

Tackling Degree Awarding Gaps in Higher Education

Despite over a decade of sector attention in UK higher education, persistent disparities remain in undergraduate degree outcomes across race, class, disability and other minoritised groups. Research has shown that these disparities do not stem from student deficits but from systemic and institutional factors manifesting as deep-seated cultural, pedagogical and curricula practices that underpin the degree awarding gap but progress in eliminating the gaps has been slow and uneven. However, meaningful transformation is possible through strong institutional leadership, purposeful collaboration, innovative practice and sustained commitment to success for all. This conference brings together practitioners (access/outreach, student success, academic development staff) academics, researchers and students to interrogate root causes, explore solutions, and share practical approaches to embedding equity and belonging across higher education, with the aim of eliminating awarding gaps.

9.15 Coffee & Registration

9.45 Welcome

Annette Hayton, NERUPI Co-Convenor, University of Bath
Fatmata Daramy, Research Associate, University of Bath

10.00 Keynote: Advancing Inclusive Practice During Sector Turbulence

Professor Zainab Khan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Resources and Transformation), London South Bank University

Professor Tony Moss, Pro Vice-Chancellor Education and Student Experience, London South Bank University

11.00 Coffee break

11.30 NERUPI Members' Presentations: Exploring Contributing Factors

- No Gaps: An institution wide approach to closing continuation, completion and awarding gaps for all equity groups
- Developing academics as Diversity Mark Practitioners
- TEF Black: (Re-)defining Teaching 'Excellence' as Commitment to Educational Justice
- Applying Intersectional Discrimination to Understanding BAME Male Awarding Gaps
- Building Blocks for Inclusive Practice: Embedding Equity to Improve Progression, Retention, Awarding Gaps and Student Success
- From Diagnosis to Design: Using the Working Diagnosis Model to Close Disability-Related Awarding Gaps
- From Insight to Action: Using Staff Voice to Address Degree Awarding Gaps
- Bridging the Gap: From Structured Intervention to Student Agency

12.30 Lunch

1.30 Presentation Panel Discussion: Understanding the Gaps

Chair: Marva de la Coudray, Director of the Centre for Teaching Enhancement and the Centre of Equity and Inclusion, London Metropolitan University

Louise Banahene PFHEA, MBE, Director of Student Success and Educational Engagement, University of Leeds

Dr Shames Maskeen, Associate Director of The Race Institute and Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Leeds Trinity University

Professor Kathleen M Quinlan, PhD PFHEA, Associate Dean for Student Experience, College of Health and Life Sciences, London South Bank University

Professor Ian Turner, Interim Head of Biomedical and Forensic Science, Professor of Higher Education in Learning and Teaching of Higher Education University of Derby

2.30 Tea & Cake break

2.45 Workshops: Practice and Solutions:

1. **Addressing the ethnicity awarding gap by creating psychologically safe spaces** Kierra Bunting, Vanessa Dodd, University of Staffordshire, - **Lecture Theatre Session Chair: Fatmata Daramy**
2. **The cost of learning**, Becky Hart, Rosie Jones, Kings and Sussex, - **Training Room 1 Session Chair: Clare Gartland**
3. **Impact Evaluation in Higher Education: From Problem Tree to Theory of Change**, Bilal Hazzouri, ARU - Interactive workshop – **Training Room 3 Session Chair: Sumaya Ahmed**
4. **Supporting BTEC Student Success: A model for academic staff development**, Nikki Anghileri, Julia Brennan, St Mary's University, – **Training Room 4 Session Chair: Sally Griffin**

3:45 Next steps: Building Sector-wide Commitment

4.00 Close

PARTICIPANT LIST



FEEDBACK FORM



<https://app.onlinesurveys.jisc.ac.uk/bathreg/awardinggapsfeedback2026>

NERUPI Members' Presentations at 11:30: Exploring Contributing Factors

SESSION A: Whole-institution change mechanisms – Training Room 1

Session Chair: Clare Gartland

- **No Gaps: An institution wide approach to closing continuation, completion and awarding gaps for all equity groups: Jill Webb, Liz Thomas, Jan Ball-Smith, Jess Penn (University of York)**

The University of York has developed an institution wide programme designed to close continuation, completion and awarding gaps across all equity groups studying at undergraduate level. The No Gaps intervention entails working with all academic departments to examine their data, explore their risks to equality, develop an evidence informed action plan, and to implement and evaluate this work. The programme is delivered by the Inclusive Education team in partnership with senior colleagues, academic quality and data team members, academic staff and evaluation colleagues, as well as departmental teams made-up of students, academics and professional service staff. This intervention was initially piloted in 4 departments and is now being rolled out across all 22 departments. This presentation will discuss the no gaps model of delivery, roll out and evaluation, including mechanisms for building the reporting and evaluation into institutional processes.

- **From Insight to Action: Using Staff Voice to Address Degree Awarding Gaps: Dan West (**

This session will share how the University of Derby used an Awarding Gaps Staff Survey to generate actionable insight and momentum for whole-institution change. The survey (n=201; academic and professional services) captured staff awareness, confidence and inclusive practice, alongside rich free-text reflections on the perceived causes of awarding gaps and what support staff need to act effectively. Findings highlighted the interplay between structural inequality (including racism and socioeconomic disadvantage), institutional processes, curriculum/assessment design, and students' lived experience of belonging and representation.

SESSION B: Curriculum and academic practice reform – Training Room 3

Session Chair: David Dobraszczyk

- **Developing academics as Diversity Mark Practitioners** I propose to present developments to University of Kent's Diversity Mark, an institution-wide programme that has sought for several years to address race awarding and experience gaps through the co-creation of selected module reading lists. In 2025, I developed a new 'Diversity Mark Practitioner Route' which supports academics to develop inclusive teaching and curriculum design practices across the range of modules they lead. This is supported by a 3-day in-person retreat in which academics come together to review their curricula and teaching practices with expert guidance on diversity, inclusion and accessibility.
- **Building Blocks for Inclusive Practice: Embedding Equity to Improve Progression, Retention, Awarding Gaps and Student Success: Dipa Kamdar (Kingston University)**

This presentation showcases a sustained programme of inclusive curriculum reform within MPharm education at Kingston University, designed to address structural contributors to awarding gaps and strengthen equity, belonging and representation across the student journey. Grounded in the Inclusive Curriculum Framework principles, the curriculum reform integrates cultural competence training, health inequalities workshops, lived-experience case studies, immersive simulations and patient-led communication teaching. Alongside strong student-reported gains in cultural awareness, confidence and preparedness, the initiative has contributed to measurable improvements in student outcomes, including enhanced academic progression for LGBTQ+ students, a positive shift in retention for students from minoritised backgrounds, and continued maintenance of a minimal awarding gap across the programme.

SESSION C: Critical and structural framings of race – Lecture Theatre

Session Chair: Fatmata Daramy

- **TEF Black: (Re-)defining Teaching 'Excellence' as Commitment to Educational Justice: Josephine Gabi (Manchester Metropolitan University), Yetunde Kolajo (University of Kent)**

Student participation in higher education has expanded, leading to increased regulatory oversight and institutional accountability for student progression, degree outcomes, and employment. These expectations are codified in Quality Standards Condition B3, which requires that providers deliver successful outcomes recognised by employers or that enable further study (Office for Students, 2024). Within a neoliberal, metrics-driven agenda, although the standards seek to ensure quality and protect student interests, they also overlook racially minoritised students' lived educational experiences (Gabi and Chikwa, 2025). Despite commitments to widening participation, the persistence of awarding gaps in higher education highlights racialised disparities in degree outcomes (HESA, 2024). These are predictable outcomes of structural conditions that the Teaching Excellence Framework continues to overlook (Gabi, 2025). TEF Black seeks to (re-)define teaching 'excellence' as a commitment to educational justice, reorienting attention towards the historical, structural, institutional and relational conditions that (re-)produce differential outcomes. TEF Black advocates for 'excellence' as an HE provider's willingness to enact transformative change in pursuit of co-liberatory educational futures for all.

- **Applying Intersectional Discrimination to Understanding BAME Male Awarding Gaps: Dami Folayan, Tim Robson (Arden University)**

Gendered racism is a form of intersectional discrimination which impedes the educational experiences of racially minoritised people in differing ways depending on how their race and gender classifications. This presentation centres the experiences of males who are racialised as BAME to exposit how Arden University's learning structure shapes our student demographic and gives rise to peculiar APP interventions and learning opportunities. We detail how our unique distance and blended learning structures shape our student demographic and gives rise to APP opportunities which can revitalise approaches to the BAME male awarding gap, producing learning which can be applied for broader sector improvement.

SESSION D: Targeted models: student agency – Training Room 4

Session Chair: Sally Griffin

- **Bridging the Gap: From Structured Intervention to Student Agency: Tamar McPherson (SOAS)**

This presentation explores the evolution of Bridging the Gap, a student-led initiative developed to address awarding gaps through paid student leadership and community-engaged developmental practice. Initially structured around predefined institutional priorities, the programme encountered changing conditions such as increasing student workloads, reduced campus presence, and uneven staff capacity. In response, the initiative reframed its approach, shifting from a primarily structured intervention model toward one centred on agency, legitimacy, and material support. The presentation also reflects on a key conceptual shift concerning belonging, arguing that belonging is not produced through participation alone but emerges through the legitimisation and material support of students' experiences and forms of knowledge.

Workshops: Practice and Solutions at 2:45

WORKSHOP 1: Addressing the Awarding Gap by Creating Psychologically Safe Spaces - Lecture Theatre Session Chair: Fatmata Daramy, Kierra Bunting and Vanessa Dodd, University of Staffordshire

At the University of Staffordshire, the Curriculum Strand of our Access and Participation Plan focuses on developing staff pedagogic practice in relation to racial equity (with a longer-term aim of reducing the ethnicity degree awarding gaps at our institution). We deliver our Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap (EDAG) toolkit with associated online introductory training (45 minutes) and our Pedagogies for Racial Equity in person training (3.5 hours). Both trainings have been evaluated as part of our APP's first year in 2024/25, and we have found those who have engaged had:

- Increased understanding and awareness of the EDAG,
- Increased understanding of the impact of racism and racial bias on students' educational experiences and outcomes, and
- Improved confidence to use evidence-based strategies and tools for more racially equitable and inclusive pedagogic practice.

A common theme of both trainings is the importance of "psychological safety" - the belief that one can express themselves, take risks, and ask questions without fear of humiliation or retaliation. From our learning, we have developed a psychological safety interactive workshop and take-home resource that are specifically related to reducing the EDAG at our institution. This workshop will:

- Introduce the EDAG context at the University of Staffordshire
- Conduct Psychological Safety workshops focused on the EDAG
- On completion, provide participants with a "menu" of actions on which can be embedded into their own practice to enhance psychological safety.

WORKSHOP 2: The Cost of Learning, Training Room 1, Session Chair: Clare Gartland, Becky Hart, King's College, London, Rosie Jones, University of Sussex

At the University of Sussex, King's College London and the University of Derby, we have been working on a collaborative project exploring the cost of learning to our students. The project was co-created by staff and students and invited students to explore what the cost of learning means to them through creative expression. This included financial, emotional, social and practical costs; students also had 'recorded conversations' discussing the impact of these costs. This work was featured in an exhibition in Elephant Park Community Space, London, showcasing students' creative expressions and perspectives on the costs associated with higher education today. Student research participants, co-creators and prospective students from local Sixth Forms and Colleges attended and engaged with the exhibition.

Our goal is to raise awareness on the impact of the UK cost of living crisis to students, and how the 'costs' associated with university are multi-faceted, particular for our APP students. Following the exhibit, the project team are currently working on a social research report and a toolkit with guidance for practitioners, schools and prospective students; the progress of which we plan to share at the conference. This workshop will:

- Invite attendees to consider the costs that students face within higher education and the ways in which we can help to support these students in a financially constrained landscape
- Explore real case studies, mitigations and strategies to support students
- Share key findings and real voices from the project, along with the development of a social research paper and toolkit, before inviting attendees to collaborate on identifying methodologies and strategies to support students
- Invite participants to engage with our next project phase.

Workshops: Practice and Solutions at 2:45

WORKSHOP 3: Impact Evaluation in Higher Education: From Problem Tree to Theory of Change, Training Room 3, Session Chair: Sumaya Ahmed Bilal Hazzouri, Anglia Ruskin University

This interactive workshop will introduce two foundational evaluation tools, the Problem Tree and the Theory of Change (TOC), and demonstrates how one leads directly to the other. Too often these tools are taught in isolation, leaving practitioners unsure of how to move from analysing a problem to designing an intervention. This session makes that bridge explicit and practical, using a worked example grounded in the Black-white degree awarding gap context, before inviting participants to begin applying both tools to their own programmes.

This workshop will:

- Introduce the Problem Tree as a structured analytical tool
- Consider the bridge from Problem Tree to Theory of Change
- Demonstrate the explicit, visual connection between the two tools using a worked example
- Support participants to apply both tools to one of their own programmes
- Encourage participants share their problem tree or a key insight.

WORKSHOP 4: Supporting BTEC Student Success: A Model for Academic Staff Development, Training Room 4, Session Chair: Sally Griffin

Nikki Anghileri and Julia Brennan, St Mary's University, London

Students entering university with non-A-level qualifications tend to experience poorer transition outcomes than those with A-levels, including lower progression and retention (Hurrell, Shawcross and Keeling, 2019; Huskinson et al., 2020). This workshop will actively demonstrate a blended learning course currently being rolled out at St Mary's University. The course, informed by current research and co-created with academic staff experienced in L3 teaching, addresses these challenges and aligns with the institution's Access and Participation Plan objectives for BTEC students. The course integrates bespoke, guided online materials with face-to-face interactive sessions designed to help academic staff better understand BTEC students' educational backgrounds and support staff in adopting teaching approaches that facilitate BTEC student transitions into higher education.

This workshop will:

- Consider the awarding gap at St Mary's, the need for the course, and the rationale for its design
- Discuss approaches to the exploration of non-A Level/BTEC students' educational backgrounds and potential learning needs
- Explore how we might determine participants' existing pedagogic knowledge relating to BTEC student transition
- Consider useful online materials
- Support participants to create an action of plan using the CLEAR model (Creek, 2025).