THE ETHNICITY AWARDING GAP IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

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Prof Chris Millward
Dr Catarina Ferreira

CONTENT

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. In this project, Aimhigher West Midlands (AHWM), together with Prof. Chris Millward, aim to understand the characteristics of the ethnicity awarding gap across the West Midlands (WM) region, what universities are doing to tackle it and what they have learned from this (i.e. what appears to work in which context).

2. The gap in the WM regions resembles the national gap, where White learners are more likely to be awarded a first or upper-second class degree than learners from other ethnic backgrounds. This gap is particularly pronounced between White and Black students. Other factors seem to affect the ethnicity awarding gap:

    *   Students living in IMD quintiles 3 to 5 postcodes have higher attainment rates than those in quintiles 1 and 2. Within these groups, White students have higher attainment rates than students from other ethnicities. This pattern emerges for Asian, Mixed and Other ethnicity students. For Black students however, attainment rates are lower than that of their white counterparts, regardless of IMD quintile;

    *   White learners have higher attainment rate than learners from other ethnic backgrounds irrespective of sex and disability;

    *   Learners who enter HE with a high or medium tariff have higher attainment rates than those who entered with a lower tariff. Within these, White learners have higher attainment rates than learners from other ethnic backgrounds;

    *   Compared to Black students, White students are awarded first and upper-second class degrees to a greater extent in every course subject. Compared to other ethnicities (Asian, mixed and other), White students are awarded first and upper-second class degrees to a greater extent in every course subject, apart from subjects allied to medicine. The gap appears to be lower in STEM subjects;

    *   Gaps between students are exacerbated when considering first class degree awards in isolation, although this might be driven by our largest institutions.

3. Despite profound differences between the missions, course profiles, student and academic characteristics and learning environments in the universities involved in the project, they all demonstrate a significant awarding gap, particularly between White and Black students, and regardless of the intersection with other available markers of student characteristics. In

response to questions about their approaches to addressing the awarding gap, partners highlighted issues they were navigating through the development and implementation of their strategies. They include balancing between targeting groups of students and implementing measures for all students, supporting students to meet the institution's requirements and changing the institution, and driving change centrally whilst facilitating local agency across the institution.

4. Partners are interested in sharing their approaches to the use of data and learning analytics, evaluating specific activities and broader cultural change, and engaging with students and academic staff. There is an appetite also to identify, investigate and test responses to hypotheses on the causes of the ethnicity awarding gap in a systematic way. In doing so, partners can draw on a rich and growing literature on UK higher education practice in this area, as well as critical studies that challenge the assumptions underpinning current policy and practice, and that advocate more fundamental change.

5. Hypotheses that could be addressed include:
   a. There are <u>biases</u> running through the engagement between universities and students of colour, reflecting institutional <u>racism</u>.
   b. Students of colour feel marginalised and minoritised in universities, which influences their sense of <u>belonging</u>.
   c. The content of the <u>curriculum</u> and the modes of <u>assessment</u> in universities serve to exclude students of colour.
   d. Students of colour are more likely than White students to be <u>commuters</u>.
   e. Students of colour gain equivalent grades when they are <u>not the minority</u> of the cohort or it is delivered by academic staff of colour.

6. These hypotheses could be addressed by systematic exploration, which would apply the same approach in a sample of courses across each of the partner universities, by testing the effects of:
   a. Anti-racism audits and actions.
   b. Tailored induction and engagement programmes.
   c. Curriculum and assessment change.
   d. Additional and tailored support for commuter students.
   e. Students of colour being the majority on a course, or it being delivered by academic staff of colour.

2. INTRODUCTION

7. Since it became a requirement for access and participation plans (APP) in 2019, English universities have had an increased focus on addressing the ethnicity awarding gap - that is, the difference in the proportion of White students achieving the highest degree grades (first or upper-second class) compared to their counterparts from other ethnicities.

8. National evidence[1] has shown that, across the country, there is a significantly higher number of White students achieving a first or upper-second class grade compared to students from other ethnicities, with a particularly large gap between Black and White learners.

9. In this project, Aimhigher West Midlands (AHWM), together with Prof. Chris Millward, aim to understand the characteristics of the awarding gap across the West Midlands (WM) region, what universities are doing to tackle it and what they have learned from this (i.e. what appears to work in which context). Specifically, our main goals are to understand i) what the gap looks like in the WM and what factors might affect it, ii) how universities in our partnership are working towards closing this gap and how this has changed since the last APP submission, iii) how these efforts are being evaluated, iv) whether there are any results or best practice that can be shared between the partners.

10. In order to address the first point, we looked at publicly available (aggregated) quantitative data[2], as well as student-level data from our partner universities. For the remaining points, universities were sent a set of questions around their strategies to tackle this gap. This document collates the results obtained from both sets of data, as well as from discussions with partners and the wider sector, shared at a workshop organised by AHWM on the 28th of April 2023, where preliminary results of this work were shown.

11. The student-level data element of the project, as well as the qualitative elements, include all partner universities other than Birmingham City College (BCU) at this point. BCU is conducting a fundamental review of its approach to addressing the ethnicity awarding gap, so is unable to contribute to the project at this stage.

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[1] https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/19811/1/HEFCE2014_03.pdf
[2] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/4dcf0f63-4ff0-4df2-ba52-3b2ef0a8a28d/access-and-participation-data-resources-sector-summary-2021.pdf> 2 <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/

3. WHAT DOES THE GAP LOOK LIKE IN THE WM?

National vs Regional picture – OfS Access and Participation data dashboard

12. As a first step, we used nationally available data[2] in order to understand how the regional picture compares with the national one. Specifically, we looked at the ethnicity awarding gap in the six universities that form the Aimhigher West Midlands (AHWM) partnership, for domestic learners studying full-time on a first-degree course, from 2016/17 to 2020/21.

13. As depicted in the graph below, the regional picture in the West Midlands is remarkably similar to the national picture, with the gap between Black and White learners slightly higher in our region, compared to the national average, in the last 2 years we have data for. Both nationally and regionally, learners from other ethnicities are being awarded first class and upper-second class degrees to a lesser extent than White learners, with the gap between Black and White learners being particularly pronounced.

Awarding gap (2016/17-2020/21)
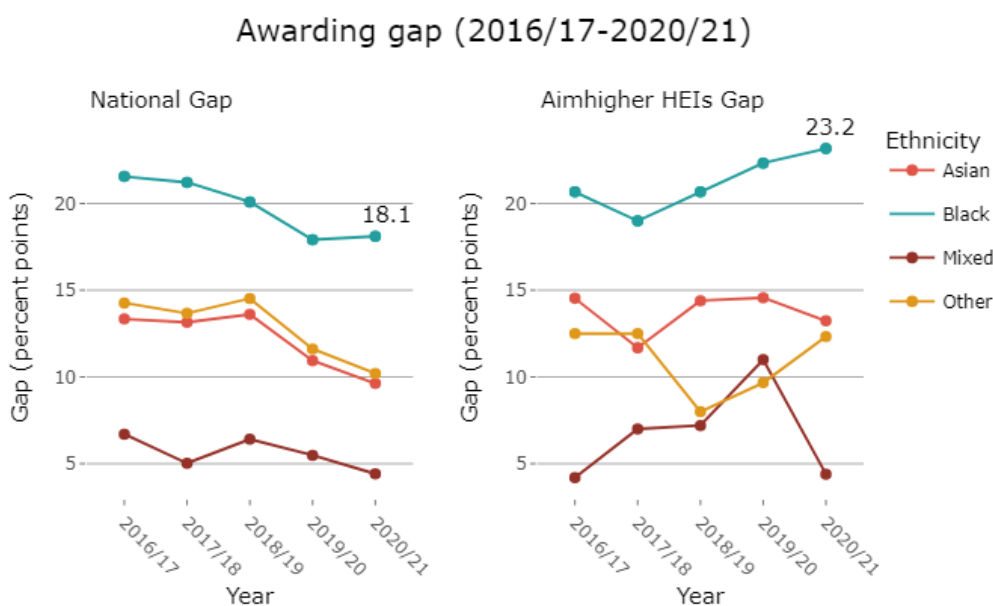
Regional picture – Universities' individual data

14. In order to explore the regional picture in more detail and get a finer-grain understanding of the gap, we asked AHWM partners to share individual-learner data for full-time, UK-domiciled, first classified degree completions in the past 5 years. This data allows us to better understand the intersections between the ethnicity attainment gap and other learner characteristics, as well as offering more up-to-date data, as it spans from 2017/18 to 2021/22.

Sample

15. For the student-level data element of the project to date, we have been able to include five of our six partner universities. The table below shows how each contributed to the final total sample of **52,881 learners**. Note that the University of Birmingham accounts for about half of the total sample. The data will thus be biased towards the reality at this particular university. We hope to mitigate this bias in the future by i) adding data from the remaining partner and ii) including additional analyses using a random sample from the University of Birmingham to reduce its weight (this will however mean that the size of the overall sample is reduced).

HEI	# of learners	% learners
Aston University	9,794	19
Newman University	2,159	4
University College Birmingham	4,993	9
University of Birmingham	27,108	51
University of Worcester	8,827	17
Total	52,881	100

16. Although all the universities are based in the West Midlands, they serve very different student populations. The table below illustrates this point, showing the percentage of learners from each ethnicity in each university for the current sample[3]:

HEI	% White	% Black	% Asian	% Mixed	% Other
Aston University	30.2	11.8	52.2	0.0	5.8
Newman University	56.6	9.0	27.6	5.2	1.7
University College Birmingham	53.8	12.8	26.1	5.5	1.7
University of Birmingham	62.6	4.8	27.0	4.1	1.5
University of Worcester	88.8	2.5	5.6	2.7	0.4
Overall	59.9	6.6	28.1	3.3	2.1

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[3] Note that for Aston University students from a Mixed background are included in the "Other" category

17. To put this in context, we looked at the population in England and the WM, using publicly available data from the 2021 census[4], as well as the staff[5] and student[6] populations in HE in England.

Region	% White	% Black	% Asian	% Mixed	% Other
England	81.0	4.2	9.6	3.0	2.2
West Midlands	77.0	4.5	13.3	3.0	2.1
Birmingham	47.1	11.0	31.0	4.8	4.5
Worcestershire	93.2	0.7	3.1	1.9	0.6

HE Population	% White	% Black	% Asian	% Mixed	% Other
Students	68.1	9.6	14.9	5.2	2.2
Staff	81.3	2.5	11.2	2.6	2.4

Regional gap – averaged across HEIs

18. With the data we received from five partner universities, we first calculated the ethnicity awarding gap for each and then averaged across the five, in an attempt to replicate the results we obtained with the publicly available data. As expected, the pattern resembles the one obtained when analysing the OfS Access and Participation dataset, as the graph on the left below illustrates.

19. The above results follow the OfS convention of considering both first and upper-second class degrees. However, there is some indication that awarding gaps are exacerbated when considering first class degrees in isolation. We thus repeated the analyses, now looking at the gap for first class awards only. As evidenced below (right), the gap is larger in this case. Note that the large increase for learners of Other ethnicities might simply be due to a smaller sample size.
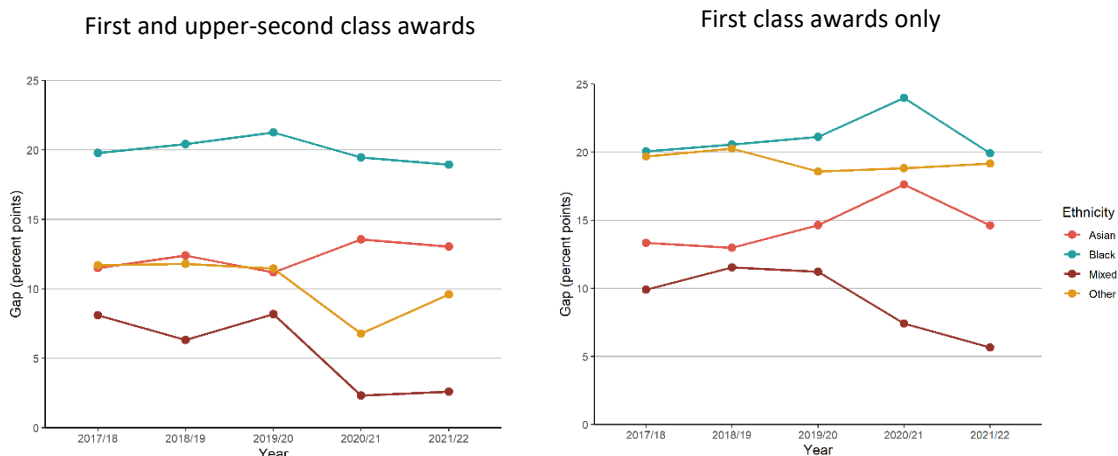

[4] https://www.ons.gov.uk/filters/498a8ceb-22ec-462b-9288-e552c020920e/dimensions
[5] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/17-01-2023/sb264-higher-education-staff-statistics
[6] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he

Ethnicity awarding gap averaged across partner universities

First and upper-second class awards

First class awards only

20. These averaged results mask what the gap looks like in each of the individual universities. The graph below illustrates the gap in each of the partner universities that shared their data, considering first and upper-second classifications together. Note that individual university data should be interpreted with care, as sample sizes are often too small. Sample sizes of under 25 students were suppressed and as such are not depicted below.

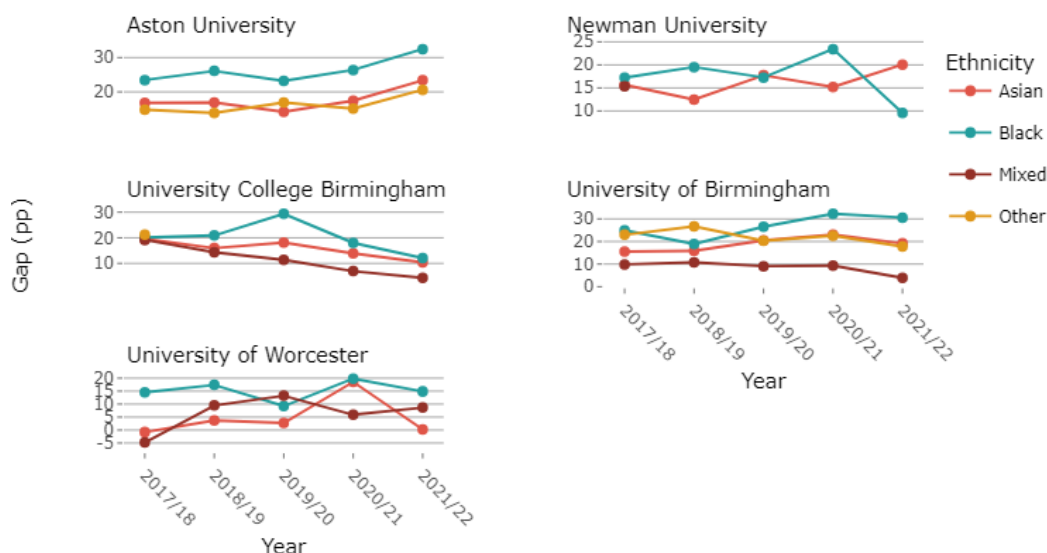### Ethnicity awarding gap for each partner university

First and upper-second class awards
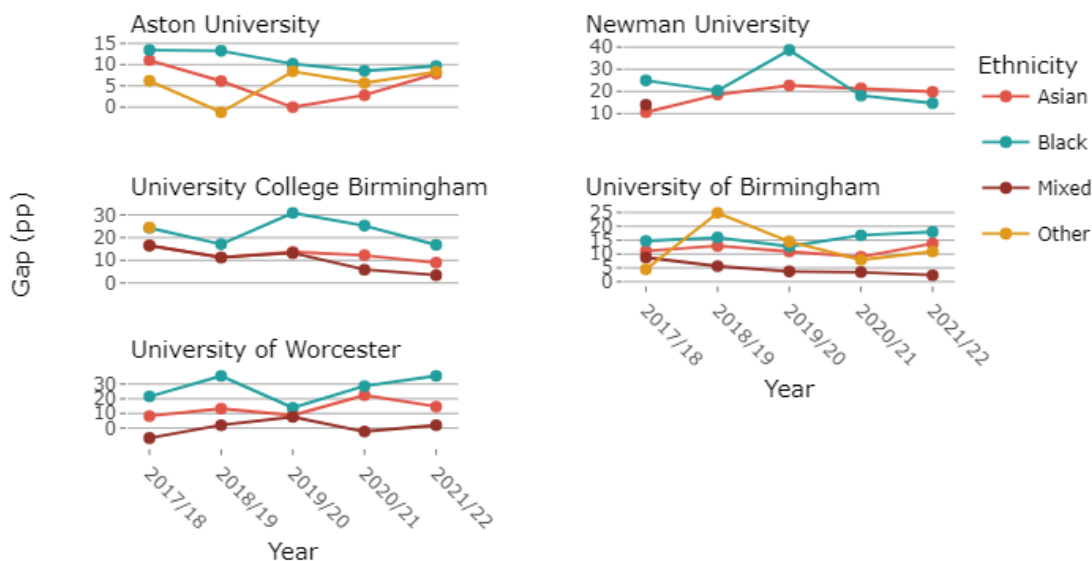
21. When looking at the gap for first class awards only, the gap is greater for the two largest institutions in the data, which are also those that award the most first class degrees[7].

Ethnicity awarding gap for each partner university
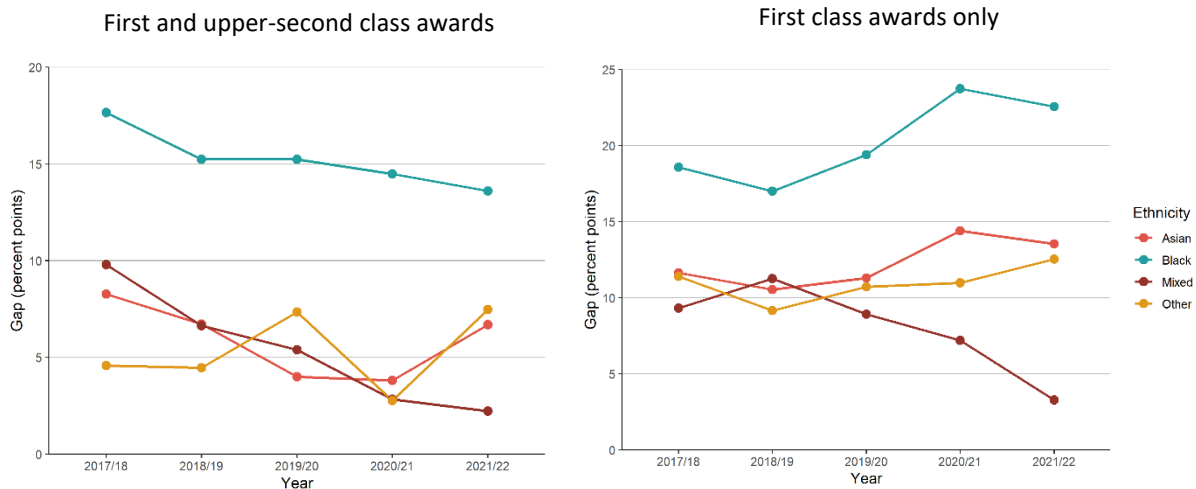
First class awards only

Regional gap – averaged across learners

22. Calculating an "average of averages", ignores the fact that each of our universities has a very different student population. It also gives equal contribution to each university, which can be a problem when their sample sizes are too small. In order to address these issues, we looked at what the gap looks like across all learners in this sample, regardless of the university they attend. We again calculated the gap for first and upper-second, as well as for first class degrees only.

23. As the graph on the left below illustrates, we again find a very similar pattern, with the gap between White and Black learners being the highest, albeit slightly smaller than when we compute an "average of averages". Again, this gap is exacerbated when analysing first class awards separately (below right; notice the scale in the y-axis is different)

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[7] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/analysis-of-degree-classifications-over-time-changes-in-graduate-attainment-from-2010-11-to-2021-22/

Ethnicity awarding gap averaged across all learners

First and upper-second class awards · First class awards only

24. In the next sections, we align ethnicity with other factors that may affect the ethnicity awarding gap.
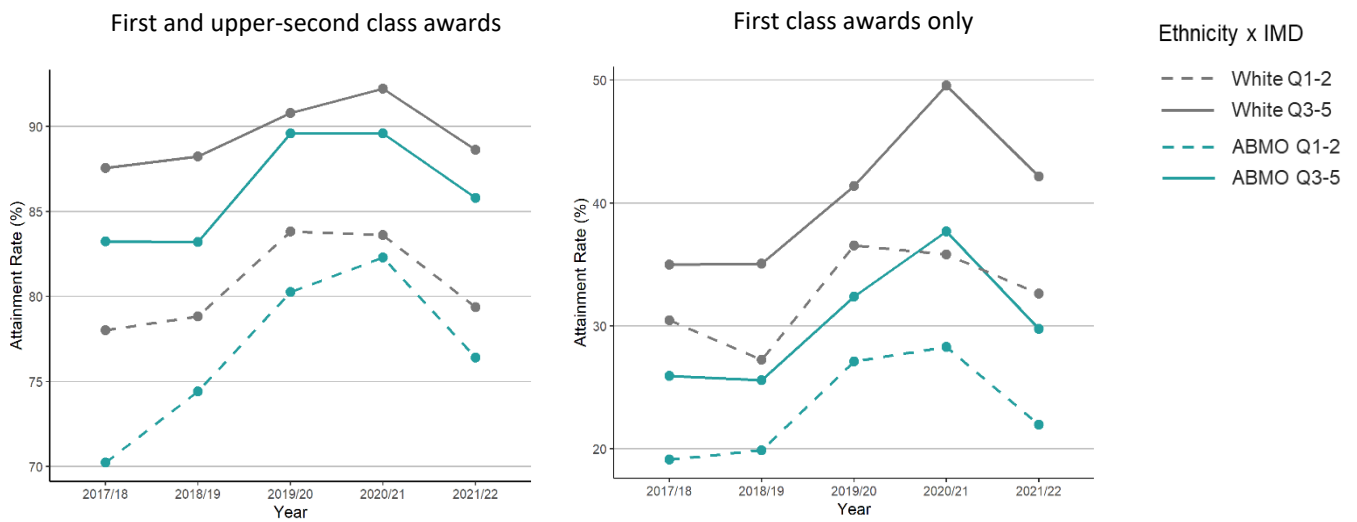
Ethnicity x IMD

25. We first looked at the intersection between ethnicity and the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). IMD is a measure of relative deprivation for small geographic areas in the UK. IMD classifies these areas into five quintiles based on relative disadvantage, with quintile 1 being the most deprived and quintile 5 being the least deprived.

26. When looking at the differences in attainment rate (the percentage of students who are awarded a first or upper-second class degree) between White students and students of other ethnicities in IMD quintiles 1 and 2 (most deprived) vs IMD quintiles 3 to 5 (least deprived), we found that students in the least deprived quintiles have higher attainment rates than those in the most deprived quintiles. Within each quintile grouping, White learners have higher attainment rates than learners from other ethnic backgrounds. This is illustrated in the graph on the left below.

27. When conducting the same analysis but looking exclusively at attainment rates for first class awards, the main predictor of success (i.e., higher attainment rate) becomes ethnicity rather than IMD quintile (below, right), with White learners more likely to be awarded first class degrees compared to learners from other ethnicities, regardless of IMD quintile.
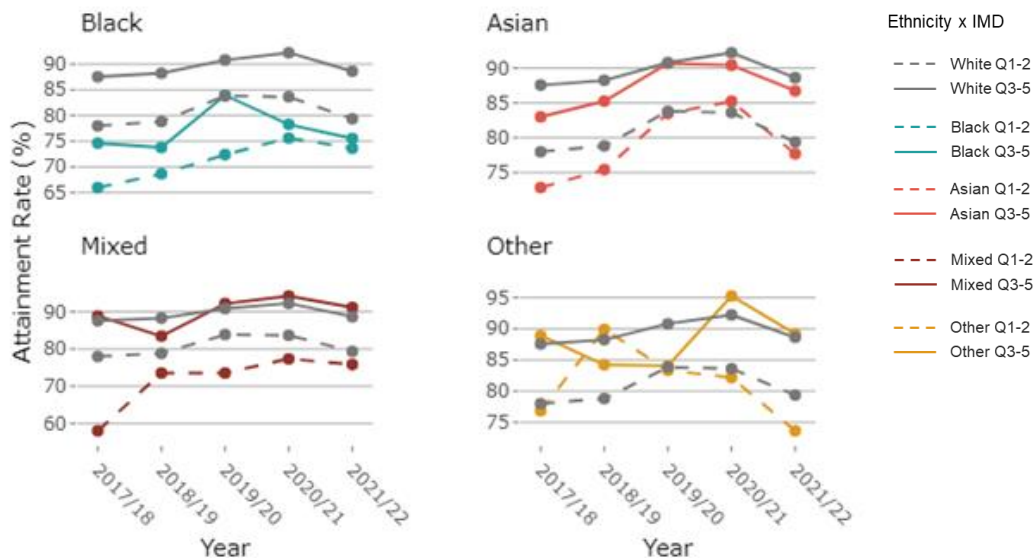
11

Attainment rate (Ethnicity x IMD)

First and upper-second class awards

First class awards only

Ethnicity x IMD
- - - White Q1-2
— White Q3-5
- - - ABMO Q1-2
— ABMO Q3-5

28. When we break this result up to look at the attainment rate for each ethnicity (compared to White) separately, for Black learners in particular, it seems that ethnicity plays a more crucial role than deprivation, with White learners performing better than Black, irrespective of IMD quintile both when combining first and upper-second classifications and when looking at first class awards only.
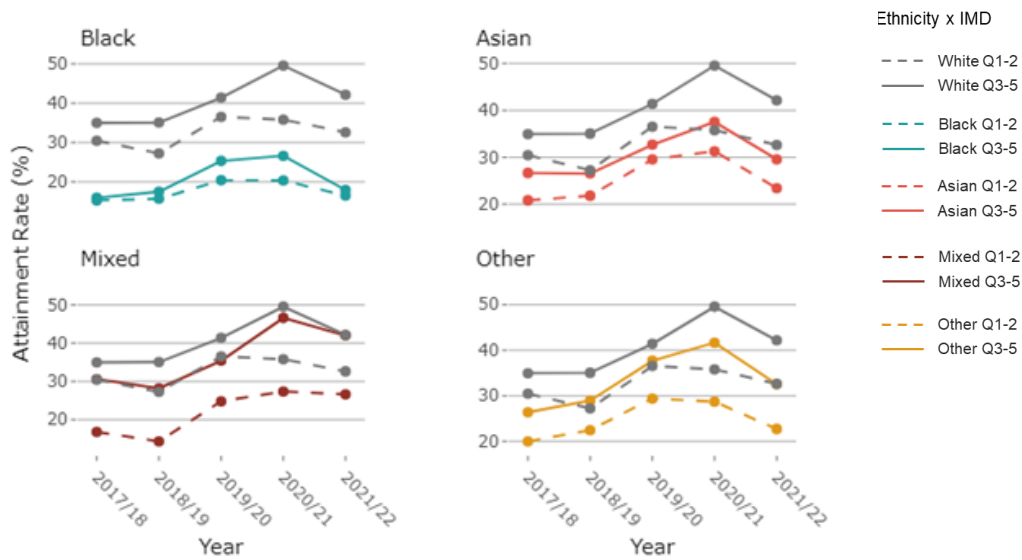
Attainment rate (Ethnicity x IMD)

First and upper-second class awards

Ethnicity x IMD
- - - White Q1-2
— White Q3-5
- - - Black Q1-2
— Black Q3-5
- - - Asian Q1-2
— Asian Q3-5
- - - Mixed Q1-2
— Mixed Q3-5
- - - Other Q1-2
— Other Q3-5

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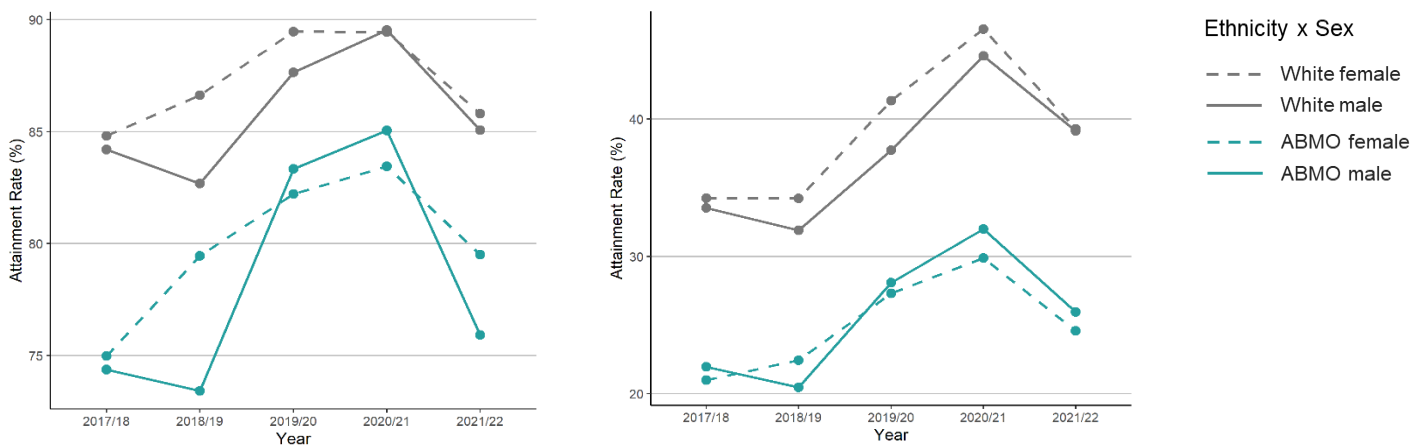## Attainment rate (Ethnicity x IMD)

First class awards only

Ethnicity x Sex

29. Looking at the intersection between ethnicity and sex (first and upper-second awards), we found that in general White students have higher attainment rates than students from other ethnicities, irrespective of sex (below, left). This pattern is even starker when looking at first class degrees only (below, right).

Attainment rate (Ethnicity x Sex)

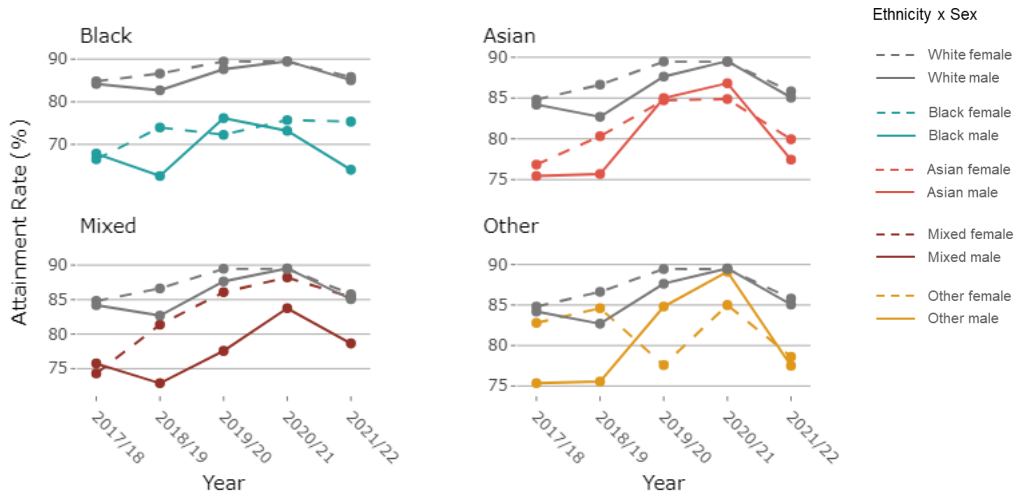First and upper-second class awards   First class awards only

30. This pattern emerges both when we compare White learners against all other ethnicities, and against each ethnicity category separately, and even more so when considering first class awards in isolation, as illustrated below.
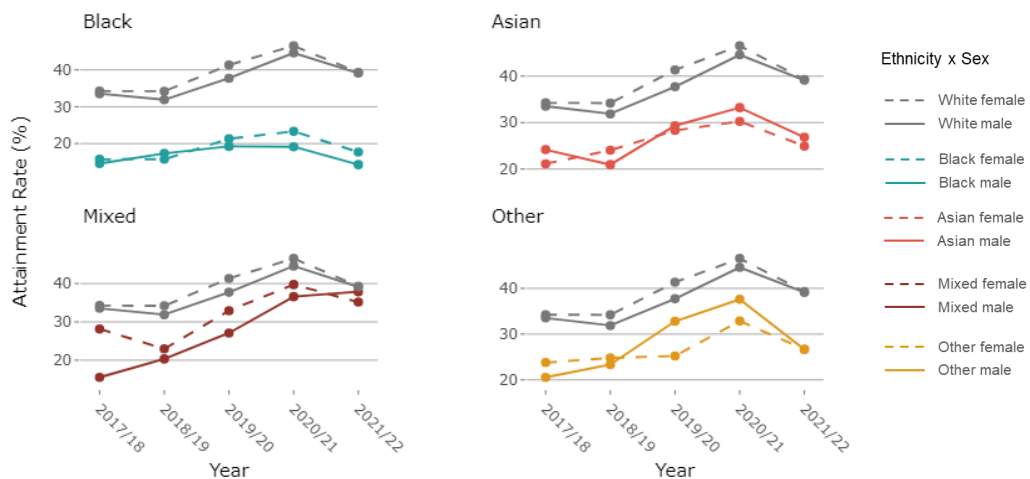
Attainment rate (Ethnicity x Sex)

First and upper-second class awards
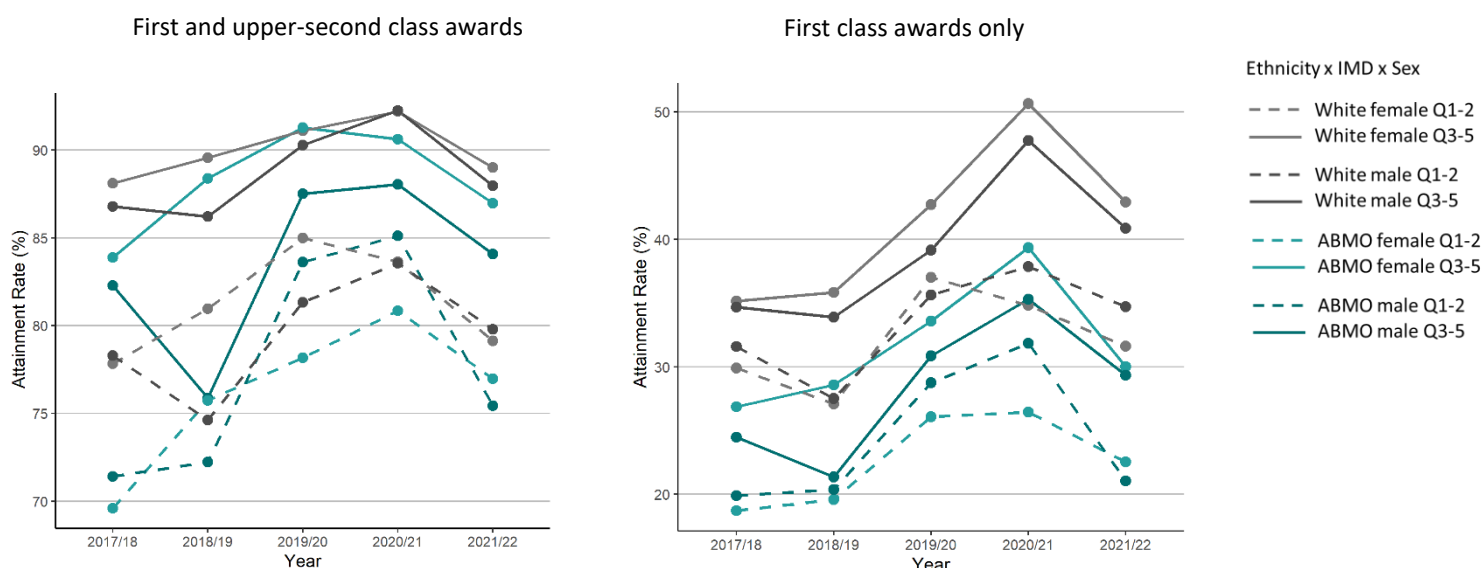
Attainment rate (Ethnicity x Sex)

First class awards only

Ethnicity x IMD x Sex

31. As learners' characteristics often interact with each other, we looked at the three-way interaction between Ethnicity, IMD quintile and Sex. As illustrated below, whereas IMD quintile seems to be the most important factor when looking at first and upper-second degrees together (left graph below), when considering first degree awards only, ethnicity seems to be the most determinant factor (right graph below). A similar pattern emerges when looking at each ethnicity separately, with ethnicity being the most relevant factor for Black learners, regardless of whether we look at first degrees only or first and upper second combined.

Attainment rate (Ethnicity x IMD x Sex)

First and upper-second class awards   First class awards only


Ethnicity x Disability

32. When considering the intersection between ethnicity and disability, a similar pattern emerges, within which White students tend to have higher attainment rates than students from other ethnicities, regardless of having a disability or not (below, left). Again, this pattern is exacerbated when looking at first class degrees only (below, right).

Attainment rate (Ethnicity x Disability)

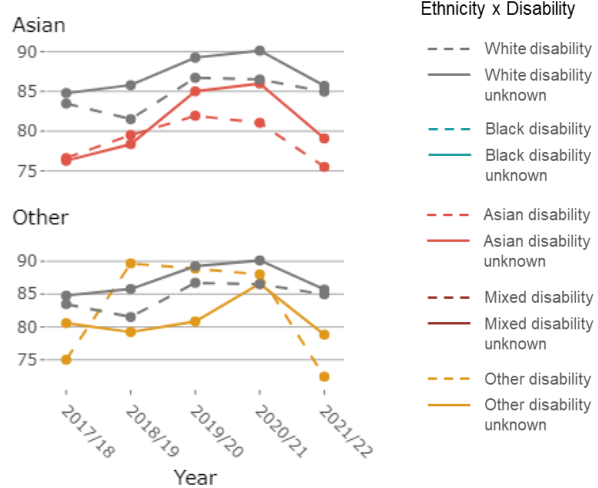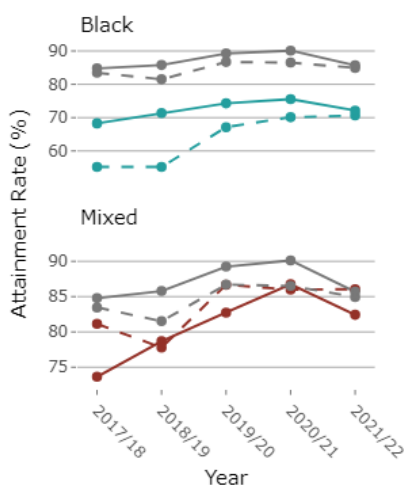### First and upper-second class awards
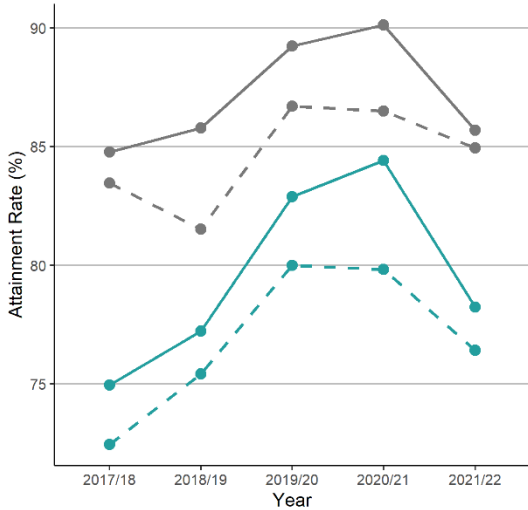
First class awards only
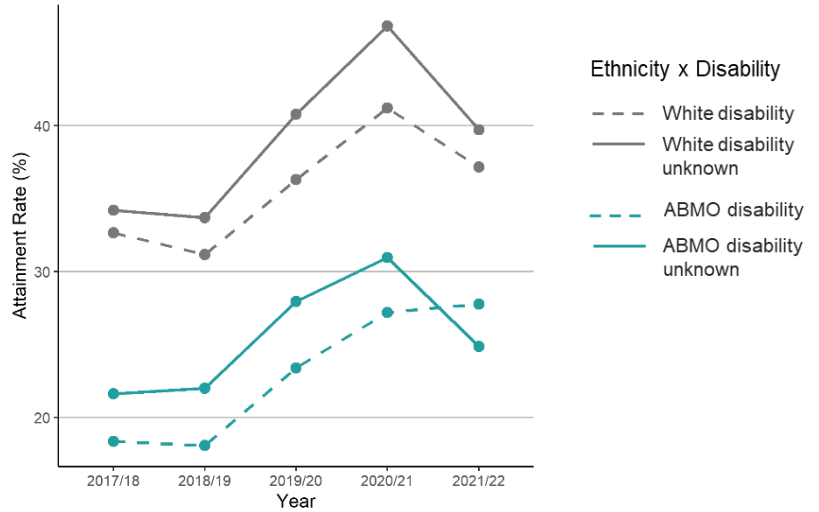
33. Once again, this is the case both when we compare White learners against all other ethnicities, and against each ethnicity category separately as shown below, particularly when looking at first degrees only.

Attainment rate (Ethnicity x Disability)

First and upper-second class awards

Attainment rate (Ethnicity x Disability)

First class awards only
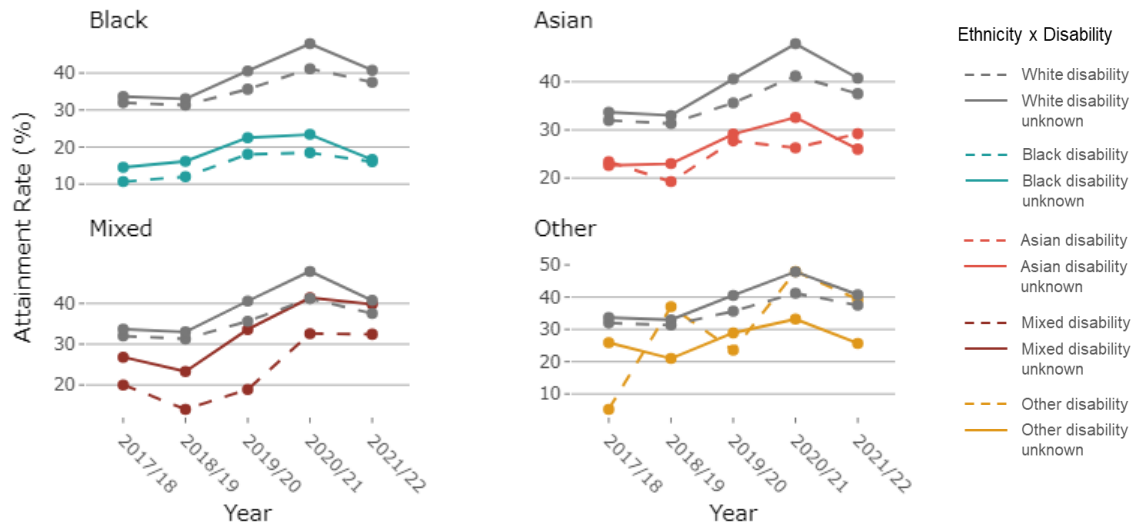
Ethnicity x IMD x Disability

34. We looked at the three-way interaction between Ethnicity, IMD quintile and Disability. As illustrated below, whereas IMD quintile seems to be the most important factor when looking at first and upper-second degrees together (left graph below), ethnicity becomes a more determinant factor when considering first degree awards only (right graph below). A similar pattern emerges when looking at each ethnicity separately, with ethnicity being the most relevant factor for Black learners, regardless of whether we look at first degrees only or first and upper second combined.

Attainment rate (Ethnicity x IMD x Disability)
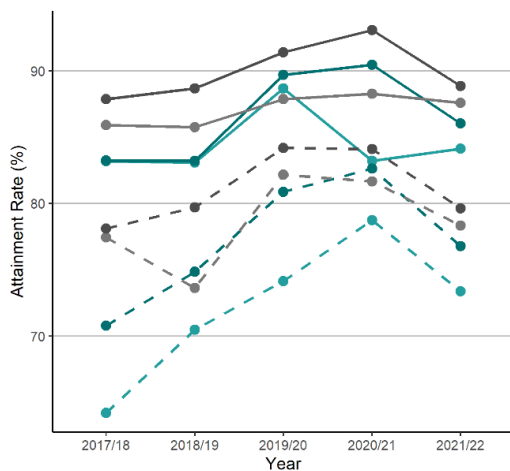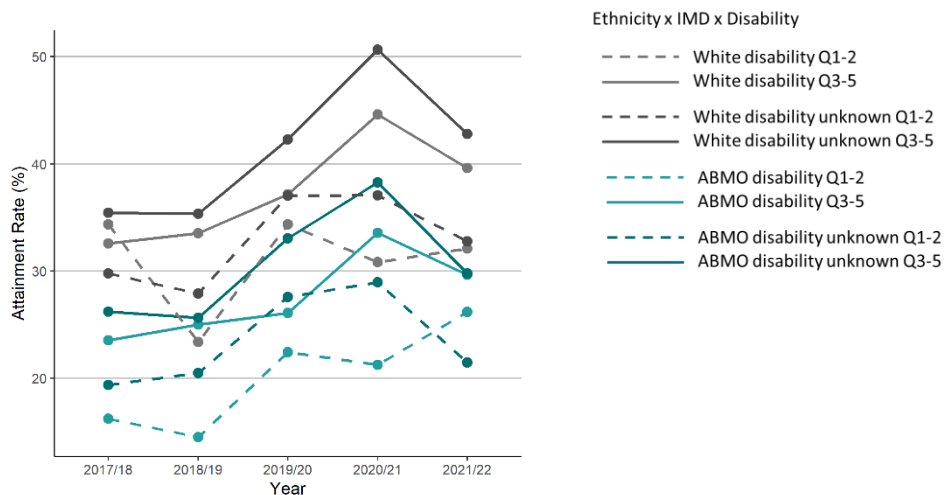
Ethnicity x UCAS tariff points

35. Looking at the intersection between ethnicity and UCAS tariff points[8], learners who enter HE with a high or medium tariff have higher attainment rates (first and upper-second classifications) than those who entered with a lower tariff. Within these, White learners have higher attainment rates than learners from other ethnic backgrounds (below, left). The gap increases when looking at first class awards only (below, right). These patterns are similar when comparing White learners with all learners from other ethnicities, and when comparing White learners to each ethnicity individually (not depicted).

Attainment rate (Ethnicity x UCAS tariff)

First and upper-second class awards

First class awards only

Course subject

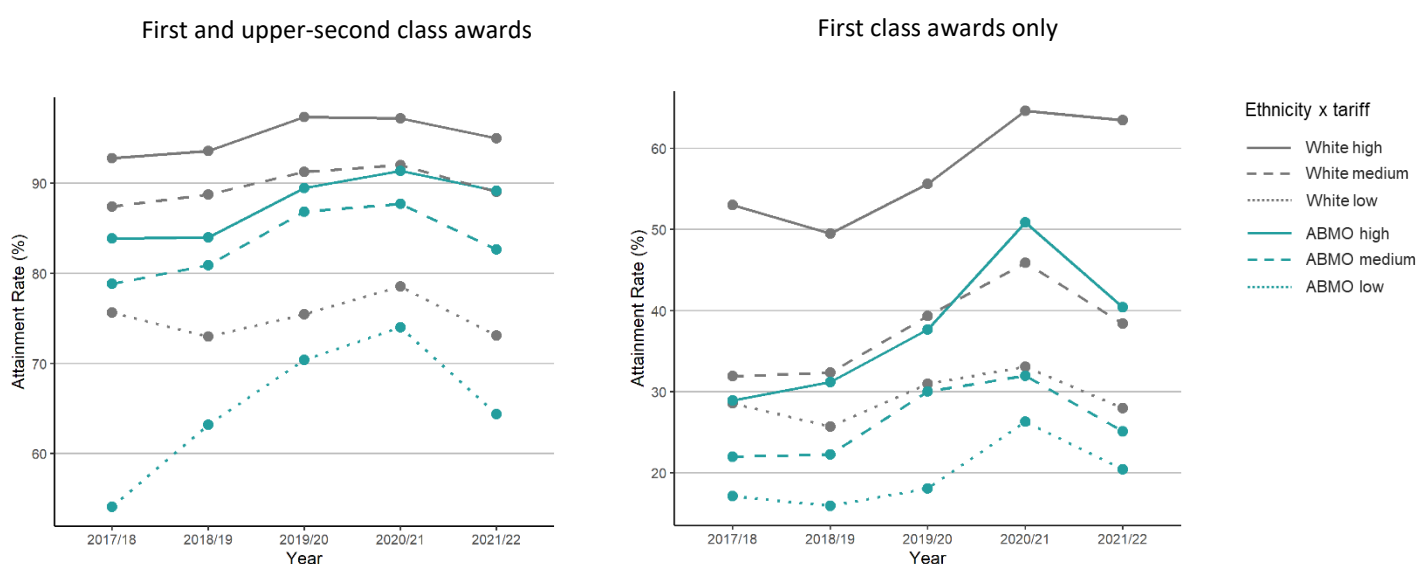36. In the next analyses we looked at the gap between White students and students from other ethnicities according to the course subjects they studied. In every subject, apart from subjects allied to medicine, White students are awarded first and upper-second class degrees to a greater extent than learners from another ethnic background. This pattern is the same when we break it down by each ethnicity, with the exception of Black learners who are awarded first and upper-second class degrees to a lesser extent than White learners in all course subjects. The gap appears to be lower in

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[8] UCAS Tariff points translate qualifications and grades into a numerical value. UCAS Tariff varies depending on the qualification and the grade achieved.

STEM subjects. Note that samples with less than 25 learners were suppressed, so course subjects that have no data in the graphs below have had one or both samples suppressed.

Gap by course subject (ABMO)

First and upper-second class awards
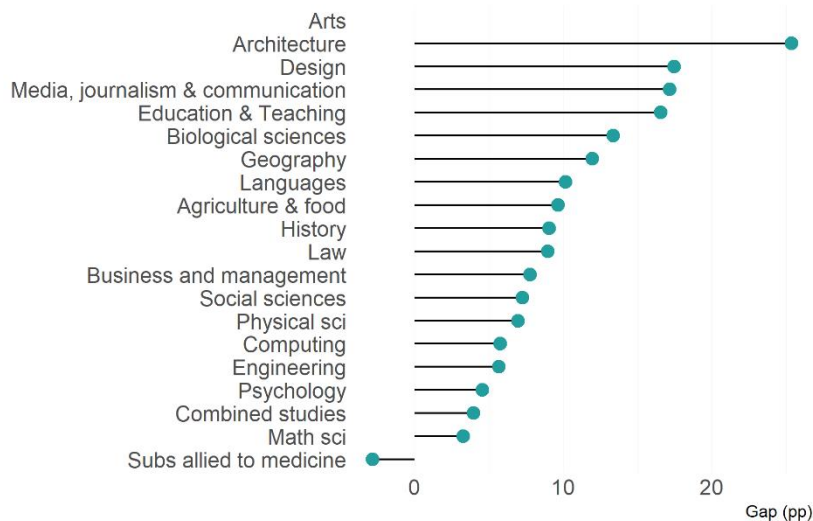
37. When looking at first class awards in isolation, learners from other ethnicities are awarded first class degrees to a lesser extent than White learners in all course subjects.

Gap by course subject (ABMO)

First class awards only

4. WHAT IS BEING DONE TO CLOSE THE GAP?

38. In their Access and Participation Plans (APP) covering the period between 2020/21 and 2024/2025, most higher education providers have specified targets to close the awarding gap between White students and those from other ethnic minorities (particularly Black students), as well as strategies and activities to deliver these targets.
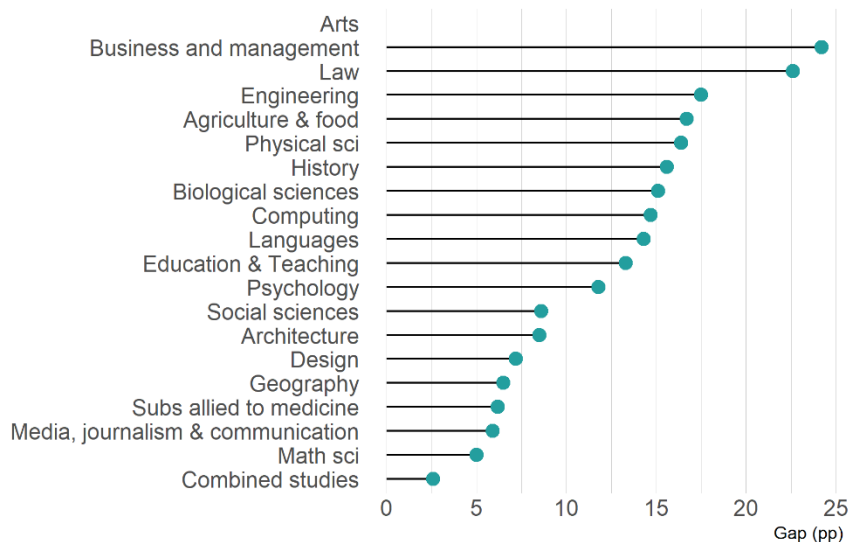
39. In order to understand their strategies, Partnership members were asked:

    i.   Why did your institution choose the activities stated in your APP to tackle the attainment gap between White and Black/other ethnicity learners? How did you reason they would support the delivery of your targets?

    ii. Have the activities you deliver changed since the plan was agreed?

    iii. How has the evaluation of these activities been conducted? What are your main findings from this evaluation?

    iv. Do you expect the targets and activities to change / change further in the APP refresh? If so, why?

    v.   Are there any particular themes you would like to probe in collaboration with the other HEIs, including potential avenues for collaborative research and investigation?

Strategy

40. Due to the timescales for setting targets and activity within the 2020-21 APP, some institutions considered that they had set targets and initiated activity without a sophisticated understanding of the issues. There had, though, been an appetite to demonstrate activity, try out different approaches, learn from this and improve over time. Where there was a more meaningful theory of change, this was often underpinned by national guidance, peer reviewed research and insights from within the institution. The five steps identified in the UUK/NUS report – providing strong leadership; having conversations about race and changing the culture; developing racially diverse and inclusive environments; getting the evidence and analysing the data; understanding what works – had been influential due to its timing just before the submission of 2020-21 onwards APPs[9].

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[9] Universities UK (2019), *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: Closing the Gap*

41. A whole institution approach has been identified as important, with senior leaders taking responsibility for monitoring activity so that all parts of the institution deliver their commitments. A committee with lay governor or other independent leadership is used in some cases for this. Larger and more devolved institutions appear to have found it more difficult to develop and implement a single coherent approach across the institution, and in some cases different staff are now responsible for delivering the strategy from those who developed it. A common theme within strategies is the balance between targeting support for individuals and improving it for all students, and focusing on supporting individual students or changing the institution in order to improve outcomes.

Data

42. National data-sets lag behind current activity and interventions to address ethnicity awarding gaps can take years to have an effect. This means that the challenges demonstrated by the data underpinning APP development may be different from the ones experienced by the students to which interventions are applied, and the results from them may be unclear until they have left. Data has played an important role in raising the profile of the ethnicity awarding gap and identifying priorities, which may relate to specific courses, stages of the student lifecycle and individual students. Institutions have identified substantially different outcomes within individual courses compared with the overall position, reflecting not only the balance of ethnicities on different courses but also the influence of subject characteristics.

43. Distraction by data can lead to deferral of strategies and interventions in pursuit of more sophisticated analysis. There can be particular challenges with small numbers when analysis focuses at disciplinary and course level, or sub-populations of students below the broad category of BAME. Notwithstanding this, partnership members want to improve their data insights, accounting for factors that particularly influence outcomes such as entry qualifications and patterns of study, as well as differences between disciplines. Intersectional characteristics may be particularly important in the West Midlands, given the propensity of students from some local communities, such as those who are Pakistani and Bangladeshi, to study whilst living at home, particularly if they are female and come from lower income families.

44. Those institutions that have made progress in developing learning analytics, which provide timely data on patterns of student engagement and academic performance, have positioned this centrally

within their strategies, albeit with careful consideration of the way in which they are used to monitor progress, prompt discussion between academic staff and students, and identify different needs such as academic skills, English and maths.

Staff and student partnership

45. Responses highlighted that strategies had changed due to feedback and advice from structured dialogue with BAME staff and students. Many universities have enhanced this engagement as part of their broader EDI and anti-racism strategies, and in response to specific developments such as the Black Lives Matter campaign. These discussions and the strategies flowing from them have often focused on institutional cultures and systems, building community, and enhancing inclusion and belonging, rather than interventions specifically focused on the academic outcomes for BAME students. They are, nonetheless, considered to be an important dimension of tackling the ethnicity awarding gap. Institutions are also involving students in their strategies through peer mentoring and peer assisted learning, particularly to support transition into and through higher education.

46. Institutions systematically engage academic staff in consideration of race through compulsory staff development programmes, though it can be difficult to sustain attention on this due to other institutional priorities. There is, though, some debate about whether activities to address the ethnicity awarding gap are best developed centrally and implemented through cross-institutional networks, or it is better to focus efforts on working with academic staff who are enthusiastic and already engaged. Reliance on local agency can lead to mission drift and some academic staff may be wary about identifying and supporting specific individuals on the basis of their race and ethnicity because they associate this with a deficit model or consider that it is incompatible with the expectations of learners in higher education.

47. There are numerous examples of initiatives by academic staff, courses and departments that have been developed independently from the institution's strategy. This reflects different perspectives between disciplines, with humanities and social sciences being most likely to engage in critical self-reflection. It can also be influenced by departments' greater proximity to the curriculum and other influential factors such as the relationship between academic staff and students and the conduct of assessment. The positions taken by government and some parts of the media on the curriculum and standards may lead institutional leaders to make commitments to an inclusive curriculum and

assessment framework, whilst being cautious about taking public positions on de-colonisation and changing assessment methods. Academic staff can be more passionate and engaged, particularly early career staff and those who are themselves BAME.

Academic delivery and support

48. Institutions are reviewing their approaches to delivering learning, teaching and assessment as lifestyles, working practices and the profile of students change. This can involve shifting away from didactic modes of delivery towards more active and collaborative relationships and approaches, and authentic modes of assessment that are less focused on examinations and more relevant to the workplace.   Current assessment approaches in universities have been identified as a self-determined code, which students unlock by understanding its implicit characteristics. This will be harder for students who are the first in their family or among few from their school and community to enter university.

49. There is evidence that students who engage with work and other forms of placement gain better academic and employment outcomes than might otherwise be expected given their characteristics. This does, though, require support, which can range from promoting and supporting participation in placements, to removing financial and logistical barriers to them, and engaging with placement students whilst they are off campus.

50. Some institutions have reviewed their academic skills or learning development support, and how they broker engagement with this by different groups of students. Where they are deployed, personal tutors can support this by identifying students and sign-posting them to services before it is too late. This does, though, require oversight and co-ordination to be effective within larger institutions.

Evaluation

51. Responses identified that it was easier to evaluate specific project-based interventions than broader measures to stimulate culture change. Similarly, those institutions that had sought to embed activities by building them through engagement with academic staff considered that this made evaluation more difficult. If there is regulatory pressure to demonstrate specific evaluation methods and findings, institutions appear likely to pursue more isolated and project-based

interventions, rather than the broader cultural and systemic activities they consider to be crucial for change in the longer-term. Most evaluation in this area appears suitable currently for identifying correlation rather than causation, deploying the student voice through focus groups alongside data on engagement, continuation and grading.

Sources of evidence

52. Increasing awareness of the ethnicity awarding gap during the last decade, coupled with the strategies required by regulatory requirements during the last five years, has stimulated a growing literature on UK policy and practice in this area. This includes studies of broader approaches to learning and teaching and student support that can be applied to the ethnicity awarding gap as well as research articles focused specifically on race and ethnicity in higher education. There is a shift in the literature from early studies scoping out the field for DfE (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007), HEA (Stevenson & Whelan, 2011), the Equality Challenge Unit (Berry & Loke, 2011) and HEFCE (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015) to more recent in-depth investigation of specific issues and contexts across UK higher education. During recent years, there has been a shift in tone and focus from generic references to BME or BAME under-attainment to the factors influencing the grades secured by particular groups of students in different contexts and with intersecting characteristics, and the effect of strategies involving different actors and levels of institutions.

53. Examples identified by partners and for this project include:
    i. Studies of student perceptions and experiences (Bunce et al., 2021; Rai & Simpson, 2023; Simons & Belton, 2021; Wong et al., 2021)
    ii. Studies of types of modes of intervention that may contribute to addressing the ethnicity awarding gap (Hubbard, 2021; Keenan, 2014; Knight et al., 2022; Moores et al., 2017)
    iii. Studies of strategies and interventions in specific disciplines (Hlosta et al., 2021; Nightingale et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2021)
    iv. Studies of strategies and interventions across specific institutions (Austen et al., 2017; Claridge et al., 2018; Duhs et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2021; MacDonnell & Bisel, 2021; McDuff et al., 2018; Quyoum et al., 2022; Seuwou et al., 2022; Smith, 2017)

54. Whilst this work might be considered to provide the most useful evidence for institutional strategies, there is a further category of critical investigation that asks more profound questions about the character of policy, institutions and relationships in English higher education. Work of

this kind challenges the motives of policy makers and institutional leaders who promote diversity and measures to address the ethnicity awarding gap, associating them with institutional and self-promotion in politicised and marketised higher education settings (Bhopal, 2017; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). It also questions whether focusing on interventions and causality under-estimates the level and scope of racial injustice underpinning the issues in higher education, and calls for a more fundamental response from institutions and governments (Gerrard et al., 2022; Sabri, 2023). This could be important for framing discussions with policy makers and within universities, stimulating engagement among students, staff and institutional leaders, and testing the boundaries of appetite for change.

Areas for discussion

55. Based on this evidence, the following issues may be identified as priorities for further discussion and investigation:
    a. Share approaches to inter-sectional data analysis and the use of data analytics.
    b. Share approaches to balancing between locally and institutionally led activity to engage academic staff whilst ensuring coherence and direction.
    c. Discuss the factors that influence appetite at disciplinary and institutional level for changing curricula, modes of learning and assessment, and ways of navigating this.
    d. Consider the different modes of evaluation that can be deployed for strategies that combine project-based work with broader cultural and systemic change, and the extent to which they can provide assurance, support improvement and demonstrate impact.
    e. Consider the role of critical concepts and theories for understanding the ethnicity awarding gap and the responses to it by different actors from government to senior leaders, academic staff, professional services staff and students, and the extent to which there is scope for fundamental re-thinking of approaches within English higher education.

56. Given the appetite among partners to identify, investigate and test responses to hypotheses on the causes of the ethnicity awarding gap, partnership members could work together on systematic testing to explore the extent to which:
    a. There is conscious and unconscious bias running through the engagement between universities and students of colour, reflecting institutional racism.
    b. Students of colour feel marginalised and minoritised in universities, which influences their sense of belonging.

   c. The content of the <u>curriculum</u> and the modes of <u>assessment</u> in universities serve to exclude students of colour.

   d. Students of colour are more likely than white students to be <u>commuters</u>.

   e. Students of colour gain equivalent grades when they are <u>not the minority</u> in their course cohort or it is delivered by academic staff of colour.

57. These hypotheses could be addressed by systematic testing, which would apply the same approach in a sample of courses across each of the partner universities on:

   a. Anti-racism audits and actions.

   b. Induction and engagement programmes.

   c. Curriculum and assessment change.

   d. Additional and targeted support for commuter students.

   e. Students of colour being the majority on a course, or it being delivered by academic staff of colour.

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