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Can the role of a personal tutor contribute to reducing the undergraduate degree awarding gap for racially minoritised students?

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Abstract

The imperative to address the complex problem of degree awarding gaps within UK higher education institutions is multifaceted and messy. Various studies have continually highlighted this persistent undergraduate awarding gap (racial equity gap or/ethnicity gap) between White and racially minoritised students. This disparity in educational outcomes, where racially minoritised students compared to their White counterparts are less likely to graduate with good honours degrees, has gained considerable attention from policymakers and scholars. This underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that transcend conventional approaches and boundaries to achieve systemic change. Efforts to close the awarding gap have predominantly focused on decolonising the curriculum, which is vital. Still, it is also crucial to recognise personal tutoring (PT) as a pivotal and often underestimated role in addressing the awarding gap. The PT role, with its potential to provide a joined-up experience for students, promoting student engagement and enabling them to navigate the ever-changing academic landscape, can be a catalyst for racial equity and an antidote to the degree awarding gap. By reviewing the literature, empirical studies, policy frameworks and practical implementations, this paper sheds light on the diverse ways PT can serve as a potent tool for promoting equity

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and inclusion and enhancing equitable outcomes for all. Through a synthesis of existing literature and critical analysis, this scoping review highlights ways PT in higher education is conceptualised nationally and internationally and how it can drive transformational change in higher education when aligned with principles of equity.

KEYWORDS

degree awarding gap, equity, personal tutoring, racially minoritised

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper reviews relevant literature on personal tutoring (PT) in UK higher education institutions. It considers the potential role of PT in contributing to narrowing the awarding gap for racially minoritised students. The paper advocates for action-oriented interventions to address racial disparities.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

This paper elucidates the national and international conceptualisations of PT and underscores its potential to catalyse transformative change in higher education, particularly when aligned with principles of equity. Recognising the pivotal role of PT, the paper highlights its potential in addressing awarding gaps.

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in higher education (HE), including the expansion and diversification of student bodies, call for comprehensive and synergised approaches to personal tutoring (PT) that foster equity, create an enriching learning environment, enhance academic excellence, cultivate cultural competence, address social injustices and meet the evolving needs of a diverse student body (Calabrese et al., 2022; Kraft & Falken, 2021). By embracing these principles, institutions can create inclusive spaces that prepare students for a diverse and interconnected world. This challenges us to reconceptualise the philosophies that inform our praxis to create a PT practice that is validating, affirming and dignifying, where all students feel valued, supported and empowered to succeed (Gabi et al., 2022). This includes providing resources that address diverse student populations' unique challenges and aspirations. The undergraduate awarding gap/racial equity gap is a particular concern as it has implications for students entering graduate-level jobs or progressing to postgraduate courses (Gabi & Gomes, 2022). Across the sector, there is a mixed picture of awareness regarding the racial equity gap and variable institutional efforts to close it. Further, there is a notable lack of research on the potential contribution of personal tutors to closing the awarding gap for racially minoritised undergraduate students. This is exacerbated by the lack of a clear

definition of the role of PT, which creates the need for specificity regarding the purpose of a personal tutor and how the role aligns with the overriding objective of achieving equity and academic success for all (Wakelin, 2021). This paper argues for intentionally reimagining PT practice and visualising its potential to create an epistemically relevant and culturally sustaining practice that aligns principles of equity to support HE institutions (HEIs) to eradicate awarding gaps and improve outcomes for racially minoritised undergraduate students (United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring, 2023). Not all personal tutors have the requisite critical racial consciousness and pastoral skills to facilitate conversations about race and racism (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). A critical race consciousness perspective does not merely focus on race. Still, it considers identity as intersectional, which highlights the multifaceted aspects of a personal tutor's social identity positions, such as ethnicity, class, sex, gender, language and religion, and how these identity positions intersect in the (re)production of relationality and systemic power, privilege and oppression. Although minoritised personal tutors may be racially literate and therefore assumed to be equipped to have conversations about race and racism, Versey et al. (2019) highlighted the need to be conscious of 'appropriated racial oppression' that may manifest through adapting their behaviour and perceiving a subordinate status as deserved natural, and thereby inevitable, negatively impacting the potential role of PT to achieve racial equity.

There is a well-documented degree awarding gap in the United Kingdom, which refers to the disparity in degree outcomes between different demographic groups (Office for Students, 2021). Specifically, this aperture relates to racially minoritised students subsumed by the acronym BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), which perpetuates a monolithic narrative that positions racialisation as a single issue (Carmichael-Murphy & Gabi, 2021). Racially minoritised students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are more likely to be awarded lower grades and achieve lower degree classifications than their peers from other demographic groups (Bolton & Lewis, 2023; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023). The 'wicked problem of the degree awarding gap' has been a longstanding issue in UK HE, with data showing that it has persisted despite various efforts to address it (Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 2022). We propose the potential role of PT as an antidote to addressing the awarding gap, as this role is crucial in providing a joined-up experience for students. In 2021, the Office for Students (OfS), the regulatory body for HE in England, published a report showing that the overall degree awarding gap has narrowed slightly in recent years. Still, significant gaps remain for some demographic groups. For example, the report found that the gap between White students and racially minoritised students receiving first or upper second-class degrees had narrowed from 16.3 percentage points in 2010–11 to 12.8 percentage points in 2018–19. On the other hand, statistics published in November 2022 by the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that of the 359,115 people who graduated in the 2020–21 academic year, 39.4% of White graduates received a first-class degree compared to only 20.0% of Black graduates; 35.6% of the group classified as Mixed Ethnic got a first-class degree. Students from Mixed Ethnic (47.6%) and Black (47.1%) groups were the most likely of all ethnic groups to receive an upper second-class degree. A positive trajectory was found whereby the gap between White and Black graduates getting a first or upper second went down from 26.2 percentage points in 2014–15 to 18.6 percentage points in 2020–21; 47.1% of Black graduates versus a slightly lower 46.3% of White graduates received an upper second-class degree in the 2020–21 academic year (UniversitiesUK, 2022). These figures, however, do not give the whole picture, as they only included UK residents before commencing their degree, and it was highlighted that this figure could only include graduates whose ethnicity was known. These figures exclude unclassified medical degrees, awarded to 12,120 White, 2655 Asian, 660 Black, 610 Mixed Ethnic and 290 other groups.

The degree awarding gap is narrower for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) students than for other subjects, which Advance HE (2020) highlights could

be explained by differing assessments. Canning et al. (2019) found that STEM faculty who believe students' ability to be fixed are less likely to inspire student motivation and more likely to have racial awarding gaps within their classes. The effect of this fixed mindset is believed to be imparted to students via nonverbal body language, conveying the idea that growth and enhancement are not possible (Rattan et al., 2012). It further influences PT approaches, limiting practices that emphasise growth and development (Burnette et al., 2013; Rattan et al., 2012). Though this research predominantly takes place in the United States, these findings can inform the UK context, which this paper focuses on. Indeed, small-scale qualitative research on social work students in England suggests that staff and other students could hold both conscious and unconscious stereotypes of Minority Ethnic students' academic abilities, which translates into lower expectations of them (Bernard et al., 2011, 2014).

The UK government's recent measures to drive change are insufficient. Despite holding universities to account through their Access and Participation Plans (A&PPs) and putting pressure on league tables to track progress in tackling access and attainment disparities (Diversity UK, 2019), there is a lack of in-depth, theory-driven research to understand Minority Ethnic students' experiences (Bunce et al., 2021). In their focus group study, Bunce et al. (2021) found that many Minority Ethnic social work students did not feel that their psychological needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy had been fulfilled. This impacted their well-being and motivation to work towards their final degree result. The exception to this rule was reportedly where individual lecturers had met racially minoritised students' needs or their needs had been met via interaction with peers. This finding could imply that the role of a personal tutor could ameliorate broader institutional shortcomings if it entailed good relational practice that made students feel able and set appropriate challenges they could meet.

With a lot of practice and research interest in the persistent degree awarding gap in the United Kingdom, Advance HE (2020) noted that various approaches are needed to address such entrenched racial inequalities. However, these must focus on addressing institutional barriers, and changing the narrative from an individualistic view of student underachievement to acknowledge that it is institutional culture and pedagogy we must address. They caution that initiatives taken are likely to take time to have a significant impact and that institutions must commit long-term resources to enable actions to be embedded. Further, they emphasise that students should be kept at the centre of any initiatives, involving them in discussions from the outset.

This paper begins by examining the current context of the UK HE degree awarding gap for racially minoritised students and the role of PT in UK HEIs, alongside the United States, the Netherlands and Australia. This is followed by a discussion of the role of PT in achieving racial equity in institutions, as documented in various institutional Race Equality Charters (RECs) and UK A&PPs. The REC was established in 2014 to promote equality, equity, diversity and inclusion (EEDI) in HEIs. To obtain the Bronze or Silver Charter Award, HEIs must assess their progress based on five guiding principles, focusing on addressing race-related inequalities. By analysing publicly available REC application forms, this analysis identifies recurrent themes related to PT and its relationship to the awarding gap. UK universities are also held to account through their A&PPs and the league tables that track institutions' progress to tackle access and attainment disparities.

FRAMEWORKS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM SEEKING TO ADDRESS DISPARITY

Sector-led frameworks such as the REC and A&PPs have been developed within the United Kingdom to address racial disparities in the attainment and awarding gap for racially

minoritised students. The REC mark was introduced in 2014 to acknowledge HEIs' dedication to maintaining the values of EEDI. The REC's primary objective is to enhance the access, participation and achievements of racially minoritised staff and students in HE. When HEIs aspire to attain the Silver or Bronze Charter Award, they must evaluate their progress level based on the following five guiding principles:

1. Inequalities based on race exist throughout all aspects of HEIs.
2. EEDI is crucial for universities to reach their full potential.
3. Sustainable and institutionalised solutions are necessary to bring about significant and desirable changes, moving away from a mindset that focuses on deficits.
4. Racially minoritised staff and students are not a uniform group; therefore, solutions and analyses should consider the diversity within this group.
5. Wherever feasible, an intersectional approach should be taken.

Given the potential impact of the REC on closing the awarding gap for racially minoritised students, a brief qualitative document analysis was conducted to identify recurrent themes in REC application forms publicly available online. The use of document analysis allowed for an examination of the content of the REC application forms, providing insights into the attitudes and practices of HEIs towards PT and its relationship to the awarding gap for racially minoritised students. Currently, the number of HEI members of the REC mark is limited to just 100, with only 38 having achieved a Bronze and one a Silver Award. Among these, about half of HEIs have made their REC application forms available online, and some of these institutions have mentioned PT or similar measures as a strategy to address the awarding gap. The analysis of said application forms identified three prominent themes:

1. The importance of the student voice.
2. The role of PT in tackling the awarding gap for racially minoritised students.
3. Action planning.

All the REC application forms reviewed mentioned the student perspective. It was found that personal tutorials provided a secure environment for students to discuss their racialised experiences in higher education. However, the competence and comfort of personal tutors when dealing with issues of race, prejudice, discrimination and racism differed between faculties and universities, as reported by students. Additionally, racially minoritised students pointed out the lack of representation and role models, and some personal tutors were perceived as unsympathetic and unapproachable. Some students noted a taboo in discussing such topics, further hindering essential conversations. Since the REC's inception in 2016, most HEIs have yet to witness a substantial impact, as evidenced by the absence of discernible shifts in staff representation and the persistent presence of the awarding gap (Advance HE, 2021). Champion and Clark's (2022) study on the impact of the REC in UK HEIs underscores a crucial observation that while established to foster inclusivity and equality within academic institutions, the scheme shows a significant gap in its integration within the operational mechanisms of universities to yield tangible change and progress. The current situation suggests a disconnect between the overarching goals of the scheme and its practical implementation within the institutions.

When examining REC application forms, it was found that discussions of PT were typically positive. HEIs reported that personal tutors were well equipped to support racially minoritised students experiencing various challenges, including those related to finance, academic skills and mental health. These institutions also noted that personal tutors were adept at raising awareness of the lived experiences of racially minoritised students, which enabled the development of individualised support services, fostered a sense of community

and belonging, and decreased dropout rates. Online personal tutorials were also highlighted as an avenue for improving the accessibility and usability of PT services. All REC applications made publicly available online had a comprehensive action plan. Analysis of action points related to PT and the awarding gap revealed that PT was perceived as an effective strategy to address the awarding gap for racially minoritised students. However, students highlighted that not all personal tutors were competent or comfortable in dealing with race, prejudice, discrimination and racism. HEIs recognised the importance of PT and included it in their action plans, which comprised measures such as increased frequency of tutorials, staff training, pedagogical and curriculum changes, targeted support and toolkits for tackling prejudice and discrimination. The analysis emphasises the importance of the student voice and case study research in shaping effective interventions and the need for sustained and institutionalised solutions to address the HE awarding gap for racially minoritised students.

Access and Participation Plans

A review of the regulatory information on A&PPs of a sample of 30 HEIs in England, eight of which hold an Advance HE REC Bronze Award, found that the majority made no specific mention of personal tutors in the awarding gap for racially minoritised students. All except one A&PP referenced work on the awarding gap (though not connected to PT), and most gave details of specific targets to reduce the gap. A few HEIs stated that their gap was not statistically significant. Five HEIs were integrating PT into a whole institutional approach, but not all made a link to the attainment gap for ethnic minority students. One of the five institutions mentioned developing resources to equip staff, including personal tutors, to understand and address attainment gaps and better use data to support early intervention and student success. Another referenced 'bolstering' academic mentoring and creating academic standards for mentors. Two HEIs referenced using or being part of the Raising Awareness, Raising Aspiration project, which began in 2018 and was funded by the OfS, focused on redeveloping PT to tackle attainment gaps in HE. Fee and Access Plans for HEIs in Wales were also reviewed. However, they contain very little detail, so it was impossible to determine if work was underway linking PT to the ethnic minority awarding gap. Some HEIs in England and Wales focus on the awarding gap in other strategies related to race equality and/or equality, diversity and inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This scoping review methodology was based on Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-stage framework to examine what we know about the role of PT in HE and its potential to contribute to closing the awarding gap. To determine the extent, range and nature of literature on this subject, we identified and analysed a range of studies, qualitative and quantitative, as well as non-research materials (Levac et al., 2010). This literature review provides a valuable basis for further empirical research in this field by highlighting what is known and identifying gaps in the existing literature, following the five stages defined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005):

1. Identify the research question.
2. Identify relevant studies.
3. Select studies to be included in the review.
4. Chart the data.
5. Collate, summarise and report the findings.

Identifying the research question

We conducted a preliminary literature search, which helped us determine the parameters of our research question whilst determining if a scoping review had already been conducted on the subject and whether there was sufficient literature to justify our scoping review. To guide the review process, we created a primary research question: How can PT contribute to closing the awarding gap? To enable us to address aspects of the review that related to this initial research question, we created five supporting research questions:

- What is the current context of the degree awarding gap?
- How is PT in HE conceptualised nationally and internationally?
- How is the role of PT framed in the institutional REC and A&PPs?
- How can PT foster student diversity, equity and inclusion, and contribute to closing the racial equity gap?
- What are the implications of the findings for PT policy, practice and future research?

Identifying relevant studies

We identified relevant studies by searching various databases, including Education Search Complete, CINAHL, EBSCO, ASSIA, SCOPUS, Wiley Online Library, WorldCat, Directory of Open Access Journal (DOAJ), Google Scholar and ERIC. After reading the titles, keywords and abstracts, papers were selected to screen for their relevancy in answering the study's primary and supporting research questions.

Selecting studies

An Excel document accessible to all reviewers via Google Drive supported the iterative process of selecting papers for inclusion in the review. Peer-reviewed studies were included, and studies irrelevant to the context were excluded. The research team is diverse and considered studies published in languages other than English. However, no relevant non-English papers were identified. We also analysed publicly available institutional REC applications and A&PPs. This process helped us agree on how to make sense of the findings and their implications for PT policy, practice and future research.

Charting the data

We collaboratively developed the literature extraction form using an Excel document, which was helpful for our calibration exercise. The research team members independently extracted relevant literature from papers to inform discussions. Reviewing the literature, we identified patterns and concepts that aligned with and addressed our research questions. Developing themes was a collaborative effort within our research team, involving ongoing discussions and refinements. This iterative approach allowed us to adapt and modify themes based on the evolving insights gained from the literature. Our constant comparison of findings ensured that the established themes reflected the content of the studies and aligned with our overarching research objectives.

Collating, summarising and reporting the findings

The review team independently analysed a subsection of the pool of literature using thematic analysis. We held a series of consensus-based decision-making meetings to enable us to agree on the final themes for inclusion in the review. These included providing the context of the awarding gap in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia and the United States. These countries were intentionally selected due to their links with the UK Advising and Tutoring Association (UKAT), '... a charitable trust and learned society representing scholars and practitioners of PT and academic advising in the UK higher education sector' (United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring, 2023) and as part of an international network of shared practice in PT and academic advising, though this does not claim to be representative of the global HE sector, for which a wider scale review would be required.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Firstly, this review overviews the awarding gap in the US, Netherlands and Australian HE sectors. These countries all have broadly comparable education systems to the United Kingdom and mature PT/academic advising systems, which meant there was value in investigating their approaches to PT and awarding gaps as part of this review to identify any areas of best practice. It then briefly charts the development of PT in the United Kingdom, explores the contemporary UK context and examines the frameworks guiding it. Lastly, practice implications derived from the extant literature and recommendations for future research directions are extended.

Personal tutoring and the awarding gap: US context

In the United States, students have 'advisors' to support their progress rather than the tutor role, which is common in the United Kingdom. These advisors are often professionals who perform advising as their primary role, rather than academics, who fulfil a tutor role in the United Kingdom (Grey & Lochtie, 2016). The US HE system differs from that of the United Kingdom because students who leave high school can attend community colleges, degree-awarding colleges and universities. Community colleges offer 2-year programmes leading to vocational qualifications or an associate degree. Degree-awarding colleges and universities offer 4-year programmes and postgraduate qualifications (Anon, 2014).

The education system in the United States has long faced the issue of the racial gap, where students of colour tend to perform worse academically than their White peers. This disparity appears in young people from their earliest schooling (Elfman, 2019) and continues through school and into HE. The racial gap in the United States encompasses grade differentials and differences in which qualifications are pursued and what types of institutions are attended. College enrolment rates are improving for young Black and Hispanic adults. However, graduation rates at 4-year degree-awarding institutions are highly related to race. Asian students have the highest rate of first-time graduation (74%), followed by White (64%), Mixed Race (60%), Hispanic (54%), Pacific Islander (51%), Black (40%) and finally American Indian/Alaska Native students (39%) (de Brey et al., 2019).

There has been little scholarship focusing on under-represented students. In a review of the global community for academic advising, *NACADA Journal* from 2004 to 2018, Alvarado and Olson (2020) found a lack of research despite evidence that these groups of students are growing in number (de Brey et al., 2019). Further, although US universities may be divided into public or private institutions or by student groupings such as Historically

Black Colleges or Hispanic Serving Institutions, research rarely divides into comparable groupings to allow for unity and cohesion within the knowledge base. When we look at the broader body of literature, a small body of work tends to pathologise students according to their broader life circumstances. Kalu (2022) finds that Black women are specifically excluded from research, as feminist work concentrates on the lived White experience, while race-based studies focus on the male experience. Camelo and Elliott (2019) identified food insecurity as a factor affecting attainment. They further highlighted that Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be food insecure, and food-insecure students are more likely to have low grades. Britton and Moreno Luna (2022) looked at how new drug laws had adversely affected college enrolment for young men from the Latin community. The laws increased the likelihood of incarceration for drug offences. Other work has considered the risk posed by stereotype threat bias (Baker et al., 2020) and unequal benefits accruing from undertaking higher education (Keo et al., 2019).

Within her recent research, Kopp (2022) used organisational racialisation theory as a lens to examine advising and identifying new ways to address the racial gap in student attainment. She suggests using racialisation theory to understand that HE is racialised, and so begin to question policies and practices at an institutional level to move towards a more socially just space. As part of the institution, advisors can start to identify areas of their practice that are not socially just and should work with students to empower them. This view is echoed by the Lumina Foundation (2023) Gallup report, which points to a lack of research into the experiences of Black learners. It suggests that more flexibility in study routes and clear support options may help keep students enrolled.

Although the intersection of race and education has been well examined in relation to the impact of the teacher's connection to the community of racially minoritised students they support (e.g. Gregory et al., 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014), the bulk of the literature focuses on tutoring for child learners and is located primarily within a US context. Reflexive accounts from male students undertaking doctoral training have offered valuable insights into how 'Implicit bias, discrimination and microaggressions are the poisons that are being added to the soup of human progress' (Smith et al., 2020, p. 85). Smith et al. (2020) give examples, such as being stopped by the police for 'driving while Black' (p. 85) and detail the significance of worrying that you will be 'accidentally shot' due to skin colour. Similarly, the tension between 'battle fatigue' and being a 'strong Black woman' has been unpacked by Corbin et al. (2018). It could be suggested that a White HE personal tutor is less equipped to support a racially minoritised student due to the lack of lived experience and, thus, understanding of the impact that minority stress can have on people (Riggs, 2010; Riggs & Treharne, 2016). Smith et al. (2020) call for further research into the impact of implicit bias and microaggressions on racially minoritised students.

The racial gap in HE in the United States is a complex and persistent issue that requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. By addressing the underlying factors that contribute to this gap, including lack of access to quality education, financial barriers and discrimination/bias, it is possible to work towards a more equitable and inclusive HE system for all students, regardless of race. Addressing these more significant issues will require a sustained and coordinated effort from multiple sectors, including government, business and non-profit organisations.

Personal tutoring and the awarding gap: Netherlands context

There is very little current data on the degree awarding gap in the Netherlands at university level; this is because the recording of migration data of Black and Minority Ethnic students has not been allowed in the Netherlands since 2018 (A. Ezawa, personal communication,

December 2022). Most research in the Netherlands has focused on the educational achievement of minority students in school environments (Colding, 2006, cited in Zorlu, 2013, p. 1). However, Bijl et al. (2005, cited in Zorlu, 2013, p. 1) noted that 'only a small percentage of young people from ethnic minorities continue their education in colleges and universities... [and] a relatively high proportion of ethnic minority students do not finish their course of study compared to Dutch students'.

The advising model in the Netherlands is well developed and more aligned with the US professional model of academic advisors, where professional advisors provide a link between the programme and the student, supporting students' personal development and study success. (LVSA, 2023). There is no specific evidence of research or consideration of the role academic advisors could play in supporting minority students' achievement in the Dutch literature. There is evidence from crucial research into the comparison between minority and majority students (social and academic integration and quality of learning) by Severiens and Wolff (2008), which considers the quality and type of interaction with staff and teachers an essential factor to student success, as well as the benefits of students feeling connected to fellow students and teachers in supporting persistence with their studies.

Personal tutoring and the awarding gap: Australian context

Specific reference to the degree awarding differential or gap for particular student groups was not found in the Australian literature concerning PT or academic advising. Mann (2020) notes that 'academic advising' as a function is undefined in Australian HE and rarely discussed in scholarly literature. She explains that students usually do not have a personal tutor or academic advisor who is a teaching staff member. Academic advice and guidance are provided for students by academic and professional staff in various other roles at specific points in their transition. Some advisors focus on special populations, such as Indigenous and First Nations students (Povey et al., 2023).

The Australian government's Department for Education (2023) Study Assist programme details additional support for tertiary study for specific groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It references that 'Most universities or higher education providers have Indigenous student support centres'. Australia's Partnership Agreement Closing the Gap (2019) includes '... a target to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are supported to participate and succeed in higher education'. Outcome 6 and Target 6 focus on entry to and completion of tertiary qualifications. Wilks et al. (2017) discuss the university-level Indigenous Student Success programme, which the Australian government funds to provide one-to-one and group tutorial study support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Australian universities have implemented the programme differently, and tutors are employed directly. Support is focused mainly on undergraduate students.

Personal tutoring and the awarding gap: UK context

PT has a long history in the UK HE system (Myers, 2013), and much of the literature describes it as a holistic and proactive approach to supporting students. Its role in supporting student achievement was reinforced by the National Audit Office (2002), which recommended that institutions schedule regular student meetings with personal tutors. The general model of provision is that each student has a named personal tutor, who is usually an academic staff member (Walker, 2022). This academic team member usually has PT oversight for several students. It is a resource-intensive service, and most lecturers will have a personal tutor role in their careers (Bassett et al., 2014; Mynott, 2016).

An exploration of the perspectives of students and staff in tackling academic bias suggests that both groups perceive academic bias as a significant contributing factor to the attainment gap, with racially minoritised students reporting experiences of stereotyping, marginalisation and cultural insensitivity (Rana et al., 2022). The importance of recognising the intersectionality of identities in understanding the experiences of racially minoritised students is highlighted, along with the need for targeted interventions that address the unique challenges different groups face (Pownall et al., 2023; Rana et al., 2022). Efforts to tackle academic bias must involve a range of interventions, such as improving diversity among academic staff, providing targeted support to racially minoritised students and addressing cultural biases in assessment practices (Carmichael-Murphy & Gabi, 2021; Rana et al., 2022). There is an urgent need to address the attainment gap, with calls for a holistic approach involving students and staff in developing practical solutions (Lochrie & Hillman, 2023; Rana et al., 2022; Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 2022).

D'Alton-Harrison (2013) focuses on the unconscious biases within the education system and how they contribute to the attainment gap. The author argues that these biases are often based on race, gender and socioeconomic status, and can significantly impact student outcomes. The study finds that addressing biases requires a shift in individual and institutional mindsets and that a more holistic approach is needed to create a fairer and more equitable system. The paper recommends a range of interventions, such as unconscious bias training for staff and students, curriculum development that reflects diverse perspectives and the creation of a more inclusive learning environment. Harrison also emphasises the importance of data collection and analysis to monitor progress and identify areas for improvement. Overall, the paper highlights the urgent need to address the unconscious biases within the education system and the importance of taking a proactive approach to creating a more equitable and inclusive learning environment.

Building on this, Alves (2019) studied the potential role of PT in improving the attainment gap of racially minoritised students. The study finds that PT can potentially enhance the academic outcomes of racially minoritised students by providing targeted support and guidance tailored to their specific needs. The author argues that PT can help address the challenges faced by racially minoritised students, such as a lack of social and cultural capital, and promote a more inclusive learning environment. The paper recommends a range of interventions, such as improving the diversity of personal tutors and providing training to ensure they are equipped to support racially minoritised students effectively. The author also emphasises the importance of engaging racially minoritised students in designing and delivering PT programmes to ensure they are responsive to their needs and experiences. The paper highlights the potential of PT to address the attainment gap of racially minoritised students and calls for greater attention to this approach to promote a more equitable and inclusive HE system.

Supporting this perspective, Wong et al. (2021) present their findings from a study of the experiences of racially minoritised HE students in STEM fields. The study finds that racially minoritised students face various challenges that can impact their academic performance, including feelings of isolation and a lack of support from their peers and academic staff. The paper highlights the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment, responsive to racially minoritised students' unique needs and experiences. The study recommends a range of interventions, such as improving diversity among academic staff and developing targeted support programmes that address the specific challenges racially minoritised students face. The authors also highlight the importance of promoting a culture of inclusivity and respect in STEM fields and engaging with racially minoritised students in designing and delivering interventions. The urgent need to address the experiences of racially minoritised students in STEM fields calls for a more proactive and targeted approach.

Similarly, Akel (2019) examines the role of race in shaping the experiences of racially minoritised HE students. The study finds that racially minoritised students often experience feelings of alienation and exclusion, which can negatively impact their academic performance and mental health. The paper highlights the importance of understanding racially minoritised students' complex and intersectional experiences, including how race intersects with other aspects of identity, such as gender and socioeconomic status. The study recommends a range of interventions, such as providing targeted support and mentoring for racially minoritised students, improving the diversity of academic staff and promoting a more inclusive and respectful learning environment. The author also gives prominence to engaging BME students in designing and delivering interventions to ensure they are responsive to their needs and experiences. The report shows the urgent need to address the experiences of racially minoritised HE students and the role of race in shaping these experiences. They call for a more nuanced approach, responsive to racially minoritised students' complex and intersectional experiences. While some progress has been made in narrowing the degree awarding gap in the United Kingdom, there is still much work to be done to ensure that all students have an equal chance to succeed in HE, regardless of their background.

Shedding light on this issue, Stevenson (2019) examined the relationship between Minority Ethnic and White students' degree attainment and their views of their future selves. The study found that Minority Ethnic students were less likely than their White peers to have a clear vision of their future selves and concluded that this could impact their degree attainment. The author argues that this is due to various factors, including experiences of racism and discrimination, lack of academic representation and cultural expectations. The paper highlights the importance of supporting Minority Ethnic students in developing a strong sense of their future selves to improve their degree outcomes and ensure more significant equity in HE.

More recently, Quyoum et al. (2022) examined the attainment gap in a Russell Group university through a mixed-methods case study. The study finds that racially minoritised students were less likely to achieve high grades than their White counterparts, and this gap persisted even after controlling for factors such as prior attainment and socioeconomic status. The authors identify several factors contributing to the attainment gap, including a lack of cultural capital, institutional racism and unconscious bias, and limited opportunities for engagement with academic staff. The paper highlights the importance of addressing these factors to improve the outcomes of BME students in HE and calls for a range of interventions such as targeted support, increased diversity in academic staff and changes to assessment practices. Zewelde (2022) investigated the relationship between 'race' and academic performance among Black African students in the UK HE system. The study finds that Black African students are more likely to achieve lower grades and not complete their degree programmes than their White counterparts. The author identifies several factors contributing to these disparities, including institutional racism, cultural differences and inadequate support systems.

With 20% of the student population comprising Minority Ethnic students, Advance HE (2020) argues that students will expect HEIs to provide evidence that they are addressing the awarding gap, thus taking racial inequality seriously. A point regarding legacy is further extended; where Minority Ethnic students have not had a positive experience of studying or believe they have not fulfilled their potential, they will be less likely to join academia. With markedly fewer Black academics in UK HEIs (e.g. in social work programmes; Bernard et al., 2011, 2014), and White staff being two and a half times more likely to be awarded professorial progression than Black staff (Advance HE, 2018), the subjugating effect is further perpetuated. Efforts to address these disparities must be rooted in recognising the historical and structural factors underpinning them, and must involve a range of interventions such as targeted support, changes to assessment practices and increased diversity in academic

staff (Advance HE, 2018, 2020; Alves, 2019; Rana et al., 2022). Overall, there is a need for greater attention on the experiences of Black African students in UK HE and calls for urgent action to address the racial disparities in academic outcomes. The papers emphasise the need for targeted support, changes to assessment practices, increased diversity among academic staff and the creation of inclusive learning environments to promote equity and inclusion in HE.

BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS TO UK PERSONAL TUTORING IN ADDRESSING RACIAL GAPS

As stressed in much of the literature, for example, Wakelin (2021), the benefits of having a PT system are increasing engagement, supporting retention/continuation and attainment, and providing a safe place for students to raise issues impeding their academic progress. Its role can be fundamental to achieving successful student outcomes, which is positive for both the student and the institution (Yale, 2019). The relationship between PT and the student can be significant during the transition to university, increasing students' sense of belonging and mattering (Gravett & Winstone, 2022). There are, however, acknowledged challenges with PT, and the literature often cites difficulty in getting a commitment from academic staff to deliver a service that frequently lacks a defined purpose (Bassett et al., 2014). Despite this, the benefits of PT are well documented, and Gravett and Winstone (2022, p. 361) describe it as 'perhaps the most salient of students' relationships with university staff'. A proactive delivery of PT usually offers oversight in monitoring student attainment and working with students who fail to meet their full potential.

Despite PT forming part of institutional student support strategies, there are various provisions and several practice models. Lochtie et al. (2018, p. 2) define PT as 'all activities where academic or professional staff work in partnership with students to provide one-to-one support, advice or guidance, of either an academic or pastoral nature'. There can be a need for more consistency in the delivery of PT across institutions and within different departments in a single institution. The main models used are primarily pastoral, professional and curriculum (Walker, 2018). The professional model sees students supported by specialised services staffed by trained personnel, while the curriculum model involves PT embedded in teaching and learning delivery (Lochtie et al., 2018). The pastoral model endures as the traditional model of PT delivery in the UK HE system. This model sees personal tutors addressing personal and academic issues and is delivered by academic staff members in the same departments as the students (Bassett et al., 2014). The pastoral model is holistic in that it aims to support students with any issue that impedes their academic progress, while providing elements of personal and academic development. It is important to note that PT should be 'part of personal, professional and academic endeavour, and not remedial'; that is, a developmental rather than a deficit model, supporting student retention, progression and success (Gabi & Gomes, 2022). Developmental advising relates to advising as teaching that fosters problem-solving and decision-making skills (Troxel et al., 2022). It is the personal tutor who is frequently called upon to signpost students to other student services, such as student well-being, disability and careers, and it is usually a personal tutor who is called upon to write references for students when they are applying for jobs (Walker, 2022). The student and their personal tutor can form an authentic and supportive relationship that can form the basis of effective teaching and learning, and directly supports the student experience (Walker, 2022). As such, it can be argued that PT is well placed to contribute to closing the awarding gap (Alves, 2019). However, scant literature directly addresses this issue, including how best to support personal tutors in doing this.

While there appears to be little or no literature directly linking PT with work to close the awarding gap, much of the research on PT alludes to increasing diversity in the student population and a need to adapt to the changing demographic of the HE student (Lochtie et al., 2018; Wakelin, 2021; Walker, 2022). There is an acknowledgement in the PT literature that both students and lecturers vary in demographics, including age, gender and ethnicity, and the issues this may cause can be overlooked and underacknowledged (Stuart et al., 2021, p. 89). A significant question concerns who is best placed to be a personal tutor and how much there might be 'tension with the assumption that any personal tutor can work with any tutee and vice versa' (Stuart et al., 2021, p. 89).

With a more diverse student population, a 'one size fits all' model of PT becomes redundant (Grey & Osborne, 2020), and rather than seeing the individual student as a problem or deficit in some way, what becomes important is that systems of PT and institutional culture need to adapt and change. Ferguson and Scruton (2015, p. 45) investigated support mechanisms used by Minority Ethnic students and found that 'minority learners considered families and peers more important than their tutors for support'. This implies that there is work to be done on promoting PT. Stuart et al. (2021) refer to issues of equality and equity, if all students need help understanding PT's role in supporting their academic journey. Ferguson and Scruton (2015, p. 46) suggest that building 'stronger initial relationships with all the learners and explaining the importance of support mechanisms' is crucial in supporting Minority Ethnic students, and perhaps this should be applied to PT.

However, limited literature points to an awareness of how personal tutors can enhance their racial literacy. McGill et al. (2020, p. 135) concluded that the value of PT was 'communicating in a manner that values the diversity of student experiences and backgrounds'. The literature also acknowledges that the provision of PT can be sketchy and that some students can have an abysmal PT experience. Part of the issue is that PT is frequently under-resourced, and academic staff can feel unsupported in their PT role (Stuart et al., 2021). There can be a lack of training provision for PT responsibilities, and this could be a key area to address in equipping personal tutors with the knowledge and skills to support institutional initiatives in closing the degree awarding gap (Alves, 2019). This has been seen in an initiative by the University of Nottingham to raise awareness of the degree awarding gap among personal tutors and included diversity awareness training (Office for Students, 2021). Such initiatives are important in equipping personal tutors with the skills and knowledge needed so that, as McGill et al. (2020, p. 8) note: a 'focus on diversity allows advisors and personal tutors to address inequalities and barriers in higher education'.

Confidence levels in relation to the number of years academics have been in PT practice have been explored in research, with findings showing staff with over 20 years of experience tend to report greater confidence (McFarlane, 2016; Wakelin, 2023). However, many staff did not feel prepared to deal with complex support needs concerning personal and mental health and well-being (McFarlane, 2016; Wakelin, 2023). Tutors reported needing to be an expert in everything (McFarlane, 2016). However, while this small-scale exploratory research helps highlight general concerns relating to confidence, there is a gap in research knowledge, specifically examining confidence in relation to dealing with support issues related to students' experience of racism and its emotional and academic impact.

Personal tutors should be equipped to support feelings of alienation from racially minoritised undergraduate students (Rendon, 1994). Valuing these feelings may be more readily achieved by tutors whose lived experience aligns with their students. Indeed, an examination of White privilege within tutoring has unearthed the reluctance of White tutors to acknowledge that tutoring goes beyond an apolitical, neutral act of initiating students into academic processes and conventions (Melzer, 2019). Such findings from the US context help inform the directions of study the UK knowledge base can take. The impact of a HE personal tutor's ethnicity and the impact of an alignment of personal experience of being racially minoritised

(or lack of alignment of personal experience) has yet to be examined explicitly within the UK context. We argue that a critique of racial equity in the context of PT is essential to the task of reducing the degree awarding gap. Consideration should be given to the advantages of recruiting more significant numbers of racially minoritised personal tutors to support racially minoritised students and to work towards greater representation within higher management structures. Further research will be needed to explore how more equitable recruitment and progression can influence institution-level policymaking that embeds principles of racial equity to reduce awarding gaps at the student level.

This literature review has not highlighted extant research examining unconscious bias, complicity, defensiveness/deflection or the effects of inaction in relation to race, PT and the awarding gap. As such, we emphasise the importance of investigating these areas in future research.

Implications for personal tutoring practice

More work needs to be done to understand better the experiences of racially minoritised students, including a particular focus on understanding how social identities can create intersectional disadvantage. An exploration of targeted interventions is necessary to address the unique challenges different groups face, to investigate which interventions could be helpful at a practical, micro level, such as:

- More diversity of PT staff.
- Increasing the frequency of personal tutorials.
- Increasing emphasis on PT during inductions.

Further information is needed to inform potential staff development activity at an organisational level:

- Developing critical racial consciousness.
- Enhancing PT skills through mentoring and coaching.
- Pedagogical, curriculum and assessment transformation embracing diverse forms of knowing.
- Allowing for flexibility in study routes and culturally sustaining support options to help keep students engaged.
- Personalised, targeted and responsive support.
- Developing toolkits to tackle discrimination and its role in the awarding gap.

At a structural level, there is a need to:

- Address the complex and multifaceted underlying factors that contribute to this gap, including lack of access to quality education, financial barriers and racism.
- Embed academic standards for personal tutors and mentors.
- Raise aspirations—however, this idea requires further examination of both a concept and a potential standard to be translated into action.

Overall, there needs to be a greater engagement of racially minoritised students in designing and delivering PT programmes, which we recommend could be achieved by:

- Co-producing research.
- Conducting case-study research to gain deeper insights into the awarding gap.

- Greater congruence of data capture to allow for comparison and cohesion of research findings to strengthen the knowledge base.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this scoping review have implications for PT practice, policy and future research on efforts to close the undergraduate degree awarding gap. Evidence that racially minoritised students are less likely to benefit from opportunities for postgraduate study (Advance HE, 2020) and entry into employment that White students have access to (Advance HE, 2020; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2018) shows a need for HEIs to address the lack of equity. This review highlights the need for primary research to specifically examine the role that PT may take in reducing the awarding gap, emphasising the urgency of a call to action for tutoring practice. An intentional transformation of PT is needed to align tutoring practice with contemporary principles of equity and racial literacy. For PT to be effective, it must be proactive, inclusive and responsive to diverse student groups' unique needs and experiences. By implementing the recommendations outlined in the literature, PT can contribute significantly to addressing the awarding gap by fostering equity, diversity and inclusion in HE.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this paper as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Specific ethical approval was not required for this scoping review. However, the researchers adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Guidelines for Educational Research.

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