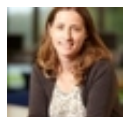


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Hard Evidence: why aren't there more black British students at elite universities?

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Oxford may be winners, but not at diversity. Andrew Matthews/PA

Young people from black British backgrounds are more likely to go to university than their white British peers, but they are much less likely to attend the UK's most selective universities.

As the Independent Commission on Social Mobility pointed out: "There are more young men from black backgrounds in prison in the UK than there are UK-domiciled undergraduate black male students attending Russell Group institutions."

According to data from the 2011 census and from statistical breakdowns released to The Conversation by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, black Britons of Caribbean heritage make up 1.1% of all 15 to 29-year-olds in England and Wales and 1.5% of all domestic students attending UK universities in 2012-13. In contrast, just 0.5% of domestic students at Russell Group universities are from black Caribbean backgrounds.

	% 15-29 year olds in England and Wales ¹	% students attending universities in the UK ²	% students attending Russell Group universities ²
White	81.2	80.4	82.8
Black Caribbean	1.1	1.5	0.5
Black African	2.2	4.4	2.1
Black Other	0.6	0.3	0.1
Pakistani	2.8	2.4	1.8
Bangladeshi	1.2	0.8	0.6
Indian	3.2	3.4	4.2
Chinese	1.5	0.9	1.5
Other Asian	1.9	1.7	1.8
Other (incl. mixed)	4.5	4.2	4.5

¹ Census data for 2011 (<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/tc2101ew>)

² HESA data for the 2012/13 academic year (students of unknown ethnicity have been excluded from calculations)

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Regardless of the type of university attended, students from black and certain other ethnic minority backgrounds are **less likely** to receive a first or upper second class degree than white students who enter with the same A-level grades. Black people are also **severely under-represented** among university professors.

These worrying facts are currently the subject of an **All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Race and Higher Education**, led by David Lammy MP.

So why aren't there more black British students at highly selective universities? And why, for that matter, are British-Pakistani and British-Bangladeshi students similarly under-represented in highly selective UK universities?

One major reason is that young people from black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds are **less likely to achieve** the grades required for entry to highly selective universities, which accounts for their lower rates of application to these universities.

However, another important part of the story is that when young people from black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds apply to highly selective universities, they are **less likely to be offered places** than their comparably qualified white peers.

Offer rates examined

Let's look first at the raw statistics on admission to the UK's most selective universities, Oxford and Cambridge. In 2011, **offer rates at Oxford University** were significantly higher for white applicants (24%) than for black Caribbean (18.9%), Pakistani (4.9%) and Bangladeshi (9.9%) applicants.

Similarly, **offer rates at Cambridge University** in 2012 were significantly higher for white applicants (30.8%) than for applicants from black Caribbean (18.9%), Pakistani (15.7%) and Bangladeshi (16.9%) backgrounds.

These are the most up-to-date figures available as neither Oxford nor Cambridge has published ethnicity-specific offer rates for more recent admission cycles.

The Russell Group as a whole doesn't publish its admissions statistics, but according to my calculations based on UCAS data for 2010 to 2013, the same basic pattern holds. Offer rates were around twice as high for white applicants (54.7%) as for applicants from the black Caribbean (23.3%), Pakistani (30.3%) and Bangladeshi (31.2%) groups.

Of course, the raw statistics don't tell us anything about the academic suitability of applicants for their chosen courses. A more sophisticated analysis is needed for that.

Interrogating the data

In my own research on admission to Russell Group universities I analysed data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). I found that ethnic group differences in offer rates remain substantial even after taking into account applicants' A-level grades, whether they had studied any of eight "facilitating subjects" at A-level, and their chosen degree subject area.

The Russell Group has responded to this research by arguing that ethnic minority applicants have lower initial offer rates than white applicants with the same A-level grades because ethnic minorities are less likely to have studied the specific A-level subjects required for entry to their chosen courses.

They also cite research conducted by Oxford University in 2011 which suggests that offer rates are lower for ethnic minorities than for comparably qualified white applicants because ethnic minorities tend to apply to heavily oversubscribed degree subjects such as medicine or law.

An in-house analysis of the data by UCAS also reportedly found that ethnic differences in degree subject choices were a significant part of the reason for ethnic disparities in offer rates at Russell Group universities.

But neither UCAS nor the Russell Group have published detailed statistics to support claims that the A-level subjects and degree subjects chosen by ethnic minorities explain why their offer rates are lower than for white applicants with the same grades.

The suggestion that ethnic minorities have lower offer rates because they apply to more popular courses is at odds with data obtained via Freedom of Information requests from Oxford University and Cambridge University. These revealed much lower offer rates for ethnic minority applicants to medicine – a heavily oversubscribed course at both universities – even for those with three A* grades at A-level.

The truth is that we are not entirely sure why there aren't more black British students at highly selective universities. Their under-representation is undoubtedly caused by multiple factors in a multi-stage process that begins long before the age of 18. But we would surely get closer to the answer, and perhaps even a solution, if UK universities were to grasp the nettle and publish detailed and transparent analyses of their applications and admissions data.

Hard Evidence is a series of articles in which academics use research evidence to tackle the trickiest public policy questions.

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