

Using evidence to narrow awarding gaps in UK higher education

Roundtable summary report

This summary report captures the topline findings from roundtable discussions focused on approaches to addressing awarding gaps in UK higher education. It identifies key talking points for QAA Members to consider in informing or evaluating your own approach and it includes an invitation to contribute to our work in this area.

About this resource

On 25 and 26 June 2024, QAA convened two sector roundtable events designed to explore how higher education providers are using evidence to develop, apply and evaluate meaningful actions to narrow their awarding gaps. This followed on from the recent publication of The Awarding Map, which captures practical tools, insights and approaches that can support you to address awarding gaps across different levels within your provider.

12 UK higher education providers participated in the roundtables, including:

- De Montfort University
- Kingston University London
- Loughborough University
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Staffordshire University
- University of the Arts London
- University College of Estate Management
- University of Exeter
- University of Hertfordshire
- University of Hull
- University of Sunderland in London
- University of Sussex

Discussions were hosted online and opened with a presentation from Professor Nicola King sharing the University of Exeter's approach to using evidence to address awarding gaps, followed by structured discussions involving all the participants.

Through the discussions, we began to generate a more comprehensive picture of how awarding gaps are measured, understood and addressed within different UK higher education providers. A number of challenges were explored, including how a better understanding of institutional data can help us to assess what works when it comes to tackling awarding gaps, and the salience of different contributing factors to gaps in different contexts and for different student groups. Roundtable participants agreed that through better use of institutional data, we can improve our understanding of what is needed to address awarding gaps and choose the right approach from a range of evidence-based options for the right context. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; change will take time and will only be effective if we work together.

Topline findings

1. The importance of **understanding the student journey**, including:
 - a. the question of whether awarding gaps are really transition gaps
 - b. the role of pre-arrival information sharing, expectation setting and use of pre-arrival questionnaires
 - c. the role of student support, including academic and professional services
 - d. preparing students for assessment and factors impacting retention
 - e. preparing students for transition out of higher education.
2. The **intersectionality** of issues - in particular relating to the individual **context of each institution**, composition of the student body, and the different and multiple challenges this can create.
3. The value of, and responsibilities arising from **good data use**, including how participating higher education providers are navigating **data literacy and overload**, the importance of communicating the right narrative to the right people (at the right time), and enhancing understanding of data as a tool and not the answer.
4. The need for better **sharing of interventions and their evaluation**. This should capture both the institutional context for the intervention and theory-driven analysis, recognising challenges around staffing and capacity, providing people with the right tools locally to determine and measure what is effective for their students, the challenges that come with navigating multiple agendas simultaneously, and the need for joined up thinking - particularly in times of financial challenge.



Talking points

1: Are awarding gaps really transition gaps?

Awarding gaps are complex. They can be the result of a range of influencing factors, most often attributed to: the personal characteristics of different students (such as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, caring responsibilities, gender, religion); external influences (such as the cost of living crisis); and the persistent challenges associated with designing and delivering equitable learning experiences for all, including modes of assessment and the impact of Eurocentric curriculums.¹ Rarely does a struggling or underperforming student fall into just one of these groups, therefore understanding and addressing the intersectionality of issues is critical to tackling the awarding gap.

It is also widely acknowledged that if a student is well embedded in a department, university or college community - somewhere they feel like they belong and matter - then accessing support when challenges arise should become easier. An important factor in addressing awarding gaps relates to how we can best facilitate that transition into communities such that all students feel more confident and able to tackle emergent issues which could impact on their progress and/or experience, and access the support they need.

Indeed, providers are judged on the equity of student outcomes and the suitability of their response to any evidence of awarding gaps. Yet, our roundtable discussions reinforced that these gaps are not really about the process of award itself; rather, they reflect gaps across the student experience and raise significant questions around how students are able and/or directed to interact with their programme of study, their provider and the higher education experience more broadly. Transitions to, through and beyond higher education form a holistic journey, rather than a series of static points for engagement, and we need to better understand how transitions are experienced and can be enhanced across the institutional landscape.



¹ It should be noted that these student characteristics are only proxy measurements, meaning that being a mature student, for example, does not automatically cause a student to get a lower grade. Rather factors that are more likely to be associated with being a mature student, such as increased domestic and financial responsibilities, the possibility of greater time spent outside of the education system, and so forth, can contribute to awarding gaps. While proxy measurements are easier to systematically collect, the real barriers are typically more nuanced.

2: Are we using data in the right way?

If we are to address awarding gaps through work around transition and student support across the student journey, we also need to have better and more timely data analysis to assist with this. Current data cycles can lead to the perception that providers and the wider sector are always left 'looking in the rear-view mirror' and focusing on gaps *after* students have graduated. Consequently, roundtable participants agreed that we need to make better use of the data we collect (both quantitative and qualitative) to understand the experience of students *while they are still studying with us*.

However, it is also important to recognise that data and data analysis will not answer the question of awarding gaps for us but rather gives us information and tools to help along the way. Too much data can be a confounding factor as there is a temptation to 'plunge down the data rabbit hole' rather than focusing on when we have enough robust analysis to inform decision-making and importantly support next steps.

As data collection and the ability to analyse large datasets increases, providers were also keen to acknowledge challenges around data literacy for those working with students. Everyone within an institution has a role to play in addressing awarding gaps but not all have the same levels of data literacy, so it was agreed that we need to support colleagues to develop an appropriate level of understanding of how to use and work with data, and 'trust' in the robustness and reliability of any analysis that is produced. For example, several described reporting mechanisms they use to highlight trends at institutional and local levels, translating complex information into clear, manageable and relevant insights for programme leaders and course teams to act upon.

3: How do we know what's effective?

The range of interventions devised to address awarding gaps and trailed across the sector is wide and varied. A common theme that emerged during discussions was the importance of highlighting the institutional and departmental context in which those interventions were delivered. Without both robust evaluation and clarity around context, it is hard even for departments within the same institution, let alone other providers, to effectively roll out similar interventions and achieve success. Reflecting on our responsibilities as a sector committed to closing the awarding gap, acknowledging and framing interventions in the context in which they were delivered is vital so that others can then understand and evolve those interventions for their own context in order to maximise the chance for positive impact.

Participating providers also agreed that it is important to share the lessons learned from 'failures' alongside successes. While participants naturally anticipated hesitancy around the sensitivity of awarding gaps data and any potential for negative perceptions of providers from a commercial standpoint, it was also recognised that enabling institutions to better share their activity such that we can learn from each other would be valuable, particularly in the current financial climate. Many providers do not have the luxury of trialling lots of different approaches and monitoring what works best to address awarding gaps in their context, so it is helpful to imagine and explore how we move towards a sector-wide evidence base for effective interventions. Addressing awarding gaps should be a moral and ethical imperative for the whole sector and not an area in which we seek to compete.





Learning from/with each other

There is clear appetite to explore further what we can do as a sector - collaborating to address awarding gaps. QAA's [Awarding Map](#) represents one space through which we can continue to collate and share insights and practical resources, and highlight examples of effective interventions in context.

Following on from these roundtable discussions, we recognise, more than ever, the value of opportunities to continue these conversations and involve a broader group of higher education providers. From January 2025, QAA will host '**Making sense of the gap**' - a series of networking events focused on specific aspects of the awarding gap and designed to enable greater sector-wide collaboration around the use of data and evidence. We will also continue to share approaches taken and lessons learnt in order to advance the conversation and seek to close the gaps between student outcomes.

If you would like to contribute to our research and/or engagement activities on awarding gaps, please contact membership@qaa.ac.uk

Thank you to all who participated in these roundtables and shared their insights and determination to help make parity of achievement and experience a reality for all students in UK higher education.

Published - 9 September 2024

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2024
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
www.qaa.ac.uk