

**Executive summary:**

# Approaches to addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap

Contextualising the landscape and developing a typology

June 2023

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

This report was commissioned by TASO to develop a typology and narrative of current approaches to address the ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG). The findings are intended to inform TASO's future work, influence policy and decision-making in the sector and provide a data dashboard for researchers. Through these mechanisms, we hope these findings will drive change in addressing inequalities in student outcomes. For a more detailed write-up of the context, terminology used, methodology and findings, please see the [full report](#).

### Methodology

Access and Participation Plans (APPs; N=249) were coded according to their evaluation strategy, [Theory of Change \(ToC\)](#) model, targets through

which to address the EDAG and nature of approaches described. This included the type of approach, type of change, target groups, clarity of change description, mechanisms of change, intersectionality and whether the approaches were targeted or universal.

Stakeholder consultations were held with staff from higher education (HE) providers in England. Participants were recruited based on their experience in addressing the EDAG in their role and represented a diverse range of roles at different levels within the provider. Participants were asked about their own experiences with the EDAG and their organisation's approach in semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

An expert reference group provided critical reflection and discussion when developing and refining the findings and recommendations. This group comprised experts from various fields across HE providers (HEPs) and HE charities.

## Context

Recent events both within the UK and worldwide have heightened awareness of racial inequality in HE and prompted further action in this area.

The Office for Students (OfS) and the broader HE sector have committed to tackling the persistent EDAG (OfS, 2019). This gap refers to the notable difference in the proportion of students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds who are awarded a first or upper-second-class undergraduate degree when compared to White students. However, there is relatively little evidence on what works in reducing this gap. TASO recently commissioned an evaluation of two curriculum reform projects to investigate whether, and how, diversified curricula address the EDAG (TASO, 2022). The work also aimed to understand whether reforming the curriculum improves the experience of students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds, in terms of their engagement with module content and overall satisfaction, as well as degree outcomes. The findings from this work indicated that these approaches had limited success, but also that they were implemented inconsistently. Based on these findings, TASO commissioned this research to map and better understand the different approaches being undertaken by the sector.

This report is relevant to four major stakeholder groups:

- Policymakers within HEPs who are responsible for securing effective strategic change concerning the EDAG;
- Practitioners working within HEPs to implement approaches to addressing the EDAG;
- TASO, in consideration of taking forward further work gleaned from the findings and recommendations which also build on a prior corpus of work in this domain;
- Researchers, who will be interested in further exploring the data presented within an interactive dashboard. It should be noted that the information within the dashboard records approaches taken currently rather than implying good practice quotients.

## Findings

### Key findings from the APP review:

The analysis of APPs found 16 different types of approaches to addressing the EDAG, as outlined in the table below:

**Table 1. Evaluation methodology**

Approach	Description
Adapting assessment practice	Reforming the assessment format or assessment processes.
Raising awareness	Workshops and sessions to develop staff understanding of the awarding gaps and/or aspects of inequality faced by students.
Developing curricula	Reforming the curriculum, including inclusive curricula and decolonising reading lists.
Running events	Extra-curricular events for students
Modifying leadership practice	Senior leadership teams adapting leadership structures and/or culture.
Using and developing learning analytics	Collecting, interrogating, and/or presenting quantitative data on the nature and extent of the awarding gap.
Providing peer learning and mentoring	Students supporting students as mentors, or learning from each other.
Incorporating personalised support	Staff supporting students through one-to-one activities, including coaching, mentoring, or tutoring.
Recruiting staff	Staff recruitment drives, typically to recruit staff from more ethnically diverse backgrounds.
Building knowledge	Undertaking research, evaluation, or other activities to build providers' knowledge and understanding around the EDAG (are distinct from learning analytics).
Producing resources	Developing guides for staff and/or students.
Developing staff skills	Events and activities to support staff skill development.
Adapting structural processes	Developing the physical and policy structure of the provider.
Supporting students	Specific sessions or staff made available to support students (e.g. workshops, tutorials). These are distinct from personalised support as they are not tailored to specific students.
Training students as allies	Awareness raising in the student population, including training.
Harnessing student voice	Seeking and using student feedback in organisational discussions and/or decisions.

Developing curricula (typically inclusive curricula; N=92) and developing and using learning analytics (N=68) were the most prevalent approaches to addressing the EDAG, accounting for 37% of all approaches described across the sector (Figure 1).

The similarity of approaches between providers is notable and may indicate a tendency among HEPs to adopt popular approaches undertaken elsewhere. This could result in less focus being given to how specific interventions may be beneficial within a provider’s particular context.

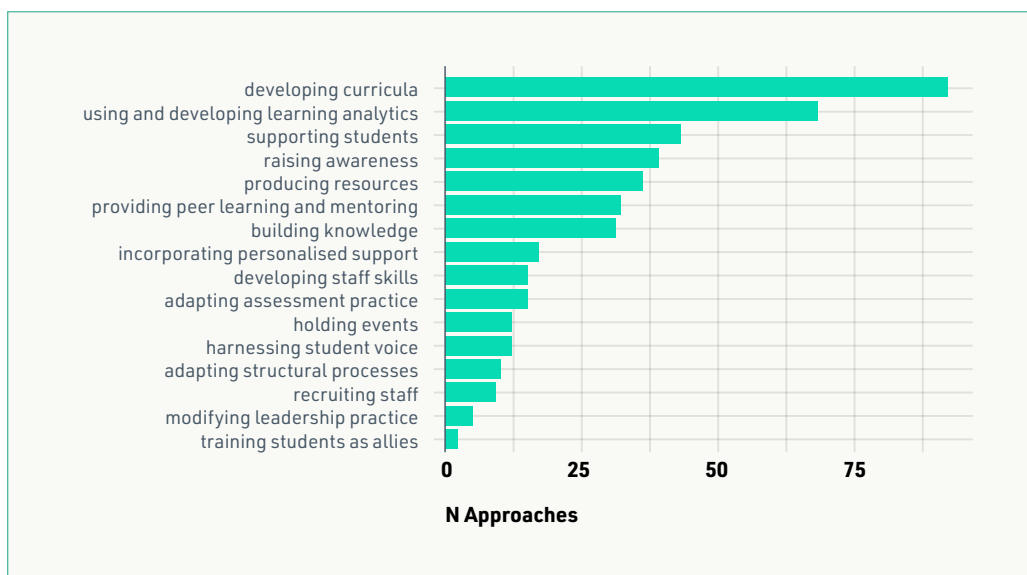
The resulting typology highlights the diversity of approaches adopted by HEPs to address the EDAG. Many of the same types of approaches are used to effect different changes, and many different approaches are used to effect the same change type.

The most common (modal) target by the end of the APP period (2024-25) was that providers would have

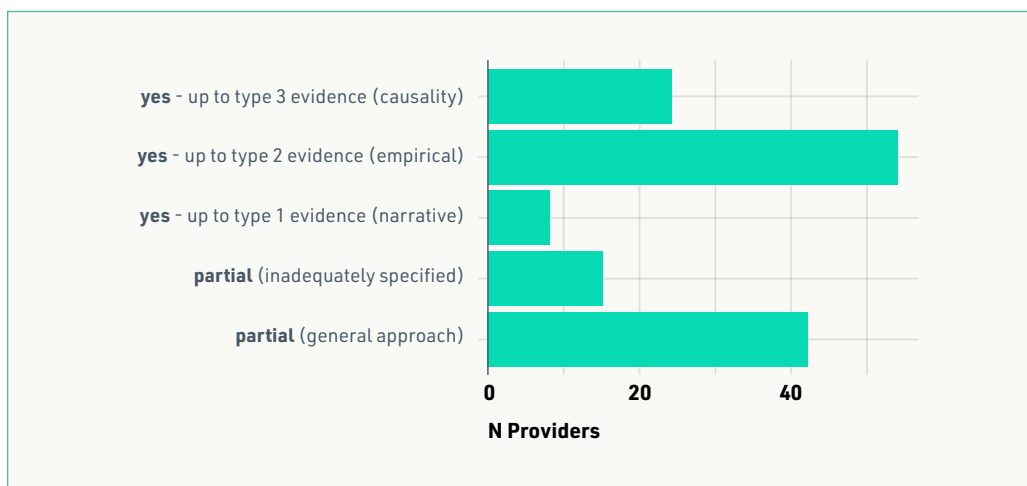
eradicated the EDAG (N=77). This is unsurprising given the key performance target set by the OfS at the time to ‘eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes between White students and Black students by 2024-25’ (OfS, 2018). The highest specified target was 39%, while the average target across all HEPs was 5% (mean=4.9%, median=5.0%). The highest specified target was 39%, while the average target across all HEPs was 5% (mean=4.9%, median=5.0%). There was no significant relationship between a provider’s 2020-21 gap and provider target.

Evaluation strategies varied between providers (see Figure 2), with the majority detailing plans for up to Type 2 (empirical) evidence in their evaluation plans. A surprising number did not include a specific strategy for their own evaluation but, rather, provided an overview of how such an evaluation would be developed.

**Figure 1: Types of approaches used to address the EDAG**



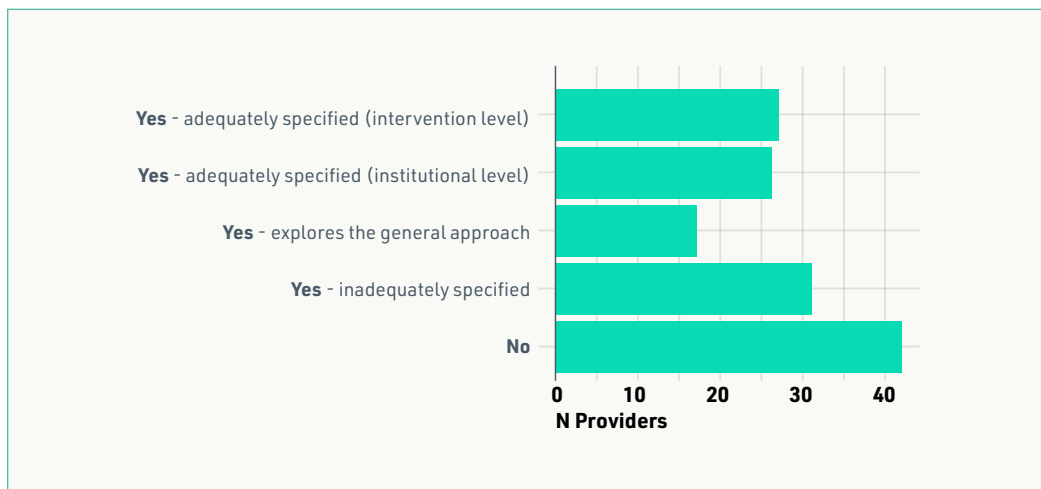
**Figure 2: Standards of evidence demonstrated in APP evaluation strategies**





ToC models showed a similar degree of variability between providers (see Figure 3), although over 40 HEPs did not include a ToC model in their APP.

**Figure 3: ToC specificity included in APPs**



## Key Themes from Stakeholder Interviews:

- **The role of people:** Across the sector, we found a real recognition of and enthusiasm for the need to address the EDAG and an understanding that a range of roles across a provider is crucial in embedding and carrying out this work. The collective staff body is important in creating a whole-provider approach; however, one-of-a-kind individuals were hailed as catalysts for effective progress. There was some concern that meaningful work may stagnate or cease if these individuals were to move roles. Successes and frustrations were both attributed to senior leadership approaches. However, this sits alongside a recognition that sustained progress requires buy-in and effort from everyone.
- **Identifying what is needed:** Providers have different levels of knowledge and understanding, depending on their own journeys, but the sector is broadly aware of the EDAG. Despite this awareness, however, the sector lacks confidence about how to address the gap. Having understood the scale of the issue and the 'wicked' nature of the gap, the task may feel overwhelming. There is also a feeling that there are very few 'safe spaces' to talk, share and learn, without fear of blame or reputational consequence for 'getting things wrong'. There is a clear desire for such a space.
- **Addressing inequality as a long-term endeavour:** Part of the challenge in addressing the EDAG is that sustainable change takes a long time to implement, embed and materially impact student outcomes. In HE, however, there is often a desire to fit work into an annual academic calendar. For those working in this space, it can be easy to lose motivation if change is not observed. Some approaches are designed to fit into a short period; however, the nature of these approaches may not result in sustainable change.
- **Integrating evaluation work:** The sector has a good awareness of the need for evidence-informed practice, and the need to evaluate approaches to addressing the EDAG. However, capacity and capability for evaluation vary greatly between HEPs. While some providers use shorter-term proxy measures, they are not confident that these short- and medium-term outcomes will lead to a sustained reduction in the EDAG. Furthermore, the desire to address racial inequalities leads HEPs to try multiple approaches at the same time, making it more challenging to determine which interventions – if any – were effective.
- **Provider-specific approaches:** Providers are keen to learn from their neighbours, but do recognise that what is needed depends on unique contextual factors. That is, providers need to understand their own local context and needs in order to develop approaches that will address specific challenges to equality. This is a challenge in a space where providers look to learn from one another and lack confidence in addressing the gap, as it means there is no blueprint to follow.
- **Centring students:** Students are central to addressing the EDAG, and there is a need for HEPs to consider how student voices are sought and valued. For effective progress to be made, students from representative ethnic and cultural backgrounds need to be involved not only in 'rubber stamping' plans, but rather in developing and implementing approaches themselves.

## Conclusions

Many of the findings in this report reiterate concepts and factors that have been highlighted in research into inequalities in HE over the past decade (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2018; Equality Challenge Unit, 2014; HEFCE, 2018; Pilkington, 2013; Singh, 2011; Thomas et al., 2017). Various sources have highlighted a focus on data, students as change agents, stages of the provider's approach and the role of individuals leading organisational change (e.g. Equality Challenge Unit, 2017; HEFCE, 2018; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Oloyede, Christoffersen & Cornish, 2021). The significance of differentiated resources and student demographics reiterates similar findings from Boliver (2015). The long and cyclical nature of the discourse reflects the inertia, lack of innovation, and repetition/recycling of 'drag and drop' interventions identified in the report.

## Recommendations

The sector lacks confidence in successfully addressing the EDAG and is seeking toolkits, guidance and advice about *what* to do. This project was intended to explore the current landscape of approaches to addressing the EDAG and does not, therefore, provide such guidance. Rather, the following recommendations are based on evidence of current practice in developing approaches and evaluations, framed particularly within the context of ToC and evaluation design.



## Develop Robust ToC and Evaluation Plans

By considering the nuances of different approaches, providers will be better placed to develop interventions that are tailored to their own organisational context, and which consider both barriers and facilitators in order to improve their efficacy. ToC and evaluation plans should be developed while planning interventions to maximise the likelihood of success. The key recommendations for planning interventions based on the findings from this project are:

- **Focus on clarity:** Of APPs which had targets to reduce the ethnicity degree awarding gap, approximately two thirds (N=43) did not include a ToC within their APP. Of those that did, a large proportion (N=30) were inadequately detailed - it was unclear how the intervention would ultimately lead to a reduction in the gap.  
Providers must develop robust ToCs with clearly articulated mechanisms of change linking activities to desired outcomes. In doing this, providers must focus on measurable intermediate outcomes which they theorise are linked to the gap, for example, a sense of belonging.
- **Plan for long-term sustained change:** Long-term approaches are harder to plan and implement, given the varied and sometimes unpredictable challenges facing the sector. Effective plans need to recognise that eradicating the EDAG is a long-term undertaking and to identify those factors which risk distracting from the awarding gap and mitigate against them. In doing so, HEPs can explicitly plan for the different stages required for change and set concrete, short and medium-term interim outcomes.
- **Integrate bottom-up and top-down activities within organisational approaches:** HEPs and regulators should recognise the value of both top-down and bottom-up approaches. A range of bottom-up activities exist, from local or regional student activism to contextualised events or small-scale campaigns and conversations with individual colleagues. For example, students at one provider developed and ran an event celebrating Black cultures for students in the city. At other providers, staff are trying new ways to support their students in and beyond the classroom, which may be promising ways of tackling the EDAG. Instead of aiming for a 'silver bullet' organisational approach that will

close the gap, recognise that sustained change relies on a combination of bottom-up grassroots and top-down organisational approaches. Targeting many approaches for small but sustainable change through holistic mechanisms may yield more effective outcomes.

- **Be clear on accountability and responsibility:** When embarking on approaches to address the EDAG, be clear about who has responsibility for undertaking the work, who will be accountable, who needs to be consulted and who needs to be informed. Through the stakeholder consultations and APPs, we found strong evidence of where students were included in developing approaches. In providers without a strong existing relationship or community with marginalised ethnicity groups, the foundational step here may be to develop trust with students, recognising that trust is earned. Where staff and students feel that their contributions are tokenised or ignored, this may create mistrust and make subsequent student engagement more challenging.
- **Develop multi-stage approaches:** Where the ultimate change is to reduce gaps in student success outcomes, the approach may include multiple stages, for example, securing buy-in, adapting the organisational structure, training staff, updating the curriculum and re-engaging students. This requires multiple layers of intervention, and systematic engagement and evaluation, to join up discrete areas of activity with continuous processes to conduct and support the entire chain of causality. Too often, the web is broken by an inability to stay on task and/or poor resourcing and coordination.
- **Articulate foundations and prerequisites for change:** A large amount of work conducted is not an 'intervention' but, rather, foundational work to support future changes. Within APPs, the foremost preliminary approach was to develop an infrastructure for using learning analytics or student data to develop organisational knowledge and understanding of the EDAG context. Such examples still fit within a logic model but providers need to consider what the 'success' of this stage of the approach would look like. To ensure preliminary activities are linked to meaningful interventions, they should be mapped to a ToC.

- **Consider the mechanisms of change:** Recognise that the success of an approach is as much about *how* it is undertaken as *what* is undertaken. When implementing approaches, effective recruitment, leadership and support are required to ensure that the people who are responsible for undertaking the work have a genuine interest in it, the skills to make measurable progress, and the support and resources to do so. Consider how and why an approach will effect change and the factors that may impact the efficacy of an approach, and recognise the barriers and facilitators to achieving change. These should all be mapped out in a ToC.
- **Reflect on and address ethical aspects:** Ensure that approaches consider the potential harms they may cause to staff and students from marginalised ethnicity groups and take into consideration how they will be perceived. Consider that tokenistic consultation might harm relationships with student groups, and consultation which requires students to relive experiences of discrimination and harassment may be retraumatising.
- **Incorporate continuous evaluation:** Apply an iterative approach to evaluation (see TASO's [Monitoring and Evaluation Framework](#)) to monitor whether approaches are leading to the desired outcomes or whether changes are needed to adapt interventions to the factors identified in the planning and design

phases. These could be discipline-specific applications or dimensions designed to foster sociocultural factors, such as a sense of belonging or inclusion.

### Recognise and Support Key People Who Effect Change

Providers typically have one or two 'key' staff who 'carry' the provider's approach to addressing inequalities in student outcomes. In some cases, these staff are not formally responsible or accountable for this role, but may be valued by the provider. The role of these key people is typically not recognised within plans to address the EDAG, and there is typically no indication of which individuals or roles are accountable for change.

Unless these staff are recognised, supported and resourced, they may face burn-out and feel unable to continue in the role. Concerns were expressed that if key staff were to leave the provider, the work they were leading would stagnate, or even deteriorate.

The challenge for authentic leaders is that sustained change requires authenticity, but the current landscape does not facilitate shared authentic responsibility. By reflecting on organisational structures and explicitly allocating accountability and responsibility for addressing inequalities, providers can best determine what systemic changes can be implemented to support these challenges.



## Use Data to Inform Action

Developing organisational knowledge and understanding of the EDAG is one of the most common approaches used by HEPs. It is indeed necessary to develop an awareness of the specific organisational context and needs, which can then be used to develop tailored approaches. However, against a backdrop of organisational diffidence, there is a potential for HEPs to become comfortable simply discussing and developing knowledge, in an ongoing pursuit to secure more data.

Within this context, there is a balance to be found between developing knowledge and understanding from research, evaluations and learning analytics, and taking bold, decisive action to develop approaches to addressing inequality. Ongoing evaluation enables providers to use their own evidence of efficacy and challenges to adopt and adapt approaches in near real time.

By including data analysis as a stage in the organisational ToC, providers can recognise the importance of this stage and use their findings to inform later stages of the approach.

## Work With Students to Address the Gap

Acknowledge that students are experts in their student experience, and that their experiences are not homogenous. By including students, providers can recognise how different approaches may address different barriers to equality.

A key element in this is to move away from a model that only consults students on plans to address inequality, and instead develop models for student co-creation. Such models should avoid tokenism and offer students the flexibility to influence the changes that matter to them. They should also consider and address barriers to students engaging in this work – including the ability to give time to unpaid extra-curricular work.

Providers may experience initial challenges in securing the engagement of students from diverse backgrounds, due to general mistrust. Before embarking on effective co-creation with students, providers may need to spend time earning the trust of marginalised ethnicity student groups.

## Be Uncomfortable

Low levels of confidence in addressing inequality, and high levels of discomfort in discussing issues of race and ethnicity, are barriers to progress for many HEPs. This is particularly evident with White staff, who may feel that they lack the expertise or lived experience to effect change. Additionally, the scale of the causal roots of the EDAG can feel overwhelming and this can, in turn, contribute to inertia in taking decisive action. A concern about blame or reputational consequences for saying or doing 'the wrong thing' can block progress. Nurturing 'safe' environments where providers can discuss plans and experiences with others without fear of blame or reputational damage will enable more effective conversations and more deliberate action to address these inequalities.

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