Institute of Law and Justice: Leadership in Addressing the Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap

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Access, Participation and Student Success Case Study

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Foreword

When first approached to participate in a Theory of Change case study I was slightly nervous, because although we had shown significant improvements as a department (reducing our attainment gap from – 28% points in 2016/17 to – 2% points in 2021/22) I felt unable to point at a particular initiative as the determining factor and of course, these figures can fluctuate on an annual basis depending on the number of individuals involved. However, through a series of conversations with Julian we were able to tease out a number of possible explanations as to how we have moved towards a more equitable approach, albeit far from perfect, with differences across subject areas and potential for large swings across percentage points depending on the numbers of students who have enrolled.

In hindsight, having been asked to take on the EDI Lead role and undertaken a significant amount of reading around the area, it soon became clear that there is no one answer. Nevertheless, a strong commitment to our core values and strong directive leadership have been critical to our progress in consistently bridging the attainment gap and embedding inclusion. Success in one subject group in one institution cannot necessarily be exported wholesale to another with the same outcomes, and within an institution a successful approach for one subject area cannot necessarily be replicated in another within the same institution. The key has to lie with the specific staff, their understanding of the issues, their willingness to adapt materials and engage in sometimes difficult conversations about how and where the curriculum, the environment and process can be developed to enable a more inclusive, rights-based approach that benefits all. Fundamentally, if leaders do want to ensure meaningful change, they have to be prepared to get beneath the statistics and try new ways of doing things. Hopefully this case study can give you some ideas to get started.

Tanya Miles-Berry – Deputy Head Institute of Law and Justice

Executive Summary

As with most other English higher education providers, there is a consistent gap between the rate of Black students achieving a 1st or 2:1 degree classification compared to White students at Sheffield Hallam University. This is recognised as a sector-wide complex or 'wicked' problem and solving it is likely to require interventions across a wide range of domains.

Alongside a range of other activities, the Institute of Law and Justice has focused on the role of institutional leadership and cultural change as mechanisms for closing its own awarding gap.

This report details the approach taken by the Institute and draws on research and evaluation from other contexts to develop a theory of change; a model for how institutional / school leadership can inform and steer the changes required to create a more inclusive anti-racist culture and close awarding gaps.

The key change mechanisms in this domain span seven key areas:

- Leadership to establish closing the awarding gap as a priority for all staff in the department
- Providing a clear rationale for why the work is important
- Using data to demonstrate the relevance of the issues to all staff
- Taking an evidence-informed approach to exploring causal issues and implementing solutions
- Collaborating with students and using student voice to make the issues concrete and real
- Providing staff with potential solutions that can be implemented in their practice context
- Ensuring staff with EEDI responsibility have sufficient agency and resources to inform institutional change.

Alongside these SHU-specific activities, we incorporate learning from other literature and contexts to discuss related solutions to some of the challenges often raised in the course of this work:

- Raising awareness of the issues and the causes of the issues
- Addressing issues potentially limiting staff capacity to engage:
    - Distraction by data
    - Discomfort with discussing the issues
    - Misconceptions about target student groups
    - Overwhelm prompted by the scale of the problem
    - Limited evidence of local relevance of the issues

These components are included as mini-case studies, which feature an evidence-informed discussion of the issues and potential solutions, highlighting expected outcomes across attitudinal, knowledge, and behavioural domains. We also include suggestions for evaluation measures or impact indicators that can be used to assess outcomes.

Context

The ethnicity degree awarding gap is a sector-level issue for higher education. Whole-sector data from the Office for Students[1] currently shows a 20% difference in the proportion of Black students being awarded a 1st or 2:1 degree classification compared to White students. At Sheffield Hallam University the gap between Black students / students with 'Mixed' ethnicity and White students currently stands at 21.5%.

The Office for Students (OfS) has made closing this awarding gap a key priority for HE providers (OfS, 2021). As many commentators have observed, however, the awarding gap is a 'wicked issue' that is resistant to a clear understanding of why it arises or how it can be addressed (Codiroli-McMaster, 2021; Ugigabe-Green & Ernsting, 2022). It is also a complex issue; awarding differences are likely to be the result of a whole series of interacting or parallel factors occurring at the level of the sector, institutional or individual staff and students. Furthermore, organisation-level attempts to address the problem can risk homogenising what is a very diverse group of students and student experiences.

At the same time, there is a range of hypothesised factors which contribute to differences in awarding patterns (Gray et al., 2024; Li, 2024; Mountford-Zimdars et al.,2015; Mountford-Zimdars & Moore, 2024). These include academic issues, with higher education institutions understood to rely on a predominantly White and middle-class curriculum and assessment process (Arday et al., 2020; Campbell, 2022; Popoola et al., 2023), which fails to reflect the interests and experiences of marginalised student groups and risks negatively impacting on their ability to engage with their studies. There are also cultural issues. In the predominantly White cultural environment of English higher education, ethnically minoritised students can feel 'othered' and feel like they don't 'fit' or 'belong' (De Sousa et al., 2021; Hensby & Adewumi, 2024; Li, 2024; Nicholson, 2022). They may also feel the need to engage in extensive identity work to 'fit in' (Cross Jr et al., 2017; Ly & Chakrabarti, 2024). All of these responses generate cognitive overload, drawing energy and focus away from their academic studies (Bunce et al., 2021; Fernando & Kenny, 2021).

The HE sector has implemented a range of responses with the aim of closing and eliminating the ethnicity awarding gap. Indeed, at Sheffield Hallam University, this represents a key 'intervention strategy' in our 2025-2029 Access and Participation Plan and will guide our collective work over the next five years.

Leadership is recognised as a core mechanism for addressing ethnicity awarding gaps in Higher Education. The visible commitment of leadership at different levels of an organisation is seen as essential to driving change (Berry and Loke, 2011; Crofts & Pilkinton, 2012; Deem et al. 2005; Singh, 2009) as is leadership engaging a whole institution approach (Andrews et al., 2023; Thomas, 2017; Universities UK, 2022). At the same time, some research highlights the risk of leadership engagement being perceived by other staff merely as a performative and box-ticking exercise

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[1] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/data-dashboard/

(Crofts & Pilkinton, 2012) or overly bureaucratic (Hashemi Toroghu et al., 2024; Pizarro Milian & Wijesingha, 2023).

This case study explores the approach adopted by Sheffield Hallam's Institute of Law and Justice to change its own culture and approach by ensuring that the Ethnicity Awarding Gap is a key priority for the whole institute and is embedded into all of its activities. It describes the crucial role played by a committed leadership approach, and how interventions can be put in place to emphasise the role of all staff in reducing the awarding gap.

Report Overview

This report is the outcome of a series of workshops focused on developing a theory of change for the leadership work undertaken by the Institute of Law and Justice (IL&J) to address its ethnicity degree awarding gap.

We begin with a case study of the work already developed and implemented by the IL&J, formally the Department for Law and Criminology. We then draw on this work alongside a range of other research and evidence to construct a theory of change to model how institutional leadership can address the ethnicity degree awarding gap. The final section of the report consists of a more detailed analysis of the different 'change mechanisms' that can be implemented across different contexts, along with recommendations for how they can be evaluated.

Case Study: Leadership of the Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap in the Institute of Law and Justice

In recent years, the Institute's leadership has focused on addressing the specific degree awarding gap in the IL&J. The ethnicity awarding gap fell from 28% points in 2016/17 to – 2% points in 2021/22, according to the most recent available data.

The institute took the following approaches:

1. Ensuring the awarding gap was viewed as a clear Institute priority

The ethnicity awarding gap was positioned as a core priority of the Institute by:

i.   Ensuring it appeared on the agenda of all department meetings and discussions
ii.   Ensuring that it was always discussed in the context of other activities
iii.   Explicitly setting expectations in institute strategic documents.

Arkins and Kortesidou (2024) note the risk that if EDI is not integrated into strategic goals, it is likely to be marginalised and 'perceived as peripheral rather than fundamental' (14).

At the same time, ensuring that EDI issues and discussions are woven through all departmental activities and meetings helps mitigate the risk that they are seen as revolving 'around short-term projects or committees and competitive funding cycles' (Arkins & Kortesidou, 2024, p.16). This outcome can give the appearance of discontinuity and a loss of confidence in an organisations ability to achieve meaningful long-term change.

2. Providing clear evidence and rationale for this prioritisation

The ethnicity degree awarding gap is a complex issue with a range of components and factors. Institute leaders communicate the nature and complexity of the issues across a range of levels by:

i.   Providing data demonstrating the extent of the awarding gap at institutional, department and course levels. This makes it clear to all staff that the issues are widespread, relevant to all, and cannot be easily explained away through further data crunching (distraction by data).
Taking a nuanced approach to data analysis and discussion of the issues. It is essential to identify student segmentation, separating out the impact for home and international, ethnically minoritised students, for example.
In the same way, even positive-looking outcomes data are analysed to show that even where gaps appear small, this is often because of specific data issues. For example, a small number of ethnically minoritised students may have received high grades, but overall, a significant gap still remains.

ii. Providing each member of academic staff with data about the awarding gap on their course(s) to avoid any risk that the problem is assumed to lie elsewhere

3. Taking an evidence-based approach to exploring the issues

To further explore the complexity of the issues and explore potential causal or contributory factors, the Institute's leadership shares and discusses a wide range of research evidence to reduce the risk of staff homogenising a range of diverse student contexts and experiences or drawing on unevidenced assumptions. Acknowledging the complexity of the issues helps mitigate the temptation to assume that there is a single, one-size-fits-all solution that can be implemented, as well as the risk that staff are overly confident in their ability to solve the issues in their areas.

The use of research and evidence from other institutions and contexts also helps demonstrate the range of possible approaches and interventions that could be implemented (see below).

4. Employing student voice and experience

To ensure that staff are directly engaged in the issue and understand its diversity and complexity, Institute leaders draw on student voices to reduce the risk that the ethnicity awarding gap is viewed mainly as an abstract data issue. This approach encourages consideration of the impacts and causes in the lived experiences of students.

The Institute has implemented several approaches to engaging students and ensure student voices play a central role in communicating the issues to staff within the Institute:

- Curriculum consultants: The Institute employs ethnically minoritised students to review and feedback on curriculum content to ensure that it is inclusive and reflects diversity.

- Manifest Diversity: The Institute facilitated the setting up of a student-led body of ethnically minoritised students, who work to address the challenges they face within the university and their institute or department.
  https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/mdaamgsteeringgroup/

- Capturing student voice: An IL&J student wrote a powerful account of their experience as an ethnically minoritised student in the department. This represents an effective way of communicating the lived experience of ethnically minoritised students to staff.

5. Ensured that potential solutions were provided

Alongside activities to raise the profile of the challenges and the provision of research and data to reveal the complex nature of the issues, the Institute leadership recognises the importance of providing clear and actionable solutions that staff can implement in their practice. This includes a range of development opportunities and programmes, as well as support for

teaching staff to reflect on their own practice and consider the impact of institutional power and their teaching identity on students and their learning experiences.

Arkins & Kortesidou (2024) observe that if organisations rely on paper strategies and/or do not sufficiently resource activity, institutional activity can seem performative to staff. They go on to argue that some of the resistance to EDI initiatives can stem from staff failing to accept or understand the challenges, encouraging a view of EDI as a tick-box exercise. Clarity about the reasons for EDI initiatives and the challenges faced by under-represented groups can help mitigate this.

The IL&J does this both quantitatively (by using course awarding gap data to demonstrate the widespread presence of awarding gaps) and qualitatively through the sharing of students' voices describing the experiences of being ethnically minoritised. Arkins and Kortesidou (2024) argue that linking issues to the specific challenges faced by particular student groups can help mitigate a tendency towards abstracting the issues. They point to the 'criticality of personal stories in educating leaders on EDI to break down ingrained cultural biases and change behaviour' (p.14).

Institutional Leadership Theory of Change

We have reflected and drawn on the approach to leadership adopted by the IL&C, as well as a range of external research and evidence, to develop a theory of change for how institutional leadership interventions can help address issues associated with the ethnicity degree awarding gap.

A **theory of change (**or programme theory) can take many forms, but it is usually informed by theory-driven evaluation approaches. These start from the premise that all activities and programmes are deliberately designed by practice experts, are informed by a set of theories about how they work and that these 'beliefs and assumptions underlying an intervention can be expressed in terms of a phased sequence of causes and effects' (Weiss, 1997, p.501).

The Institute of Law and Justice is recognised across the university for taking a clear and strategic approach to leadership on the awarding gap and other EEDI issues, and for making a significant positive impact on its own ethnicity awarding gap. The theory of change included below is designed to capture and map the programme theory informing its leadership of this issue.

We have structured the discussion around a series of potential challenges that a department or Institute leadership may face in guiding staff through the complexity of EEDI issues.
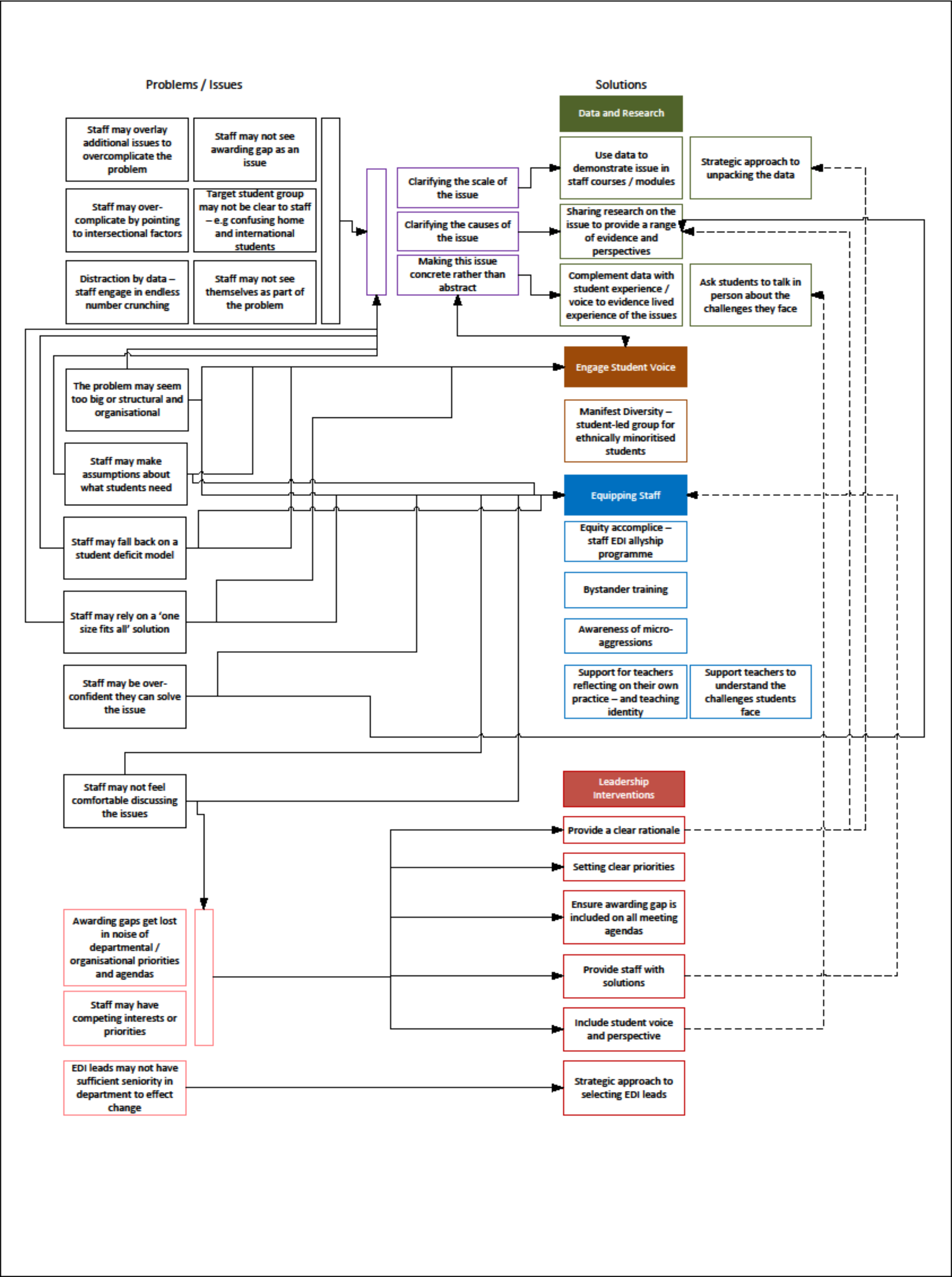
It is important to note that not all of the challenges described below reflect the specific situation in the IL&J. Alongside the Institute's approach, we have drawn more broadly on relevant literature to discuss related challenges that other departments, institutes or HE providers have identified. We then discuss the solutions which have been implemented in the IL&J and which we believe may support efforts to address similar challenges faced by other Institutes or departments.

From an evaluation perspective, we then describe the expected outcomes from each of these interventions. These have been mainly expressed as intended impacts on department and Institute staff, usually in terms of attitude, knowledge and behavioural outcomes (e.g. Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Schrader & Lawless, 2010; Straus et al., 2010). We have made tentative suggestions about how these change outcomes might be translated into evaluation measures or indicators.

Three further things to note are that;

i. Suggestions for evaluation measures are expressed in general terms. From a theory-driven perspective, evaluation measures should reflect an intervention's intended 'change mechanisms' (the specific things that an intervention does to generate change) to ensure that evaluation is specifically measuring the outcomes of mechanisms that we know are 'built-in' to the activity (Dalkin, et al., 2015; Mark & Henry, 2004). This increases our confidence that evaluation outcomes accurately reflect changes that are actively designed into and/or implemented during the activity. For this reason, we suggest that each specific intervention or activity is likely to require bespoke evaluation measures devised specifically for it.

ii.   As the theory of change diagram/map below illustrates, this is a complex area. In such cases, there is rarely a single linear correspondence between a problem and a solution. Some of the proposed solutions respond to a range of different challenges, and in the same way, each individual challenge may be addressed by a combination of different solutions (e.g. Lynne & Apgar, 2024; Powell et al., 2024). This complexity can make it difficult to distinguish the impact of different activities happening in parallel. Where this is the case, it can be more instructive to focus on specific change outcomes rather than the overall higher-level impacts of the activity.

iii.   Similarly, the evaluation measures we suggest tend to target 'intermediate' changes and outcomes rather than attempting to capture the overall impact of an intervention or activity on the ethnicity awarding gap (Harrison & Waller, 2017). This is because there may be a gap of 2-3 years or more between the implementation of leadership interventions and the point at which awarding outcomes are known. This more immediate focus also increases our confidence in an intervention's impact on these intermediate outcomes. Further work is needed to understand how these intermediate outcomes (such as changes to student experience or behaviour) contribute to higher-level degree awarding outcomes in a complex system.

Theory of Change Map

Problems / Issues

Staff may overlay additional issues to overcomplicate the problem

Staff may not see awarding gap as an issue

Staff may over-complicate by pointing to intersectional factors

Target student group may not be clear to staff – e.g confusing home and international students

Distraction by data – staff engage in endless number crunching

Staff may not see themselves as part of the problem

The problem may seem too big or structural and organisational

Staff may make assumptions about what students need

Staff may fall back on a student deficit model

Staff may rely on a 'one size fits all' solution

Staff may be over-confident they can solve the issue

Staff may not feel comfortable discussing the issues

Awarding gaps get lost in noise of departmental / organisational priorities and agendas

Staff may have competing interests or priorities

EDI leads may not have sufficient seniority in department to effect change

Solutions

Data and Research

Use data to demonstrate issue in staff courses / modules

Strategic approach to unpacking the data

Clarifying the scale of the issue

Clarifying the causes of the issue

Sharing research on the issue to provide a range of evidence and perspectives

Making this issue concrete rather than abstract

Complement data with student experience / voice to evidence lived experience of the issues

Ask students to talk in person about the challenges they face

Engage Student Voice

Manifest Diversity – student-led group for ethnically minoritised students

Equipping Staff

Equity accomplice – staff EDI allyship programme

Bystander training

Awareness of micro-aggressions

Support for teachers reflecting on their own practice – and teaching identity

Support teachers to understand the challenges students face

Leadership Interventions

Provide a clear rationale

Setting clear priorities

Ensure awarding gap is included on all meeting agendas

Provide staff with solutions

Include student voice and perspective

Strategic approach to selecting EDI leads

Challenges and Potential Solutions

In the section below, we explore some of the individual issues identified in the Theory of Change map in more detail.

1. Limited Awareness of Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap

Issue(s):

One of the challenges associated with attempts to shift organisational culture towards a more inclusive position is that staff may have only a limited awareness of the extent to which the ethnicity degree awarding gap and other EDI concerns are key strategic and organisational issues.

In an HE context, for example, Crofts and Pilkinton (2012) interviewed a range of staff with responsibility for EDI, some of whom suggested that they felt that HE had made sufficient progress for inequality to no longer be an issue (p.17). Similarly, De La Torre et al. (2024) point to the risk of 'liberal complacency' and the risk that even supportive staff may have time to 'devote for just one of the many liberation / equity projects and networks' within their institution (pp.174-5). Pizarro Milian & Wijesingha (2023) found that a majority of the Canadian university teachers they interviewed had only a 'superficial understanding of EDI policies' (p.450).

Across other types of organisations, there are similar issues in raising awareness about the urgency of an EDI agenda. In another Canadian context, Workman-Stark (2023) suggests that staff resistance to organisational diversity initiatives is likely to be informed by individual attitudes about members of diverse groups and their perception of the benefits or threats of diversity-related changes. Similarly, Pizarro and Wijesingha (2023) argue that staff responsiveness to the EDI issue is likely to depend on their individual 'worldviews' (p.451).

Challenge(s):

Some of the challenges in implementing effective EDI or ethnicity awarding gap interventions arise from the need to ensure the issue and the challenges are clear to academic staff, and therefore, that staff buy in to the interventions:

- Staff may not perceive the ethnicity awarding gap as an issue relevant to them or their role.
- Staff may not perceive the ethnicity awarding gap as an issue that is relevant to their students.

Potential Solutions:

[Theory of change solution: Data and research]

There are data solutions that can be put into place:

- Detailed data can show staff the specific issues in the courses or modules for which they are responsible.
- A strategic approach to unpacking this data can reveal the complexity of issues and help eliminate incorrect assumptions about target student groups or the causes of the issues.

Intended change outcomes:

Staff are

- more able to see the specific issues in the courses for which they are responsible.
- much more aware of the details of the awarding gap in the areas over which they have influence or impact.
- more likely to be prompted to take action.

Evaluation measures / impact indicators:

Attitudinal change:

Staff are

- more confident in their understanding of the issues
- more confident that they can see how the issue applies in their own area, and consequently
- more likely to take action in response (a behavioural outcome).

Knowledge change:

Staff have

- increased knowledge about department / institutional awarding gaps in the areas for which they are responsible.

Behavioural change:

Staff engage

- with activities and interventions designed to address awarding gaps.

2. Data obfuscation

Issue(s):

Although institutional data can be an important tool for identifying the need for and encouraging change, there can be a range of quality issues with the available data. These can discourage staff from engaging with institutional data, as it may be perceived as flawed, incomplete, or of poor quality (Afridi & Murji, 2019).

Writing in the context of US civil servants, Goldsmith (2018) suggests that most will be susceptible to 'data distraction', which can arise 'when one examines data for better managing an existing process without first clearly identifying the problem to be solved' (n.p.). Renieris (2019) goes further in her suggestion that 'talking about "data" is easier than talking about power, inequality, exploitation, […] racism, and misogyny' (n.p.).

Moreover, there is a risk that proxy data can become the primary concern rather than the issues it is supposed to represent. Harrison and McCaig (2025), for example, pointed to the risk that the use of postcode-based measures to identify young people as targets for widening participation outreach risked these measures themselves becoming the 'proxy for more real forms of social, economic or cultural disadvantage' (p.812).

Challenge(s):

Staff may lack clarity about the scale or nature of awarding gap issues, either through a lack of access to clear information or an inadvertent or deliberate strategy of challenging the underlying data:

- Staff may overlay a range of factors or data to overcomplicate the problem and, therefore, the solutions.
- Staff may be distracted by data and data analysis. This can be an attempt to achieve clarity through increasingly refined analysis.

Potential Solutions:

[Theory of change solutions: Data and Research Solutions, Engage Student Voice]

- Detailed data can show staff the actual issues in the courses or modules for which they are responsible, providing a clear picture of the situation or change across time.
- Clear and consistent datasets can help focus on the issues as indicated by the data rather than perceived inconsistencies in that data.
- A consistent approach to unpacking this data can clarify the situation across different courses and modules and for different student groups and support comparative analysis.
- Consistency of data can also encourage a shared and collaborative approach to addressing the issues.
- Sharing research on ethnicity awarding gap issues issue can help frame it and create a shared reference point for staff and help point to potential solutions that can be implemented in their context.
- Incorporating student voice and lived experience can help broaden the discussion from quantitative data to individual students and their experiences.

Intended change outcomes:

Staff

- are less inclined to become lost in the data and are more focused on the human implications of the issues.
- have more clarity on the nature of the specific issues they can focus on.
- move away from thinking of this as a data issue towards recognising it as an issue involving individual students.
- are more likely to take action.

Evaluation measures / impact indicators:

Attitudinal change:

Staff are

- more likely to view the awarding gap in a more holistic way, rather than relying solely on the data picture.
- more confident in thinking about and exploring potential solutions.

Knowledge change:

Staff have

- increased knowledge about aspects of the awarding gap and its implications for student experiences.
- more understanding of how awarding gaps impact on individual students.

Behavioural change:
Staff engage   • with activities and interventions designed to address awarding gaps.

3. Staff Assume Limited Personal Responsibility / Agency

Issue(s):

One of the challenges of driving cultural change in the interests of increased equality, diversity, and inclusion is the risk that some staff may feel that exclusion or inequality issues are not relevant to them or their work. Writing about staff engagement in student-staff EDI partnership initiatives, for example, Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2021) argue that staff engagement in interventions often involves only the 'usual suspects', staff already engaged in the relevant agenda (p. 229).

Other colleagues may feel that issues such as the degree awarding gap are not relevant to their courses or practice (Stevenson, 2012). Or they may see it as competing with a range of other professional, departmental or institutional priorities and agendas.

Nguyen et al. (2023), for example, identify a series of other issues that can encourage staff resistance to EDI programmes, including affective factors such as fear of the unknown or loss of privilege and cognitive factors such as confirmation bias or fixed belief. As noted above, De La Torre et al. (2024), Pizarro and Wijesingha (2023) and Workman-Stark (2023) argue that staff responses are also likely to be determined by pre-existing beliefs, attitudes and worldviews. In the broader context of organisational theory, Rehman et al. (2021) suggest that this kind of staff resistance can inhibit positive institutional change.

A related issue is that for some staff, the problem may seem too large or associated with structural and organisational factors and therefore, outside of their locus of control (see below). This can result in a reduction in their sense of agency or responsibility, which in turn can exacerbate the issues discussed above.

Challenge(s):

Staff may distance themselves from involvement in the awarding gap. They may not see themselves as part of the problem and assume that it is only an issue for others:

- Staff may assume that their own courses or modules do not have an ethnicity degree awarding gap.
- Staff may assume that the demographic makeup of the student population on their courses means that the awarding gap is not relevant to them.
- Staff may have a range of other competing professional or institutional priorities and objectives.

Potential Solutions:

[Theory of change solutions: Data and Research, Engage Student Voice]

- Detailed data can show staff the actual issues in the courses or modules for which they are responsible, providing a clear picture of the situation.
- A consistent approach to unpacking this data can clarify the situation across different courses and modules.
- Sharing research on the issues can help frame it, create a shared reference point or opportunities for collaboration, and/or point to potential solutions.
- Incorporating student voices and lived experiences can help broaden the discussion from quantitative data to individual students and their experiences and make it more 'real' for academic staff.

Intended change outcomes:

Academic staff are

- less likely to abdicate responsibility from being involved in interventions to address awarding gaps.
- more likely to have an awareness of how the awarding gap impacts on them and their students.
- more likely to be aware of how the awarding process impacts on individual students.
- more likely to take action in their area of responsibility.

Evaluation measures / impact indicators

Attitudinal change:

Staff are

- more likely to consider the awarding gap as relevant to them and their work.

Knowledge change:

Staff have

- more detailed knowledge about the ethnicity awarding gap and its relevance to their work.
- more awareness of how this impacts on their students.

Behavioural change:

Staff are

- more likely to seek solutions and interventions they can apply in their own context

Staff engage

- with activities and interventions designed to address awarding gaps and seek opportunities to implement them in their own context.

4. Staff are Overconfident they can Solve the Issues

Issue(s):

Some academic staff may be over-confident in their ability to address awarding gap issues. Sometimes, this can be a result of oversimplifying the causes and contributing factors. Kidd (2021), for example, argues that staff may be naïve about the complexity of the issues. In a similar way, Pizarro Milian and Wijesingha (2023) suggest that, in a Canadian context, many HE staff lacked detailed familiarity with institutional EDI policy and requirements. Bosch (2024) argues that organisational managers may defer to simplistic models of inclusion and diversity to encourage rapid decision-making and avoid the complexity of issues.

Challenge(s):

- Staff may assume that they already have a clear understanding of the causes of, and how to resolve, the ethnicity awarding gap in their own context.
- Overconfidence can reduce engagement with other interventions and solutions and / or collaborative engagement with other activities.

Potential Solutions:

[Theory of change solutions: Data and Research, Engage Student Voice]

- Sharing evidence and research on the issues can help broaden understanding of the ethnicity awarding gap, its various aspects, and the range of interventions that can be put in place to address it.
- Incorporating student voices and lived experiences can help broaden the discussion from quantitative data to individual students and their experiences, thereby making it more 'real' for academic staff and introducing diverse perspectives and experiences.

Intended change outcomes:

Staff

- are more likely to understand the complexity of the issues and potential solutions.
- have a broader awareness of the different causes of the ethnicity awarding gap and a range of potential solutions.
- are more likely to have an awareness of the diversity of different students and their experiences.
- are more likely to be prompted to take a collaborative and consultative approach to addressing awarding gaps in their area of responsibility.

Evaluation measures / impact indicators:

Attitudinal change:

Staff are • more likely to consider the awarding gap as a complicated challenge with a range of aspects. • more likely to be open to collaborative and consultative approaches.

Knowledge change:
Staff have • more detailed knowledge about the complicated and diverse nature of the ethnicity awarding gap and its impact on students. • more awareness of other kinds of interventions and solutions.

Behavioural change:
Staff engage • with collaborative and consultative activities and interventions designed to address awarding gaps and broaden out their own approach.

5. Incorrect Framing of the Student in Ethnicity Awarding Gaps

Issue(s):

This encompasses two related issues, both of which stem from a potentially inaccurate understanding of students and their experiences.

The first is that academic staff may make incorrect assumptions about what students 'need' to help mitigate ethnicity awarding gaps (Li, 2024; Stevenson, 2012).

The second is that academic staff may fall back on a deficit model or cultural deficit model of students in which the ethnicity awarding gap arises because of deficiencies or lacks in the individual students rather than considering the role of structural or organisational factors (De Latore et al., 2024; Gutman & Younas, 2024; Li, 2024; Singh et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2021)

A related issue is that academic staff may be inclined to focus on a 'one-size-fits-all' solution that they believe will be more effective in solving the problem for all students in all contexts (Islam, 2021; Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 2022). This can lead to the issues around abstraction and oversimplification discussed above.

Challenge(s):

- Staff may assume that the awarding gap arises because of deficiencies in individual or groups of students that need to be corrected.
- Staff may make incorrect assumptions about the causes of the ethnicity awarding gap and therefore attempt oversimplified or ineffective 'fixes'.
- This can also limit engagement with other interventions and solutions.

Potential Solutions:

[Theory of change solutions: Data and Research, Engage Student Voice, Equipping Staff]

- Sharing research on the issues can help broaden understanding of the ethnicity awarding gap, its various aspects, and the range of interventions that can be put in place to address it.
- Incorporating student voices and lived experiences can help broaden the discussion from quantitative data to individual students and their experiences, making it more 'real' for staff and introducing more diverse perspectives and experiences.
- Providing training to staff to help them understand the impact of micro-aggressions, their own teaching identity and practice, and the role of allyship can support them in developing more inclusive teaching practice and engagement with students.

Intended change outcomes:

Staff

- are more likely to understand the complexity of the issues and potential solutions.
- have a broader awareness of the different causes of the ethnicity awarding gap and potential solutions that can be implemented.
- are more likely to have an awareness of the diversity of different students and their experiences.
- are more likely to take a collaborative and consultative approach to addressing awarding gaps in their area of responsibility.

Academic staff

- are more likely to have awareness of and implement effective changes to their practice to support diverse students.

Evaluation measures / impact indicators:

Attitudinal change:

Staff are

- more likely to consider the awarding gap as a complicated challenge with a range of factors and components.
- more likely to be open to collaborative and consultative approaches.
- more receptive to training and support for engaging and supporting a diverse student population.

Academic staff are

- more likely to be open to reflecting on their own teaching identity and practice.

Knowledge change:

Staff have

- more detailed knowledge about the complicated and diverse nature of the ethnicity awarding gap and its impact on students.
- more awareness of other kinds of potential interventions and solutions.

Academic staff have

- more understanding and knowledge about the experiences of different students.

Behavioural change:

Staff engage

- with collaborative and consultative activities and interventions designed to address awarding gaps and broaden out their own approach.

Academic staff

- reflect on and adapt their own teaching identity and practice for the benefit of their students.

6. Staff are Intimidated by the Scale of the Problem

Issue(s):

This is a different form of the personal responsibility issue. The ethnicity awarding gap is a meso-level structural / organisational issue (Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 20222), and ultimately, a broader cultural issue. Recognising this can lead to academic staff feeling discouraged that, as individuals, they can have any positive impact or influence (Stevenson, 2012). Similarly, Richards et al. (2023) found that some staff felt that their institution aspired for equality but did not have the infrastructure required to achieve it. Consequently, they may disengage from local attempts to respond to the issues.

Even within an individual institution, the scale of the issues can challenge staff and negatively impact on their engagement with EDI. Pizarro Milian and Wijesingha (2023) noted that the Canadian academic staff they interviewed perceived inconsistencies across their institution in the way in which EDI was implemented, encouraging "resentment" and "backlash" (p.456).

Challenge(s):

- Some staff may focus only on structural / organisational factors.
- Some staff may point to the large scale of the issue and the relatively small size of their course or module to suggest that they cannot influence it.
- Both of these issues can lead to staff disengaging from department or Institute approaches to the awarding gap.

Potential Solutions:

[Theory of change solutions: Data And Research, Student Voice, Equipping Staff]

- Sharing research on the issues can help broaden understanding of the full range of the ethnicity awarding gap, its various aspects, and how it impacts on individual students.
- Sharing research and evaluation outcomes can demonstrate the range of small-scale interventions that are being put in place and the positive impact these can have.
- This can encourage a view of the issue being incrementally addressed by interventions working in parallel, rather than assuming that a single intervention can solve the whole problem at once.
- Incorporating the voices and lived experiences of individual students can make it more 'real' for academic staff and encourage them to positively re-calibrate their expectations of the smaller scale at which their actions can make a difference on the ground.
- Support for teachers to reflect on their own practice and teaching identity can help them develop strategies for their own practice and engagement with students.

Intended change outcomes:

Staff

- are more likely to view the ethnicity awarding gap as a complex issue with a range of interventions impacting at a range of different levels.
- are more likely to have an awareness of the diversity of different students and their experiences.
- have more understanding of the smaller scale, local interventions and activities they can implement to positively impact on the ethnicity awarding gap in their own practice.
- are more likely to seek out interventions that they can put in place.
- are more likely to engage with and contribute to collaborative efforts to address inequality.

Academic staff

- are more likely to reflect on their teaching practice and interactions with students.

Evaluation measures / impact indicators:

Attitudinal change:

Staff are

- more likely to see the value in smaller-scale interventions that they can incorporate into their own practice.
- more likely to feel positive and optimistic that they can positively impact on the awarding gap.

Staff feel

- more able to engage and contribute to interventions.

Knowledge change:

Staff have

- more detailed knowledge about the complicated and diverse nature of the ethnicity awarding gap and its impact on students.
- greater understanding of how interventions can be implemented at various levels, including their own personal practice.
- more knowledge of the kinds of interventions they can implement in their own context.

Academic staff have

- more understanding about the way in which their teaching identity might impact on different students.

- more knowledge about what solutions they can incorporate into their own teaching practice.

Behavioural change:

Staff engage

- with collaborative and consultative activities and interventions designed to address awarding gaps and broaden out their own approach.

Academic staff

- reflect on and adapt their teaching practice to support a diverse range of students.

7. Staff Discomfort with Discussing the Ethnicity Awarding Gap

Issue(s):

Discussing issues around ethnicity and racism can be uncomfortable for many staff in higher education and can feel unsafe. There is fear of inadvertently saying the 'wrong thing' or using incorrect terminology (Bunce et al., 2021; Claridge et al., 2018; Stevenson, 2012). This can limit safe and open discussions about the ethnicity awarding gap and, therefore, strategies to address it.

This discomfort can also make it difficult to see how much different staff are engaging with the issues and the extent to which they are implementing interventions.

Challenge(s):

- Without open discussion, it is not possible to explore data, research or ideas about how to address the ethnicity awarding gap.
- Without open discussion, it is not possible to see how and to what extent different staff are engaging with activities and interventions.

Solutions:

[Theory of change solutions: Engage Student Voice, Equipping Staff]

- Incorporating student voice and lived experience can help make it more 'real' for academic staff and introduce diverse perspectives and experiences, which in turn can increase their confidence in discussing the issues.
- Providing training to staff to make them more aware of the impact of micro-aggressions, their own teaching identity and practice, and the role of allyship can provide them with solutions that help them navigate the issues with a positive set of tools available.

Intended change outcomes:

Staff

- have a broader awareness of the different causes of the ethnicity awarding gap and potential solutions.
- have a greater understanding of student experiences and how to talk about it in an inclusive way.
- are more likely to have awareness of the diversity of different students and their experiences and increased comfort and confidence in talking about the issues.
- are more likely to engage in discussions with colleagues and, therefore, contribute to interventions and activities and collaborative activities.
- have access to a range of tools and approaches they can use to support their students.

Evaluation measures / impact indicators:

Attitudinal change:

Staff are

- more comfortable discussing issues related to ethnicity, racism, and the ethnicity awarding gap.
- more confident in contributing to departmental or institutional activity.
- more confident in working with and supporting diverse student groups.

Knowledge change:

Staff have

- more detailed knowledge about the complex and diverse nature of the ethnicity awarding gap, its impact, and the different groups of students affected.
- more awareness of allyship and the impact of micro-aggressions.

Academic staff have

- access to a toolkit of interventions they can implement in their own practice.

Behavioural change:

Staff engage

- with and support all students with confidence.

Academic staff

- reflect on and adapt their own teaching identity and practice for the benefit of their students.

8. Ensuring the Awarding Gap Is an Institutional Priority

Issue(s):

Universities are often large, complex organisations, situated in a complex landscape with a range of regulatory, financial, regional and practical challenges. The ethnicity degree awarding gap is one of many challenges HE providers and their staff may face at any given time. The role of institutional leaders in embedding it as a strategic priority is often described as a crucial element (Andrews et al., 2023; Stevenson, 2012; Universities UK,2022).

It can, however, be challenging to keep this issue at the top of the priority list, to keep staff focused on it, and to ensure that it is not lost in the noise of competing agendas and priorities (Arkins, 2023; Arkins & Kortesidou, 2024).

As noted above, individual members of staff may also have other personal or professional priorities, attitudes or worldviews, or may decide to focus on other liberation issues.

Challenge(s):

- Ethnicity awarding gaps can get lost in the noise of other departmental priorities and agendas. They risk being seen as performative box-ticking exercises, rather than meaningful strategies.
- Staff may have a range of other interests, priorities and agendas that do not include equality, diversity, inclusion and the ethnicity degree awarding gap. This can mean they have limited time or energy to devote to relevant activities or interventions.

Potential Solutions:

[Theory of change solutions: Data and Research, Engage Student Voice, Equipping Staff]

- Ensuring that the ethnicity awarding gap is discussed at all department meetings, in the context of other issues, and formally included on all agendas, helps embed it in departmental culture and reduces the likelihood of the issue being overlooked.
- Discussing data at all levels (sector, institution, department, course and module) can reinforce the ongoing importance of the issue.
- Discussion of research on the issue can raise awareness and highlight its importance.
- Incorporating student voice and lived experience can help make the issue more 'real' for academic staff who may be otherwise inclined to ignore the issue.
- By increasing their awareness of the experience of different student groups staff can develop a more nuanced understanding of the issues.
- Providing staff with a range of implementable solutions and interventions can help reduce the 'know-do' gap (Fahim & Straus, 2023) and equip them with the necessary tools to address issues in their own context.
- Providing training for staff to help them understand how the issues may manifest for different students and how these issues have been addressed elsewhere, can increase their awareness of the scale of the issue.
- Providing training to staff to understand the impact of microaggressions, their own teaching identity and practice, and the role of allyship can equip them with solutions that help them navigate these issues.

Intended change outcomes:

- Academic staff are clear about the priority and importance attached to issues around the ethnicity degree awarding gap, which will enable it to remain balanced against competing agendas.
- Engaging in discussions about the awarding gap and associated issues at every opportunity keeps it current and a clear priority.
- Academic staff have a series of tools available which helps them avoid being overwhelmed by the complexity of the issue and/or uncertain how to respond to them.

Evaluation measures / impact indicators:

Attitudinal change:

Staff view

- the ethnicity awarding gap as an ongoing priority for the department.
- the awarding gap as something that is being tackled within their department.

Staff are

- confident they are equipped to take action in their own practice.

Knowledge change:
Staff have

- detailed knowledge about the nature of the awarding gap in their own department or course.
- clear understanding of how and why the awarding gap is a priority for them.

Academic staff have

- Access to a toolkit of interventions they can implement in their own practice. |
| **Behavioural change:** |
| Staff engage

- with local activities to address the awarding gap and contribute to ongoing discussions.

Academic staff

- reflect on and adapt their own teaching identity and practice for the benefit of their students. |

9. Staff with EDI Responsibilities May Lack Seniority

Issue(s):

Staff with EDI responsibilities may be selected for a range of reasons and may not always have sufficient departmental seniority to meaningfully effect change (Bhopal, 2023). A recent study suggested that this was often the case at Sheffield Hallam (Donelly et al., 2023). Consequently, the role can be seen as a token or nominal role. In other cases, staff may take on the role with a great deal of personal commitment and perform their duties in time over and above that allocated in their academic workload model.

Challenge(s):

- Staff with EDI responsibilities, or those who take on responsibility for addressing the ethnicity awarding gap, may not have sufficient seniority or be in a position to implement required changes and ensure that agreed actions are delivered.
- Staff may be committed to the role but still lack sufficient authority to drive meaningful change.
- Other priorities and demands on staff result in this work being carried out in their own time. This can result in staff being unable to give it the full attention it requires and / or risk staff burnout (Andrews et al., 2023).

Potential Solutions:

[Theory of change solution: Equipping Staff]

- Careful and strategic decision-making about who takes on relevant leadership can ensure that staff in the EDI role have sufficient authority to drive the agenda forward.
- Ensuring that the EDI role is sufficiently work-planned can ensure that the person in the role has sufficient time and energy to drive forward changes.

Intended change outcomes:

- Effective and committed staff with EDI responsibilities are provided with the necessary resources and authority to drive meaningful change and engage colleagues in the process.
- Staff in EDI roles are sufficiently resourced to carry out the role effectively.

Evaluation measures / impact indicators:

Attitudinal change:

Staff with EEDI responsibilities feel

- supported and that they have sufficient authority and resources to deliver their role.

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- feel that their work is a priority for their department.

Other staff view

- the role as important, effective and impactful.

Behavioural change:

Staff in the department

- engage with the agenda.
- support and respond to the work of the EDI lead.

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