

The Lincoln Equality of Attainment Project (LEAP)

Dr Xiaotong Zhu

Research Fellow

Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute

Report

The existence of discrepancy in student attainment across the HE sector is well-evidenced. Although access, retention, performance and progression are usually concerned in relation to certain characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, gender and disability), it is the discrepancy in degree attainment that is strikingly apparent and persistent over time. A wealth of compelling empirical evidence has been provided by previous studies to demonstrate that the proportion of students achieving a ‘good’ degree (i.e. a first or upper-second classification) differs between different groups of students, including females and males, those from lower and higher socio-economic backgrounds, and in particular, those from different ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Conner et al. 2004).

The importance of ethnicity for the persistent degree attainment gap as such is conveniently discussed with reference to the controversial umbrella categorisation “Black and Minority Ethnic” or BAME (Stevenson et al. 2019). Abundant evidence shows that White students are more likely to obtain a good degree than all BAME groups, including a recent report by Universities UK and the National Union of Students (2019). Although the degree attainment gap also complexly associates with other variables such as entry qualifications, prior attainment, age, gender and type of institution, evidence suggests that ethnicity still plays a significant role even after the effects of a wide range of variables are controlled for (e.g. Broecke and Nicholls 2007; Richardson 2008). Despite longstanding concerns within the Higher Education sector, “little progress has been made in reducing it as the degree attainment gap has remained nearly static” (Austen et al. 2017, p.1).

Informed by the literature, the LEAP project was initiated to be aligned with the University of Lincoln’s strategic plan which emphasises the promotion of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within the university. LEAP is part of the institutional commitment to the Access and Participation Plan (APP) recently approved by Office for Students (OfS), the Higher Education regulator in England. Within the University’s official APP 2020-2024 report, a set of attainment-related targets have been

established with regard to socio-economic status (i.e. deprivation), ethnicity, gender and disability. Those targets are as follows:

- **Socio-economic:** Taking a lead from the OfS KPM4 success measure, by 2030-31 Lincoln aims to eliminate the absolute gap in degree outcome between IMD1 and IMD5 students. Lincoln's target setting follows this trajectory. By 2024-25, the aim is to have a reduced gap of 7.1%;
- **Ethnicity:** Taking the lead from the OfS KPM4 success measure, by 2024-25 Lincoln aims to eliminate the absolute gap in degree outcomes between all BAME and White students;
- **Disabled:** Taking the lead from the OfS KPM5 success measure, by 2024-25 Lincoln aims to eliminate the absolute gap in degree outcomes between all disabled and non-disabled students;
- **Gender:** Taking the lead from the OfS KPM4 success measure, by 2030-31 Lincoln aims to eliminate the absolute gap in degree outcomes between all male and female students. Lincoln's target setting follows this trajectory. By 2024-25, it aims to have reduced the gap to 5.3%.

As an institutional strategic research project, LEAP primarily aims to understand above attainment gaps or differential outcomes through mixed-methods approaches to identify barriers and promote good practice especially in terms of teaching and learning. LEAP also seeks to inform and support interventions to narrow those gaps, although it does recognise that student attainment is a complex issue and that there is no single 'magic bullet' for improving it.

For the initial phase 2019-2020, the particular concern of LEAP is to explore and then provide recommendations to reduce the degree attainment gap or differential outcome between White students and those from BAME backgrounds in the context of the University of Lincoln. It has been noted that great variation exists in degree attainment when the BAME group is disaggregated, with the widest separation (26.2% in 2017-18) between Black and White students. Outcomes from the initial phase are expected to inform future work on understanding and addressing the outcomes associated with other student groups.

The design of the LEAP action plan is guided by the LEAP values established by and shared within the LEAP community:

- To create a sense of belonging for all staff and students in the academic community;

- To investigate the causes of the attainment gaps and differential outcomes and work to narrow these gaps;
- To ensure inclusive and collaborative practice in teaching becomes “the norm”;
- To develop a range of resources and toolkits for academics to help students achieve equality of attainment at School, programme and module level;
- To embed Equality, Diversity and Inclusion questions within the programme validation processes;
- To share best practice in embedding Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the curriculum, teaching and university environment, and enable what are sometimes difficult conversations;
- To ensure the academic community has positive and diverse role models embedded throughout;
- To empower all staff and students to “speak out” if they see non inclusive practice or discriminatory behaviour, creating channels of communication to enable this.

References:

Austen, L., Heaton, C., Jones-Devitt, S. and Pickering, N. (2017) Why is the BAME attainment gap such a wicked problem? *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 3(1), 1-13.

Broecke, S. and Nicholls. T. (2007). *Ethnicity and degree attainment. Research Report RW92. London: Department for Education and Skills*. Retrieved from www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RW92.pdf

Connor, H., Tyers, C., Modood, T. and Hillage, J. (2004) *Why the difference? A closer look at higher education minority ethnic students and graduates*, Department for Education and Skills Research Report RR552, London: DfES.

Richardson, J. T. E. (2008) The attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33 (1), 33–48.

Stevenson, J. O'Mahony, Khan, O. Ghaffar, F. and Stiell, B. (2019) *Understanding and overcoming the challenges of targeting students from under-represented and disadvantaged ethnic backgrounds*, Report to the Office for Students. Accessed on 29 Sep 2019 from: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/d21cb263-526d-401c-bc74-299c748e9ecd/ethnicity-targeting-research-report.pdf

Universities UK and National Union of Students (2019) *Black, Asian and minority ethnic student attainment at UK universities: #Closingthegap*. Retrieved from www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-closing-the-gap.pdf