



Raising Awareness of the Ethnicity Degree  
Awarding Gap

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## Foreword by the BAME Ambassador

Students from BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) backgrounds often face unique challenges and barriers in higher education. These challenges are not just academic; they permeate various aspects of university life, from social interactions to mental health, the wider university landscape. The degree awarding gap is a stark reminder of these systemic inequities. This project is close to my heart because I have witnessed first-hand how these disparities can affect one's academic journey and overall university experience.

Despite working hard and striving for excellence, the persistent gap in degree outcomes between BAME students and their white counterparts is still significant. It is not just a statistic; it represents real lives and untapped potential that could significantly contribute to society if given a fair chance.

Working as a BAME Ambassador in the Students' Union has given me a platform to voice these concerns and work towards meaningful change. The research into the DAG at Hallam has revealed significant gaps in awareness and understanding among students and staff alike. Raising awareness of the DAG is crucial because it is the first step towards addressing and ultimately closing this gap. It is not just about recognizing that a problem exists; it is about understanding the systemic factors that contribute to it and actively working to dismantle them. I believe that raising awareness should be a collaborative effort between the University and the Students' Union, using sensitive and supportive approaches.

By embedding anti-racism principles and fostering an inclusive environment, we can create a space where every student, regardless of their background, can achieve their full academic potential. This is not just an institutional responsibility; it is a moral imperative.

Together, we can make a difference, and it starts with awareness, understanding, and action.

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**HSU BAME Ambassador, 2023-2024**

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## Introduction

Students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds continue to be impacted negatively in UK Higher Education, from admissions into universities to microaggressions in teaching and learning spaces, and most prominently in degree outcomes (see Arday and Mirza, 2018 and Bhambra et al., 2018). According to Sheffield Hallam University, the ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG) is:

“the difference between the percentage of white UK students awarded a first-class or 2:1 degree (what is known as a ‘good honours degree’) and the percentage of ethnically minoritised UK students awarded a first-class or 2:1 degree” (SHU, 2024a).

Attempts to ‘close’ the gaps in attainment between ethnic minority students and their white counterparts became a key priority of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) nationally, with the Office for Students advocating for a new approach to regulate access and participation within HE (OfS, 2018; UUK and NUS, 2019). At SHU, the EDAG is predominantly wide compared with other HEIs. For those graduating in the academic year 2021/22, the difference between white and BAME students achieving a Good Honours degree at Sheffield Hallam was 15.3%, compared with 8.2% as the average across the HE sector (SHU, 2024b).

As part of an ongoing commitment to equality and social justice, Hallam Students' Union is in the process of adopting an Anti-Racist SU manifesto (HSU, 2024), a central part of this Anti-Racist manifesto is raising awareness of the EDAG, so that combative efforts can be made.

## Executive Summary

- Three quarters of respondents do not know what the EDAG is, and some of those that are aware of the concept of the EDAG do not know it has a name, or do not know the wide-reaching implications.
- According to the Student Representatives, raising awareness of the EDAG is essential to better understand how to close it, but the techniques of raising awareness should be nuanced. The Representation system should be central to the dissemination of this information, as students would feel more comfortable learning about EDAG from Department Reps.
- 22% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that SHU has support staff that they identify with, which increases to over a quarter (25%) when Home-based BAME students are considered. Results reflect a high level of ambivalence across the Home-based BAME population about whether they feel they are represented in the university among support services or other administrative staff.
- Student Representatives agree raising awareness should be a joint University-Union approach, utilising social media to make information accessible and easy-to-understand. However, sensitivity is required, as the EDAG is a complex problem with profound real-world consequences for minoritised students.

## Recommendations

- A support-based approach to raising awareness, which sees the EDAG as a complex, multifaceted issue which can cause distress, should be employed by Sheffield Hallam.
- Strategies at raising awareness of the EDAG should be rooted in a commitment to principles of equality, diversity, inclusion, and more specifically anti-racism.
- Specialist EDAG training for academic and support staff, as well as Student Representatives, so that specific information can be disseminated in top-down flows.
- This multi-level strategy embeds closing the EDAG as a commitment to social justice within Hallam's organisational culture, rather than as a sectorial imperative.

## Methodology

This project utilised a mixed-methods research design, comprising of separate quantitative and qualitative stages of data collection and combining these for a

singular analysis. This research project was undeniably inspired by the intriguing work of former BAME Ambassadors.

The first stage of data collection utilised the HSU's three-wave pulse survey 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' (HHAWD) which assesses students' levels of satisfaction with services and support from SHU and HSU. The third wave of HHAWD was open between 6<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> May 2024 and bespoke questions were included about students' awareness of the EDAG (see Appendix A). This wave welcomed 1186 responses. To gauge whether there had been a shift in awareness about the EDAG among the student body, data from the project by 2021/22 BAME Ambassador Zhané Murrell-Smith were considered.

For the second stage of the project, a workshop was hosted at the SU to invite student representatives to discuss the EDAG and what can be done to raise awareness of it appropriately (see Appendix B). The workshop took place in May 2024 and invited Department Representatives. 4 Department Reps attended the workshop.

## Findings

### Part 1: HHAWD survey data

In 2022, just over 67% of respondents (n=391) were not aware of the EDAG, whilst 12% were not sure of it (Murrell-Smith, 2022). In the HHAWD Wave 3 data, the question was not a 'yes/no/don't know' question like previously. The question was adapted to understand the complexities and nuances of being aware. Despite the questions not being identical in form, there are certain interesting trends and comparisons that can be drawn between the two sets of data.

When asked if they were aware of the EDAG, 75% of respondents to the HHAWD Wave 3 survey (n=1186) answered that they had not heard of it (see Figure 1 for a visualisation of this). An extra 9% had heard of it but were unsure of what the EDAG is, whereas 16% of respondents were either somewhat or very aware of the EDAG.

### 'Are you aware of the Ethnic Degree Awarding Gap?'



- I am very aware of the Ethnic Degree Awarding Gap at Sheffield Hallam University
- I am somewhat aware of the Ethnic Degree Awarding Gap, but don't know how it applies to Sheffield Hallam
- I have heard of the Ethnic Degree Awarding Gap, but I am not sure what it is
- I have not heard of the Ethnic Degree Awarding Gap

Figure 1: Awareness of the EDAG by all respondents (n=1186).

At a first glance, it may be easy to assume that awareness of the EDAG has declined over the past two years among the student population. Without a doubt it is worth noting that the 2022 study had a lower response rate, with 391 respondents compared with 1186 in the Wave 3 data.

Additionally, about 52% of respondents identified as BAME in the 2022 study (Murrell-Smith, 2022), compared with less than 38% of respondents from the Wave 3 survey.

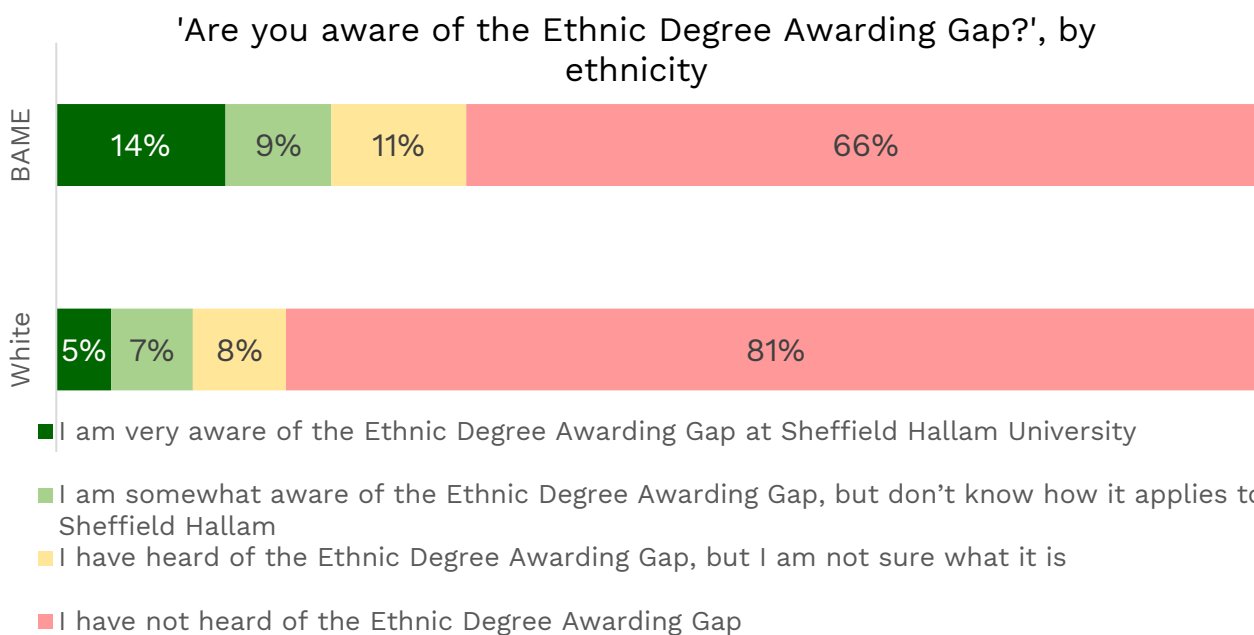
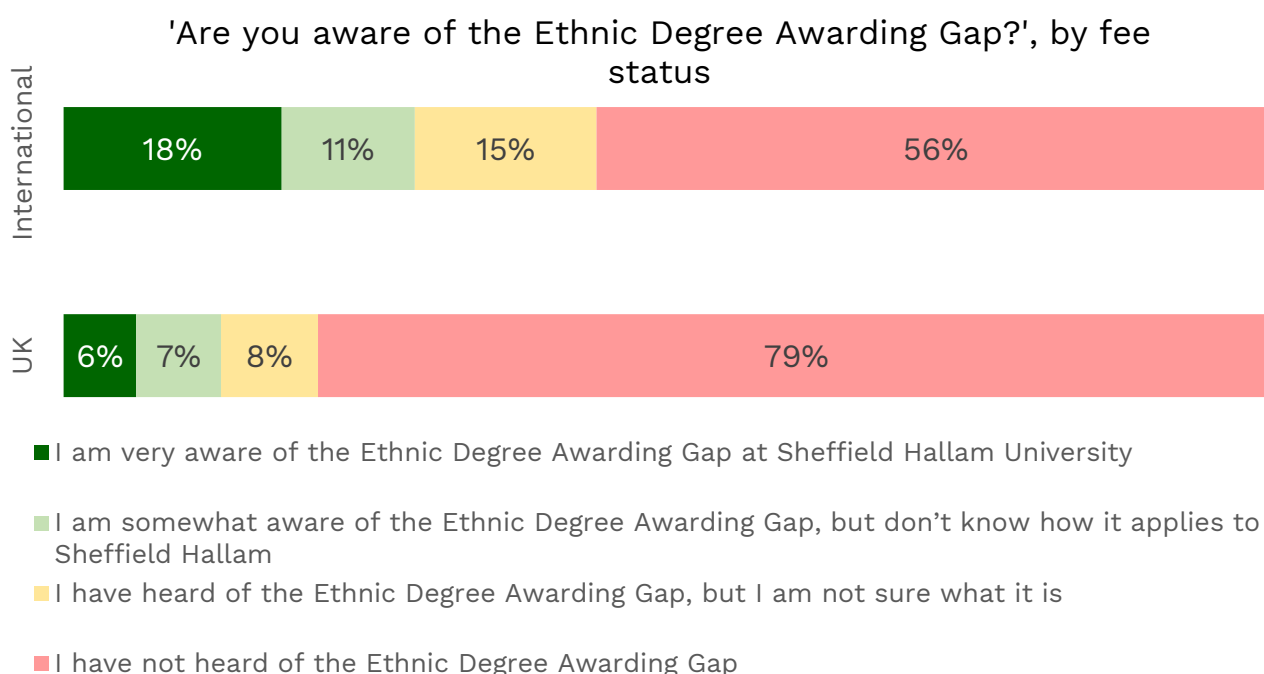


Figure 2: Awareness of the EDAG by ethnicity of respondents (n=1186).

When these results for awareness for Wave 3 were analysed based on ethnicity (see Figure 2) there was a considerable difference across all the levels of awareness between BAME and white respondents. 12% of white respondents were aware (very or somewhat) of the EDAG, compared with 23% of their BAME counterparts. As well, 66% of BAME respondents had not heard of the EDAG compared with 81% of white respondents.

Perhaps even more of a difference for awareness is when respondent fee status is analysed. As visualised in Figure 3, 29% of international student respondents are very or somewhat aware of the EDAG compared with only 13% of their UK counterparts. For international students too, the rate of not having heard about the EDAG is at 56%, which is as well a very significant trend.

Respondents were asked as well to state to what extent they believe that SHU effectively fosters a diverse environment where all students feel safe and included across various aspects of university life. This question wording and structure choice was mainly to gauge respondents' feelings on a set of issues that the academic literature has distinguished are the key factors in the EDAG.

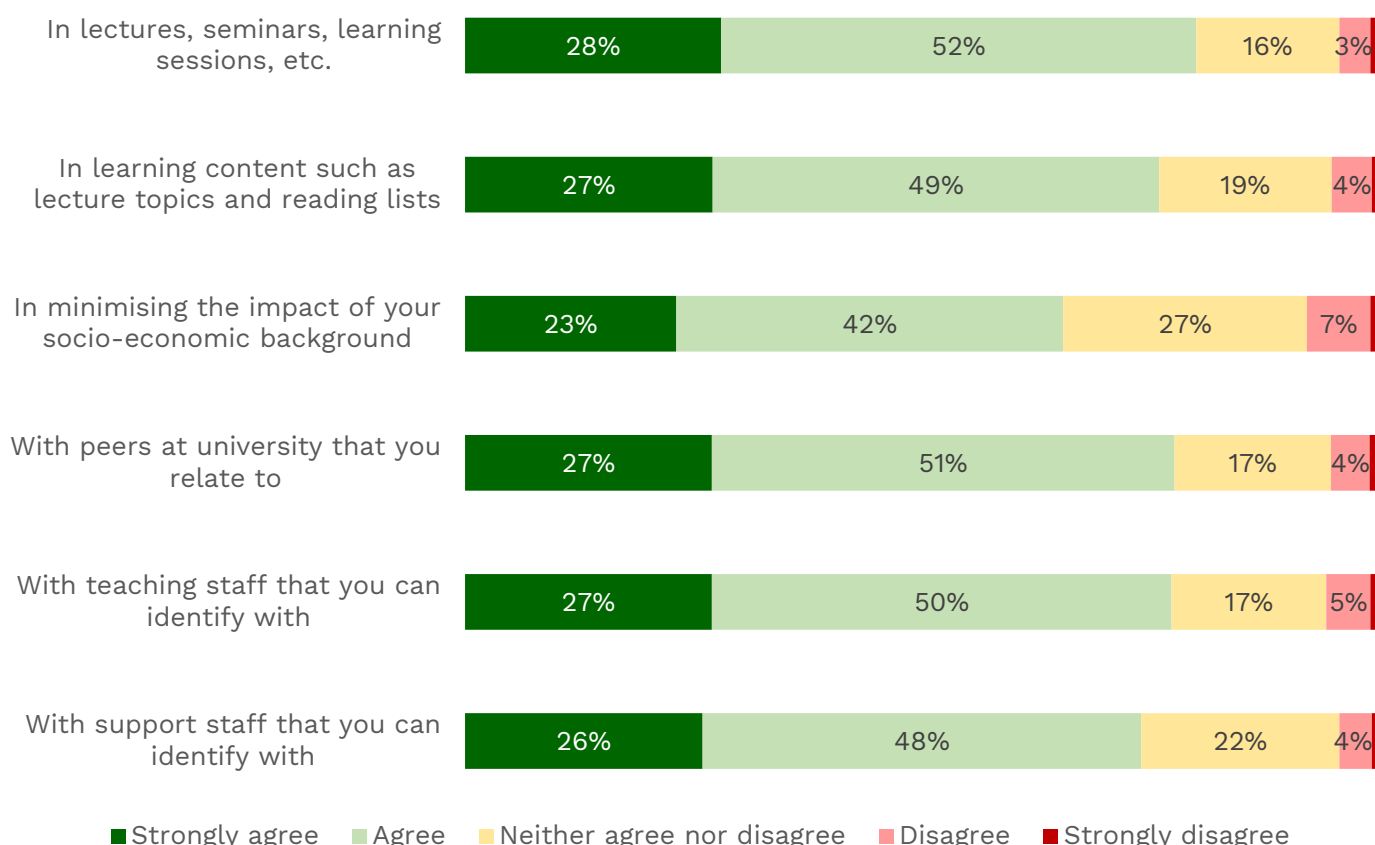


*Figure 3: Awareness of the EDAG by fee status of respondents (n=1186).*

Interestingly across all respondents, lectures, seminars, or learning sessions were the aspect most agreed to be safe and inclusive for all students at SHU, with 80% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing (see Figure 4). After lectures and seminars, 77% of respondents agreed that they 'related' to their university peers.

8% of respondents felt that SHU doesn't effectively minimise the impact of students' socioeconomic backgrounds, which was the area with the highest level of disagreement.

'Do you believe that Sheffield Hallam University has effectively fostered a diverse environment where all students feel safe and included, in the following areas?'



*Figure 4: Extents to which respondents believe SHU makes all feel safe and included across various areas (n=1186).*

## Part 2: EDAG Workshop

Student department reps were recruited via an email as participants. The rationale for this choice was to include students who were nuanced in their knowledge of SHU and HSU structures, policies, and processes.

None of the participants knew what the EDAG was. Participants were aware that there were disparities in degree outcome but in terms of the concept and the severity, there was little or no awareness.



“Yes, like of course you know different people aren’t going to be treated the same. But I didn’t know there was a name.”

When asked if they believed that Sheffield Hallam University does enough to raise awareness of the EDAG, the participants unanimously disagreed.

The participants thought that within their roles as department reps that awareness of the EDAG was fundamental. When asked if they think there should be EDAG-related training for Department Reps in future years, the participants all agreed that this would be a good decision.

“I think for us as Department Reps that [EDAG] is really good to know. We might see these issues in our departments and we can inform staff as well.”

Participants were asked to in two groups develop strategies to address and increase awareness of the EDAG among Hallam students. One group were Hallam Students’ Union (Figure 5), and the other group was Sheffield Hallam University (Figure 6). Their ideas were expressed in mindmaps and are shown below.

Participants were explicit in their response that any strategy to raise awareness should be a joint effort of both SHU and HSU. Some of the participants spoke about the importance of BAME students being socially included during their time at university. This emphasis on a joint University-Union effort for awareness strategies going forward highlights that the EDAG is as much a social inclusion problem as it is an academic success one.

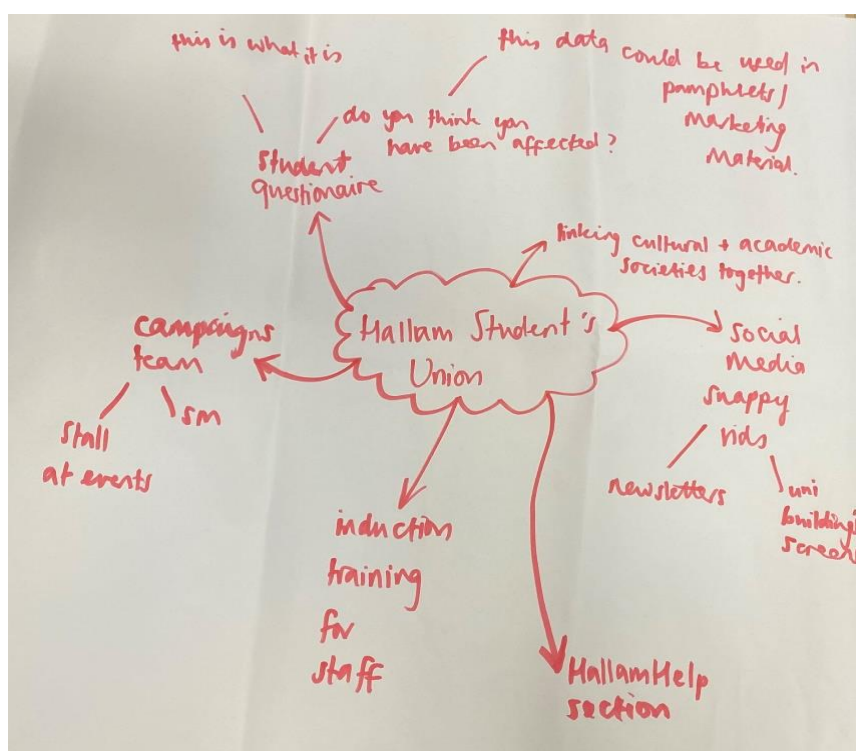


Figure 5: A mindmap with ideas of strategies for HSU for raising awareness of the EDAG, completed by participants.

The participants throughout the discussion came to the conclusion that strategies to raise awareness of the EDAG should be nuanced. The EDAG was identified as an emotion-laden concept and thus should be handled with sensitivity.

Earlier, when discussing their SHU/HSU strategies (see Figures 5 and 6), one of the participants discussed dissemination of information about the EDAG through specific social media chains:

“Social media is so important too. Just having something that students can look at to learn about this from”.

However later, this same participant reflected on their perspective:

“Maybe that means social media isn’t necessarily the best thing... like if you saw this while you were on your own at home then it could be quite upsetting”.

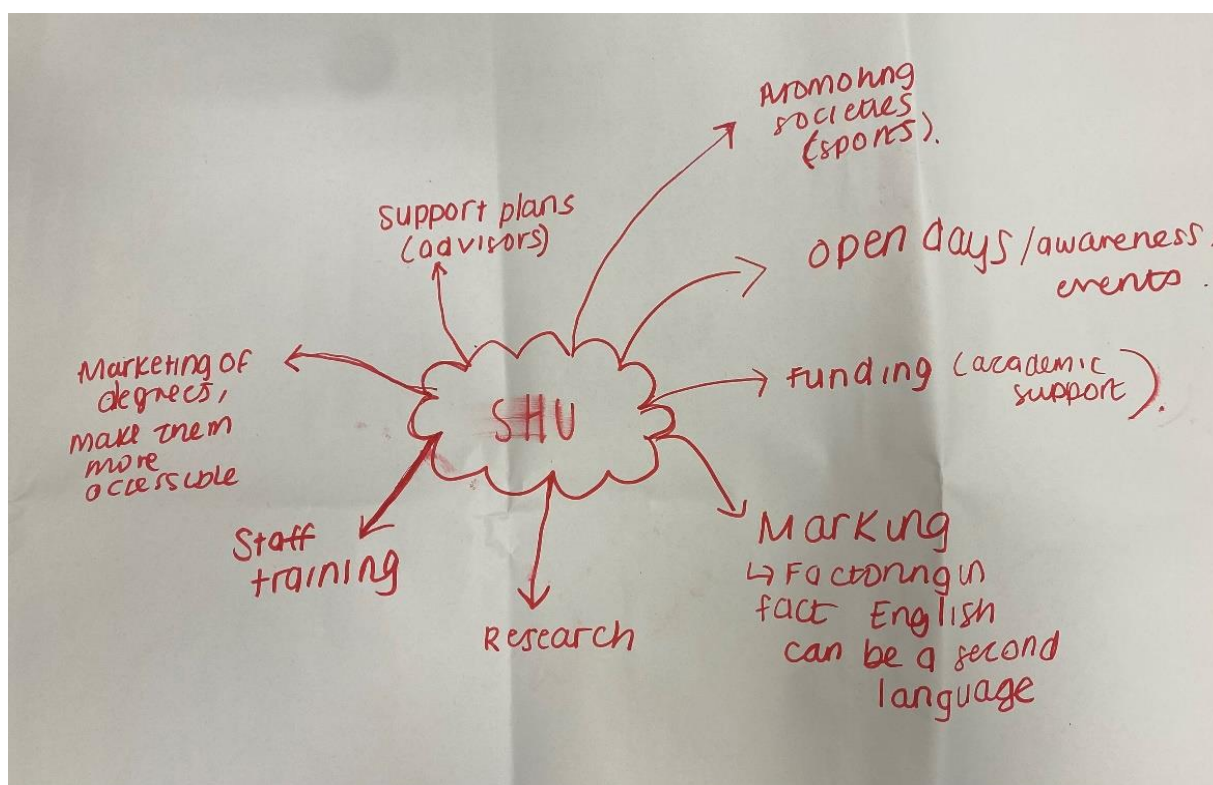


Figure 6: A mindmap with ideas of strategies for SHU for raising awareness of the EDAG, completed by participants.

To the participants, the element of support and taking a sensitive approach to raising awareness was crucial. When asked if there were any ways which were more effective than others in raising awareness, one of the participants responded:

“Definitely if you are talking to students and informing them, then put that support in there. Rather than just being like “this is what it is” but not giving any kind of idea how to support them. Because they don’t want to be singled out and they need to be reassured as well”.

Participants agreed that staff training on strategies of closing the EDAG would be extremely effective. They believe their role as Department Reps could prove beneficial in disseminating information about the EDAG from the top-down, from 'senior' levels to representatives to students themselves.

## Conclusion

Awareness of the EDAG has proven to be an area of importance for Hallam to address and close the gaps, however pinning down what exactly 'awareness' is remains a blurry problem. Information about the EDAG should be readily available and disseminated in channels with the aid of student representatives, through whom students would feel more supported and comfortable. It is hoped these findings sow the seeds for further research and intervention into the multidimensional problem of the EDAG.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Bespoke Questions included in the ‘Hallam, How Are We Doing?’ Q-set

#### **“Are you aware of the Ethnic Degree Awarding Gap?”**

*Please select the one option that most describes your level of awareness.*

I am very aware of the Ethnic Degree Awarding Gap at Sheffield Hallam University.	<b>1</b>
I am somewhat aware of the Ethnic Degree Awarding Gap, but don't how it applies to Sheffield Hallam.	<b>2</b>
I have heard of the Ethnic Degree Awarding Gap, but I am not sure what it is.	<b>3</b>
I have not heard of the Ethnic Degree Awarding Gap.	<b>4</b>

#### **“Do you believe that Sheffield Hallam University has effectively fostered a diverse environment where all students feel safe and included, in the following areas?”**

With support staff that you can identify with	<b>1</b>
With teaching staff that you can identify with	<b>2</b>
With peers at university that you relate to	<b>3</b>
In minimising the impact of your socio-economic background	<b>4</b>
In learning content such as lecture topics and reading lists	<b>5</b>

In lectures, seminars, learning sessions, etc.

**6**

Strongly agree	<b>1</b>
Agree	<b>2</b>
Neither agree nor disagree	<b>3</b>
Disagree	<b>4</b>
Strongly disagree	<b>5</b>

## Appendix B – EDAG Workshop ‘script’

### Timings:

- **Introduction: 5 mins**
- **Topic 1: 12 mins**
- **Topic 2: 15-17 mins**
- **Topic 3: 20 mins**

**~About 6 mins leeway~**

### Introduction: (5 mins)

Introduce ourselves, the project, and the workshop.

### **TOPIC 1: WHAT IS THE DEGREE AWARDING GAP?** (12 mins)

#### Mini-group activity #1 (5 mins)

On the board there are a few demographic factors. In small groups please rank these in how big of an influence you think each are on...

Getting a first- or upper second-class degree.

Think about your own experiences at Sheffield Hallam as well.

#### Group discussion and comparison of answers (7 mins)

What is the Degree Awarding Gap?

What affects it?

### **TOPIC 2: HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW ABOUT DAG?** (15-17 mins all group discussion)

Were you aware of the DAG before coming to SHU?

Do Hallam do enough to inform about the DAG?

What are the benefits of students being aware of the DAG?

Is it important to learn what causes DAG?

**TOPIC 3: HOW CAN WE MOVE FORWARD?** (15-20 mins)

Mini-group activity #2 (5-10 mins)

Split the room into 2 groups, ask them to develop strategies (1 of them Sheffield Hallam University, 1 of them Hallam Students' Union) to raise awareness of the DAG and to ensure equality of outcome.

Group discussion of 'strategies' (10 mins)

What is the best way? Are there any ways that aren't effective in raising awareness?

Wider awareness? Is there enough knowledge, recognition, and awareness of the DAG?

Why is it not addressed enough before coming to university?

Narrower awareness? Will students knowing about disadvantage help enough?