

## The black award gap

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### ***Presentation abstract***

The Learning Development team at the University of Northampton has been developing research projects to understand the extent and potential causes of award gaps (Coulson and Loddick, 2020; Loddick and Coulson, 2020; Coulson, Loddick and Rice, 2021).

However, the team was not prepared for other findings that emerged from this research related to the Black award gap. Firstly, Black students who engage with a tutorial can see an improvement of up to 4 sub grades. Secondly, analysing award gap data revealed that the Black award gap could be reduced by 50% by eliminating non-submission of assignments.

This mini keynote outlined the projects that have been developed: a project with Black students within the Foundation degree framework to ascertain why they might not submit their assignments and a second project to engage 'Black Student Advocates' will also be outlined. The challenges of this work were also shared.

Questions posed:

1. How has your institution approached the Black award gap?
2. How might you contribute to the reduction (or elimination) of the Black award gap?
3. Can we eliminate the Black award gap?

**Keywords:** award gap; learning development; impact; tutorials; assignment submission

### ***Community response***

'Kate facilitated a fascinating discussion. The headline findings showed that:

- 1) Learning Development tutorials have a positive impact on self-reported confidence;
- 2) Students who attended Learning Development tutorials improved their grades;
- 3) The (UK student) Black Awarding Gap could be reduced immediately by 50% if non-submission and capped grades were eradicated.

and therefore:

- 4) Learning Development teams are important financial investments for HEIs as they impact on student outcomes.'

'This is a particularly hot topic at my institution at the moment – I think this is a hot topic everywhere – and although our consensus was that the award gap cannot be entirely eliminated, it was reassuring to see the impact that LD can have on reducing the gap. The evidence of these research projects is invaluable in proving the overall impact of LD services but also gives us more of a voice to engage in conversations about reducing the award gap. It was great to see that Kate had managed to find ways that LD could be part of that.'

'This interesting session addressed a key question and one I think we need to get a hold of: how do we measure our impact? I think we all know that we do have an impact on student retention, attainment and progression (all hot topics) but haven't quite managed to evidence it. I think the work done at Northampton goes some way to addressing this and I am pleased to see that 'management' took note and this allowed the LD team to progress their ideas and have even more impact.'

'This is a great start to this. However, each institution is different and just addressing non-submission, for example, would not have the same effect at our institution as we already have different ways of dealing with that. I am not sure we will find the same impact of non-submissions at my institution, so I'd like to investigate this further. There is such a lot of work to still do on this issue. I am sure we DO make a difference, we've just got to find our own way of proving it.'

'In terms of the questions of whether we can remove the awarding gap altogether, there was an excellent starting point with 'yes, we've done it in schools' (although there is still some way to go, see: Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). Part of the problem is that progress has also left other groups behind (with white British boys also

under-achieving). Similarly, it was disappointing that the research discussed in this session was focused on UK students only. There is a desperate need to look at this more holistically - and inclusive of international students. One take-away, however, was Northampton's new projects looking into negotiated assessment and negotiated referencing. These have the opportunity to impact all students. I also liked the involvement of the Black Student Advocates via their Student Union on an upcoming project. Fundamentally, it was reassuring to see Learning Development could have an impact on this key issue.'

### ***Author's reflection***

I found the three individual mini keynote sessions very different - they were all positive and welcoming but the focus in each session varied:

- Session 1 - A focus on definitions about "black" and "award gap" and where we should be focussing. Lots of discussion about how we can undertake small things that will contribute to a larger shift within academia.
- Session 2 - Lots of stats chat about how statistically the gap cannot be removed but it can be narrowed, and lamenting that it will take decades, if not longer to achieve.
- Session 3 - A more robust debate about systemic racism and systemic challenges to the award gap, with the onus on moving a focus from it being a problem caused by the student and, therefore, their responsibility, to it being a systemic and organisational issue that is wider than even HE.

I came away very pleased that so many colleagues wanted to listen to what I had to say. I have struggled with admitting that I don't have all the answers and I do get some of this anti-racist work wrong but I try hard and I am learning.

I sense that this mini keynote debate will feed into the new EDI CoP/Working Group quite well.

### ***Acknowledgments***

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### **Statement on AI use:**

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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