

From local to institutional attainment change: scaling-up local initiatives

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Abstract

Ethnicity-based gaps in degree outcomes are a pervasive sector issue. At the University of Wolverhampton, substantial investments have been made a) to fund research into why the outcomes gap occurs, the better to understand it, and then b) to implement and evaluate initiatives to reduce it. However, upscaling smaller initiatives to university-wide actions can be fraught with issues. This case study will provide a synthesis of the research carried out at Wolverhampton and the ways this was used as an evidence-base to inform institutional change. The study will also consider some of the lessons learnt from our attempts to embed the outcomes into institutional 'business as usual'.

Context

The University of Wolverhampton has participated in several projects relating to inclusivity and the reduction in the attainment gap for degree outcomes between 'white' and 'black, Asian and minority ethnic' (BAME) students. Two multi-institutional projects that researched the reasons for disparities in students' academic results were:

1. The *Disparities in Student Attainment* (DiSA) project, funded by the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (Cousin and Cureton, 2012)
2. The *What Works?* programme, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Higher Education Academy and Action on Access (Thomas, 2012; Cureton *et al.*, 2017; Thomas *et al.*, 2017).

The outcomes from these projects and the subsequent processes to embed the actions and recommendations into institutional practice form the basis of this case study.

Project outcomes

The outcomes from both projects suggested a) that there is no single reason for the disparities seen in the marks and grades of assessment activities and b) that these disparities are the result of a complex intersection between several factors which can have a negative impact upon students' lives and well-being. These factors – and the interplay between them – should be considered when discussing with members of staff and students the issue of attainment disparities.

Cousin and Cureton (*op.cit.*) identified four interrelated categories to explain some of the intersecting factors (see also Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015; Cureton and Gravestock, 2018):

1. Relational factors – *i.e.* factors that have impact on students' relationships with their peers, lecturers, academic departments and the university itself;
2. Aspects of pedagogy – *i.e.* design of learning, teaching and assessment activities and the inclusivity of the learning environment;
3. Psycho-social processes – *i.e.* the psychological contract that a student has with a university, including consideration of whether this contract is enhanced or violated by a student's expectations of higher education (HE);
4. Social and cultural capital – *i.e.* the knowledge and understanding that students have when they enter the HE environment and the opportunity for students to acquire new knowledge in order to make a successful transition into HE.

The outcomes from the two projects that are believed to reduce disparities in student attainment can be allocated to one or more of these four categories. For the purposes of this case study, three broad themes have been chosen for discussion. These themes have resulted in proposed recommendations and actions for University-wide dissemination and embedding. The three themes relate to the four categories above as follows:

1. Belonging (Relational factors);
2. Assessment activities (Aspects of pedagogy);
3. Expectations (Psycho-social processes; Social and cultural capital).

More detailed information about these themes is available in Cousin and Cureton (*op.cit.*), Thomas (*op.cit.*), Cureton *et al.* (*op.cit.*) and Cureton and Gravestock (*op.cit.*).

Belonging

One of the key findings from the national *What Works?* programme was the importance of students' sense of 'belonging' within an institution. The concept of belonging was found to be multi-faceted and the primary outcome from the programme was that students were more successful if they felt that they were accepted, had strong learning relationships (*e.g.* with peers, lecturers) and felt valued as part of an institution (Masika and Jones, 2016; Humphrey and Lowe, 2017). A strong sense of belonging provided students with the resilience and confidence to support them during difficult periods in their studies.

The notion of belonging also equated with 'engagement', in that students who had a strong sense of belonging were also the ones who were likely to engage fully in academic and social activities. The *What Works?* programme found that black male students had a lower sense of belonging compared with other groups of students and that these students were less likely to achieve a 'good' degree classification at the end of their period of study.

The *What Works?* programme also identified that the number of students who considered leaving during their first year of study was far greater than the number who actually left (Thomas, *op.cit.*). Institutions participating in the programme found that between thirty-three and forty-two per cent of students had considered leaving in the first year of study, whereas around eight per cent had actually withdrawn. Issues such as a feeling of isolation and not fitting in were suggested as explanations for why students had considered withdrawing from their studies. It was also demonstrated that many of the students who subsequently went on to withdraw from HE had low overall levels of satisfaction.

The development of effective learning relationships between students and members of staff was found to be central to supporting and enhancing students' confidence and their potential to achieve. Feedback from students indicated that lecturers could enhance belonging by showing respect and demonstrating that they could see potential in the students; however, belonging could also be lost rapidly if lecturers were perceived to be rude or unapproachable. When students did not have effective learning relationships with members of staff, they would often rely on their peers for support. Although this could sometimes be an effective form of learning relationship, one of the issues identified was that peers may unintentionally spread misconceptions about academic processes and procedures, particularly in relation to assessment activities.

Assessment activities

Effective assessment design can help students' transition into HE, as well as supporting students' mental wellbeing. Examples of effective practice can include: early formative assessment; reviewing deadlines for summative submission so that they are not bunched; effective group work activities to support peer interaction (Krause, 2001; Tinto, 2006; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Crosling *et al.*, 2009; Houghton and Anderson, 2017). As periods of assessment can be times when some students might question their preparedness for HE, it is important that strong learning relationships with lecturers and peers have already been established. The reduction – or elimination – of any barriers relating to the successful completion of assessment tasks is therefore of prime consideration in supporting students to achieve and to continue in HE.

Students can sometimes spend more time on worrying about an assessment activity and trying to understand the requirements of what they are being asked to do than on their production of the assessment task (Oldham and Dhillon, 2012; Howell-Richardson, 2012). A central outcome from the University's *What Works?* project was the production of clear and concise assignment briefs and enhancing students' understanding of what was required of them. The University's projects found a clear link between the availability and quality of assignment briefs and the number of students who subsequently submitted assignments and achieved good results (Cousin and Cureton, *op.cit.*; Cureton *et al.*, *op.cit.*).

In order to support students' assessment-literacy skills and understanding of an assessment task, the University developed student-centred 'Assessment Unpacking' activities. This process aligns with the proposal that assessment activities will be more effective at promoting and supporting learning if students have been involved in the process as active participants and partners (Nicol, 2009; Winstone *et al.*, 2017). The assessment unpacking activities at the University were conducted as follows:

- In small groups, students discussed their understanding of the assignment requirements and articulated this information to the lecturer and the class as a whole.
- Students were then given an opportunity to ask questions anonymously about what they did not understand – for example, by posing questions on Post-it Notes.
- Lecturers responded to the points raised during the student feedback and addressed any misconceptions in understanding.

Members of staff participating in the project were surprised by some of the misconceptions that students had regarding the assessment activities; however, staff also noted that there were fewer queries regarding the assessment activity outside class contact hours following the assessment unpacking process.

The assessment unpacking activities were found to reduce student anxiety, increase student confidence and support the development of learning relationships between students and members of staff. Students felt that they were empowered in a safe environment to articulate their own beliefs and understanding about the assessment tasks. The process also helped to reduce the impact of misconceptions that might have been spread by peers.

Expectations

Students from different institutions involved in the projects indicated that they had not been clear about the HE environment before starting their studies. Students understood that there would be differences between further education and HE environments, but were unable to articulate what these differences might be.

In many cases, this lack of understanding of HE related to processes and procedures concerning assessment activities (e.g. understanding the degree classification scheme, institutional marking schemes and the importance of spelling and grammar in some assignments). Students commented that they often felt as though they did not know the 'rules of the game'. Part of this confusion related to students' understanding of HE terminology. One specific example was the term 'independent learning', which was found to be poorly understood by many students. Hockings *et al.* (2017) conducted a national cross-institutional project to investigate the understanding of the term 'independent learning' and to determine the activities that students were undertaking as part of this process. It was found that students frequently equated the term 'independent learning' with the model of 'homework' that they were familiar with from their experiences at school or college. Some students also perceived 'independent learning' as a way for them to take on the responsibility of bridging the gap between material delivered within the HE classroom sessions and what was required for the curriculum as a whole.

In order to address issues relating to students' transition into HE, some of the projects used an interlocutor to help to explain some of the characteristics of the HE environment. The use of an interlocutor was also found to be useful for developing and managing students' expectations, especially when the conversation focused on raising aspirations and discussing students' potential. This was particularly important where students were the 'first in family' to enter HE and where there was not the appropriate knowledge within the home environment to support the students' studies. Providing clear information to students and to their families about the HE environment helped to develop understanding and an awareness of the issues that the students would be facing during their period of study. Such information was essential to support an effective transition into HE, in order to ensure that expectations could be developed and managed and to underpin the psychological contract that the students had with a university.

From local to institutional

As has been shown above, the two projects resulted in the identification of a number of activities and recommendations that were shown to have a positive impact upon student satisfaction and attainment. Although these activities relate to issues regarding attainment, the processes involved in the implementation of these outcomes within the institution will be common to many projects and institutions.

Following the completion of the projects, a number of the institutional activities and processes were adopted, with the intention of embedding the project outcomes within the normal day-to-day practice of the University. These activities included:

- dissemination via faculty and institutional learning and teaching events;
- use of the annual peer-review activities within the academic faculties;
- alignment of the Graduate Teaching Assistants' work with the project outcomes;
- integration of the project outcomes into the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education and Professional Practice;
- a series of Students' Union 'summits', which encouraged members of staff to pledge to undertake work to reduce the gap in student outcomes.

The University also established an 'Attainment Champion' within each of the four academic faculties. These champions met on a regular basis with members of staff who had been involved with the project and also with members of senior management. The champions were members of staff, from within the faculties, who had credibility in their subject areas and also knowledge of the issues relating to attainment. The use of champions, or 'change agents', can be a powerful way to enact change within an organisation through quality-management processes (Hutton, 1994); in this case, they helped to ensure that the implementation of the project outcomes was not simply viewed as a 'top-down' change and that the local context would be addressed through the involvement of the champions.

Lessons learnt

It was found that many of the activities listed above were appropriate for raising awareness of the issues and the strategies identified in the projects, but they were not always sufficient to embed practice across the institution. Discipline areas that had participated in the projects continued to implement the project outcomes; however, although these activities were adopted in other disciplines, the implementation was not pervasive or consistent.

One of the potential issues that has been recognised when trying to apply project outcomes to an existing curriculum is that these activities can be viewed as 'bolted-on' and additional pieces of work. The impact of these activities is therefore susceptible to gradual change over time – a form of 'academic creep' – with a reversion to the former practice. For example, changes were made to the assignment briefs with the good intention of providing additional relevant material and information to students, but they lost in the process the key elements of clarity and brevity. Also, once some members of staff had conducted the assessment unpacking activities a number of times, they felt that they understood the students' misconceptions and addressed these through revised and clarified assignment briefs. In some instances, the assessment unpacking process then became lecturer-centred rather

than student-centred, in that a lecturer would explain in more detail what s/he thought the students needed to know on the basis of information provided in previous assessment unpacking activities. Although this information might have been explicit, helpful and informative, changing the nature of the assessment unpacking activities also changed the learning relationship between the student and lecturer, which might have had the impact of reducing the confidence and empowerment that students felt in undertaking the student-centred approach to assessment unpacking. Alongside this, new members of staff joining the institution were being introduced within the academic faculties to the more lecturer-centred, rather than student-centred, approaches that had been recommended by the outcomes of the projects.

One of the generic problems associated with internally- or externally-funded projects is that it can be hard for the members of the team to continue the work of the project when the period of funding has finished, particularly when dedicating time to the embedding of project outcomes. In order to ensure that this work is continued, it needs to align – and be seen to align – with institutional priorities and activities. At the end of a project, some members of staff can sometimes have the perception ‘We’ve already done this, haven’t we?’, particularly with the introduction of new internal initiatives and external drivers with impact on staff workload. It is therefore important that relevant outcomes remain visible, are embedded within institutional priorities and form part of a strategic direction and approach. This will ensure that a consistent message is communicated to students and to members of staff about the work that is required. For this reason, having a single initiative can be an effective way of raising awareness of change; however, this initiative needs to be located in a suitable department within an institution and should be led by a member of staff with credibility and the ability to influence and support change.

Following the completion of the DiSA and *What Works?* projects, the University underwent a period of restructuring, which meant that there was no longer a suitable central location for the initiative. Also, the roles of members of staff who had been involved with the initial projects were revised and it was harder to influence institutional change from these new roles. This also made it harder to support and co-ordinate the work of the faculty attainment champions. Although the role of champion or change agent can be a powerful method of enacting change, one of the risks observed was that it was possible for other members of staff to feel less responsibility for implementing change, owing to perception that this was the role and responsibility of the attainment champion.

Concluding comments: addressing the lessons

The University has been revisiting the outcomes from the DiSA and *What Works?* projects and is undertaking a number of specific inclusion- and attainment-related activities to support the embedding of the projects’ recommendations. In order to address the lessons described above, the responsibility for the co-ordination of activities relating to the development of inclusive curricula – including addressing the attainment gap – has been brought into a central department that was established after the restructuring process and which has responsibility for supporting learning and teaching across the institution. This department has been able to draw upon the expertise and experience of members of staff from across the institution, many of whom were involved in the DiSA and *What Works?* projects. The department has also established an institution-wide ‘Include Me’ community of practice, to

raise the awareness of members of staff and students of inclusion-related issues and to support the work of the attainment champions by demonstrating that these issues are relevant to all members of the academic community.

The department has also ensured that key outcomes from the projects are now established within the institution's 'Learning & Teaching Strategy'. Effective implementation of the Learning & Teaching Strategy will be supported through the curriculum design of and development process for all new and revised courses. These processes will ensure that course-development teams are, as part of the planning and design process, involved in a discussion about the issues and that the implementation of these outcomes will be embedded as part of the newly-developed curricula and should not be viewed as additional 'bolt-on' activities.

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