

Measuring Student Attainment Gaps: Exploring Alternative Measures of Inequality in Education

Gabriella Cagliesi ¹and Denise Hawkes ²

¹University of Sussex;
²University of Greenwich
mgc25@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract

Black, Asian and minority ethnic people (BAME) attainment gaps and related gaps are increasingly becoming a feature of the English Higher Education KPI for Institutions, Departments and Academics. Motivated by a sector desire to promote Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, we challenge the validity of the measure used within this KPI. The measure used across the sector is largely a difference in the group proportions or mean GPA of the students with and without certain characteristics. Whilst this provides an opportunity to identify possible modules with attainment gap problems, they lack the distributional aspects needed to truly quantify issues of inequality. Using data from within our two economics departments, we focus on the reported values of attainment gaps produced for each module as part of these KPIs. We explore the impact of using alternative inequality measures taken from different methodological approaches, ranging from statistical measures, such as the Gini coefficient, to econometrics probability matching and Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition, as well as education segregation literature. The results suggest that distributional aspects are a necessary aspect of any measure of the attainment gap and that significant changes in the student cohort, as caused by policy change, need to be treated with care. The results provide a challenge to the Office of the Students accepted measure and challenges policy makers on this important issue, BAME Attainment Gap, to consider an alternative, distribution-based measure in order to make an effective change in the outcomes for all students in the sector.

Keywords: bame; distribution; diversity; equality; inclusion