

Race on the Agenda

Mind the Gap: Choice, Opportunity and Access in Higher Education for UK- Domiciled BAME students

A commentary on the Augar Review

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Mind the Gap: Choice, Opportunity and Access in Higher Education for UK-Domiciled BAME students. A commentary on the Augar Review.

The Augar Review of Post-18 Education and Funding was published in May 2019. ROTA considered the Report in terms of how its recommendations may influence BAME students' and prospective students' decisions to apply to university and their choice of course. Our views are presented here.

Reducing tuition fees to £7,500

Data collected from students by UCAS suggests that the amount of tuition fee is less of an influencer than location of university, suitability of course, what the student experience is like, social life, where to live and the type of accommodation.¹

Lowering fees is not the whole picture in the student decision-making process and the Report can be criticised for not taking into account other, diverse factors which influence decisions.²

Financial hardship can continue throughout university and for some students additional costs, not always taken account of when applying, can mount up. Financial burdens can precipitate students into exploitative, low-paid jobs whilst studying. This exploitation is associated with working in insecure industries such as cleaning, catering, bar work and call centres and in largely unregulated 'promotional' work which may include escort/hosting and sex work. Financial hardship experienced by students whilst at university can cause such high levels of stress and anxiety that mental health is affected.

WHAT DOES ROTA SUGGEST?

- Attention should be made to factors other than tuition fees, such as additional costs of accommodation, subsistence, equipment and materials for some courses, which may precipitate students into debt and subsequently into poorly paid or exploitative work
- The effect of financial hardship on student wellbeing should be more fully explored, as it may have been underestimated as a contributory factor to mental health problems developing in the student population as a whole, and in some specific groups, such as Black male students. (NUS, 2018. Education Policy Institute, 2018.)
- More research should be carried out to identify the support students need from their universities once they have begun their course. The type of support may for example, include improved access to student counselling services; better awareness of students' mental health and wellbeing; improved responses to students who have requested additional support.

¹ Helen Thorne (UCAS) speaking at the SIPS seminar, June 24th 2019.

² Chris Husbands, speaking at the SIPS seminar on June 24th 2019 referred to the 'Page 203 Problem' in the Augar Report, i.e. In seeking to more effectively target funding on cost of provision and characteristics of students, the Report 'misunderstood what drives student choice and behaviour.'

Reduced fee income may result in some university courses being cut with a likely effect not just on the sector, but on prospective and current students. The possibility that some universities may need to reassess which courses they can afford to offer could result in a narrowing of choice for students in some subject areas. It is too early to predict whether, or which, universities could be forced into a financially unviable position, although the Augar Review reported there are warning signs from some institutions. Students intending to enrol could find that they have to look further afield, choose different courses or change their plans. This might not present problems for students from more socially and economically advantaged backgrounds. Other students may be more limited in their choices, for family, cultural or financial reasons, preferring to study close to home or to study part-time for example.

WHAT DOES ROTA SUGGEST?

- Further research should be undertaken to determine which students would be most adversely affected by the closure of some university courses or institutions.

The restoration of additional maintenance loans and means tested grants.

Superficially attractive, the restoration of additional maintenance loans and means tested grants targets students from poorer backgrounds. There is, though, a perception that means tested grants can be bureaucratic and expensive to administer.³ Moreover, there is a suspicion that conditions could be attached to the terms of the grant awarded to recipients – conditions which might not apply equally to other students. The Fairer Fees report from the Sutton Trust gives an example from the United States:

‘At Harvard, students from families earning less than \$65,000 (just under £49,000) are given a mix of scholarship funds to cover almost all their tuition fees and maintenance costs, although students are also expected to take on some paid work on campus to cover the remainder of their expenses.’ (Sutton Trust. 2017.)

WHAT DOES ROTA SUGGEST?

- There is a case for investigating whether students on means-tested grants would be subject to obligations - to do paid work, for example - which other students would not be expected to do and how this would be perceived by students themselves.

The question of under-representation of some groups of BAME students will not be answered by means tested loans and grants.

ROTA’s research points to other factors which contribute to under-representation. These include a lack of government support to address financial inequality; a failure of policy at school level to engage with BAME students’ aspirations, with low expectations perpetuated; the continuing

³ This perception is not always justified. The Australian Grants Website for example, appears to have developed an online calculation tool for what students may expect as a government contribution and maintenance grant. American universities, including Harvard, have a similar tool.

existence of discrimination; gender bias against Black boys; a lack of support schemes e.g. peer mentoring; few Black role models; a lack of awareness of Widening Participation schemes⁴ and of the 'Gold Award' schemes.⁵

Some minority ethnic students, such as those from Black Caribbean, Somali, Gypsy, Irish Traveller and Roma communities, continue to experience barriers to accessing higher education. In some universities, the attainment gap persists throughout the period of study. (Office for Students, 2019.)

The drop-out rate for some BAME groups of students between 2008 and 2015 remained higher compared with other groups. (Office for Students. 2019.)

There is a suspicion that barriers to attainment are perpetuated at institutional level and the failure to listen to BAME students and staff is thought to contribute to this situation, as discussed by the Guardian newspaper. (The Guardian, January 2019.)

WHAT DOES ROTA SUGGEST?

- The views and experiences of BAME school students should be sought so that initiatives can be developed to counteract low teacher expectations, overcome discrimination and increase awareness, attainment and participation in higher education.
- Schools should review their policy and practice on engaging BAME students to prepare for higher education and actively work with parents and students to encourage and support the most disadvantaged BAME young people, e.g. through measures which may include peer mentoring and forging links with higher education institutions seeking to increase diversity.
- Improving access to higher education should be followed up with positive steps to ensure that the minority ethnic student attainment gap is addressed and the drop-out rate reduced, at institutional level.

Students on vocational courses should be eligible for additional student loans and financial support.

In economic terms, additional financial support for students on vocational courses appears an attractive option. As a market-driven recommendation, targeting shortages and re-focusing funding towards vocational and technical qualifications, provided predominantly by the FE sector, appears a persuasive argument for some students: perhaps those who have not achieved the necessary grades for academic courses. Or for less well-off students. In ROTA's view, this risks reinforcing attitudes

⁴ Colin McCraig, at the Sheffield Institute for Policy Studies seminar on the impact of Augar (June 24th 2019) alluded to difficulties associated with 'managing the problems of the Widening Participation programme' as reported by some universities. The WP Programme, designed to enable students from less advantaged backgrounds to enter university, requires additional resources, management, teaching and support which universities have not always been able to fully provide.

⁵ Gold Awards are part of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework assessment by panel. The Office for Students publishes the outcomes of the Gold Award assessments annually.

and misconceptions amongst education policy-makers about the type of students 'suited' for university and for those 'suited' for other types of provision.

There is an underlying assumption in the Augar Review that students from less privileged backgrounds would benefit from, and can be directed towards vocational courses, which perpetuates the current situation and which may exacerbate existing racist and classist attitudes towards students. This is reinforced by a lack of inclusive teaching which begins at school and continues at university. A recent report by the Greater London Authority (LKMco. 2019) addressed the attainment gap for Black Caribbean boys and boys from White families in receipt of free school meals. It made the point that teacher expectations and preconceptions about these pupils can have a negative effect on aspiration and achievement.

WHAT DOES ROTA SUGGEST?

- Race Equality Charters should be compulsory in every institution, using the regulatory powers of OFS and Equality Disparity Unit & offshoot organisations to ensure that this is followed through

The Race versus Class dimension risks reinforcing prejudice on both sides of the debate. Some universities have begun to address socio-economic disadvantage by appointing Working Class Officers whose role is to support students from working class backgrounds to challenge stereotypes and encourage wider participation. Manchester University initiated these appointments in 2017 and since then other universities including SOAS and St. Hilda's Oxford, have followed.

In ROTA's view, this initiative is a positive step towards acknowledging an historical imbalance in student intake, especially visible at Russell Group universities, whilst cautioning against strategies which may, however subtly, reinforce 'Class v Race' prejudices.

For example, ROTA can be confident in asserting that not all working class students have 'low aspirations' or need support to challenge stereotypes. This is true of a number of students - some White, some BAME - with parents in traditionally working-class occupations, who have high expectations of university education and whose achievements match those of students from other backgrounds.

The Runnymede Trust (2019) has examined the Class v Race issue, in the report *Class and Race in post-Brexit Britain*. In the chapter, *The Role of Cultural Capital for Understanding Race, Ethnicity and Class* by LSE academic Mike Savage, he notes that 'although in the UK ethnic minority youngsters are more likely to go to university than are whites...it is the white working class – those on the receiving end of decades of stigmatization – who fare particularly badly.'

Other research, such as that carried out by Tim Wise (2012) *Affirmative Action: Racial Preference in Black and White* discusses the situation in American schools, in terms of proximity and access to resources within some schools, with minority students being more likely affected by poverty, going to poorer schools with less access to resources, hence less expectation of going to University.

WHAT DOES ROTA SUGGEST?

- Initiatives such as those set up by some universities to challenge class stereotypes should ensure that by doing so, race stereotypes are not perpetuated. This may be overcome by appointing Student Ambassadors – or similar representatives - from diverse ethnic backgrounds
- If additional financial support is made available for students enrolling on vocational courses, there is a risk that some BAME students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds but who nevertheless have aspirations towards university, may be dissuaded from applying to higher-level or more academically prestigious institutions/Russell Group universities. This is in contradiction to widening BAME participation. Ways of counteracting this potential risk should be investigated more widely before additional financial support for vocational courses is brought in.

Access and Participation Plans, Student Premium and support for disadvantaged students

Higher Education institutions must have Access and Participation Plans in place to support disadvantaged students and under-represented groups⁶. The Student Premium is intended to provide additional resources for students at the highest risk of dropping out.

The Augar Review reported that there has been no comprehensive national evaluation of specific programmes to assess the impact of the different approaches taken by universities to widening participation, and that providers should be held more closely to account for the outcomes of their programmes. (Ch. 3. P 97).

It further noted that the current way of calculating the Student Premium did not capture sufficient information on disadvantage at the individual level.

A more rigorous evaluation of Access and Participation plans is required and universities should be held to account for the outcomes. However, we consider that Recommendations (Ch. 3.6) of the Review do not go far enough. Although agreeing with the principle that access and support should be improved, along with enhanced reporting measures, ROTA finds that the Review fails in its detail of what constitutes 'sufficient' and 'additional' support.

There is a lack of representation of the BAME student voice, student unions and race equality organisations in determining policy on access and support. A better understanding of what kind of support is needed by students from disadvantaged backgrounds - financial and otherwise - could perhaps have been gained from students themselves. Although the Review accepted evidence from student organisations during the consultation period, scant reference was made to the voices of students and student representative bodies in the Report.

⁶ Augar Review of post-18 Education and Funding. 2019. Ch. 3 p.76

In a meeting in May 2019 with ROTA and Amatey Doku, Vice-President of the National Union of Students (which contributed evidence to the Augar Review Consultation) it was thought there was a case for more fully exploring issues of access, participation and experiences at university from the student perspective, and more particularly from UK-domiciled BAME students. The NUS has instigated a number of student surveys and has reported on issues of equality in higher and further education as in *Why is my curriculum White?* (2015) and the recent NUS/Universities UK report *Closing the Gap* (2019).

WHAT DOES ROTA SUGGEST?

- Strategies to support disadvantaged and/or underrepresented groups should examine closely the profile and needs of UK-domiciled BAME students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The views of such students on the support that would best work for them should be included in any further consultations in the wake of the Augar Review.
- The voice of student unions, student representative groups and Race Equality organisations such as ROTA, should be sought, to provide a more complete insight into the needs of BAME students and to help inform and shape future policy
- Further information should be gathered on the experiences of BAME students in higher education, with a view to addressing disadvantage among some groups of BAME students and exploring instances of racial discrimination and abuse.⁷ ROTA's research has explored the attainment gap; retention rates; historical inequality; lack of role models; unconscious racial bias and the 'White Curriculum' (NUS, 2015.)

Lower prior attainment is associated higher drop-out rates and lower wage-earning capacity.

Students from less advantaged groups generally enter university with lower prior attainment than their more advantaged peers. Low prior attainment tends to have an adverse effect on earning potential after graduation.

The Augar Review reported that lower prior attainment, measured by A-level and BTEC grades, appears to be associated with dropping out (a drop-out rate of 12.8% in 2016-17.) There is a higher drop-out rate from students who enter university with BTEC qualifications: the lowest-attaining BTEC student drop-out rate exceeded 15% in this period. Which groups of students are more likely to study BTECs is subject to debate, but an analysis of HESA statistics carried out in 2017 suggested that Black students are three times more likely than White students to hold only BTEC qualifications. (Holford, A. 2017.)

⁷ Examples of this have been reported in the Press, e.g. where a Black female student was cornered in her room on a university campus while being racially abused by a group of white students, an incident which the University failed to handle effectively.

The Augar Review reported that of the students who completed their degrees, those with relatively lower qualifications at entry earned less than those whose qualifications were higher. This disparity in lower wage potential persists until at least 29 years of age .(Ch.3.p.89.)

WHAT DOES ROTA SUGGEST?

- To combat poor prior attainment, in addition to schools improving ways to prepare students for higher education, universities should, through their Widening Participation initiatives, work more closely with schools. This work should be focused on raising aspirations - and grades - for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including UK-domiciled BAME students.

To counteract grade-inflation, minimum entry level requirements should be revised.

The Augar Review reported that more students with lower prior attainment are now attending university. A disproportionate number of BTEC students - one in four of all English domiciled entrants – entered Higher Education with higher UCAS points gained through BTEC qualifications than students entering with A-Levels: ‘since 2012, the number going to university with BTEC and other qualifications has increased by 24 per cent’. (Augar Review, Ch.3.p 90.)

The Review looked at the issue of equivalence between A-levels and BTEC qualifications and concluded that ‘grade inflation’ is continuing to take place at BTEC level in some schools and colleges. The Review referred to statistics on school and colleges, which distinguished between those which have chosen to use the post-16 BTEC grading system - but which have now addressed the ‘over-inflated’ UCAS points system - and those which have not, and who continue to award higher points. This has been demonstrated by a 40 per cent rise in BTEC students achieving Distinction or Distinction Star between 2006 and 2016. The Review stated :

‘We are concerned about this, particularly since achievement in BTECs is inflated when it comes to tariff points: there can be no other reasonable explanation for BTEC students earning more UCAS points than A level students with the same level of GCSE attainment.’
(Augar Review, ch. 3. P 90.)

The Augar Review looked into ‘revising entry to degree-level study on the basis of prior academic attainment’ based on a new tariff of a minimum of 3 D-grades at A-level (or the assumed BTEC equivalent of Merit, Merit, Pass).

WHAT DOES ROTA SUGGEST?

- Reviewing grade inflation issues and revising entry-level requirements needs further scrutiny, to see what effect it would have on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some such students may achieve the required marks, but subsequently fail to reach the standard expected by their university. It may be of interest to look at strategies adopted by universities in other countries, which are designed to support students academically, who do not reach the required marks. One such university is

the University of the West Indies. UK-domiciled BAME students may choose to continue their studies at the University of the West Indies. Some discover that, even though the A-level grades they achieved in the UK were sufficient to gain entry, they subsequently struggle, or fail to meet grades required by the University. Individualised learning programmes are put in place to ensure that they meet the academic standards needed to place them in good stead for a better final degree grade .

Measures to address disadvantage: contextualisation

It was recognised that should a minimum-entry level requirement to university be introduced, measures to counteract disadvantage would need to be put in place. To offset any adverse impact on equality of access, 'contextualisation' could be employed when assessing applications.

This is described as a process whereby factors such as sex, where applicants live and type of secondary school attended could be used to adjust grades to allow for disadvantage – a 'minimum entry threshold contextualised for socio-economic background'. (Ch.3. p101.)

Contextualisation - which the Augar Review considered 'possible, not a recommendation'- would not necessarily work for all applicants, for reasons of focusing too narrowly on some socio-economic factors and not others. It has its critics, too, because it is seen to 'break the clear link between attainment and entry established by minimum entry threshold'. The Augar Review recommended that contextualisation, or a version of it, is 'feasible' and could be introduced, albeit in combination with other measures such as a selective number cap, over a period of time leading up to 2022/23.

WHAT DOES ROTA SUGGEST?

- The suggestion that contextualisation of grades might be adopted should be given further scrutiny to see whether it would be sufficient to allow for disadvantage. If found to be sufficient, it should therefore be adopted wholesale rather than piecemeal and earlier than 2023. However, a narrow interpretation of contextualisation should be avoided – as the Augar Review points out.

A note on differentiated course fees

The Augar Review made clear that after consultation, the Panel rejected differentiated course fees:

'Differential fees at subject level is undesirable at subject level, and unworkable at institutional level and would not bring overall benefits to the individual, economy or society'.
(Ch. 3. p.105)

In ROTA's view this is to be welcomed. Initial research carried out by ROTA between 2018-2019 indicated that the introduction of differentiated fees by subject would be likely to hit UK-domiciled BAME students from less socio-economically well off backgrounds the hardest. However, this is not clear-cut and ROTA proposes monitoring the situation. The issue of differentiated course fees may be taken up again. A shift in funding from HE to FE for example, could give rise to another appraisal of differential fees at subject level.

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