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Learning to ‘write right’: examining the impact of targeted interventions upon students experiencing intersectional disadvantage

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Abstract

This case study analyses two initiatives at the University of Kent that aimed to tackle student degree awarding gaps (DAGs), specifically those between black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students and white students and those who have studied for Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) qualifications and A-level students. The initiatives involved inclusive academic skills workshops alongside supervision sessions that sought to direct, develop and demystify academic study for disadvantaged students. Assessment of quantitative data and the findings from a cohort focus group indicate that students experiencing the most intersectional disadvantage (*viz.* students with both BAME and BTEC characteristics) in a University of Kent social sciences department benefited from these initiatives and their grades improved, narrowing the awarding gap significantly in that academic year.

Key words: higher education, intersectionality, BAME, BTEC, awarding gaps

Introduction

The pernicious problem of degree awarding gaps (DAGs) in United Kingdom (UK) higher education (HE) has been identified and explored by many authors, focusing particularly upon the gap between black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) home students and their white counterparts in terms of the likelihood of their achieving what has been described as a ‘good degree’ – a 2:1 classification or above (Austen *et al.*, 2017; Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting, 2022; Jeavons, Leguizamon and Cole, 2024). However structural impediments to academic success have also been suggested to intersect; for example, degree outcomes at 2:1 or higher are less likely if students have previously studied for vocational – such as a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) – rather than academic qualifications (Gartland and Smith, 2018; Peake, 2018). In this case study, I examine the impact of two concurrent initiatives that sought to tackle these intersectional gaps in a social sciences department at the University of Kent, specifically the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (SSPSSR). Using qualitative data from student focus groups and quantitative data relating to student characteristics and their respective grades, this case study demonstrates how the initiatives worked together to enhance a sense of belonging among disadvantaged student groups, to develop their skills by directing them to relevant services or sessions that would assist them, and to demystify the academic world.

Degree awarding gaps

There is long-standing evidence, going back as far as the 1990s (Connor *et al.*, 1996) and persisting to the present day (Hensby and Adewumi, 2024; Bolton and Lewis, 2023), that students from ethnic minority groups in the UK are less likely to graduate with a good degree than their white counterparts – this in spite of the fact that this group’s participation rate in HE has been rising since the start of this century and now far exceeds that of white students (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2017; Department of Education, 2015).

‘Intersectionality’ (Crenshaw, 1989) refers to how inequalities can overlap and compound in society. In relation to BAME higher education and DAGs, it has been found that factors such as gender and social class further compound these statistics (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Richardson, Mittelmeier and Rienties, 2020), as do such other characteristics as age, disability or part-time study. BTEC-entry students in particular – compared to those entering university with A levels – are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic groups (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014), to belong to an ethnic minority group, or to have a disability (Kelly, 2017, pp.11-12).

Though addressing DAGs has become a priority within HE policy, there is little consensus about what helps to narrow them (Banerjee, 2024, p. 33). Many solutions focus upon teaching materials and reading lists. Extra-curricular and support provision – for example, to enhance academic skills – tend to receive less attention, despite being as important to a student’s success as the delivery of specific academic content. There are also many features of the university setting that may perpetuate exclusion and it has been argued that universities must open up ‘discourses of the academic world’, also described as ‘academic literacies’ (Taylor *et al.*, 1988) and enable access to the ‘unthinkable’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 29). For example, non-traditional students, such as those entering with BTECs or those from BAME backgrounds, can lack awareness of – or not feel entitled to request – additional support (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2017). It is through making explicit HE’s vague and esoteric practices that students can begin to see themselves as ‘insiders’ in this setting and develop a sense of belonging and community, which in turn helps with their engagement and improves their grades, particularly so in the case of those most likely to drop out of their degree (Thomas, 2012). Through these networks of discourse and support, students can develop resilience, autonomy, self-regulation and self-realisation within their studies (Cross and Atinde, 2015).

Context

In SSPSSR, the BAME/white DAG in the year 2018/19 was 23%, but had been as severe as 26% in the preceding years (University of Kent, 2023). To attempt to tackle this issue, a group of students who were deemed to be at risk of under-attainment was selected prior to the autumn term of 2019. This group comprised students (n = 38) who identified as black, Asian and/or minority ethnic *and* had an average grade at the end of stage 2 of between 55 and 61.

These students were targeted because their results were close to the 2:2 and 2:1 borderline (60) and small improvements could therefore result in an upping of their final qualification category. Cynically, it could be argued that students with borderline grade averages represent the ‘low-hanging fruit’ in tackling DAGs, but the fact that a large proportion of BAME students had also entered university with a BTEC (n=26) meant that this group’s members were far

more likely *not* to attain a 2:1, owing to the intersectional inequities facing them. These students were, therefore, also considered to be the most at risk within this particular department.

The students were collectively told of their borderline grades and presented with DAG-related data and theory both at the university and in HE more generally. They were then, in October 2020, invited to an introductory workshop designed to address the fact that students are frequently excluded from DAG-related discussions at the higher levels of university administration and HE governance (Wong, ElMorally and Copsey-Blake, 2021). A recent report highlights the importance of 1) working directly with students to address DAGs (Andrews *et al.*, 2023, p. 44) and 2) authenticity and building trust with marginalised groups, which are generally mistrustful of institutions (*op.cit.*, p.10). Within liberatory pedagogy, students must “*recognize their historical, racial, class, and gender situatedness*” (Giroux and McLaren, 1991, p. 33), which includes being made aware of structural inequalities that may affect them, and they must be offered opportunities to participate in and to direct potential solutions. Care was taken to provide a comfortable space in which students were not pathologised (Ng’andu and Adewumi, 2024) in relation to their race, ethnicity, entry qualifications or current grades. The following solutions were developed co-creatively with the students in that session, following a workshop and discussion on how DAGs ought to be tackled collectively.

The intervention

Firstly, the targeted students were invited to attend a weekly ‘WriteRight!’ workshop programme – a module designed to engage students and to make academic work enjoyable (as well as to improve grades). The module had, each week, a different focus, including academic writing (*e.g.* referencing, introductions, conclusions, editing *etc.*), assessments (*e.g.* exam skills) and generic skills (*e.g.* time management). The programme is open to all students at all levels of study as a skills enhancement measure, and therefore does not carry the stigma associated with remedial classes. It involves a substantial amount of peer learning (for example, in workshops where students deconstruct one another’s feedback) and students are given pathways to academic literacy through what Morrow (2009) describes as ‘*epistemological access*’. For this, I worked alongside students towards making that which is unfamiliar about HE more familiar, including the oblique system of what is valued in the university environment. For example, one session involves working through and demystifying the marking scheme for coursework.

Secondly, I invited students to individual meetings with me, with the intention of equipping them to deal autonomously with the nuances and implicit structures that form university study. I termed these meetings ‘Triple D*’ supervisions. Inspired by the highest grade achievable at BTEC (DDD*) I coined the title – standing for ‘*Direct, Develop and Demystify*’ – because it was recognisable to students within the cohort as representative of academic success.

In the Triple D* supervision meetings, I discussed previous essay grades and feedback with students. I noted that many of the students in the cohort were in the 55-61 average grade category owing to variable grades (some very low and some very high) rather than being consistently 2:2 grade students. In these instances, I discussed both what students had ‘got right’ for their high-grade assignments and what the feedback was saying for assignments with

which they had been less successful. By discussing these things with the students, I got a stronger sense of what feedback they didn't understand, which areas they were struggling with and how to develop these aspects to improve their overall grades. I then: **directed** them to relevant, specific WriteRight! sessions that would help them; worked with them to **develop** and build upon the areas in which they were doing well (for example, if students were already conscientious planners, but not incorporating the essay plan into a structured introduction, I coached them on how to do that better); **demystified** aspects of assessment and feedback that students had misunderstood or were not aware of (for example, by talking over the marking scheme or feedback terminology and encouraging students to practice peer-marking one another's work using the scheme).

Evaluation

To assess the effectiveness of WriteRight! alongside the Triple D* supervisions, I used quantitative data relating to student characteristics, their respective grades, and their attendance at the WriteRight! programme across the academic year. These data were extracted from the University of Kent's central student data system and anonymised for the general data protection regulation (GDPR) in February 2020. I also collected qualitative data from a focus group (with five students from the target cohort) conducted during the exam period in June 2020. Participants were asked to reflect on the teaching and support they had received, how diverse they felt the curriculum was, and how helpful WriteRight! and the Triple D* supervisions were. This work was approved by the University's ethics committee, and the students involved in the focus groups signed informed consent forms. Owing to COVID-19 restrictions, the focus group took place on Zoom and all participants were advised to hide their real names and turn cameras off, to ensure their anonymity to other students in the group. This strategy aimed to prevent students from knowing who else was in the specific target cohort and their interpersonal relationships from affecting any information they imparted.

Findings

Triple D* supervision meetings

Of the targeted cohort, twenty-five of the thirty-eight students attended at least one Triple D* meeting. Twenty-eight (74%) achieved a 2:1 degree at the end of the academic year – this included three BAME students who did not attend the supervisions but had attended WriteRight! at least once. The remaining ten BAME students from the target cohort who did not achieve a 2:1 were students who did not attend either of the supervisions or any WriteRight! sessions.

In the focus groups, participants mentioned understanding the importance of these supervisions in contrast to the previous years' meetings with their academic advisers and, in particular, the frankness of the approach and accessibility of the supervision:

"I feel like they need to let students know that they have [a supervision] and what kind of help that they can offer, because I feel like, especially in first and second year it was very vague and you just don't know what the whole point was, but then third year [in the TripleD supervisions] I feel like it was more obvious."*

“Third year when I got a new academic adviser [for Triple D supervision] I feel like it was much better, like you know, [...] the emails and everything else just helped, to know that you could see someone, and second year we didn’t get anything like that, I didn’t even know the academic adviser.”*

WriteRight!

Though the expectation might be that students are likely to improve to some extent over the course of a year at university (and particularly in their final year), the quantitative data showed that WriteRight! attendance particularly improved grades for students who experienced intersectional disadvantage (figure 1). These data were captured from the period September 2019-February 2020, after the first two assignments per module were completed, and comprise stage 3 students only (n = 448). The most measurable improvement in grades was observed in students who were both BAME *and* entered the university with a BTEC only, *when* they attended at least one WriteRight! session. These students were shown to have improved by almost seven grade points on average, bringing their average grade up to just below 60. This can be compared to an improvement of only 2.8 for BAME BTEC students who did not attend any session. As this sample size is relatively small (n=26), BTEC-only students in general (n=49) are included here also to demonstrate how WriteRight! attendance encouraged an improvement of nearly two grade points for these students also.

The data for A Level-only students comprise the majority of students in SSPSSR and are included here, as a control, to demonstrate that attainment amongst this group was generally higher (it actually decreased slightly over the year regardless of attendance on the WriteRight! programme). This suggests that the combined BTEC and BAME students specifically showed substantial grade improvement compared to the control data.

A Level Only Students	Sample	Current Grade Average	Improvement since Summer 2019
Did not attend WR!	301	60.8	-1.14
Attended at least 1 WR!	96	59.9	-1.06
Total	397	60.9	-1.12
BTEC Only Students	Sample	Current Grade Average	Improvement since Summer 2019
Did not attend WR!	34	55.4	1.46
Attended at least 1 WR!	15	58.4	3.43
Total	49	56.3	2.07
BAME BTEC Only Students	Sample	Current Grade Average	Improvement since Summer 2019
Did not attend WR!	17	52.5	2.77
Attended at least 1 WR!	9	59.8	6.93
Total	26	55	4.21

Figure 1. Grade averages in February 2020, SSPSSR

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The focus group findings indicated that students had previously felt excluded from the discourses of success in their degree because it hadn't been made clear to them what success was or how to achieve it. Assignment feedback was universally described as 'vague' and focused on content rather than how arguments are conveyed or structured. Collectively, they identified how the process of academic improvement had been demystified for them since stage 2:

"In the past I didn't really know what was expected, in like coursework for you to submit, and I feel like the sessions made it so clear, like what you'd be expected to do and how to write, but I didn't know that before."

"I really didn't know if it [WriteRight!] would be useful, but like after going to one or two sessions I was like, yeah, it's actually really useful, and it helps you like be more engaged with your learning, and just know what you need to do [...] I feel like in second year I was just getting through it..."

In particular, students found the collective experience of working with their peers and giving them feedback in the workshops equally enlightening:

"The one where we discussed with other students, so that was helpful, to kind of also take a step back and be objective rather than looking at it as in 'this is my essay, blah, blah, blah'. Because you were then giving someone else feedback, and sort of taking a role of the marker, which I quite liked. [...] I think that was really useful just to see how other people have done it. "

The mention of enjoyment in 'taking a role of the marker' suggests that autonomy and confidence are also improved by this initiative.

One student in particular emphasised how knowing that she was a borderline 2:2/2:1 student encouraged her to attend WriteRight! in order to identify things to increase her grade:

"it'd be useful to go and just see like if there were things that I could identify and things that could just push the mark [up], especially like when I went into my third year and it'd be like the most important [for my degree]."

Beyond these qualitative findings, WriteRight! was also found to have had a positive effect in 2019-20 and 2020-21 as part of the University of Kent's Student Success Evaluation Framework (De La Torre *et al.*, 2024).

Outcome and concluding remarks

The BAME DAG in SSPSSR narrowed from 23% (2018/19) to 13% (2019/20). The BTEC DAG also narrowed by 18%, from 51% (2018/19) to 33% (2019/20). It is important to note that many universities saw a reduction in their DAGs during the COVID-19 pandemic, often attributed to being the result of so-called 'no detriment' or 'safety net' policies and online exams (McMaster, 2021; Walker, 2021). Whilst the former factor may have led to higher grades for some SSPSSR students, online exams did not play a role in these particular findings, as the grade data was collected in February and exams take place only in the summer term at the University of Kent. Nevertheless, we must be cautious when making claims about effects upon the 'wicked problem' that is the DAG (Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting, 2022). This case study provides a robust examination of the impact of these interventions upon students in the cohort, with two caveats: that it is the case study of a specific department in one university and thus potentially not generalizable, and that the pandemic cannot be considered a 'business as usual' time period for any student in HE.

The findings of the project support those of Dent (2017) and Alves (2019), *viz.* that BAME students benefit from a form of 'close' and empathetic personal tutoring which aims to overcome the structural barriers that may be inhibiting students' progression on their course. Targeted academic advice sessions are useful for highlighting areas for improvement (*e.g.*, attendance or a particular academic writing component such as 'good introductions') that students may not be aware are affecting their grades (**development**) and signposting students to skills resources that will help them address specific issues they have been experiencing (**direction**). Perhaps most importantly, in tandem with the generic academic skills sessions, students understand more about markers of academic success and share these understandings with their peers (**demystification**). The findings also suggest the importance of our being candid with students about how grading and feedback operate (these, to students, are often expressed in unfamiliar language or can seem deliberately oblique). Encouraging students to discuss feedback with one another not only clarifies their uncertainties, but also alleviates their understandable fear, shame or reticence by allowing them to talk through feedback in an objective setting. In this study, the WriteRight! and Triple D* supervision initiatives addressed with some effectiveness the BAME/white awarding gap.

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