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Addressing the Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap through writing retreats: a case study and reflection

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Abstract

The awarding gap between UK-domiciled full-time Black and white students is a significant problem at HE institutions across the country. This paper examines a case study of a dissertation writing retreat programme which sought to address this awarding gap at a university in the south of England. The programme was based on an innovative 'three Cs' framework which focused on three core areas: Community, Culture, and Curriculum. Inspired by the community-building and curriculum elements of the framework, the programme built trust and collaboration between specialists and students, aiming to empower Black students to excel in one of the most important and impactful aspects of their degree, whilst also providing them with a space to engage positively with their peers and the wider university community.

Keywords: academic writing; writing retreat; dissertation; awarding gap; widening participation; social mobility.

Introduction

Within UK Higher Education (HE), there exists a serious and persistent attainment gap for students from marginalised ethnic backgrounds. This ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG) is particularly marked for specific student groups: in 2021/22, the proportion of white students graduating with a first- or upper second-class degree was 83.3% but this fell to 62.8% for UK-domiciled Black students, equating to a 20.5% gap (Advance HE, 2023). It is vital that HEIs focus on closing this gap, given that university entry

requirements are the same irrespective of ethnicity and that proportionate recruitment, completion, and pass rates exist across different student groups (Rai and Simpson, 2023). Furthermore, given that first-class or upper second-class degrees are often the minimum entry requirements for graduate jobs and postgraduate courses, the continuing existence of the EDAG has a profound long-term impact for many students from minority ethnic groups across the country.

The reasons for the EDAG are myriad, complex, and often highly contested. It is widely recognised that all students in HE are currently encountering a range of issues including the increased cost of living (Russell Group, 2023), balancing studies with paid work (Sutton Trust, 2023), and feelings of isolation (TASO, 2023). Students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds often face additional challenges, such as a lack of representation within the staff population (Universities UK, 2022), the curriculum (Arday, Branchu and Boliver, 2022), and reading matter (Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2020). Further, students also report experiences of direct racism and microaggressions within HEIs (Wong, ElMorally and Copsey-Blake, 2020). When viewed cumulatively, these barriers underline how and why many students from marginalised ethnicity backgrounds experience a lack of belonging on campus and report feeling a sense of 'otherness' in HE settings (Osbourne, Barnett and Blackwell, 2022).

This article provides a case study of a dissertation retreat programme aligned with the goal of reducing the EDAG and centred around 'three C's' – Community, Culture, and Curriculum – a framework identified through student consultation and research within our institution. Drawing upon the community-building and curriculum elements of the framework, the retreat programme sought to empower Black students to excel in one of the most impactful aspects of their degree, whilst providing them with a space to engage positively with their peers and the wider university community. The programme was organised collaboratively by academic skills specialists and professional services colleagues responsible for student success, all of whom work within a central Widening Participation and Social Mobility (WPSM) directorate at a university in southern England. Collaboration between WPSM colleagues was central to the success of the retreats as we engaged actively in a shared goal: ensuring that the dissertation retreat programme made a meaningful impact in addressing the EDAG and providing transformational change for individual students (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004; Wise, 2022; Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2023). Collaborative efforts meant that students who attended the retreats not

only developed their academic skills, including academic writing and goal setting, but they also improved in other areas: specifically reporting increased feelings of self-efficacy and confidence. As the retreat programme is in the first year of its inception, we hope that the retreats will have positively impacted the likelihood of these students completing their dissertations and/or improve their scores on this part of their degree programmes. This will then lead to improved overall degree classifications for those on the retreat, increasing the number of Black students awarded a 'good degree', which in turn will reduce the awarding gap.

Writing retreats

Structured writing retreats have become increasingly popular within HE in recent years, offering academic development opportunities for faculty and early-career and postgraduate researchers. Those who attend make substantial progress with writing projects, experience a focused, productive environment away from other distractions and build collaborative networks (Moore, 2003; Murray and Newton, 2009; Swaggerty et al., 2011; Casey, Barron and Gordon, 2013; Papen and Thériault, 2018). Structured retreats are centred on three core elements: firstly, participants write together in a shared space; secondly, the organisation of each day into fixed writing slots; and thirdly, the discussion of writing progress, goals, and achievements, interspersed throughout the programme (Murray, 2008; Murray and Newton, 2009). The retreat format can vary from a single day on campus or virtual retreats to multi-day residential provision. The role of the facilitator – who usually has expertise in academic writing development – is important, as they are responsible for establishing the framework: initiating and closing blocks of writing time, facilitating discussion, goal setting, and prompting reflection by participants (Murray and Newton, 2009).

There are numerous benefits to attending a writing retreat. The provision of dedicated time and space for writing increases productivity and efficiency (Grant, 2006) and leads to a greater motivation to write (Moore, 2003). There are also more complex, lasting benefits: writing retreats can impact the wellbeing of those who attend (Eardley, Banister and Fletcher, 2020), support their self-efficacy and self-regulation when tasked with significant writing projects (Vincent et al., 2023) and increase the likelihood that participants self-identify as 'writers' (Papen and Thériault, 2018). Furthermore, the retreat can be a

'mechanism for establishing a community of practice of writers' (Murray and Newton, 2009, p.550), and this sense of community can allow participants to become 'more actively engaged agents in their own academic development' (Cunningham, 2022, p.1423). Nevertheless, despite the many positive benefits of writing retreats, their use is mainly reserved for academic staff and postgraduate research students. Those studies which do exist on participation by undergraduates largely focus on retreat interventions which are offered within discipline-specific contexts, often embedding the retreat within a semester-long module of teaching and learning activities (Davenport, 2022). Whilst there is value in the discussion of the community-building practices of undergraduate retreats for the current case study, our focus on addressing the EDAG meant that our participants were drawn from a variety of disciplines, with many having never met before, making the need for trust and collaboration between staff and students, as well as between students themselves, even more vital to achieve.

The dissertation retreat programme

The Academic Skills team – comprising specialists in academic writing, study skills, and mathematics and statistics – has an established role in supporting undergraduates with their dissertations. We knew that our existing support (including one-to-one appointments and pop-up events) was valuable to undergraduates completing a final year project. However, we were also aware that our service was under-utilised by students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds, including those from minority ethnic groups. Given the EDAG at the university, it was also important to connect with Black students and facilitate a sense of institutional belonging. By choosing to focus on the dissertation, a double-weighted section of the degree programme, we realised we might be able to achieve this whilst simultaneously facilitating a significant impact on their final grades.

The dissertation retreats were designed collaboratively by Writing and Study Skills Officers. The plan was to deliver the retreats in various formats to provide maximum accessibility, and to this end we offered students a two-day on-campus, a virtual, and a three-day residential, retreat. The design of the programme drew on our pedagogical and subject-specific knowledge, our experience as practitioners, and rigorous research into both structured retreats and engagement by WP students. However, to recruit, communicate, and engage effectively with the students, we needed to collaborate

O'Connell and Daniell
Addressing the Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap through writing retreats:
a case study and reflection

with colleagues within our wider directorate. The Student Success team in WPSM work closely with students through their oversight of scholarships, awarding gap programmes, and student panels. We came together, the Academic Skills team organising the pedagogical design of the retreats, and the Student Success team drawing on their established levels of trust and credibility with students to ensure 'buy-in' and create an effective recruitment and communications strategy for the retreats.

Through conversations between the Academic Skills and Student Success teams, it was decided that whilst the retreats would be targeted primarily at full-time UK domiciled Black undergraduate students, the eligibility criteria should also include students from other WP groups, specifically care experienced and IMDQ1 students. An Expression of Interest (EOI) form was created, and it was decided that the recruitment process for the retreats would be tiered:

- **Tier 1: Students nominated directly by the Student Inclusion team.** Members of the Inclusion team contacted students they worked closely with, communicating the purpose of the retreats and the benefits of attending. Building on these established connections, nominated students were provided with priority access to the EOI form, a few days before other applications were considered.
- **Tier 2: Students involved in Student Success projects but not nominated by staff.** This tier encompassed students who were part of WPSM's flagship scholarship programme, Ignite Your Success, as well as those from the Awarding Gap Project, Care Experienced, and Estranged students.
- **Tier 3: Any other students who met the retreat eligibility criteria.** (IMDQ1, Black/mixed Black ethnicity, Care Experienced, and Estranged).

On-campus day retreats

The on-campus retreats were organised over two non-consecutive days at the start of November 2023. The dates were chosen so that students would be making progress on their dissertations, but there remained a reasonable gap between the day retreats and the residential, taking place in January. Central to the day retreats was their in-built flexibility. Our aim was to facilitate attendance at lectures and seminars whilst still providing the opportunity for the students to participate in as much of the retreat as possible. Therefore,

we decided that students would be free to leave the retreat location, attend classes and then return, so long as this was done quietly and with respect for others in the room. Further, because many students were unfamiliar with the retreat format, the writing slots were limited to 45 minutes. This allowed attendees to fully focus on the task at hand. This initial retreat included formal taught components to familiarise students with the requirements of the retreat format. One of the Writing Skills Officers ran a short session at the start of the day, introducing students to effective goal setting and guiding them in academic writing practices and skills. This meant that each 45-minute writing block could begin with the students (in pairs or small groups) setting a goal or intention. We encouraged the students to ensure these were SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-limited), to commit them to writing and discussing them with their peers in order to foster accountability. Likewise, the sessions would end with a five-minute review period, where students would reflect on whether they had met their goals and, if not, what they might do differently next time. There were also overarching goal setting and reflection periods at the start and end of the day so students could celebrate their progress and observe how much they had achieved over a day's focused work.

Virtual retreat

The retreat progamme was meticulously planned. However, we had not factored in the weather. During the week leading up to the second of the day retreats, it became clear that adverse weather conditions would make it dangerous for both staff and students to make their way onto campus. Rather than cancelling altogether, the Academic Skills team decided the retreat would go online. We had only a day's notice to inform students, and again worked closely with the Student Success team to ensure effective communications, sending invites to students via email and other communications channels.

Making the retreat virtual was a relatively straightforward exercise because many of the elements we had included in the in-person event transferred naturally to an online environment. We divided the day into the writing sessions as planned and set up each session as a separate Teams call, so that students could come and go as they needed to. The goal-setting and reflective elements remained too – although rather than talking directly to peers, we set up a Padlet so that students could post their intentions there.

O'Connell and Daniell
Addressing the Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap through writing retreats:
a case study and reflection

Residential retreat

The culmination of the Dissertation Retreat Programme was the residential retreat, which took place over three days in late January 2024 at Cumberland Lodge, an educational charity which acts as a venue for residential events. As well as carrying over the writing blocks and goal setting from the on-campus days, we used reflections and informal feedback from students and staff to shape the design of the residential one. From this, key strategies for ensuring the effectiveness of the residential retreat were developed:

- Students were given a pre-retreat preparation task which encouraged them to stimulate ideas, take ownership of their learning, and prepare to focus on their dissertations over the three days. They needed to identify three aspects of their dissertation which they wanted to work on during the retreat, organise the materials they would need to bring with them, and consider any obstacles which might arise – together with how they would overcome them. Students wrote this down and brought it with them to the retreat.

- The retreat space was used to optimise accessibility and cater to the diverse physical, mental, and emotional needs of students. As well as having the shared space of the more formal 'writing room', another room was available if students required a quieter space to make progress with their work. A member of the Academic Skills team also worked in this space and was available for one-to-one discussion and coaching with students.

- Staff with a range of specialisms attended the retreat. Writing, as well as Maths and Statistics officers were available to discuss work with students. A member of the Student Success team also acted as the pastoral support contact for students, in case they required it.

- Communal meals and non-writing time were built in as essential components of the retreat. These were the times and spaces where students got to know their peers and staff more fully, building mutual bonds of trust and fostering a sense of belonging. Students built relationships with both their peers and the support staff which allowed them to talk through their writing progress openly in the knowledge that they were in a safe space where they would be treated with encouragement and respect.

Key lessons from the retreat programme's initial year

The retreats proved to be very popular, with 52 students participating across the programme, with consistent high-quality engagement by target groups throughout the process. Students worked well, grouped together at tables, and reported that they were more productive than usual, due to the environment, accountability, and uninterrupted writing time. They embraced goal-setting and reflective activities, setting themselves (mostly) achievable targets and thinking constructively about any failures. Academic Skills staff had productive conversations with those who ran up against problems: so, instead of becoming blocked or immediately asking staff to provide them with a solution, students were more proactive in tackling any writing barriers they encountered, taking ownership of their own learning, and remedying problems through collaborative discussion with peers and focused effort.

Trust and collaboration were essential to the organisation, design, and delivery of the retreat programme, particularly between facilitators and students. As facilitators, we focused very much on levelling off the normal staff-student hierarchy, beginning the residential retreat by talking about our own experience of writing a larger research project (for example, the challenges and feelings about the process of academic writing). We then drew on the rapport we had built with students during one-to-one interactions, and encouraged discussion of the writing process, allowing students the time and space to express their feelings about their work.

This trust and collaboration were also essential to our goal of fostering a sense of 'belonging' and community for the students who attended. In planning the retreat, we decided to keep numbers of attendees fairly low with 20 students attending the residential, in order to more easily build relationships on a one-to-one basis – both between us and students and between the students themselves. This paved the way for peer-to-peer collaboration and discussion, which in turn allowed students to view each other as important sounding boards in the process of refining their thinking and drafting their dissertations. One of the most unexpected outcomes from the retreat was the value of communal meals and leisure time. It was in these more informal settings that students asked each other questions about their dissertations and the repeated articulation of their projects allowed them to refine their writing even further.

However, the pilot year of retreats did present challenges which we will use to refine the programme in the next academic year. One issue was low engagement by students in preparatory exercises leading up to the retreats, crucial for maximising the benefits of the retreat experience. Additionally, catering to a diverse cohort with varying needs posed a challenge. Some students thrived in communal work environments, while others required solitude to concentrate, necessitating a careful balance to ensure that all learners felt supported and productive. To address these challenges, we will further refine the scope and evaluation of the initiative. Going forwards, we will recruit a core group of 30 students at the end of second year, creating a comprehensive package of group coaching sessions, workshops and retreats to encourage consistent participation in the programme and build stronger bonds of community amongst students. The pilot year evaluated the retreats through student feedback and staff reflective logs. In the refined retreat programme, evaluation will be enhanced through a tripartite student survey at the beginning, middle, and end, alongside observations of group coaching sessions and staff reflective journals. Improved evaluation will provide more comprehensive and timely insights, supporting the need for targeted interventions which can effectively address the EDAG.

Conclusion

The Dissertation Retreat Programme was successful on a number of levels. It was an impactful and innovative attempt to developing address awarding gaps for Black students. It drew on the wide range of expertise of both the Academic Skills and Student Success Teams; and it demonstrated the efficacy of the structured retreat model for undergraduate students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds. Whilst the EDAG remains a sector-wide issue, the retreat programme offers lessons for practitioners on the importance of developing initiatives centred on trust and collaborative practices with students. These can then be used to leverage cultural change and make important impacts towards reducing awarding gaps. Going forwards, we hope that the expansion of the retreat programme will have a transformative impact in increasing students' academic self-efficacy, dissertation performance, and sense of community, thereby making the project an exemplar of good practice in addressing awarding gaps.

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