

Investigating the Elimination of Differential Outcomes

QAA Funded Collaborative Enhancements Project

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Repository link: <https://heawardgap.org.uk/>



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Executive Summary

This QAA funded project aimed to create an [online repository](#) to share case studies and evaluations of support mechanisms or interventions from higher education institutes (HEI) across the UK, demonstrating where racialised awarding gaps have been closed through particular actions or processes. This looked to provide those accessing the resource the opportunity to replicate and develop research, support mechanisms, and interventions in their own institutional contexts. Ultimately, the repository aims to share practice from across the sector, recognising the wealth of knowledge and collective effort of individuals and organisations from across the sector, enabling higher education practitioners to avoid duplication, and progress our commitment to eliminating award gaps. To achieve this, we developed a WordPress website to host the repository and invited contributions from across the sector, featuring written case studies, talking heads, publications, and author reflections.

This repository was showcased at a hybrid launch event in January 2023, where a variety of speakers discussed their repository contributions. This event received positive review, with key sector challenges identified in the multifaceted nature of differential experiences and outcomes, how projects and practice should be embedded institution wide, and whether sustainable change was achievable within our current educational structures. These are represented within the aim of the repository; to recognise the multifaceted nature, share practice, question and evaluate, and embed approaches to support students as a sector, challenging traditional practice.

Overall, the project was successful in developing an online repository. However, there were challenges in obtaining case studies to host. There is consistent traffic to the webpage, and constructive feedback on the usability, content, and purpose of the repository has been gained. Recognising the longevity of this repository, further work is required to collate further content for the repository, and to assess the impact within higher education institutions and student success. This can be achieved by more thorough promotion of the repository, and embedding content generation and collation within institutional strategy.



Background

The impact of inequalities within higher education has attracted increasing attention, particularly concerning gaps in degree award, progression, and student experience, becoming a high priority of HEIs nationwide (OfS, 2018). United by a shared common commitment to eliminating award gaps and promoting inclusive learning, the UK Higher Education Award Gap Group (formerly known as the NW Award Gap Group) is a collective of academics across North-West Business and Law Faculties in higher education. We believe that through our shared endeavours we can make greater progress in the elimination of differential outcomes. Our aim is to work in partnership with students, academics, and professional service teams across the sector to ensure equality of opportunity for all students and the elimination of differential outcomes within our Faculties and Schools.

In spring 2020, a series of public online events was hosted to engage discussion, share knowledge and build a community around awareness, support and best practice of award and progression gaps. This series covered themes such as interventions in learning and teaching, graduate outcomes and employment, valuing staff diversity and inclusivity, and moving beyond conversation. The series was attended by over 250 representatives from over 56 educational institutions, reaching beyond the North-West. The series concluded by inviting attendees to share their suggestions on moving forward, and what resources they would find most beneficial to their practice and institutions. Here, a repository of best practice resources was suggested.

Aiming to harness the collective effort of individuals and organisations across the sector, the online repository looked to host and share case studies and evaluations of support mechanisms to improve inclusive learning experiences and outcomes for different student groups. This was collated and developed by the partner institutions and a student intern. By sharing learning beyond the institution, we share the wealth of knowledge and experience across the sector and provide a toolkit for sustainable development. This repository would be an excellent practical resource to share case studies of supporting different student groups in particular contexts, providing HEIs the opportunity to replicate and build upon within their own contexts, benefitting the wider QAA community. In addition, evaluations of unsuccessful support mechanisms will be included.

Project Objectives

This project aimed to share practice, collating case studies of work undertaken within the UK higher education industry concerning the narrowing and closure of racialised awarding gaps. Whilst this encouraged successful case studies, we can learn from research, projects, and activities undertaken where the intended outcome was not achieved. Therefore, the submission of case studies reflecting

on activities which did not achieve the intended outcome but led to valuable learning and lessons to implement in future were also encouraged. Furthermore, the sharing of this practice will be evaluated to strengthen the replicability and development of case studies.

These aims were underpinned by the following research objectives:

RO1 – Create website to host repository of case studies

RO2 – Identify individuals contributing to this area in HE through evaluation of public conferences, seminar series, symposiums, other public media platforms

RO3 – Collate case studies concerning the narrowing and closure of the racialised award gap in UK HE

RO4 – Host launch event to showcase the repository to sector professionals

RO5 - Evaluate repository visitor motivations and behaviours to inform how the repository can be developed

RO6 – Identify to what extent case studies have been replicated or developed by repository visitors

Creating the Repository

The repository was created utilising WordPress (RO1). This was selected due to ease of creation and subsequent maintenance. Here, pages were created such as a homepage, about, case studies, and how to contribute. These were created with both desktop and mobile accessibility in mind.

To obtain and collate contributions for the repository (RO3), we created a call for contributions and submission guide which could be hosted on the repository. Recognising the multitude of factors which contribute to racialised award gaps, we wanted to encourage contributions from any area which may impact this. Therefore, the contribution guidance indicated the following potential areas for submission:

- Developing an inclusive student experience
- Designing and evaluating support mechanisms or interventions
- Enhancing employability
- Modifying learning and teaching practices
- Building community and student belonging
- The impact of staff representation
- Decolonisation practices
- Other related issues

With these criteria, the format for contributions required consideration to promote meaningful engagement and ensure consistency. Initially, this requested potential contributors to indicate the context of their contribution, a description of their activities, and the impact. In addition, we acknowledge the time constraints for those working within this area and wanted to minimise the drafting process. So, we encouraged potential contributors to utilise previously drafted material to populate the case study contribution. In order to support different styles and preferences, we also included the option to create a video, rather than a written submission.

Our first call for contributions was circulated amongst the project partner institutions as a pilot. The aim of this initial call was to collate a small sample of contributions to upload early on in the project so potential contributors to the sector wide call would have examples to refer to. This initial call resulted in the submission of three written case studies, and one video. In addition, this enabled us to refine our call for contributions to encourage more potential submissions. For example, the initial call format was identified as overwhelming and was subsequently refined to request the following three key areas:

- Summary – Indicating the context (e.g., type of institution, discipline, etc.), rationale, aims and objectives, and a description of activities undertaken.
- Impact, Learning Outcomes and Take-aways – Demonstrating the outcomes and impact of the activities undertaken, including how this may influence practice.
- Personal Reflections – A reflection on lessons learned and how this may shape future work. This section also included any suggestions for anyone wanting to undertake similar approaches within their institutions.

This format was embedded as form on the Repository itself, with links to the relevant guidance to streamline the process.

In addition to the broad call for contributions, we identified individuals who are publicly contributing to the area of racialised award and progression gaps within UK HE (RO2). This would provide an additional channel to showcase their work, and for repository visitors to replicate or develop this work within their own educational contexts. Here, we recruited a student research intern to identify individuals through public listings of conferences, seminars, talks, podcasts, academic journal articles and related media. As a side note, the student intern commented in their reflection how their role assisted in developing their research skills:

“One of the most important things I have learnt from this process is the importance of keeping a record of my work... However, knowing this now, I can take that forward into future work especially further internships or jobs... I am now also much more aware of the importance of being confident in my work and knowing that I do know what I am talking about. Finally, I have honed my research skills I can find the information I require much more quickly which will be of great benefit.”

- Student Research Intern



Alongside this process, we encountered challenges in obtaining institutional ethical approval. This was predominately in consideration of the data ownership and institutional reputation. For example, where a case study is contributed, there are a number of potential ethical concerns such as attributing the case study to the contributor and their institution, whether the case study was written in a manner which protected the identities of any staff or students involved, were there other contributors to the project, do they permit the case study to be publicly displayed on the repository, and whether the submission completed or conflicted with their educational affiliation. In addition, there was a concern about how their submitted content may impact future publication opportunities. Therefore, we had to build a rigorous contribution review strategy, data management system, and consent process which accounted for any future changes requested by any of the contributors. This posed a further ethical issue: the retention of personal data required to maintain communication with the contributors for continued consent.

However, a more significant challenge lay in obtaining case study contributions. The wider call for contributions was circulated through the QAA member network, our own institutions, and our social media channels in October 2022, and the targeted emails were also sent. While this call facilitated interest through these channels, demonstrated by comments, shares, and email responses, we only received contributions of projects which were known to the project team within our own institutions or personal contacts. This, we attribute to workplace culture, as outputs which can be included in the Research Excellence Framework (REF), such as journal articles, are prioritised institutionally. Therefore, individuals may be less inclined to share their work in this area due to time pressures and the way outputs are valued. This is problematic, as certain outputs are more valued than those which impact the experience and outcomes of our students. In addition, this means we, as a sector, are not sharing the support mechanisms and interventions to support student success and what we have learned from them beyond our immediate teams.

Repository Launch

The repository launch event (RO4) occurred on Tuesday 17th January 2023 at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School. Practitioners from the wider HE sector with experience and/or an interest in closing racialised awarding gaps were invited, with the aim to launch the repository and hear from some of the contributors. The hybrid event was publicised through the QAA member network, our own institutions, and our social media channels. This resulted in 30 online attendees and 32 in person representing over 26 UK educational institutions and professional bodies.

The daylong event featured Maisha Islam (University of Winchester) and Dr Iwi Ugiagbe-Green (Manchester Metropolitan University) as our keynote speakers. Our panel session provided discussion upon particular initiatives and the subsequent challenges faced, with panellists Donna Jones (Manchester Metropolitan University), Rexford Obeng (Hertfordshire University), Pradeep Passi

(Salford University), and Kaushika Patel (De Montford University). Our afternoon session focused on sharing support mechanisms in more depth, with Dr Paul Campbell (University of Leicester), Dr Theresa Nicholson (Manchester Metropolitan University), and Amanda Yip (Hertfordshire University).

Throughout the day, we saw clear online engagement, conversation, and networking, with overriding concerns regarding who's experience is being represented within sector and institutional datasets, the multifaceted nature of differential experiences and outcomes, whether decolonisation was truly achievable within the sector recognising structural barriers, and how projects and practice should be embedded institution wide and beyond. These key aspects are represented within the aim of the repository; to recognise the multifaceted nature, share practice, question and evaluate, and embed approaches to support students as a sector.

The post-event questionnaire (RO5), despite low completion (n8, 13%), indicated the event sessions were useful in raising awareness of tackling racialised degree awarding gaps, and the respondents were likely to use the repository and contribute. The survey was completed by both online and in person attendees, comprising of HE academic staff, doctoral students, and educational policymakers. Whilst the response rate is not as high as anticipated, key insights into the potential impact of the event were gathered. For example, the following quote from an attendee demonstrated the immediate impact of the launch event, and highlighted how the repository may be engaged with:

"The concept of thinking about our own sphere of influence was really helpful - I think that the scale of the challenges can be disheartening but scaling that down and thinking about what I can do as an individual to help push the agendas was really helpful.

The fact that the repository exists - I will absolutely be signposting this for colleagues and encouraging them to engage with it.

The fact that the question of awarding gaps was tackled from different angles - it really reinforced the fact that there isn't one silver bullet but through doing a combination of different things, we can make a difference to the lives of our students and just because it's hard, it doesn't mean we shouldn't try."

– Educational Policy Maker

While comments like these are helpful in highlighting the immediate impact of the event, it would be beneficial to revisit the repository content in a further event to provide individuals to discuss the longer-term impact. Therefore, a future event could focus specifically on those who have engaged with the content of the repository, providing an opportunity to share their experiences of utilising the case studies and the outcomes and/or challenges (RO6).

Evaluations

There are two main impact indicators for this project: the engagement with the repository and subsequent content, and feedback provided upon the repository.

Engagement with the Repository

Based on figures obtained on June 29th 2023, the repository has received 1795 visitors, with 2812 page views since publication in November 2022. Naturally, the most popular page is the homepage, with 1066 visitors. The second and third most visited pages are two of the case studies, ‘Lived Experiences of BAME Students Uncovered Through Reflective Diaries’, with 245 visitors, and 247 page views; and ‘Decolonising the STEM Curriculum Online Toolkit’, with 184 visitors and page views. The pages regarding contributing to the repository fall within the least visited. This demonstrates how the repository is being utilised more to seek content than share. Moving forward, we hope to see these numbers grow, with more visitors engaging with the case studies and resources. From our page analytics, where visitors are not using direct links, it is indicated the visitors are referred mostly from Google.com, LinkedIn, and the QAA website.

To encourage engagement with the repository, a newsletter was created. Individuals could sign-up to the newsletter via the ‘contact us’ page of the repository. The first newsletter was distributed on the 22nd March 2023 to provide an overview of the launch event, and announce the most recent call for contributions window. The newsletter is distributed on a quarterly basis, currently with 91 members on the distribution list.

Repository Feedback

We invited feedback from users (RO5) of the repository as part of our reflective approach to developing a useful and accessible source of information that supported colleagues working in the area. This invited respondents to comment on three areas:

1. The look and feel of the repository
2. Whether the current case studies have aided your thinking or approaches in addressing the awarding gaps
3. What else might be helpful in making the repository more effective.

Overwhelmingly, the feedback was positive and constructive, with consistent reference made to the ease of use. For example:

“Look and feel is clear, responsive, accessible and easy to navigate.”



“Have to say this looks absolutely brilliant! Well done to all that have contributed!”

“The repository includes a variety of resources, such as research articles, case studies, and effective practices – it’s helpful there are insights from two disciplines (Business and Law, STEM). It provides a platform for sharing success stories and strategies for overcoming barriers to equitable awarding.”

Comments for further development on the look and feel included suggestions for gathering other sources of information into the repository, such as policy and sector resources. For example:

“I would find it useful to also include some policy documents as the repository needs to be carefully curated and regularly updated with the latest information and insights.”

“I think some case studies could benefit from some actionable points, i.e., how could I, the reader, achieve this as well.”

This feedback has been particularly helpful, and we have begun a Publications page in response. This draws in reports, publications, and policy documents to compliment the case studies to provide HE professionals with further resources to inform their approach.

In second area of focus, impact of the current case studies, feedback was again positive in respect the usefulness of the content to aid thinking and provided further suggestions for ongoing improvements:

“Yes, they were interesting, and I liked the variety in media. Two things ... you might want to think of a ‘TLDR’ summary up the top to embed the key messages. And they were crying out to invite interaction – maybe through discussion, but even just as a set of provocation questions/resources associated with each?”

Whilst much of the responses provided to the first and second focus areas extended to included suggestions for further enhancements, there were additional comments provided such as:

“I think the platform to invite deeper interaction with key concepts and ideas. I wonder also if there’s a risk of this being a tool for the converted, and some links out to primers on key controversies (‘I’m terrified about whether I should use the term BAME’) might broaden engagement”

The reviews of the repository provided evidence that the content, look and feel, and usefulness were all positive. The further additional suggestions have provided useful areas for the group to focus on and to plan ongoing improvements as the repository progresses. Continuing to seek user feedback will form part of the ongoing workplan associated with the repository to ensure it remains relevant and useful to those seeking to draw on the content to inform their understanding and practice.



Future Steps

Moving beyond the funding period, the repository will continue to develop. This will involve both maintaining the current content whilst seeking additional contributions. For example, there will be an annual process reviewing the content and tracking progress with the contributors. This will provide further insights into the long-term impact of the projects and support mechanisms, and how they have evolved. We will continue to raise awareness of the repository through our channels and newsletters, and also have planned a workshop in Autumn 2023, and a conference presentation for Spring 2024.

One of the key issues arising within this project is raising awareness of the work regarding the experiences and outcomes of Black, Asian, and other racially minoritised students being undertaken within the sector. As previously mentioned, we faced a significant challenge in collating case study contributions to the repository, despite initial high interest. In recognition of how work is valued within the HE sector, and in response to some of the feedback indicated above, we are creating a publications page on the repository. This enables us to include the work which is channelled into conference papers, journal publications, reports, podcasts, and other creative media. Therefore, we will be seeking publications and resources to add to this area to inform and guide individuals who are new to or experienced in this area. These will be sought via social media posts, and ensuring we are up to date with the latest developments. The short-term impact of this could be seen in the website analytics, identifying the number of visitors and page views. By collating existing publications into the repository, we become the first port of call for anybody interested in this area looking to identify research, discussions, and case studies, thus supporting their research and pedagogical practice. In the long term, we hope this will encourage individuals to submit their own case studies and publications.

A key mechanism to ensure we are progressing as a collective to support student success, is to embed these processes of sharing within the institutional context and strategy. In the short term, this revolves around raising awareness within our institutions. In the medium term, we will be encouraging our institutions to identify the projects, support mechanisms and interventions which have sought to improve the experiences and outcomes for racially minorised students, and to evaluate the impact. It is anticipated these will then be developed into case studies for the repository. As previously mentioned, individuals may be uncertain due to the way outputs are valued. Therefore, it is recommended time is provided for this exercise, recognising the impact this work has on student success.

Furthermore, we intend to collect statements and reflections from repository visitors to gain insight into how the repository content has informed or influenced their practice. This links with seeking the annual process of reviewing the content and contacting authors to indicate how their case studies have evolved. The reflections from repository visitors and the contribution authors will be included on the repository to demonstrate the long-term impact of the contributions, and to track the evolution and potential for the case studies. This will be helpful for further visitors to the repository in highlighting how case studies have been adapted to fit different contexts.



Over an extended period of time, we hope to see the repository take a central role in hosting case studies, reflections, publications, and guidance for UK HE professionals to consult when considering their own progress as an institution. In addition, these may feature within institutional access and participation plans. Once more case studies are collated, we will be in a position to identify how those case studies have evolved, developed, and in some instances replicated within another HEI. Expanding this further, we will seek to include student perspectives. The collation and tracking of these case studies will provide a mapping of approaches, identifying good practice, lessons learned, and ultimately supporting the nationwide approach in narrowing gaps in experience and outcomes for racially minoritised students.