

## MINORITY STUDENTS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

A number of groups of students could be considered to form a minority in higher education in the United Kingdom. This includes, among others, those who are the ‘first in their family’ to attend university, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, transgender and disabled students. However, the term *minority students* is most commonly used, within the context of higher education research and policy, to refer to students from black and minority ethnic (BME) or non-white backgrounds.

This entry focuses on patterns in student experience in relation to BME students that are UK domiciled. It begins with a brief description of who counts as BME and then highlights some persistent disparities in relation to access, retention and graduate outcomes for BME students when compared with white students. The entry then considers some of the measures that are being taken by higher education providers to address ethnic and racial disparities the UK and concludes with reference to student-led campaigns which question the extent to which measures focused on increasing access to, and representation within, higher education for BME students can genuinely tackle persistent inequalities.

### Defining BME

The latest UK Census, published in 2011, recorded just under 13 % of people as belonging to a Black, Asian, Mixed or Other ethnic group. That BME students represented around 29 % of all entrants to full-time degrees in 2015/2016 is seen as a mark of progress. However, as highlighted in the following section, this picture of progress is not so straightforward.

Data on ethnicity in higher education is collected around the following categories: White, Black, Asian, Chinese, Mixed and Other. However, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the main data collecting bodies, also use more specific codes for the UK domiciled students. This enables statistics to be analysed for the following ethnic groups: White; Black-Caribbean; Black-African; Other Black background; Indian; Pakistani; Bangladeshi; Chinese; Mixed-Black; Mixed-Asian; Other mixed background and Other ethnic background. Some data sets also include Arab students.

Researchers and policymakers have generally found the term *black and minority ethnic* to be useful in helping to trace patterns of inequality between white and non-white students. At the same time, there is recognition that the term can be limited because it masks differences within the category of BME. Variations exist in relation to access, progression and outcomes among the ethnic groups which make up the BME category. For example, students from Chinese and Indian backgrounds tend to have higher educational outcomes than students from Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black-Caribbean backgrounds. Students from Chinese and Indian backgrounds are also

less likely to exit their degree programmes within the first year compared to other BME students. There are differences according to socioeconomic status, gender, age, ethnicity and other factors within the BME category which means that the BME students are not a homogenous group. 'Gypsy and Traveller' students fall outside of the BME category but they also face considerable discrimination within the UK education system on the basis on race and ethnicity. Finally, the situation of Muslim students also complicates the category of BME because while the majority of Britain's 2.5 million Muslims are of Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent, there are also African, Arab and white Muslims. Within higher education, there has been increasing scrutiny of Muslim students because of the 'Prevent' counter-terrorism duty. The Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 introduced a new statutory duty for higher education institutions to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.

### **Ethnic Disparities in UK Higher Education**

Research and policy evidence reveal persistent disparities in relation to the higher education of UK domiciled BME students. The number of BME students applying to and attending UK universities has risen considerably over the last 30 years. According to HESA, which publishes annual statistical records in relation to staff and student in higher education in the United Kingdom, there was a 34 % rise in the number of BME students between 2010/2011 and 2015/2016. The rise for white students was 5.5 % over the same period.

Despite the increased take-up of university places by BME students, records show that there are variations in the types of institutions that white and BME students attend. BME students are predominantly concentrated in post-92 institutions, which are former polytechnics and colleges of higher education that were granted university charters in 1992 as part of the expansion of higher education. BME students are less likely to secure places in elite institutions such as the Russell Group of universities (the 24 self-selecting UK universities that describe themselves as 'world-class, and 'research -intensive') which are known to be better resourced and prestigious due to their reputation for research and academic achievement. This is the case even when BME students have similar or the same entry grades as white students.

One explanation for the lower rate of acceptance of BME students to elite institutions is 'self-exclusion'. However, Michael Shiner, Tariq Modood and Philip Noden, in research commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation and published in 2014, challenge this notion. They did find that some BME students, for example, Black-Caribbean, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi groups were less likely to target elite universities. However, once the variables related to candidates' socio-economic status, their schooling and whether they applied only to local institutions were taken into account, there was little evidence that BME candidates were reluctant or unwilling to apply to elite institutions. Shiner and colleagues found that candidates from most BME groups were more, rather than less, likely than their white British counterparts to apply to elite institutions. Another explanation put forward by Oxford University for the lower proportion of offers to BME students is that BME students tend to apply for more competitive degree programmes such as Medicine and Law. However, rates of acceptance are still lower for

BME students on these courses when compared to white students who have similar entry grades. This raises questions about bias in the university admission processes.

BME students are also more likely to leave university without completing their degrees and to achieve lower outcomes, on average, than white students with similar entry grades. This can have a consequences in terms of the types of employment that these students are able to secure. Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, in particular, experience significant disadvantages in terms of graduate outcomes.

The 'BME attainment gap' refers to the difference between the proportion of White UK-domiciled students who are awarded a 'good degree' – a first (typically 70% or above) or 2:1 (typically in the 60-69% mark range) and the proportion of UK-domiciled BME students who are awarded the same degrees. The attainment gap has been found to exist at all levels of prior attainment for BME students so that the gap is as large for high-performing Indian graduates as it is for high-performing Black or Chinese graduates. This means that the gap cannot be explained by factors such as schooling or 'prior attainment'. It exists regardless of entry qualifications, subject choice, degree outcomes and other factors such as socioeconomic status and gender. Further, the gap persists even into the labour market for BME students. Data included within a briefing published by the Office for Students (OFS) in 2019, showed that Black African students who graduated in 2010-2011 were 5.9 % less likely to be employed or in further schooling three years after graduating than white students. Since the disparities cannot be explained by common variables, it would suggest that other factors need to be examined such as institutional structures and curriculum.

### **Measures Taken to Address Ethnic Disparities**

Higher education providers are employing a number of measures to address persistent ethnic disparities. Access and Participation Plans are one such tool. These plans set out how providers will improve equality of opportunity for under-represented groups to access and succeed in higher education. They include the provider's ambitions for change, as well as the targets, actions and investments required to deliver the plan. The plans are monitored by the OFS which acts as the regulator and competition authority for the higher education sector in England.

Another measure to address racial and ethnic inequalities in higher education is the Race Equality Charter (REC). Developed by the Equalities Challenge Unit, which is now part of Advance Higher Education (an agency formed in 2018 from the merger of Equality Challenge Unit, the Higher Education Academy and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education), the REC offers a framework through which higher education institutions can work improve the representation, progression and success of minority ethnic staff and students within higher education. Providers set up self-assessment teams in order to identify the institutional and cultural barriers that stand in the way of minority ethnic staff and students and to develop initiatives for action. Institutions can apply for a Bronze or Silver REC award, depending on their level of progress. Some of the key principles underlying the REC

are that racism is an everyday feature of UK society and is significant in higher education, While not necessarily overt, racial inequalities are present in everyday situations, processes and behaviours. Solutions developed by providers need to avoid a deficit model which amounts to blaming individual BME students and staff for the inequalities found. The REC operates from the assumption that BME staff and students are not a homogenous group and that analysis needs to be focused on the intersection of multiple identities and inequalities.

While measures such as Access Plans and the REC commit providers to institutional and cultural change, critics have argued that these types of provisions for solutions, in reality, often mean tinkering around the edges of an institutionally racist higher education system. Solutions focused on increasing access and numerical representation without necessary addressing the core issue of historical and endemic racism may very well take a long time to achieve change. These ‘top-down’ measures require ‘buy-in’ from senior management teams, which in most institutions remain entirely white.

The decolonise education movement, a ‘bottom-up’ student-led movement, takes an alternative approach in calling for the institutional structures of higher education to be dismantled. Inspired by the South African Rhodes Must Fall campaign which was directed toward the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in 2015, the British decolonise movement is centred on the hidden and formal curriculum of education. Student-led campaigns such as ‘Why isn’t my Professor Black?’ and ‘Why is my Curriculum White?’ which in the United Kingdom began their life at University College London, have sparked national debate about the need to decolonise the university. The campaigns have drawn attention to the Eurocentrism that lies at the heart of the British education system and therefore underpins the curriculum and recruitment processes within universities: Despite ongoing diversity programmes, there are only 30 Black British women professors in UK higher education, and fewer than 20 from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, while the curriculum continues to privilege white Western-centric authors, texts and knowledge. The campaigns have exposed how resistant to change many universities continue to be, while also drawing attention to the need to challenge the hostile and toxic environment that higher education has become for many Muslim and home and overseas BME students who are daily subjected to intense monitoring and scrutiny. By focusing on attention on UK higher education institutions as part of the problem, decolonise campaigns question the extent to which top-down institutionally led solutions can eradicate ethnic disparities in higher education.

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See also

Access to Higher Education, Diversity Committees, Race in Higher Education, Racism and Decolonising HE , Russell Group, Poverty and Student Access to Higher Education,

## FURTHER READINGS

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