



Blog post

Personal tutoring: A catalyst for equity and an antidote to the racial awarding gap?

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Despite racially minoritised students entering UK-based higher education with similar entry qualifications to their white counterparts, they are more likely to leave the university with a lower degree classification (Advance HE, 2020). This discrepancy, known as the ‘ethnicity awarding gap’, persists despite gaining considerable attention from policymakers and scholars, and has implications for students entering graduate-level jobs or progressing to postgraduate courses (Gabi & Gomes, 2022). This underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that transcend conventional approaches and boundaries to achieve systemic change. So far, efforts to narrow the awarding gap have predominantly focused on decolonising the curriculum, which is vital (Gabi et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2023). Still, it is also crucial to recognise personal tutoring as a pivotal and often underestimated role in addressing the awarding gap. The personal tutoring role, representing the sole regular and continuing contact between student and institutional staff, can provide students with a joined-up experience, enabling them to navigate the ever-changing academic landscape. As such, personal tutoring could be a catalyst for racial equity and an antidote to the racial awarding gap.

Through a synthesis of existing literature and critical analysis, our scoping review highlights ways personal tutoring can drive transformational change in higher education when aligned with principles of equity. We examined (a) the current context of the degree awarding gap, (b) the conceptualisation of personal tutoring in higher education, (c) how personal tutoring can contribute to closing the racial equity gap, and (d) the implications of the findings for personal tutoring policy, practice and future research.

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Critical racial consciousness

Not all personal tutors have the requisite critical racial consciousness and pastoral skills to facilitate conversations about race and racism (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). A critical race consciousness enables personal tutors to disrupt the persistence of a racially unjust status quo. It also considers how multifaceted intersecting relations of, for example, class, sex, gender, race, language and religion can create systemic privilege for some students and disadvantage for others. It can be argued that, although racially minoritised personal tutors may be racially conscious and, therefore, assumed to be equipped to have conversations about race and racism, Versey et al. (2019) highlighted the need to be conscious of appropriated racial oppression. This may manifest through racially minoritised personal tutors perceiving the subordinate status and ‘intellectual inferiority’ that is unjustly attached to their racial group as deserved, natural and inevitable, thereby negatively impacting their potential role in contributing to achieving racial equity. Effective personal tutoring encompasses cultural humility, relational equity, radical openness and a pedagogy of listening to students’ diverse living knowledge, histories and aspirations.

Cultural humility

Practising cultural humility enables recognition that personal tutors may not know nor understand but are available to listen. This can create a truth space for meaningful, authentic dialogue and reciprocal learning. Discomfort is often integral to this reciprocal learning process, especially for sensitive topics such as race and racism. Avoiding such topics often results in student discomfort and a lack of psychological safety (Trepagnier, 2016). The absence of a feeling of safety has the negative effect of silencing, which can impact students' authentic academic and social belonging and feelings of mattering. This may not be unique to racially minoritised students only but all students who may feel silenced by, for example, a curriculum that does not connect with their goals and lived experiences.

Implications for practice, policy and future research

These findings have implications for personal tutoring practice, policy and future research on efforts to narrow the undergraduate degree awarding gap for racially minoritised students. Institutions will need to ensure that personal tutors are supported through intentionally structured mentoring and coaching programmes and that personal tutoring is formally valued and recognised as part of professional development reviews and career progression. Further research is needed to examine the impact of students' and personal tutors' differential positionalities on racial disparities and the awarding gap.

This blog post is based on: Gabi, J. et al. (2024). Can the role of a personal tutor contribute to reducing the undergraduate degree awarding gap for racially minoritised students? *British Educational Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3999>

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