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WHY THE DIFFERENCE? A CLOSER LOOK AT HIGHER EDUCATION MINORITY ETHNIC STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

*Helen Connor, Claire Tyers (IES)
Tariq Modood (University of Bristol) and Jim Hillage (IES)*

Introduction

This report is about the influences on participation in higher education (HE) of minority ethnic students, and their achievements and transitions to the labour market. It presents findings from a multi-stranded study covering flows into, through, and out of undergraduate study in England. Much of the analysis focuses on differences between individual minority ethnic groups (using the standard Census ethnicity categories, and covering UK-domiciled students only). The principal elements of the study were: a review of recent research literature, secondary analysis of national statistics, and new research involving surveys of, and interviews with, a number of target groups — potential, current and past students, parents, employers and others.

Key Findings

- **Minority ethnic people are more likely to take HE qualifications than were White people.** The higher education initial participation rate (HEIPR) for minority ethnic groups in aggregate is considerably higher than the average, and they represent a higher proportion of the graduate output, compared with their share of the working population.
- **However, the minority ethnic population does not participate in HE in a uniform way.** The individual minority ethnic group participation rates vary considerably overall, and their representation varies between universities, subjects, geographic regions, and courses. Also, **the minority ethnic undergraduate student body is highly heterogeneous.**
- **A range of factors affect HE entry, but aspirations and expectations of the value of, and benefits from, higher qualifications are a more significant positive 'driver' for minority ethnic than for White students, especially most Asian groups.** This combines with greater **parental and family influence** to play a more significant role in encouraging HE participation among minority ethnic than White young people, and also in choices of what and where to study in HE.
- **Although their HE initial participation rates are higher, on average all minority ethnic groups do not do as well in degree performance as White students.**
- **Significantly, minority ethnic groups also do less well in the labour market, initially at least, than White graduates.** They face more problems securing their preferred choice of jobs or careers. They are **more likely to go on from degrees to further study or training.**

High participation

Minority ethnic groups comprise a higher share of the undergraduate population in England (16 per cent) than of the working population (nine per cent). Their HEIPRs vary from 39 to over 70 per cent, and all minority ethnic groups have a higher HEIPR than the White group (38 per cent). The average minority ethnic HEIPR is 56 per cent compared with an overall average (known ethnicity) of 40 per cent. Minority ethnic specific participation rates need to be treated with caution, as there are a number of uncertainties with the data used in their calculation that require further investigation. When gender is taken into account, other differences emerge, but only the female Bangladeshi figure drops below the White figures (male and female).

Very uneven distribution

Minority ethnic students are clustered at certain institutions, mostly the post-92 universities in London. Their representation among undergraduates at many universities is low (under ten per cent at around half of them) and mostly low in pre-92 universities. This pattern relates to locality (with a high representation in London as many students stay locally), and differences between universities in their entry requirements and range of courses and subjects on offer. There is also some racial bias in admissions likely at some universities.

There is also a skewed subject distribution, *eg* twice as high a minority ethnic representation in computer science, law and medicine degrees as the average, but much lower in education and humanities. There are also differences by both ethnicity and gender in subjects and qualifications studied.

Different trajectories

Minority ethnic young people are equally as likely as White people to gain entry qualifications to go to university by age 19 (which contrasts with the situation at 16, at GCSE level) but the type of highest qualification held and their schooling post-16 vary significantly. Minority ethnic degree entrants have lower entry qualifications on average, fewer take the traditional 'A' level route, and more are likely to come into HE from FE than are White entrants. These overall results mask divergences between groups:

- Indian and Chinese groups are the most likely to take the traditional 'A' level highway' to HE and are better qualified as HE entrants.
- Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups do not gain as high 'A' level qualifications as do Indian or Chinese, but perform better than Black students.
- Black groups, particularly Black Caribbean, are generally older on entry, with a wider range of entry qualifications than the average.

These are generalisations, but serve to illustrate the distinct trajectories prior to HE, which influence HE participation levels and patterns, and can have an effect on subsequent progress and graduate outcomes.

Other factors of influence

Other key influencing factors on HE entry and choice of HE study are:

- influence of parents and families
- expectations on economic gain and careers, and
- concerns about student finance.

The effect of family social background, specifically parental socio-economic status and parental experience of HE, is also evident.

An important conclusion from the research is that the influence of ethnicity on decisions about HE entry is powerful, but not equally so for all minority ethnic groups. Being a member of a particular ethnic group is one of a variety of factors affecting decision-making about going on to HE, some of which interact with each other. In particular, it is likely that strong positive parental support/commitment to education mitigates some negative effects, such as being in a lower socio-economic class. This would explain why minority ethnic groups disproportionately enter full-time degree courses, despite having lower than average class profiles.

Progression

Minority ethnic students are more likely to leave degree courses early than White students, and Black more likely than Asians. Allowing for the main

factors that cause early leaving (eg entry qualification and entry route) and also controlling for other differences (like subject, gender, age), the apparent difference reduces considerably.

While there was no satisfactory reason found for differences, other than the likely continuation of parental/family positive influence on young entrants, there were several issues, found to be of more concern to some minority ethnic than White students, that may contribute to early leaving. These include staff support, feelings of isolation, and cultural diversity.

Degree performance

Both overall and by specific group, fewer minority ethnic students gain first or upper second class degrees than White students. In particular, Black students are much more likely to get a third or lower class degree. However, smaller differences exist between White and some minority ethnic groups (eg Chinese) in first class degree attainment.

The degree performance gap reduces when controls for other background variables are brought in (mainly entry qualification and previous schooling) but does not disappear.

Various aspects of the student experience can affect studies and also final degree performance of students (eg extent of term-time working, financial issues), and these were found to vary by ethnicity (and also by other variables). But high levels of satisfaction with outcomes were found among minority ethnic final year students generally, and no evidence of any greater disadvantage being felt on average at this stage. Few race relations issues at institutions were reported. However, reflecting back one year on, some (particularly Black and Asian graduates) were less than satisfied with their institutional and course choices.

Transitions to the labour market

Minority ethnic degree graduates have higher initial average unemployment rates compared with White graduates, and for some groups it is much higher (eg male Pakistani and Chinese). The range of employment taken up varies between minority ethnic and White groups. There is a greater tendency for minority ethnic degree graduates to seek further qualifications than for White students (in particular, Chinese and most of the other Asian

groups), and there are variations between ethnic groups (and also by gender) in the type of postgraduate study taken.

Net of any general ethnicity labour market effect that is likely to make a contribution, an individual's choice of degree discipline, prior education, degree performance, career/job search attitude and behaviour, and personal attributes, can all contribute to experiencing relative disadvantage in the graduate labour market. Ethnicity is certainly making a contribution to many individuals' experiences, but how much being a member of a particular minority ethnic group adversely affects them directly, rather than indirectly (ie through the other factors mentioned above), has not been shown conclusively, and needs further investigation.

A number of university-based positive action programmes have been developed to help improve minority ethnic students' employability. While such activities are generally viewed positively, and appear to be expanding, more evaluative evidence would help employers, institutions, students or others to judge which of them are most effective and for whom.

Under-representation in graduate intakes

A greater commitment to ethnic diversity in the workplace has filtered into graduate recruitment programmes, in public sector organisations and some of the larger private ones. On the whole, minority ethnic graduates continue to be under-represented in graduate intakes of large firms. The main reasons are:

- the policies of some large employers of targeting certain institutions
- the lack of minority ethnic role models
- discriminatory practices in selection methods, and
- issues around eligibility to work in the UK.

The research has shown that the recruitment process is a key area to be addressed.

Implications for policy and further research

This report has shown considerable diversity in the HE participation of minority ethnic students, which means that a detailed understanding of minority ethnic patterns and their various causes is important in developing future policy. Various recommendations are made on the need to be more focused in policy approaches and in further research.

- More needs to be done to raise earlier attainment and to close the 'A' level gap, especially for some Black students.
- A better understanding is needed of the influences (positive and negative) of parents in the decision-making process about HE and their interaction with other interventions (eg careers guidance).
- Further work needs to be done on improving statistical measures of HE participation for sub-groups, including ethnic groups, and we recommend greater use of Census data.
- Although student finance was not any greater deterrent for minority ethnic than White students overall, it is important to monitor the impact of the proposed changes on individual ethnic groups (and sub-groups).
- Monitoring and evaluation of the new Foundation Degree qualification should include racial equality (along with gender, age and socio-economic class).
- Further research and analysis is needed into retention and degree performance of minority ethnic student groups, and the significance of various factors (including student satisfaction, and family/parental support to students).
- Further research is required on graduate career choices, including minority ethnic students' preference for further study, on the effectiveness of the various diversity programmes of universities and employers, and other measures designed to improve graduate employability.
- More private sector employers should monitor ethnicity in graduate recruitment.

Finally, there is a tendency to focus mostly on relative disadvantage. Some minority ethnic students are doing much better than comparative White groups. This should be given greater recognition.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR552) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB552) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes, DfES, Room W628, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ.

Email: stella.mascarenhas-keyes@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

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