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An inclusive model of programme enhancement

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Abstract Within our institutions, there are an increasing number of projects that aim to make our programmes more inclusive. These kinds of projects can be motivated by a desire to address the attainment gap between students with differing ethnicities. This discussion piece aims to widen the conversation by recognising that it is essential that inclusivity does not stop at considering only the ethnicity of our students. Setting inclusivity within an agenda of continual programme enhancement keeps the need to shrink the ethnicity attainment gap in focus whilst remaining mindful of the needs of all students, whatever their age; gender; race; socio-economic background; or level of physical or academic ability. Specifically, when we aspire to improve the outcomes for our lowest attaining students, we take an intersectional approach to student support and the positive spill-over effects of the changes to content, assessment and formative feedback mechanisms we put in place will benefit the many as we pursue a more inclusive curriculum.

Key words attainment gap; curriculum enhancement; inclusivity; intersectionality

Introduction

Within Higher Education (HE), there is an ongoing agenda of continual programme enhancement. The changes we make to our programmes include issues of content, delivery and assessment. These changes arise for various reasons that include industry requirements for specific technical knowledge and skills, as well as the need to acquire the

transferable skills that will be required by tomorrow's graduates. Other drivers include student feedback from module and programme evaluation surveys, and liaison meetings with programme representatives to ensure that students are involved in programme change as co-creators of their curriculum. Additionally, there are institutional policy changes which affect programme design; for example, when a new assessment policy requires changes to the assessment structure on individual programmes.

There are also requirements for change which are imposed from outside an institution. For example, in their approach to access and participation, the English government's Office for Students (OfS) (2020a) has set targets for the sector to improve the recruitment and continuation of the least represented groups within HE. The OfS also highlights the need to eliminate the degree awarding gap for black students in particular, as well as for students with disabilities. HE providers are required to set out how they are promoting equal opportunities across their diverse student populations and their proposals must be documented in Access and Participation Plans which are monitored by the OfS. This is driving a focus on recruitment, continuation and attainment gaps across the sector.

Discussion

The 2018–19 sector data provided by the OfS (2020b) shows a 22.1% attainment gap for black students when compared with their white peers, attainment being measured as the percentage of students who graduate with first- or upper-second-class honours. The OfS (2020b) note that the gap has decreased from 24.6% over a five-year period but remains high. The data also presents an ethnicity continuation gap of 6.6% for students continuing into their second year of study in 2018–19. Whilst smaller than the degree classification attainment gap, the OfS comment that the ethnicity continuation gap has actually increased over a five-year period.

This resonates with the literature which documents a growing awareness of the attainment gap for black and minority ethnic (BAME) students when compared with their white peers (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2017; Stevenson, 2012). It should be noted at this point that although the BAME acronym is widely used in the literature and media to refer to anyone who is not white British, the term is coming under increasing criticism because of the polarised view of a richly diverse population which it presents. In HE, there are now an increasing number of projects and initiatives underway at the institution, school and programme levels in order to address ethnicity attainment gaps (McDuff et al., 2018; Warren and Reilly, 2019). These projects, both large and small, are vital moves toward making our portfolios more inclusive. However, by definition, an inclusive curriculum includes everyone:

> 'An inclusive curriculum is a curriculum that improves the experience, skills and attainment of all students – including those in the protected characteristic groups – by being student-centred and addressing disadvantage' (Kingston University, n.d.)

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (n.d.) prescribes that protected characteristics include *inter alia* age, disability, gender, race and religion. Therefore, when we talk about inclusivity, our conversations should encompass inclusivity as a whole and not only focus on the ethnicity of our students. An inclusive curriculum considers all the protected characteristics and also socio-economic factors. In England the importance of facilitating excellent outcomes for all students is formalised in the Teaching Excellence Framework because its analyses of split metrics look at the performance of institutions across various student categories which reflect many of these factors (OfS, 2020c). However, the picture is more complex than this type of analysis suggests since the categories are not mutually exclusive. This complexity includes the protected characteristics identified by the EHRC because

> '… intersectionality tells us that the protected characteristics are interdependent and that we need to consider how they are related to one another' (Christoffersen, 2017: 14).

Figure 1 shows how making the curriculum more inclusive is an important part of the programme-enhancement process within an institutional setting. Inclusivity means that we consider how to engage all students and help them to achieve the outcomes they aspire to. How does our curriculum include all students: female and male; students with or without disabilities; students from lower and higher socio-economic groups; 'commuter' students with demanding part-time jobs and 'traditional' students who live in our halls of residence; the academically strong and students who struggle; students from differing backgrounds and ethnicities? Furthermore, any list of characteristics cannot fully reflect the diverse intersectionality of our student body. For example, Christoffersen (2017) shows how ethnicity and gender together have been observed to have an impact on degree attainment. Also, students who identify as white may include white males from low socio-economic groups. This is a group of students who have been highlighted by the UK government as needing support both to enter and then to succeed in HE (Hunter et al., 2018). Therefore, when we look at inclusivity, we do not only consider the ethnicity of our students.

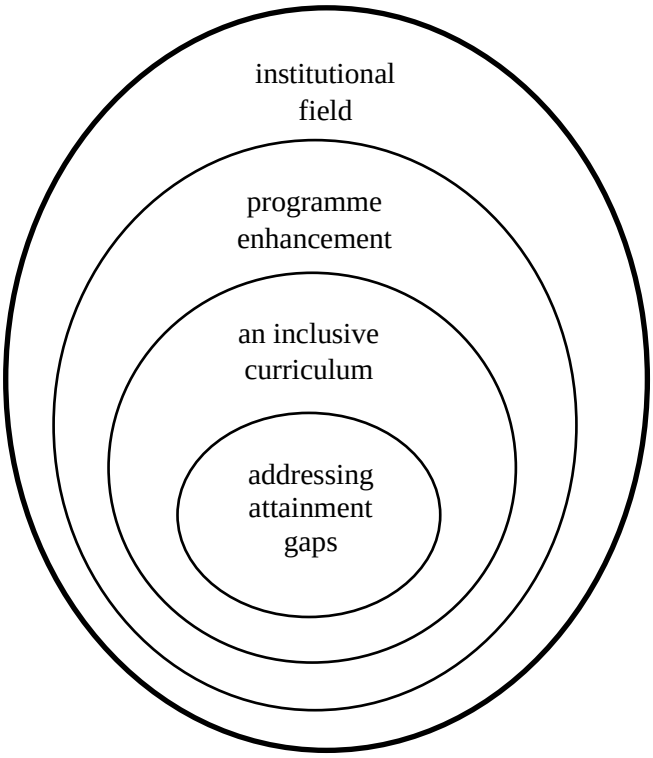

Figure 1: An inclusive model of programme enhancement

However, it has to be noted that the recent focus on the attainment gap between BAME and white students has played a hugely important role in challenging the supremacy of the overall mean result for a cohort as the main key performance indicator. We are now being encouraged to bring those students with lower attainment outcomes into sharper focus. Therefore, programme enhancement through addressing attainment gaps is also included in Figure 1. However, the question to ask is, who are our low-performing students and how can we support them better? Students are not a homogeneous group and their needs may differ.

Conclusion

Where an institution has detailed data at the programme and module levels, it is extremely useful to see any attainment gap between different categories of students in

order to take action to address any inequality of degree outcomes and continuation metrics. Increasingly, our institutions are providing this type of granular data, thereby enabling an informed approach to one aspect of curriculum improvement. However, if attainment-gap data is not yet available, particularly at the modular level, we do not need to exclude our programmes from the process of developing inclusivity. We can review our delivery, assessment structure and planned opportunities for formative feedback to support any students with low attainment. The positive spill-over effect will then help all students from whichever sub-group(s) they identify with and reflect an intersectional approach to student support. In this way, we will improve the student experience and outcomes for the many as we work toward programmes which are truly inclusive.

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