

## Education in Practice



# **Kavanagh, DPJ (2026) ‘Mind the gap: why higher education should move beyond awarding metrics to progress measures’, *Education in Practice*.**

First published online on 3 June 2026

ISSN 2057-2069

<https://education-in-practice.co.uk/kavanagh-dpj-2026-mind-the-gap-why-higher-education-should-move-beyond-awarding-metrics-to-progress-measures/>

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# Mind the gap: why higher education should move beyond awarding metrics to progress measures

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## **Abstract**

The awarding gap is typically defined as the difference in the proportion of students from different demographic groups who obtain a “good” degree (first- or upper second-class honours). In UK higher education, it has become a central lens through which equity is monitored. However, this simple metric conceals a number of important caveats and shortcomings.

This paper critiques the awarding gap as a binary, end-point metric. It shows how reliance on the “good degree” threshold discards information, creates perverse incentives, and obscures the roles of non-continuation, inequitable access, selection effects, and compensatory advantage. Drawing on UK sector data, institutional practice, and the wider equity literature, it argues that a narrow focus on awarding gaps encourages institutions to intervene at the wrong point in the educational lifecycle, locates responsibility disproportionately within universities, and renders upstream inequalities less visible to scrutiny.

The paper argues for a shift towards more granular and lifecycle-oriented approaches to monitoring educational inequity. In particular, it proposes the inclusion of value-added measures framed as progress gaps, which assess outcomes relative to students’ starting points. Such measures offer a clearer way of distinguishing inequities that pre-date entry from those that emerge within the university environment, and provide a more precise basis for evaluating the contribution of higher education institutions to the production or mitigation of educational inequity.

**Keywords:** equity, awarding gap, equality, student progress, Office for Students

## **Introduction**

Equity in education is an increasingly important consideration for modern higher education (HE) institutions across the world. This is not only a result of a straightforward moral duty to equity, but also due to increased outside pressure from governments, regulators, and the public at large (Conner and Rabovsky, 2011). Universities are expected to provide inclusive learning environments where all students, regardless of background, have the opportunity to succeed. As such, equity is an important facet of shaping institutional priorities and policies. The pedagogical literature has broadly arrived on an agreed set of domains in which equity should be sought, although there are some differences between studies. Generally speaking, the six domains of the student lifecycle across which equity should be embedded are: Aspiration, Academic Preparation, Access, Experience, Progress, and Outcomes (Pitman *et al.*, 2020). In the UK, sector-wide analyses of equity are carried out by the Office for Students (OfS). Using data from HE providers, the OfS analyses equity across relatively similar but narrowed domains: Access, Continuation, Completion, Attainment, and Progression (Office for Students, 2024a).

It would not be unreasonable to state that – at least historically – institutional focus across these domains has not been equal. Many HE providers have focused more heavily on certain domains and not others; for instance, institutions have invested significant amounts of time and money on improving access, whilst paying less attention to other aspects of the student lifecycle (Brennan and Naidoo, 2008). Fortunately, this situation (at least in the UK) is improving. Many institutions have now implemented a variety of schemes that cut across the equity domains and work to ensure that students are provided with the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background. While progress has been made in widening participation, gaps in continuation rates, academic performance, student satisfaction, and graduate outcomes continue to reflect persistent structural inequalities (Low and Kalender, 2024, Office for Students, 2023). These differential outcomes are often referred to as ‘gaps’, and have been used to reference differences in access (Martin, 2024), continuation (De La Torre and Dowie, 2023), and outcomes – the latter often referred to as the Awarding Gap. Historically, the Awarding Gap has been referred to as the ‘Attainment gap’. More recently, this terminology has changed to move away from the

term attainment as a reflection of student deficit. The term 'Awarding Gap' identifies the potential role of the institution in this disparity.

### **The Awarding Gap in the UK: a national picture**

In the UK, references to the Awarding Gap most often refer to the difference in degree-level outcomes between students of different ethnicities (Universities UK, 2022), although it is increasingly recognised that sizeable awarding gaps also exist between other subgroups of students, including those defined by socio-economic background, disability, and care-experienced status (Bolton and Lewis, 2024). The most common outcome measurement used in assessment of the awarding gap is the attainment of a "good" degree, considered to be either a 2:1 or a first-class honours. In this paper, terms that are common in the literature will be used, although it should be noted that there are significant difficulties with some of them, and their use does not reflect the author's opinions on their suitability. A number of organisations have proposed that the term Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) should be disaggregated and no longer used (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021); a recommendation adopted by the UK Government. Using BAME as an aggregated group can hide differences in the underlying data, and although it is used extensively in Awarding Gap reporting, including by UUK (Universities UK, 2022), many are moving away from its use.

There are, of course, many other characteristics that can be examined in relation to awarding gaps, and not all of them show persistent disparities. For example, coinciding with substantial institutional work on Reasonable Adjustments (RAs) and disability support, the national awarding gap between students with and without reported disabilities has now closed (Office for Students, 2024a). Nevertheless, awarding gaps remain highly complex. Intersectionality between multiple demographic and contextual factors means that simple "Group A vs Group B" comparisons are often misleading or incomplete (Nichols and Stahl, 2019).

These complexities mean that awarding gaps should not be treated as a single, uniform phenomenon. Different student characteristics are associated with different patterns of access, continuation, completion and degree outcomes, and these patterns do not necessarily operate in the same way. In some cases, the gap is large, persistent and clearly visible in national data; in others, the evidence base is thinner, the direction of the gap has changed, or the relevant disadvantage is partly hidden by selection

effects before students enter higher education. It is therefore useful to consider the major categories separately, while recognising that these categories often overlap and interact in practice.

### ***Ethnicity***

In the academic year 2022-23, across the entire HE sector, the awarding gap between BAME and non-BAME students was 11.6 percentage points (pp). Disaggregating this data, the largest ethnicity awarding gap exists between White and Black students, at 22.4pp. There is also a sizeable gap between Black students and those of other ethnicities; there is an almost 10pp awarding gap between Black students and the next nearest grouping of 'Other'. The gap between White and Black students had been decreasing from 2018 through 2020 but increases in subsequent academic years have ultimately reversed some of that progress (Office for Students, 2024a).

### ***Socio-economic background***

The UK remains highly stratified by socio-economic deprivation, and this is also a major driver of differential outcomes. Deprivation is most commonly measured using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), which combines seven weighted domains to assign a deprivation score to small geographical areas (Lower Super Output Areas, typically covering around 1,500 households). For comparative analyses, these areas are usually grouped into quintiles, where Quintile 1 (Q1) represents the most deprived areas and Quintile 5 (Q5) the least deprived. The awarding gap between students in Q1 and Q5 is 18.3pp, and between students in Q1+2 vs Q4+5 the awarding gap is 13.9pp (Office for Students, 2024a). As with the ethnicity awarding gap, deprivation-related gaps narrowed between 2018 and 2020, but have reversed in recent years.

### ***Dependants***

Nationally, the impact of having dependants on Awarding Gaps is largely understudied, and solid data is lacking. It is only recently that sector-wide data collection processes have started including this category. No longitudinal data around dependants is available from the OfS, which makes it difficult to paint a national picture on how having dependants might influence a student's degree outcome. Indeed, the first UCAS cycle to collect data on dependants (both parenting and caring) was in 2023. Although there is little direct evidence on degree attainment for this cohort, there has been some work carried out investigating the impact of parenthood on the educational experience and

subsequent outcomes. While the available evidence does not demonstrate a clear degree-awarding gap for students with dependants, it does show that student mothers experience a more constrained and demanding route through higher education (Lyonette *et al.*, 2015). This remains an area where further attention would be valuable. Indeed, an extensive review of the literature around students with dependants reveals that it is heavily skewed towards mothers, with limited attention focused on male, disabled, BAME, or LGBT+ parents or carers (Moreau and Wheeler, 2023).

### **Disability**

Although historically there have been awarding gaps associated with students with disabilities, these have now largely closed (and in many cases, flipped) both locally and nationally. However, in the context of other awarding gaps, these have been quantitatively minor but strongly persistent. Between 2010 and 2018, there remained a 1 to 2% awarding gap between disabled and non-disabled students in every academic year (Hubble and Bolton, 2021, Office for Students, 2024a). This gap closed in 2019 and has remained reversed ever since. In every year after this, students with registered disabilities have outperformed those without. Some institutions and publications have described the Awarding Gap in such cases as a 'reverse' awarding gap (University of Reading, 2024, Advance HE, 2025). This terminology is unhelpful in general terms, as it treats the original direction of the difference (non-disabled students outperforming disabled students) as the 'default' or 'normal' position and any movement beyond parity as an anomaly. Statistically, the recent negative gap (at least nationally) is very similar in magnitude to the small positive gaps that preceded it, and it is perhaps better understood as minor fluctuations around parity thus avoiding overinterpretation.

### **Student age**

As access to university increases, there are an increasing number of undergraduate students whose age at entry is considered Mature (21 and over). This has at least partially been driven by a range of institutional policy changes which have been aimed at widening participation and accommodating diverse demographics and the movement towards a model of the 'Age Friendly University' (Montepare, 2019). The proportion of undergraduate students considered mature is increasing; in the academic year 2022-23, 28.7% of students were mature, which represents an increase of 4% compared to 2017 (Office for Students, 2024a). However, mature

students still face significant challenges once within HE. Not only are they much less likely to complete their course of studies (10% less likely to complete compared to 'young' entrants), but for those that do, there remains a 9% awarding gap between Mature and Young students.

### ***Local and/or 'commuter' students***

A number of studies consistently show that students who live at home and/or commute to university have poorer outcomes than their peers. Nationally, there has been – and remains – a substantial gap in achievement between commuter and non-commuter students. In datasets, the OfS classifies these students as “local” or “not local to address prior to entry”; the Awarding Gap for students classified as local was 6.8% in 2010, and 5.4% in 2023, with a gap of between 5% and 7% maintained for every intervening year (Office for Students, 2024b). Interestingly, some studies suggest that the gap does not exist in mature commuter students versus non-commuter students, with mature commuter students generally performing better in terms of good degree achievement (Artess *et al.*, 2014). A number of studies have put forward suggestions for these underlying differences in outcomes including reduced engagement either due to, or alongside, poor student satisfaction, financial circumstances, travel impact, and general academic experience (Thomas, 2018, Maguire and Morris, 2018).

### ***Parental experience in higher education***

Parental experience of higher education is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of who enters, navigates and benefits from university. Students without parental experience of HE completion are often referred to as first-generation students (FGS; i.e. students whose parents do not have a HE qualification). This can be understood partly through Bourdieu's concept of capital: parental HE experience may provide students with material, cultural and social resources that help them understand expectations, navigate institutional systems and access support (Bourdieu, 1986). This can provide significant attainment advantages to non-FGS students, with some referring to parental higher education experience as a form of 'educational capital' (Barsegyan and Maas, 2024, Giotakou, 2024). In terms of outcomes, FGS students do not perform as well as non-FGS students, with a persistent awarding gap of around 6% in favour of non-FGS students (e.g. 2012: 6.1%, 2023: 6.8%).

## **Finding the gaps in the Awarding Gap**

The awarding gap is a valuable metric for understanding systemic inequalities in higher education. However, when metrics are applied at institutional level, there is often a tendency to focus narrowly on the numbers at the expense of context and nuance. In many universities, the awarding gap is reported as a single figure with a single dimension – typically a BAME vs non-BAME undergraduate comparison. This simplified approach is an unsurprising consequence of the wider “metricisation” of the sector: the drive to convert ever more aspects of university activity into quantitative indicators. Such metrics inevitably oversimplify complex underlying issues. Since the late 1990s, metricisation has advanced steadily, beginning with reforms such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which arguably marked the start of the modern metrics-based governance of universities. Institutions now operate in an environment dominated by league tables, student satisfaction scores and global rankings. In 1975, the British economist Charles Goodhart wrote in an article, a statement which has subsequently been taken as “Goodhart’s law”: “Any observed statistical regularity will tend to collapse once pressure is placed upon it for control purposes” (Goodhart, 1975, p. 116). The British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, phrased it unmistakably: “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure” (Strathern, 1997, p. 308).

Whilst the awarding gap itself has value as a metric, it has faced criticism on two main fronts: the analytical methodology used to generate the gap, and the sociological validity of how those figures are interpreted. Crucially, criticism of the awarding gap does not disprove the existence of inequity. Rather, such critiques remind us that quantitative values of this nature must be treated carefully: we need to be confident that they represent what we think they represent, and that they are applied constructively to the problem at hand. We should therefore ask ourselves a question posed by Gert Biesta: are educational institutions “measuring what we value, or [...] just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure” (Biesta 2009, p. 35)? This distinction matters because the choice of metric does not simply describe educational priorities; it can also shape them. In the context of the awarding gap, this raises the possibility that a narrow, easily measurable outcome may come to stand in for the wider educational values it was intended to represent.

***How much disadvantage is enough? It's complicated***

Students who enter university bring with them a wide array of lived experiences, resources, and constraints. It could be tempting (whether implicitly or explicitly) to consider disadvantage as some kind of quantitative concept, such that disadvantage can be modelled in a way that is additive. However, by accepting this idea, you must also accept that the inverse of disadvantage (i.e. advantage) can be used to offset one's disadvantageous position. This significantly complicates the relatively simplistic view on disadvantage that is sometimes adopted at an institutional level when considering awarding gaps. For example, two students with *disadvantage X* may not carry the same consequence forward into their academic career. Yet, any quantitative assessment of performance based on categorisation would simply consider both students to have *disadvantage X*. This is a problem, and there is good evidence to suggest that this occurs continuously throughout the student lifecycle. This phenomenon, referred to as "compensatory advantage" (Bernardi, 2014), details how students from resource-rich or higher socioeconomic backgrounds are much less likely to suffer long-term disadvantage from any given environmental or social shock at earlier stages in their academic career. For instance, there is extensive evidence from a wide range of education systems which supports the idea that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to drop out of university completely following an adverse assessment outcome (Herbaut, 2021). Continuing with the idea of summation, some believe that disadvantage across multiple domains can be multiplicative and therefore interaction effects are important. This concept of "intersectional disadvantage" posits that multiple disadvantages can lead to significant barriers to achievement that become difficult to overcome (Loets, 2024). For instance, studies suggest that disabled women have higher attainment gaps over and above those experienced by disabled men and non-disabled women (Meadows-Haworth, 2023). Others suggest that those with multiple disadvantages should be considered as categorised by those disadvantages simultaneously in an almost separate joint category; Crenshaw puts this clearly in a piece discussing discrimination against black women in the late 1980s where she suggests that for the purposes of analysing discrimination, disadvantage is not simply summative:

I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white

women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. [...] sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women - not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (Crenshaw, 1989, pp. 149-50)

The intersectionality theory of disadvantage, however, is not a given. In a recent large cohort study, Brophy (2025) examined the interaction between gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Whilst some interactions between disadvantageous 'categories' were found to be statistically significant, their effect sizes were negligible, with any cumulative effect not necessarily altering the probability of obtaining a good degree. In fact, considering gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status independently was sufficient to explain attainment gaps.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that disadvantage rarely behaves as a simple summative criterion. The practical question for universities should not simply be *how much* a student is disadvantaged, but rather when does this disadvantage *become enough* to cause a change in outcome risk. In this context, disadvantages can be considered as threshold effects (effects that tip the student into failure risk) and saturation effects (effects that provide no additional risk of failure over and above the already existent risk). The bar for these threshold effects is also not the same between courses of study. In lab-heavy or placement heavy programmes (such as Biomedical Sciences, Nursing, or Medicine), learning and progression relies heavily on session attendance and cannot be readily compensated through extra reading, extra study, or additional sessions. As a result, some courses may have a significantly lower bar for these thresholds, and therefore considering student disadvantage across an institution as a homogenous entity is also slightly risky. These lower functional thresholds in lab- or placement-heavy programmes make institutional level analysis of awarding gaps (and even worse, national averaging) difficult; such compaction may hide the real size of awarding gaps in some courses.

***Use of a threshold-based metric when better data is available***

The generally accepted outcome metric for measurement of the Awarding Gap is a "good degree". This is widely (almost exclusively) considered to be the award of a 2.1 or 1<sup>st</sup> class degree (Universities UK, 2022). As a result, selecting this binary yes/no

outcome as measure for the Awarding Gap throws away the resolution provided by *detailed* student performance. This can mask underlying differences in distributions, oversimplify complex phenomena, and ultimately lead to misinterpretation by either erroneously identifying or masking the size of an Awarding Gap (Hubbard, 2024). Given that UK universities have standardised awarding thresholds for degree classifications, the only real justification for using threshold-based metrics can be simplification of data for stakeholders and the public. This rationale does not provide sufficient support for the loss of granularity of the underlying dataset of student performance.

Reducing a continuous achievement distribution into a single binary outcome of “good degree” discards a huge amount of relevant, important, and *available* information. A number of problems follow from this binary classification, including but not limited to:

*The measure is overly sensitive around the boundary:* Small shifts in average marks near 60% can generate big changes in the size of the awarding gap. If a student has an average mark of 59%, then they are not classified as having obtained a good degree. A mere 1% increase in the average mark generates a 100% return on the student’s binary outcome, and they have a good degree. In addition to being overly sensitive around the boundary, the measure is practically unmoved by huge swings far away from it. An institution with massive improvements in mark in the low 50% range is likely to see almost nil improvement in the awarding gap.

*The measure masks actual differences in achievement:* Two students - one with a “good” degree and one without could have either significant mark disparity or not, but with binary options it is almost impossible to identify. Consider two scenarios – student A scores 59% and student B scores 60%. The binary classification of “good degree” means that this result is classified no differently than a situation where student A scores 40% and student B scores 80%. Furthermore, all results that are not in the “good degree” category are lumped together and considered equally, when clearly they are not equal.

*Perverse incentives exist around the 60% boundary and are masked by lack of granularity:* Binary classification encourages providers to pay particular attention to the 60% boundary. For example, discretionary rounding, viva uplifts, and reallocation of support towards students at the borderline will all lead to an increase in the number of

students obtaining “good degrees”. A report by Universities UK identified that most institutions permit students for borderline consideration at 2% from a grade boundary, which some institutions allowing a deviation of 3% from a grade boundary to be considered for an uplift (Universities UK, 2020). To be clear, I am not arguing for the HE sector to become harsher in their considerations of borderline cases, but from the perspective of those considering the awarding gap, openness and transparency around the borderline cases would be beneficial. If nothing else, this would remove concerns levelled at the sector around classification ‘engineering’.

One, perhaps obvious, response to these limitations is to replace the binary “good degree” outcome with metrics that retain the full range of information relating to student academic achievement. At a minimum, we should consider differences in continuous final average marks and consider achievement across the full distribution of classifications. We could go further and question whether the current degree classification system is itself the problem; many have argued that the classification system is too coarse (Knight, 2002). This is not a new argument; in 1997, a national inquiry into HE (the Dearing Report) went as far as to say, “that the honours classification system had outlived its usefulness” and that “it no longer provided useful information” (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997, p. 139). Nearly two decades later, a sector-wide trial led by the Higher Education Academy examined the feasibility of introducing a grade point average (GPA) alongside existing classifications, and concluded that adopting a GPA system would likely be beneficial for UK higher education (Bloxham *et al.*, 2015). Although some institutions now report GPA-style scores in addition to the traditional honours classification, uptake and understanding across the sector remain variable. Wider adoption of more granular systems, used alongside rather than instead of existing classifications, would be an important step towards generating richer, more sensitive data with which to understand and address awarding gaps. Some have gone even further and suggested a complete removal of classifications and grading altogether, leaving just ‘pass’ and ‘fail’ with no other intervening classifications at all (Donald, 2025). Such a move would remove almost any ability to assess academic achievement and is unlikely to be a productive move.

***Some confounding variables contribute quietly to the Awarding Gap***

The underlying data for the awarding gap is based on a final outcome measure, and by its very nature, requires students to complete their studies in order to be a contributor to the dataset. Therefore, it is apparent that non-continuation is an important factor that should be considered when we think about the Awarding Gap. Those who withdraw before a final award is made simply disappear from the calculation. Yet non-continuation is itself strongly socially patterned. Sector data show that continuation rates are systematically lower for students from deprived areas, mature entrants, some minoritised ethnic groups, and disabled students, even after controlling for prior attainment and subject of study (Office for Students, 2020a). This is important, as the number of students in an institution that do not continue their studies into Years 2 and 3 may be significant.

In addition, simple comparisons between demographic groups does not take into account inequity in university access. For example, white males eligible for free school meals (FSM; a marker of deprivation) are less likely to attend university than any other group of students when considering gender, deprivation, FSM status, and broad ethnic group (Bolton and Lewis, 2024). In simple terms, many of the most educationally disadvantaged white FSM-receiving students are simply not present in the undergraduate population at all. This means that those white FSM students who do enrol tend to be higher attaining and a more motivated subset, whereas for some other demographic groups a broader range of prior attainment and circumstances is represented. As a result, the demographic composition of the student body is *already* selectively filtered before any awarding-gap analysis takes place. This can contribute to the development of awarding gaps - the most disadvantaged potential students from some backgrounds have been filtered out at earlier stages of the educational journey. Meaningful interpretation of awarding gaps therefore requires us to think carefully about this issue and whether this access gap underlies (at least part of) the awarding gap.

***The Awarding Gap focuses on outcomes and not processes – “gap-gazing”***

The focus on quantitative outcomes tends to shift the focus of interventions towards outcomes and not processes. For instance, interventions that specifically work to raise grades, may not ‘fix’ underlying inequitable processes; additional examination support for disadvantaged students might improve grades temporarily, but this is not the same

as supporting equal resource or facility access, or promoting peer inclusion. Furthermore, approaches of this nature can inadvertently reinforce deficit narratives, leading to blanket assumptions that students of a given demographic inherently require additional support (Davis and Museus, 2019). This focus on outcomes rather than processes has led some equity researchers to coin the term “gap-gazing” (Gutiérrez, 2008). Worse, by focusing on final degree metrics retrospectively, institutions are only identifying inequity at the point of failure, where no further meaningful support can be given. Essentially, by the time an institution calculates its awarding gap, for those students whom that calculation is derived from, it is too late.

One way to move beyond gap-gazing is to rethink equity monitoring more generally, moving from a single outcome measure to broader monitoring around the entire student lifecycle. This means pairing awarding gap data with a range of other progress indicators that capture how different groups move through their educational journey, e.g. patterns of application, offer and enrolment; early engagement with teaching and assessment; continuation and progression between years; use of mitigating circumstances and extensions; access to key learning resources and placements; measures of belonging; and group participation. These analyses can be used to provide proactive monitoring and measurement that identify differences in progression long before the point of final degree classification. Perhaps as importantly, they would help to shift the focus away from simple binary outcomes and direct attention towards aspects of curriculum, pedagogy and institutional structures that are amenable to change, allowing interventions to be designed around transforming processes that have impacts on the student experience.

***The awarding gap shifts the blame, and the onus to fix inequity, onto the University***

The shift from “attainment gap” to “awarding gap” was intended to move attention away from the idea of a student deficit, and to move towards institutional responsibility for gaps in “good degree” attainment. In some respects, this has been useful – it has meant that HE institutions have had to genuinely engage with their role in outcomes. HE institutions have taken this responsibility as an opportunity to explore how their curriculum, assessment practices, and educational environments may have contributed to inequity. However, this shifting of responsibility onto the university essentially fixes the cause of the disparity (and therefore the onus to fix it) at the level

of the university. It contributes to an undercurrent which suggests that the University is the point at which this educational disparity first appears, which is clearly not the case. Many of the inequalities observed in degree outcomes reflect disparities that have accumulated throughout earlier stages of the education system and wider social structures.

By focusing almost exclusively on disparities observed *after* students have entered higher education, we risk allowing other parts of the system to face reduced scrutiny. This can allow upstream inequalities to lose focus from both policy and public viewpoints, with the problem being framed as belonging entirely to higher education. This is not to diminish the obligations of universities to address inequity in their own practices, but to emphasise that awarding gaps are the culmination of a longer chain of structural disparities that require coordinated action beyond higher education alone. A meaningful response requires coordinated action across the educational pipeline, rather than expecting universities alone to remediate decades of accumulated disadvantage in the final three or four years of formal education.

### **Moving from an Awarding Gap to a progress gap**

The awarding gap, as it is currently constructed, is an end-point metric: it captures differences in the proportion of students who reach a predefined outcome at the end of their studies. As a result, it tells us little about how far different groups have progressed during university relative to their starting point. A student who enters with strong prior attainment and graduates with a 2:1 may, in one sense, have underachieved relative to expectation, while another who enters with weaker preparation and attains the same classification may have made substantial progress. Collapsing these distinct trajectories into a single binary outcome obscures achievement and blurs the distinction between inequities that pre-date university and those that develop within it.

One way to address this is to complement awarding-gap analysis with explicit progress metrics that track how students develop academically over time. Rather than simply asking “*how many students get a good degree?*”, progress metrics would instead ask: “*how far do students move in their educational experience?*”. This form of measure is known as a “value-added (VA) measure”, which makes an assessment of the progress of students relative to their starting position. Although there is some work looking in

this area (Kandiko Howson and Buckley, 2020, Evans *et al.*, 2018, Arico *et al.*, 2018), the term “progress gap” is not as widely established as other disparity measures such as awarding, attainment, continuation, and completion gaps. In higher education, sector reporting tends to distinguish stages of the lifecycle (access, continuation, attainment, progression), but equity debates around attainment have remained anchored to end-point outcomes such as the proportion achieving a “good degree”.

The use of individualised student progress as a measure does have some precedent in education. Perhaps the most well-known measure is Progress 8, which aims to capture the progress that students make from the end of primary school up to the end of Key Stage 4 (end of secondary school). It is specifically described by the government as a VA measure (Department for Education, 2025) and is used to make comparisons between schools by assessing by how much students’ expected grades differ from their actual grades. In terms of equity, such measures are useful. Previous systems had focused on the percentage of students getting above a certain grade. This often meant that school focus could too often be placed on students close to the selected grade boundary. Systems such as Progress 8 which focus on *distance travelled* benefit from their design in that all students – including both those of higher and lower attainment – are contributors to institutional performance (Burgess and Thomson, 2020).

Translating this kind of approach into HE would not be straightforward. Unlike primary and secondary education, universities do not operate a standardised curriculum and there is no single definition of what constitutes “progress” across different institutions. Furthermore, the most obvious starting point for progress in HE are entry grades, whether this be measured in UCAS tariff points or some other measure. These measures are potentially problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, the qualifications that contribute to a given student’s tariff points may differ in type/context compared to other students (e.g. BTEC, A-Level, T-Level, etc). Secondly, although entry grades are relatively strong predictors of achievement, they are nuances that should be considered. For example, the entry grades achieved by students are influenced by the type of school they have attended. It has been known for some time that students who attend private or independent schools achieve higher grades prior to university, but are less likely to achieve a first-class degree than state school

attendees with the same grade profile (Ogg *et al.*, 2009, Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2014).

Nevertheless, the underlying logic of VA assessment is already present in higher education, albeit in fragmented form. In many institutions, academics are encouraged to provide students with feedback that identifies specifically what *they* have done well, and where *they* can improve going forward. This model provides students with personalised feedback that allows them to assess themselves against their own previous performance. For instance, a student who is suggested to improve X, and then does so for the next piece of assessment, can easily identify their own progress. This can sometimes be difficult to achieve, as very few students have continuity between markers as they cross modules. This has led to some considering a more formal approach to integrating previous feedback with each marking task. This has been termed 'ipsative assessment', and compares a learner's current performance with their previous performance (Hughes, 2011). The author suggests a 'mixed model' which stops short of full 'ipsative grading' (i.e. grading work against your last piece of work, which itself would have significant difficulties).

Much of the literature on differential attainment adjusts for prior attainment when modelling degree outcomes, and sector bodies routinely acknowledge that raw awarding gaps conflate institutional effects with differences in student intake. Similarly, a small number of institutions have developed explicit VA models that benchmark degree outcomes against expectations derived from entry qualifications and subject of study, with the aim of improving equity analysis. What is largely missing is a shared language and framework that frames these approaches as actual measures of progress, rather than simply technical adjustments to awarding-gap statistics. A move towards approaches that are more explicitly framed as progress gaps would be beneficial. It changes the question from "who is less likely to obtain a good degree" to "who makes less academic progress than would be expected from their starting point". This matters for equity; analysis of progress gaps more directly interrogates what happens within the university environment itself. This provides a clearer idea of the contribution that the university might make to generation of mitigation of educational inequity.

One of the clearest examples of a progress-oriented approach to equity in UK higher education is the VA model developed at Kingston University, which benchmarked degree outcomes against expectations derived from entry qualifications and subject of study (Office for Students, 2020b, McDuff *et al.*, 2018). Expected outcomes are derived from national patterns of degree attainment for students with similar entry qualifications and studying similar subjects. By aggregating these expected probabilities across a cohort, the metric estimates how many students would be expected to obtain a “good degree”. The ratio of observed to expected outcomes then provides a VA score, indicating whether a group performs above, in line with, or below expectation. In this way, the metric adjusts for differences in intake profile and focuses attention on disparities that cannot be explained by prior attainment or subject mix alone. A value-added score of 1.0 indicates outcomes in line with expectation, while scores above or below this threshold indicate relative over- or under-performance, respectively. In the Kingston study, differences in VA scores were observed between BME and White students across a number of participating institutions (Office for Students, 2020b).

Taken together, this work suggests that VA approaches provide a useful way of reframing differential attainment as a question of progress rather than solely of outcomes. Although such measures do not eliminate all of the conceptual and methodological challenges associated with equity analysis in higher education, they offer a clearer means of separating disparities that largely pre-date university from those that emerge within it. Framing these adjusted differences as progress gaps shifts attention towards institutional processes and environments, and provides a more direct basis for assessing the contribution that universities may make to the production or mitigation of educational inequity.

## **Conclusions**

The awarding gap is a deceptively complex metric. Treating the binary “good degree” threshold as the sector’s primary indicator of equity obscures more than it reveals. Threshold-based measures discard information, are highly sensitive around classification boundaries, and invite perverse incentives in institutional behaviour. They also mask the contributions of non-continuation and unequal access, and sit uneasily with what is known about intersectionality, compensatory advantage, and the cumulative production of disadvantage across the educational pipeline. By focusing

on retrospective outcomes, awarding-gap analysis further encourages a form of “gap-gazing” that locates both problem and solution at the point of graduation, while rendering upstream inequalities less visible to scrutiny.

The argument advanced here is not that awarding gaps should be abandoned, but that they require reframing and supplementation. Monitoring awarding gaps remains important, but it should be complemented by more granular measures of achievement (such as continuous marks, full classification distributions, or GPA-style metrics) and by value-added, lifecycle-oriented indicators that track access, engagement, continuation and progression. Taken together, these approaches would allow institutions to identify earlier points of divergence, design interventions that address inequitable processes rather than terminal outcomes alone, and situate their own responsibilities more clearly within a wider system of shared accountability for educational equity. Ultimately, equity in higher education cannot be adequately understood or addressed through end-point outcomes alone; it requires measures that capture how students progress, where divergence occurs, and which parts of the system are positioned to intervene.

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