

Awarding Gap Representatives 2023/24: An evaluation

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Executive Summary

This report seeks to evaluate the impact of the ‘Awarding Gap Representative’ (AGR) role in bringing about interventions to reduce local awarding gaps, which vary in size and nature by subject.

AGRs play a central role in two key activities within the Access and Participation Plan (2024-25 / 2027-28), both aimed at closing continuation and awarding gaps. ‘Bespoke Local Interventions’ (Activity 17) refers to the specific initiatives that the AGRs and their school colleagues are implementing to close these gaps (e.g. Peer Assisted Learning or Decolonising the Curriculum; these have separate evaluation reports). The ‘Awarding Gap Steering Group’ (Activity 16) focuses on our decentralised approach whereby AGRs drive institutional action on awarding gaps. This intervention focuses on enabling staff at school-level to implement awarding gap solutions and is the focus of this report.

A focus group and survey analysis – with similar lines of questioning around effectiveness of the AGR role and progress made - were conducted to understand the experience of AGRs. A descriptive analysis of internal documentation (School Teaching Enhancement Action Plans - STEAP) aims to identify the extent to which awarding gaps are formally prioritised for action in each respective school, and the measures being taken to respond to them.

Taken together, the findings appear to show moderate successes. The AGRs participating in the evaluation have been able to make progress in specific areas, and the STEAP plans show a relatively high prioritisation of outcome gaps. However, clear barriers to the AGR role were identified that could be addressed partly through the implementation of the sixteen resulting recommendations.

Introduction

Report caveats

This report is part of the first cycle of more robust evaluation in line with our new Access and Participation Plan. Therefore, we acknowledge that the evaluation still has limitations and we do not intend to over-claim the strength of any conclusions.

There were practical challenges to data collection, and it is acknowledged that the limited sample size of survey and focus group data reduces the robustness of claims about the programme's effectiveness beyond immediate reactions. Nevertheless, the data here still provide valuable insights into engagement and the immediate perceived benefits and challenges of the model. Future evaluations will aim to strengthen data collection where possible. Long-term data on student awarding will also become available.

Rationale

The University of Reading (UoR) is like most HEIs in the United Kingdom in that persistent gaps in the retention and attainment rates of underrepresented groups can generally be observed (outcome gaps). Table 1 shows differences across a range of widening participation cohorts at the University of Reading in rates of retention and good degree awards (continuation and awarding gaps, respectively).

Cohort	2021/2 continuation gap	2022/3 awarding gap
'BAME'	3.1pp	12pp
Black	7.3pp	23.4pp
IMD2019 Q1&2	2.9pp	10pp
FSM eligible	4.7pp	5.6pp
Mature	3.6pp	0.3pp
Disabled	-0.8pp	-3.9pp

Table 1 - overall continuation and awarding gaps by cohort

UoR is a complex institution with thirteen academic schools, each consisting of multiple departments. The size of awarding gaps and the cohorts affected vary by subject area. In 2022/3 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic ('BAME') awarding gaps (when organised by school) ranged from -3.7pp to 18.5pp. This variance persists when using longer term averages (4-year averages show school-level awarding gaps ranging from 2pp to 16.9pp).

Local champions and collaborators are essential for ensuring that reforms to close awarding gaps are implemented in ways that are meaningful and relevant to staff and students. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution to addressing awarding gaps, as each initiative must be thoughtfully

contextualised to the unique factors of individual departments by colleagues with the local power and influence to implement them (Rooney, 2020).

Intervention

A colleague in each academic school is appointed the additional responsibility of ‘Awarding Gap Representative’ (AGR).

The role of the AGR is to absorb centrally provided information on awarding gap theory and practice and use this to ‘embed the agenda locally’. In other words, cultivate a local school culture in which awarding gaps are acknowledged, understood, and acted on (thereby closed). The target groups may vary depending on the data context of the individual school, as could the interventions used to support them.

Specifically, AGRs are expected to:

1. Attend regular meetings of the ‘Awarding Gap Steering Group’.
2. Champion inclusive approaches that are considered to close awarding gaps.
3. Be a source of news, data and information on awarding gaps for colleagues.
4. Develop customised action plans or integrate awarding gap solutions into existing action plans.
5. Assist in designing, implementing, and evaluating local interventions to address awarding gaps.

Theoretically, this should de-centralise the agenda such that each school is acting according to their respective context.

Context

The Awarding Gap Steering Group has been operating since September 2021. This evaluation covers the academic year 2023/24.

Table 2 and Figure 1 help to demonstrate the varied nature of outcome gaps. The total number of widening participation students subject to APP targets and the differing sizes of these gaps result in inequalities being more pronounced in some areas than others.

Table 2 - The relative impact of continuation and awarding gaps organised by school

School	Total # WP students in ‘poor standing’¹ over 4-years
Chemistry, Food and Pharmacy	541
Henley Business School	439
Biological Sciences	226
Built Environment	211
Law	211

¹ ‘Poor standing’ refers to students failing to continue or failing to be awarded a first or second-class honours degree.

Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences	205
Politics, Economics and International Relations	198
Mathematical, Physical and Computational Sciences	198
Humanities	128
Arts and Communication Design	113
Institute of Education	111
Literature & Languages	87
Agriculture, Policy and Development	82
Archaeology, Geography and Environmental Science	49

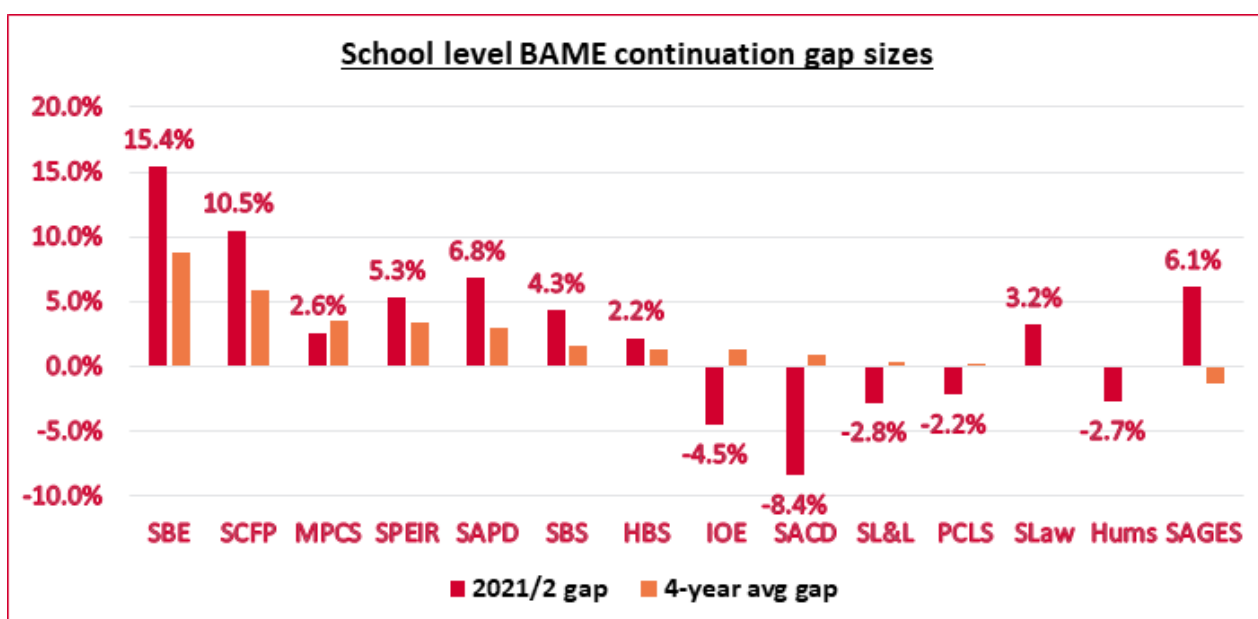


Figure 1 - BAME continuation gap sizes organised by school

Link to Access & Participation Plan (APP)

The APP objectives are:

IS3: Ensure that underrepresented students remain on course and complete their studies with equivalent success rates to the wider student population by 2030.

IS4: Eliminate degree outcome gaps that correlate with ethnicity and socio-economic disadvantage by 2030.

These activities are linked to the following targets:

- Achieve parity in rates of continuation between Black and white undergraduate cohorts by 2030, from a baseline gap of 8.4pp.
- Achieve parity in rates of continuation between young and mature cohorts by 2030, from a baseline gap of 7.9pp.
- By 2030, achieve parity in undergraduate degree attainment between white and Black undergraduate cohorts (from a 28.3pp gap) and ABMO and white undergraduate cohorts (from a 13.9pp gap).
- By 2028, achieve parity in undergraduate degree attainment between IMD2019 Quintile 1 and Quintile 5 cohorts (from a 10pp gap) and between Free School Meal eligible and Free School Meal ineligible cohorts (from a 3.7pp gap).

Previous evaluation

None.

Methodology

Research questions

1. *Has the appointment of Awarding Gap Representatives resulted in the co-production of awarding gap interventions, as measured by STEAP plans?*

2. *What insights do Awarding Gap Representatives have about the strengths, challenges and key learnings from carrying out their responsibilities? (note, this has changed slightly from the original: How do Awarding Gap representatives find the process of developing new interventions?)*

Data collection

The report uses a qualitative, exploratory evaluation (see Table 3). It examines the data from one focus group comprised of 4 Awarding Gap Representatives, a survey which received six responses, and School Teaching Enhancement Action Plans (STEAP). Three Representatives participated in both the survey and the focus group.

Table 3 - Data collection methods

Data collected	Data collection method	Data analysis method	Type of evaluation
The number of awarding gap interventions	Review of 'School Teaching Enhancement Action Plans'.	Descriptive analysis.	Type 1 – this is a marker of success in prioritising awarding gaps for action.

Data collected	Data collection method	Data analysis method	Type of evaluation
Feedback on the effectiveness of the Awarding Gap Representative role	Awarding Gap Representative focus group and survey.	Survey analysis. Thematic analysis of focus groups.	Type 1 – this provides operational insights.

See the Appendix 1 for the focus group questions used.

Ethics and Data Security

All study procedures meet the internal standards for such exercises and the data is stored responsibly in compliance with our data protection standards. Respondents to the survey and focus group were informed that the data provided would be utilised for evaluation and only published in an anonymised form.

Limitations

The sample size is relatively small as 4 of 13 AGRs attended the focus group and 6 of 13 AGRs responded to the survey. The research design itself is narrow in scope as it presents only those awarding gap interventions explicitly referenced in STEAP plans.

It should also be acknowledged that this intervention does not directly measure impact on students; however, the first step in closing Awarding Gaps is enabling staff at school-level to enable changes.

Results

Analysis of focus group themes

Table 4 provides a summary of the themes, subthemes and representative extracts from the focus group transcript.

Table 4 - Summary of main themes

Theme	Subtheme(s)	Representative quotation
Resource and capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff time. Formal recognition. 	<i>“The only frustration I have is time... we have a lot of ideas but are barely able to put 10% of them into practice.”</i>

Theme	Subtheme(s)	Representative quotation
Awareness and buy-in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared ownership of the agenda. • Trust in the data. 	<i>“You can only move as fast as your slowest group of people and there are pockets of resistance.”</i>
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural factors (e.g. leadership, staff turnover). • School culture 	<i>“We’re fortunate that our leaders are championing this and ensuring that awarding gaps are considered as part of everything being done.”</i>
Enabling action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sphere of influence versus control. • Case studies and student voice. 	<i>“A lot of our ‘translating into practice’ comes from department heads focussing on what changes are within their power to facilitate.”</i>

Resource and capacity

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the discussion was the resource and capacity required to make progress as an Awarding Gap Representative. Participants emphasised that addressing awarding gaps requires a time investment—one they are willing to make but challenging due to time constraints and competing priorities.

“One negative of having so many students is not having enough time to work on our ideas.”

Pooling or expanding resources by engaging additional staff in the agenda was an essential strategy for building capacity, either by hiring EDI Officer-style roles or building alliances with colleagues.

“For a number of years, we have had a committed group of staff pushing the agenda, looking at the data and driving changes and that is why our awarding gap metrics are consistently better than in other parts of the university.”

Awareness and buy-in

AGRs acknowledged that one key area where positive progress has been made is improving general awareness of awarding gaps among colleagues through inclusion-themed events and meetings. However, they distinguish between awareness and genuine 'buy-in'—acknowledgement that the issues are credible and necessitate action or change.

A recurrent theme concerning buy-in was difficulty using data as a basis for action. AGRs expressed uncertainty about what data can be shared and in which format, since access to the data is restricted which creates a potential barrier. In the cases where buy-in was strong, concerns remained about the ability to translate this good-will into action.

“For us the real problem is building trust in the data. Some colleagues are only satisfied if they can personally analyse the data.”

“People do understand the need at the intellectual level but then comes the step where you need to tell them ‘Okay, now go and do something about it’... there is a gap there.”

Environment

Another recurring theme in the discussion was the effect of the local school environment – the systems, structures and cultures within the school that influence the agency of AGRs. Notably, school leadership recognising awarding gaps as a priority was seen to be key.

“When changes were made, awarding gaps weren’t considered. It either wasn’t on the priority list at all or was too low. Some of the progress we were making has gone out of the window.”

“What we have now is a clear agreement that this is a priority, and we should all be working harder on this topic. That is a very helpful thing.”

A significant consensus among the AGRs was the effect of school structure and bureaucracy. The role of AGR itself can ‘fall’ to colleagues for arbitrary reasons. Staff turnover and the restructuring of roles and responsibilities can confuse accountability. In addition, siloed working and committee structures can confine awarding gap work to administrative areas and prevent integration into day-to-day practice. AGRs expressed a particular desire for better integration into teaching and learning methods and standards.

“Some of the challenge comes down to ownership ... through EDI committees and boards it gets kept as a separate thing.”

“You try to promote this, but something gets lost in translation as ultimately it comes down to what people do in the classroom.”

Prevailing attitudes and experiences of colleagues can contribute to a local culture in which awarding gap work is either enabled or hindered accordingly. However, one AGR noted that the Awarding Gap Steering Group itself was a useful opportunity to learn what is considered good practice.

“There is a backlog of knowledge about things that have been tried before and if something didn’t work the tendency can be to relegate potentially useful ideas to the past.”

“After every meeting we’ve had I’ve been able to bring something back and pass potential solutions on to department heads. For example, we have a strong movement now for standardisation of lecture capture.”

Enabling action

An important aim of the focus group was to learn key strategies from colleagues who had made progress in their roles as AGR, whether by raising the profile of awarding gaps, conducting useful data analysis, creating action plans or designing interventions.

A common challenge was that of awarding gap meetings failing to produce concrete outputs. One AGR shared a tactic for moving from discussion to action, which was to put a proposed solution at the forefront.

“Come up with a solution and make the topic for your meeting: ‘can we do this?’ That makes your meeting about action right from the start.”

Another useful strategy for enabling action was to take a long-term view and work methodically to integrate the agenda as a communal exercise. This approach requires taking the local culture into account and acting accordingly.

“The way to do it for us has been to take it slowly and use an evidence-based approach. Every colleague will say, ‘What’s your reference for that?’ so that’s why we have taken a year to get people on board and give them a say in our plan, so that it’s a shared responsibility.”

One AGR shared how motivating colleagues to implement changes can be done effectively when colleagues have a clear idea of how particular students are being affected. They shared an example of how platforming the case of one student who required greater flexibility to their learning made those accommodations standard practice.

“Everybody bought in across the board... when you talk about specific students the people who were resisting initially can start to see the problem.”

Key findings from the survey

The six survey responses reflect a range of experience levels among AGRs. Responses were received from colleagues who have been in the role for two or more years (1 out of 6), one year or more (4 out of 6), and less than six months (1 out of 6).

Awareness and understanding

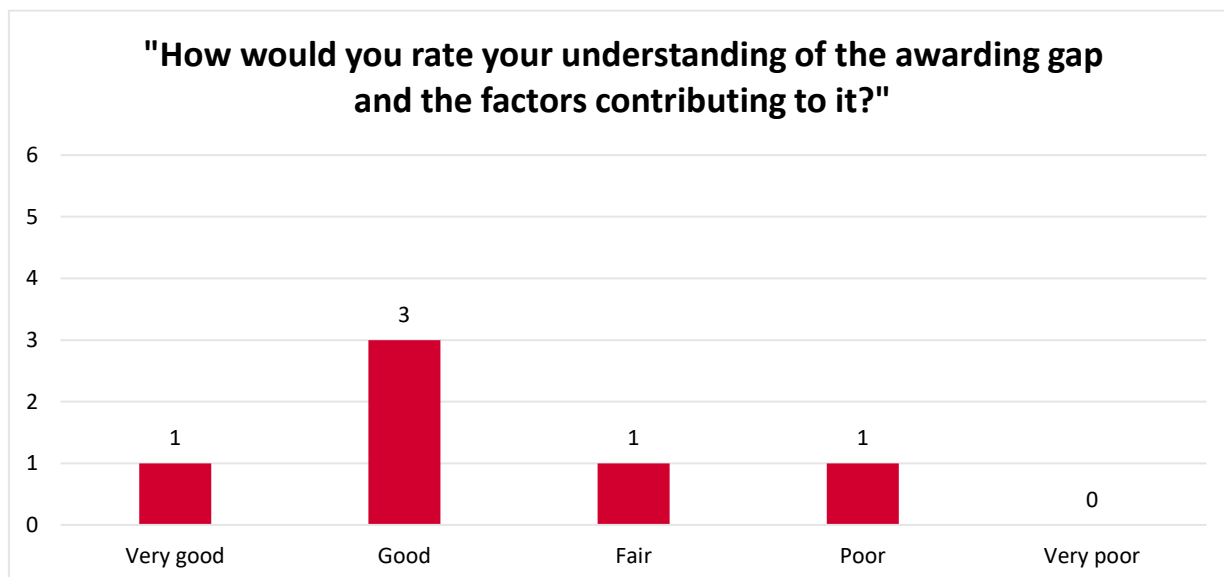


Figure 2 - AGR survey question relating to awareness and understanding

Most respondents (four out of six) rated their understanding of the topic as either "Good" or "Very Good," indicating a generally strong comprehension of awarding gaps. One respondent assessed their understanding as "Fair," while another rated it as

"Poor", suggesting that more could be done to inform AGRs. A one-page summary of awarding gaps and their causes was suggested as a useful resource.

Activity areas

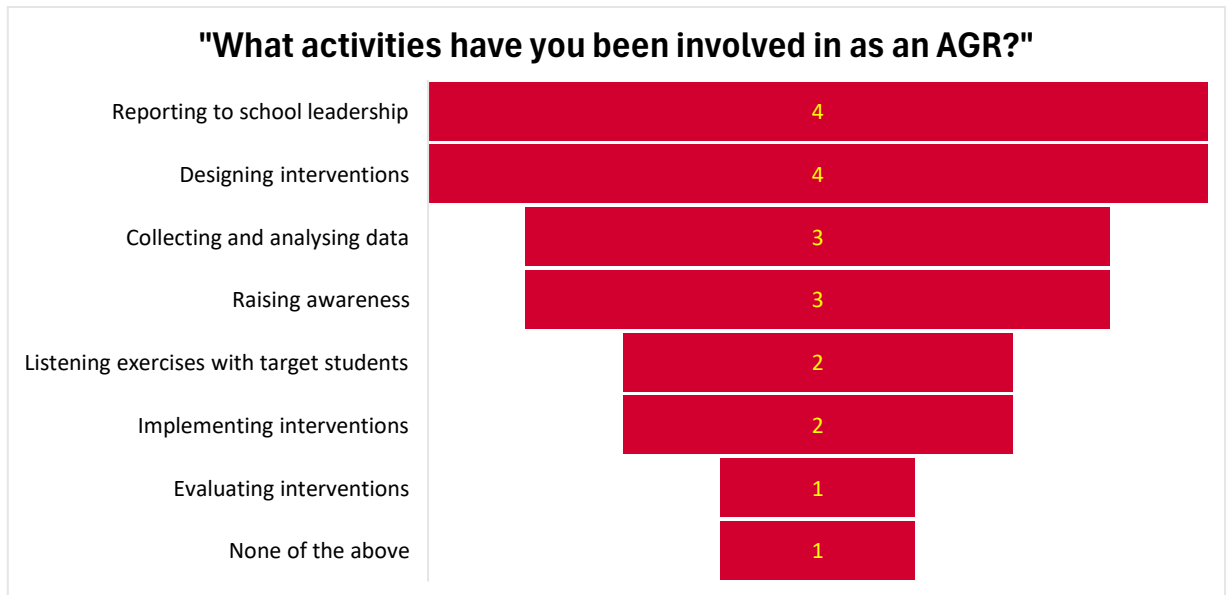


Figure 3 - AGR survey question relating to areas of activity

The survey responses indicate that AGRs are primarily engaged in reporting to school leadership and designing interventions. The remaining results suggest that while this sample of AGRs are actively involved in strategic planning and communication, there may be opportunities to strengthen their capacity to implement ideas and conduct evaluations. However, the responses note a wide range of activities and initiatives in 2023-4 including but not limited to developing inclusive curricula, developing bespoke resources for target students and running action planning workshops with faculty teams.

Support

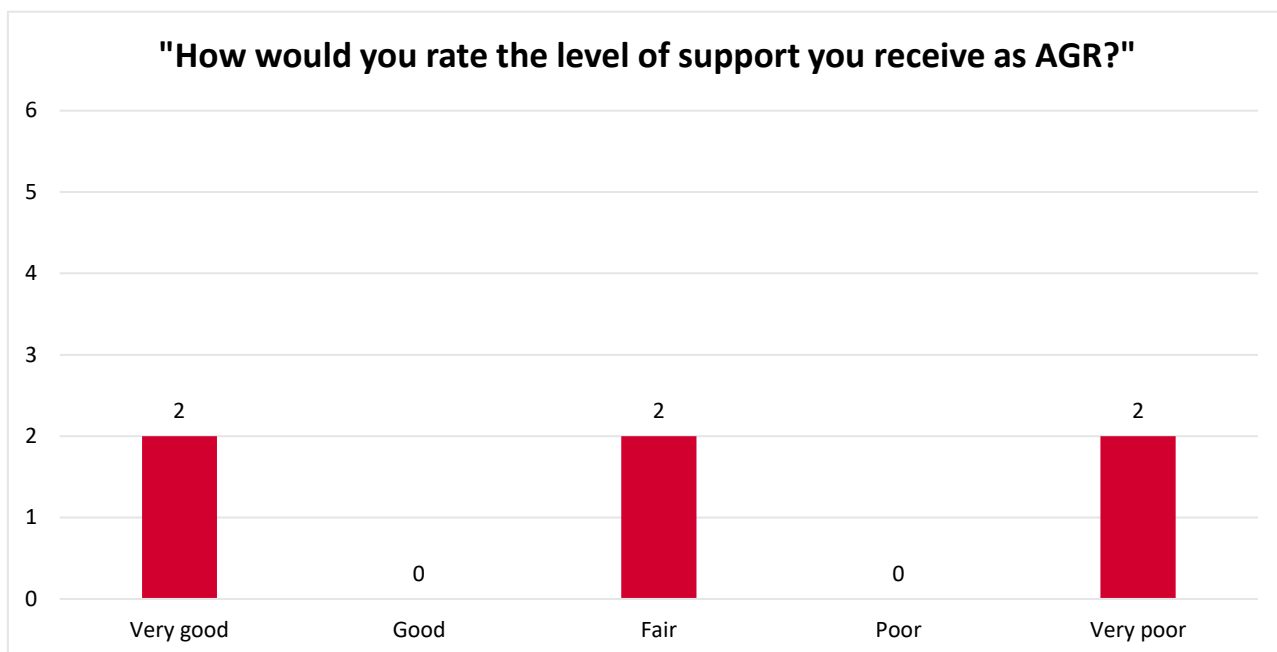


Figure 4 - AGR survey question relating to support for AGRs

Survey results on support levels reveal a polarised experience among the AGRs who responded. While two individuals rate the support as “Very Good”, an equal number rated it as “Fair” and “Very poor”, indicating inconsistency in the support provided and a desire for more standardised and accessible support for AGRs.

In the responses ‘support’ was defined primarily based on local school structures and a lack of formal time allocations for the role. This corroborates the experiences described in the focus group. Another element of the support requested centred around a sense of overwhelm and difficulty knowing where to begin.

Suggestions for enhancement included:

- Ringfencing time or providing some alternative means of recognising the time investment and/or increasing administrative support to help implement initiatives.
- More structure and support for school level action planning (e.g. developing school level action and evaluation plans).
- Having better access to bespoke data from PSO.
- Greater support with evaluation and impact.

Analysis of 2023-4 School Teaching Enhancement Action Plans (STEAP)

Each STEAP plan records several individual priorities. Thematic groupings can be made as below (Figures 5 and 6).

Meta-theme	Priority count
Student experience	13
Student outcomes	9
Teaching and learning	9
Employability	5
Staff support	2
Other	1

Figure 5 - School priorities in STEAP plans as grouped by meta-theme

Meta-theme	Subtheme	Priority count
Student experience	Student voice & partnership	5
	Attendance & engagement	3
	Student feedback	3
	Support services	2
Student outcomes	Continuation gaps	2
	Awarding gaps	6
	General attainment	1
Teaching and learning	Assessment and feedback	5
	Teaching methods	4
Employability	Employability & progression	5
Staff support	Academic tutoring	1
	Feedback for staff	1
Other	Sustainability	1

Figure 6 - School priorities in STEAP plans as grouped by sub-theme

In 2023/4:

- Student experience was a major focus, with student voice & partnership receiving high priority, followed by attendance & engagement and student feedback.
- Assessment & feedback and teaching methods are notable priorities under Teaching & Learning, highlighting the emphasis on effective pedagogy.
- There was a moderate level of commitment to employability and progression.
- Academic tutoring and feedback for staff indicate that staff support was a lower-priority concern, along with sustainability, mentioned once.

As a potential indicator of success for ‘embedding awarding gaps into local school environments and action plans’, most pertinent to this study is that ‘Student Outcomes’ was the joint-second-highest priority area. Within this category awarding gaps (6) emerged as the primary focus and the highest priority sub-theme overall, with some attention paid to continuation gaps (2) and general attainment levels (1).

The next graphic (Fig. 6) analyses the activities listed within the student outcomes-related priorities to identify the main approaches documented.

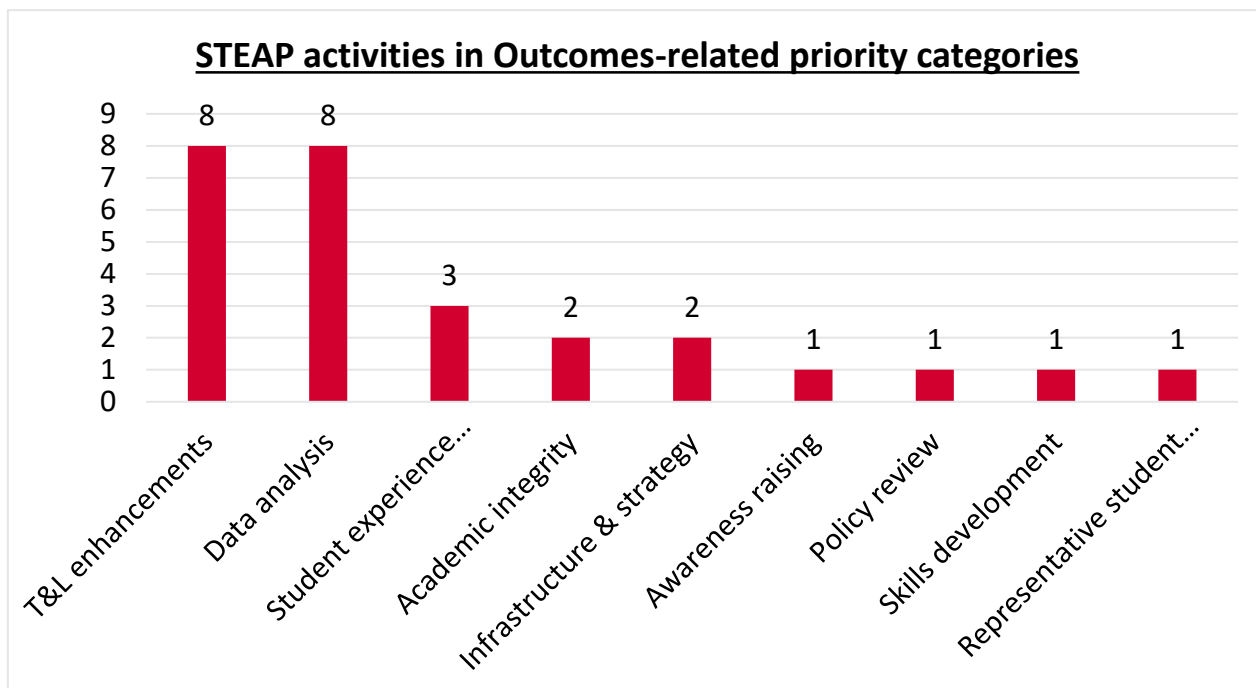


Figure 7 - STEAP activities in Outcome-related categories

Overall, in 2023-4 the primary emphasis is on pedagogical improvements and data analysis. This reflects the typical ‘first step’ of analysing data to develop a local evidence base. Teaching and learning enhancements are the main practical actions documented, and activities include decolonising the curriculum or leveraging formative assessments.

‘Student experience enhancements’ such as community-building exercises and events, support for students to avoid academic integrity procedures and ‘infrastructure & strategy’ (in the form of hiring additional staff and developing strategic plans) all receive moderate attention. Other areas, such as ‘awareness raising,’ ‘policy review,’ ‘skills support,’ and ‘representative student voice,’ received a lesser focus.

Conclusions

The findings from the focus group analysis indicate that among the limited sample of participants, initial progress has been made through the de-centralised model, particularly in relation to data analysis, raising awareness and planning potential interventions. However, several key challenges persist that, if addressed, could enable further progress.

The most significant barriers to conducting the role of AGR include limited resource and capacity, inconsistent levels of support, and difficulty translating buy-in into practical, accountable actions. However, there is evidence that there are effective approaches—

such as fostering buy-in through data, strategic planning and taking an evidence-based approach—can lead to meaningful progress.

The survey results are largely consistent with the focus group findings and offer some useful strategies for supporting AGRs, such as through enhanced training and guidance.

The analysis of STEAP plans is encouraging given the relative prioritisation of awarding gaps. While many schools have opted for further data analysis as a first step, teaching and learning strategies also feature prominently. In future, schools could be supported to consider better integration of awarding gaps into other priorities – for example, adding an awarding gap lens to assessment and feedback – as well as identify relevant interventions to address awarding gaps. For the AGR role to have a tangible effect, the content of STEAP plans requires sufficient buy-in at all levels to impact programme or even module level detail.

Recommendations

Resource and capacity expansion

1. Explore the feasibility of formal time allocations and opportunities for workload recognition for AGRs, to ensure sustained engagement.
2. Explore the feasibility of apportioning time from the Outcomes team to directly support project management and aid in the administration of awarding gap initiatives.
3. Facilitate cross-school collaboration to pool expertise and capacity.

Strengthening awareness and buy-in

4. Improve transparency and access to awarding gap data, ensuring colleagues can engage with and trust the findings.
5. Provide training to AGRs on interpreting and using awarding gap data effectively to drive change.
6. Develop a centralised repository of best practices, such as lecture capture and inclusive assessment strategies, and promote these evidence-backed case studies across the institution.

Enhancing local school environments

7. Ensure that awarding gaps remain a priority in leadership discussions and high-level school planning.
8. Integrate awarding gaps into teaching and learning committee business rather than limiting it to EDI forums.

9. Offer proactive support in advance of the STEAP-writing process for considering effective awarding gap integration into local school strategy.

Moving from discussion to action

10. Encourage action-oriented meetings by providing solutions and case studies to forefront in academic meetings and discussions.

11. Provide structured templates and guidance for school-level action planning and accountability.

Standardised support for AGRs

12. Provide clear guidance on how, when and in which format data can be shared.

13. Enhance the training provided to AGRs and develop a one-page summary of awarding gaps and their causes (to supplement the existing Awarding Gap Toolkit), ensuring all AGRs have a foundational understanding.

14. Offer peer support to AGRs such as through Action Learning Sets and more informal spaces to share ideas.

15. Support AGRs to access relevant local data to support local data analysis.

16. Provide guidance and resource for evaluating the impact of interventions.

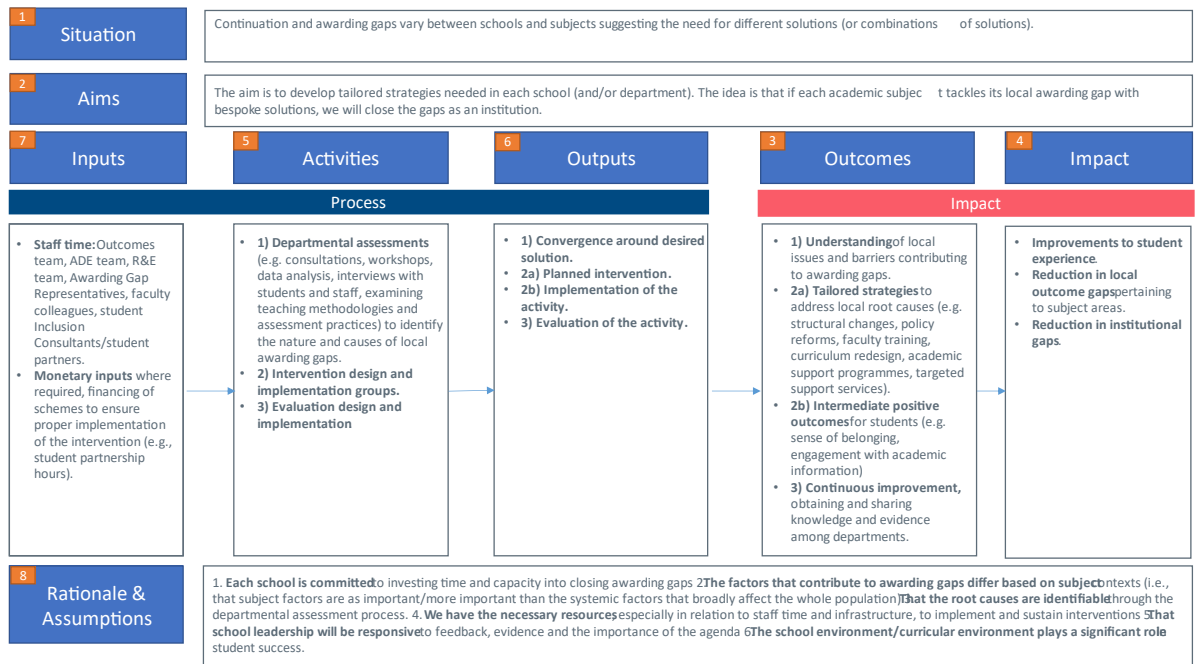
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Rooney (2020) *The BAME awarding gap: what we know, what we don't know and how we might respond* [online] Available at: <https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/li/2020/01/31/the-bame-awarding-gap-what-we-know-what-we-dont-know-and-how-we-might-respond/> (Last accessed: 10/12/2025)

Notes

This report has been reviewed by members of the Access and Participation Evaluation Subcommittee (APES).

Appendix 1 – Theory of Change



Appendix 2 – focus group questions

- How do you collaborate with faculty members, administrators, and other stakeholders to address awarding gaps within your school?
- What strategies or initiatives have you implemented or been involved in?
- What are some of the biggest challenges you've encountered in your role as an awarding gap representative?
- Can you identify any systemic or structural barriers that hinder your ability to effectively reduce awarding gaps?
- Can you share examples of successful steps taken towards intervening to close awarding gaps within your school? What factors do you believe enabled constructive progress to be made?
- What does 'success' in your role look like to you? What outcomes do you hope to achieve?
- What support or resources do you currently receive to fulfil your role as an awarding gap representative?
- Are there any additional training, tools, or resources that you feel would be beneficial in enhancing your effectiveness in this role?

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- How can the university administration or faculty leadership better support awarding gap representatives?
- Looking ahead, what do you see as the most pressing priorities or areas of focus for addressing awarding gaps within your school?
- How can we continue to collaborate and support each other in our efforts to reduce awarding gaps?