded across the whole institution. At times, inclusive practice risks being undermined outside the classroom.



## Taking action on 'Developing racially diverse and inclusive communities'

A greater push to implement university-wide change is needed so that the work universities are doing to create inclusive communities is fully reflected in students' experiences. Universities should go further to ensure there is accountability for all staff to actively contribute to creating inclusive cultures. While long-term actions to improve staff diversity are under way, more needs to be done in the immediate term to improve students' access to diverse role models, to encourage BAME students into postgraduate study and to improve the diversity of academic pipelines.

Although interventions to increase BAME students' access to postgraduate study could also directly impact ethnicity degree awarding gaps, this remains a clear area of inequality. A greater focus on access to postgraduate study will help to diversify the academic pipeline and create a new pool of role models for future undergraduate students, and empower BAME students to contribute to world-leading UK research.

**Universities should go further to ensure there is accountability for all staff to actively contribute to creating inclusive cultures.**

It is important that work to diversify university staff populations is prioritised. Universities can draw on existing guidance such the [McGregor-Smith Review](#). While it will take some time to see the impact of this work, universities should implement short-term measures to increase students' access to diverse role models.

Short-term work should not replace or undermine the longer-term measures required, but short-term initiatives could include:

- supporting the academic pipeline through high-quality mentoring and coaching for postgraduate researchers and early career researchers
- deploying alumni networks as mentors and speakers
- inviting external speakers and experts for guest lectures, employability discussions, events and debates
- supporting students' access to specialist services and networks such as the [Black, African and Asian Therapy Network](#)
- considering the holistic student experience and ensuring that inclusive practices are embedded consistently across institutions, including professional services departments.

Universities could further embed inclusive approaches through:

- working with students, implementing inclusive practice leads (or similar roles) in schools and faculties to promote inclusive teaching and share good practice
- implementing similar roles within professional services departments
- collaborating with students to develop a Students Futures Manifesto that sets out concrete actions to improve students' experiences and sense of belonging at university
- adding racial inequality as a standing item for teaching committees or similar, ensuring that discussions reach, and can be fed into from, all academic levels
- formalising accountability for removing awarding gaps as part of staff performance reviews and/or development conversations for staff, including professional services
- providing training or guidance to line managers to enable productive development conversations about racial inequality and inclusive practices.

## Case studies

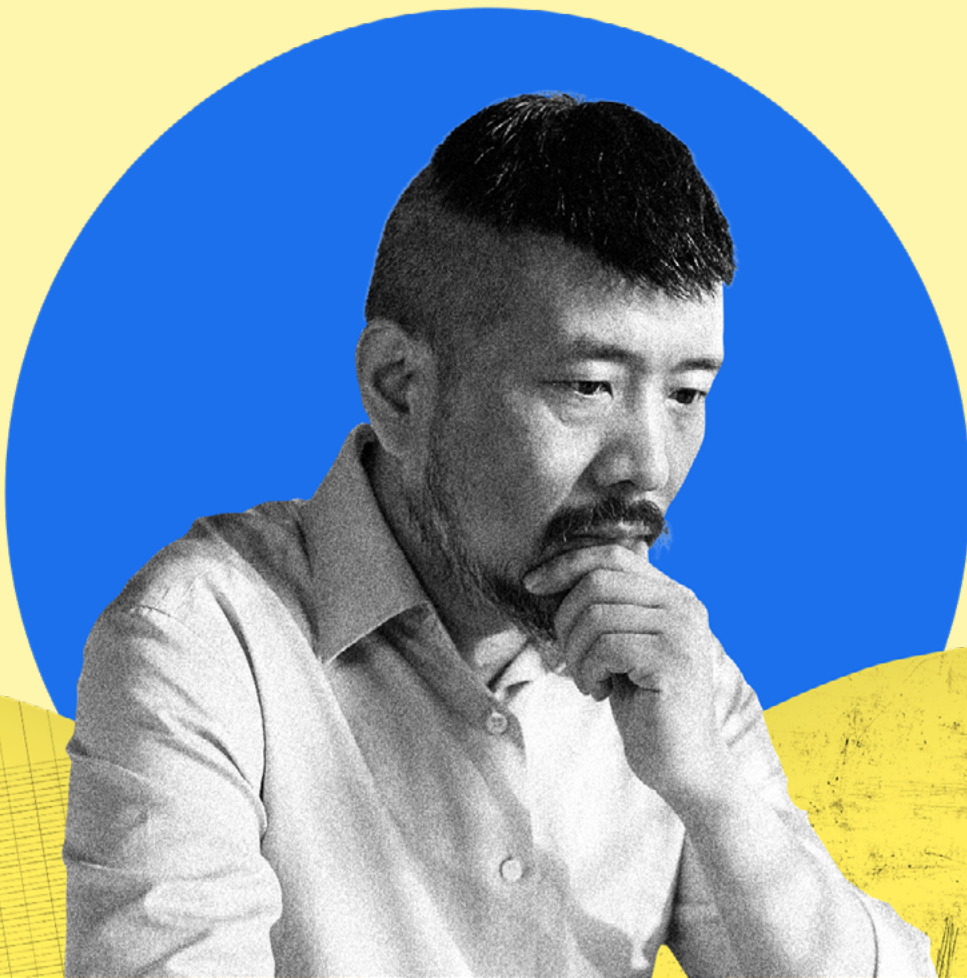
- London Metropolitan University, [Fixing the pipeline](#)
- University of Brighton, [Inclusive practice partnerships scheme](#)
- UCL, [BAME awarding gap toolkit](#)

**“Having diversity, enough diversity, in leadership actually means that the opinions, the struggles and the complaints of people from all backgrounds will be seen to its final resolution.”**

Chinyere Edith Chukwudi-Okeh, MA Creative Writing, Swansea University



## **Recommendation 4: Getting the evidence and analysing the data**



## In our 2019 report, we recommended:

'Universities need to take a more scientific approach to tackling the attainment (awarding) gap, by gathering and scrutinising data in a far more comprehensive way than they may currently be doing, in order to inform discussions between university leaders, academics, practitioners and students.'

## Findings related to 'Getting the evidence and analysing the data'

- Over 87% of respondents to our survey have set, or plan to set, an institutional key performance indicator (KPI) for ethnicity degree awarding gaps.
- 82% of respondents told us their institutions are disaggregating ethnicity data, although the level of disaggregation varies. Institutions most commonly use HESA's six categories (White/Black/Asian/Mixed/Other/Unknown), with Asian categories sometimes disaggregated further, for example into Indian and Chinese ethnicities.
- 77% of institutions are taking an intersectional approach to analysing data and tailoring their interventions. The types of intersection most commonly considered are gender, age, household income (or other measures of deprivation), and disability.
- Institutions are carrying out a wide range of research projects using qualitative approaches, many of which are co-created between staff and students, to understand the lived experiences of BAME students.
- Most responding institutions are gathering insights from students on communicating ethnicity degree awarding gaps, but are less likely to gather insights from students on intersectional approaches and disaggregating data. This data is mostly collected through students' union involvement and focus groups, interviews or surveys, and less commonly through student ambassador schemes.
- Dashboards containing ethnicity degree awarding gap data, accessible to all staff, are now common at most institutions which responded to our survey, but whether this data is available at faculty, course or modular level varies significantly.

The sector has made substantial progress in taking a more comprehensive approach to gathering and scrutinising ethnicity degree awarding gap data. We now have a much better understanding of what a good approach to managing awarding gap data looks like. This includes the importance of developing institutional data expertise and implementing comprehensive data dashboards to inform and drive institution-wide change.

Collecting the data is an essential first step, but universities must be proactive in ensuring that staff are empowered to act on the information available, in line with clear institutional action plans. This means giving heads of department, or staff in similar roles, ownership of awarding-gap data, ideally broken down at course or modular level to enable tailored approaches to removing gaps across the whole institution.

**Collecting the data is an essential first step, but universities must be proactive in ensuring that staff are empowered to act on the information available.**

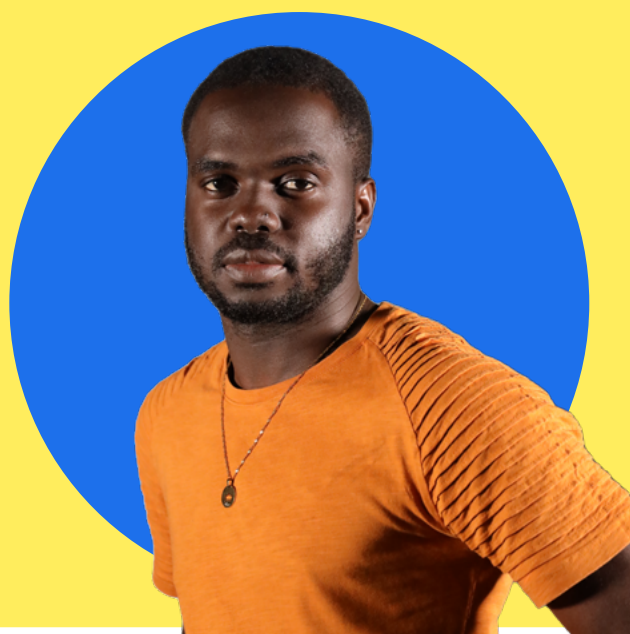
Universities need to work more closely with students in this area, and to be transparent about awarding gaps, sharing information that is easily accessible and digestible.

Our analysis of the latest UK awarding-gap data highlights the ongoing inequalities among BAME students in the award of Firsts (an aggregated sector gap of 9.5%, but a growing gap of 19.3% for Black students). As a priority, universities should interrogate their awarding-gap data to understand their disaggregated ethnicity degree awarding gaps for first-class degrees, consider what additional or targeted interventions may be needed as part of an institutional approach, and share this information with staff and students.

**"I think we have the data, I think now is for universities who have been doing the work to kind of share the successes of their interventions, so that across the board, across all universities in the UK, we can begin to close that gap."**

**Lanvell Blake**

Master's in Global Challenges, Law, Policy and Practice, University of Swansea



## Ongoing barriers affecting 'Getting the evidence and analysing the data'

### Small cohorts of BAME students

Institutions with small populations of BAME students highlighted concerns around data protection and making sure that students are not easily identifiable.

### Communicating ethnicity degree awarding gap data with students

Our engagement with the sector revealed that universities are less likely to communicate with students on more technical areas, including awarding-gap data, intersectionality and disaggregation.

Some of the existing methods for sharing awarding-gap data, such as through access and participation plans in England, are not engaging, easy to find or digestible for students.

## Taking action on 'Getting the evidence and analysing the data'

Awarding gap data needs to be a key institutional metric. Universities need to empower staff with access to the data they need to remove ethnicity awarding gaps. For many universities, implementing a data dashboard has been key to building awareness and a nuanced understanding of awarding gaps. Universities should be more transparent about awarding gaps, and share information with students in an accessible way.

Practical suggestions are to:

- implement data dashboards with appropriately trained staff to manage awarding-gap data centrally
- give academic staff access to awarding-gap data, ideally broken down at course or modular level, to enable tailored approaches to removing gaps
- give ownership to heads of department (or similar) to further prioritise and embed work to remove gaps across the institution
- present awarding-gap data, actions being taken to remove gaps, and ways for students to get involved clearly and concisely on university websites.

Difficulties remain for universities with small populations of BAME students where data can become identifiable. In this circumstance, universities could consider using intersectional factors to combine and therefore increase student cohort numbers for targeted work.

## Case studies

- Kingston University London, [Using the value-added score](#)
- De Montfort University, [The attainment gap](#)
- Sheffield Hallam University, [What is the degree awarding gap?](#)
- University of Winchester, [A targeted approach](#)



# Recommendation 5: Understanding what works





## In our 2019 report, we recommended:

'Universities can work together to address gaps in the evidence-base by using applied research to ensure that evidence on 'what works' is high quality and share evidence of what works and what doesn't. As a first step, we've collected some case studies, which universities and students are encouraged to engage with and develop.'

## Findings related to 'Understanding what works'

- 54% of respondents to our survey estimate that they evaluate all or most of their activities to remove ethnicity degree awarding gaps, with 9% evaluating very few or no activities.
- Over half the respondents (54%) believe the reduction in ethnicity awarding gaps, seen across the sector in 2019/20, is linked to changes in assessment practices and the introduction of no-detriment policies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Universities have made some progress in recognising and responding to the need to address gaps in the evidence. While most institutions are implementing evaluation into at least some of their activity to remove awarding gaps, there is still a significant way to go to ensure that good evaluative practice is being effectively and consistently employed within institutions and across the sector.

The ethnicity degree awarding gap is a complex and multi-faceted issue. The abundance of work universities are doing in this area can make it challenging to attribute an impact to a particular intervention. For this reason, a coordinated institutional approach that embeds evaluation into institutional action plans and quality assurance from the very start are crucial. Institutions must continue working together to share good practice, consider whether they are doing enough to make evaluation findings accessible across their university and further afield, and make full use of existing resources, such as those made available by TASO.

There is a lot of proactive work under way to explore the impact of the pandemic, and the accompanying changes seen in university provision and assessment practices, on ethnicity awarding gaps. Over this period, universities have generally been more flexible and compassionate during the significant uncertainty and disruption we all faced. Universities might have tailored support services to individual needs, introduced no-detriment policies, or switched from traditional closed-book examinations to online assessments.

**There is still a significant way to go to ensure that good evaluative practice is being effectively and consistently employed.**

The sector is continuing to develop a shared understanding of which changes have had a positive impact on reducing ethnicity degree awarding gaps, while maintaining quality and standards, with many institutions intending to retain practices where the evidence of a positive impact is strong. UUK has a role to fulfil in gathering this emerging evidence and sharing good practice across the sector.

## **Ongoing barriers affecting 'Understanding what works'**

### **Evaluation of the impact of initiatives has increased in complexity**

Evaluation has become more complex as the number of interventions to remove ethnicity awarding gaps has increased. It can be difficult to isolate and evaluate the impact of a particular intervention when so many are running concurrently.

### **Resourcing evaluation and data expertise**

Universities need to build the necessary expertise to embed evaluation into work to remove ethnicity degree awarding gaps from the start. This requires appropriate resourcing of evaluation and data expertise inputs, at a time when universities face funding constraints and growing pressure to do more with fewer resources.

### **Imbalance between a coherent, whole-institution approach and targeted interventions**

Different departments within an institution have different gaps and intersectional factors to consider, requiring different approaches and interventions. This variation makes it difficult to communicate a clear and coherent institutional approach to removing ethnicity awarding gaps.

## **Taking action on 'Understanding what works'**

Appropriately resourced evaluation expertise is needed to build institutional understanding of what works to remove awarding gaps. Evaluation should be planned into institutional and local approaches to removing awarding gaps at inception. Universities should use existing resources, such as those provided by TASO.

It is important that, while demonstrating causality in interventions represents a significant challenge, it does not prevent action from being taken or approaches being tested, or mean that appropriate measures of success cannot be clearly understood from the outset.

Practical suggestions are to:

- map activities to remove ethnicity awarding gaps to assess the extent to which evaluation is taking place as well as any duplication, areas of expertise and successful and unsuccessful interventions
- use existing resources (such as those provided by [TASO](#) and the [Race Equality Charter](#)) to measure progress more effectively and consistently
- collaborate with partners to share examples of successful (and less successful) work across the sector, acknowledging the moral underpinning of this work for students: opportunities could include regional partnerships or a greater focus on work within university mission groups, for example
- invest in evaluation expertise to make more efficient use of resources.

Universities should continue researching the impact of measures implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic on ethnicity degree awarding gaps, including qualitative experience data from students. A [Quality Assurance Agency \(QAA\)-funded collaborative enhancement project](#) with University Alliance institutions, led by Teesside University, will analyse the impact of alternative assessment methodologies and associated regulations introduced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. We will also continue work in this area to share lessons learned across the sector.

**Universities should continue researching the impact of measures implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic on ethnicity degree awarding gaps.**

## Case studies

- University of Sheffield, [Race equality strategy and action plan](#)
- University of Leeds, [Race equality action plan](#)

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