Strand: Staff and Student Experience

Blog post: Do we consider the awarding gap for our Black, Asian and minority ethnic students on Foundation Year Programmes?
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The Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) attainment gap, or better labelled 'degree awarding gap' is a longstanding issue in the higher education sector and still, does not quite get the attention it deserves. To serve as a reminder, this is the difference between white students and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students being awarded a 1st or 2:1-degree classification. Universities have now moved towards the reporting, discussion and in most circumstances – actions to alleviate and/or rid the awarding gap. To relate this to Foundation Year (FY) programmes, we should be considering if there are any gaps between student groups on our modules, and end of year results. More importantly, if an awarding gap exists on degree programmes or modules, we should not be using or considering a student deficit model to explain away the data. One way to take on a potential or existing awarding gap is to consider how our FY programmes are impartial and unbiased, what practices have we employed to ensure equity? A key aim should be to facilitating a provision which empowers students and grades.

As we are all aware, Foundation Year Programmes can provide an incredibly effective pathway into higher education for non-traditional students. For many of our students, this may be the only option of access to university. Previous findings show that FY programmes are designed to prepare students for, and ease transition to degree level study. In some contexts, Foundation Years have an incredibly diverse student population and there is often a whole host of good conversations and practice shared about support (academic and pastoral), learning and teaching and student engagement. As the directors, heads of, programme convenors/leaders and lecturing staff: do we see a gap on our programmes or modules; do we consider this and what are we doing about it?

From my previous teaching and leadership experience working on a FY in one university, we typically had a high percentage of Black and Asian students (above 60%). This is no different at the university I have recently moved to where the FY programme has a high BAME population at 74% (much higher than the university average, 2019-2020). Interestingly, in both universities there was also a higher percentage of Black and Asian students withdrawing or not continuing their academic studies when compared to white students. In my experience, many of our Black or Asian students leave university due to the financial circumstances and/or non-engagement and academic failure. Therefore, it is a priority to consider these reasons for withdrawal when considering the large BAME student populations. Due to the above differences in attainment, withdrawal, and engagement, I have wondered for some time, do we really consider possible differences between our student groups, and any potential or on the verge awarding gaps on FYs? If we do, we should talk about it more and work together. We often see 'inclusive teaching practice' and discussions of 'inclusive assessments' to better support our students but could we really take stock as a network.

Below are some initial thoughts (not exhaustive) from a personal regularly-updated Spreadsheet which reflects on discussions and observations with students, staff,

teaching experiences, module results, exam boards, research and/or conference presentations related to the awarding gap, and more recently exploring the #BlackLivesMatterHE. You may find you cover these items in your everyday approach to FY provision, or they may help start initial discussions on your programmes.

Action to take into consideration for FY leaders and/or teaching staff:
An important statement made in a webinar this week that stuck with me: "Consult black students. Their needs aren't at odds with white students – if you get things right for your BME students you'll make it a lot of things better for everybody when you do so" Amatey Doku, Wonkhe – Black Lives Matter @ home webinar, 9th July 2020.

- Consider the student make-up on our foundation year programmes, know who the students are

- Consider if there are any award gaps that exist on your programmes (can also be on modules, look deeper)

- Attainment gap/awarding gap information published in universities (how is this information published in your university, does it only focus on final year students, does it incorporate 4-year degree programmes)

- Be open about data on your Foundation Year programme

- Investigate Module level data which may tell a different story (may be gaps here between students)

- Also consider your progression/withdrawal data (not always about grades/achievement and attainment)

- Avoid the term BAME, BME when talking and referring to students – this term clusters students together in a homogeneous group

- Realise that lived experiences of students are different (especially between the BAME acronym)

- Explore the intersections of students lived experiences (race, gender and so on)

- Explore who out students are, what are their drivers, aspirations, offer – meeting those supporting students for the future, prepare students for successful lives

- Consider value added scores (this could be possible but if no university approach, would need to be completed/computed manually)

- Network and facilitate buddying up of similar programmes in terms of challenges we face (e.g. award gaps, engagement, withdrawal rates) and share good practice

- Continue to facilitate inclusive teaching practice, assessments and decolonising modules and programmes

Finally, I will leave you with some questions to consider and I look forward to the discussions this may lead to: Are these any observed awarding gaps on modules and/or the entire programme? Are you provided with data on this from your university, or do you need to look at this manually? What can be actioned to further support our Black, Asian and minority ethnic students? Are there active ways that the Foundation Year Network (FYN) can consider awarding gaps with a view of sharing information, data and then actions to close these gaps?

As a professional network of practitioners and supporters of FY programmes, could we work on resources to tackle this? Can we share more ideas on decolonising the curriculum? Could we set up a resource toolkit on the FYN website? These are all strategies and ways to collaborate. If this interests you, please do get in touch and let us begin to explicitly tackle potential awarding gaps on our FY programmes.