



The Open
University

The under-attainment of ethnic minority students in higher education: what we know and what we don't know

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Some have claimed that people from ethnic minorities are under-represented in UK higher education. For instance, Gorard et al. (2006, 22) maintained that “Inequalities in HE [higher education] participation are evident throughout the life-course and include differences in terms of . . . ethnicity.” This has led to an interest in ways of increasing the participation of ethnic minority groups in further and higher education (e.g., See, Gorard, & Torgerson, 2012; See et al., 2011).



In fact, Connor et al. (2004) estimated that in 2001–02 the participation rate in UK higher education was 38% for White people but 56% for people from ethnic minorities.

Moreover, the proportion of UK-domiciled students from ethnic minorities increased from 14.9% in 2003–04 to 18.4% in 2010–11 (Equality Challenge Unit, 2012).



While there may be particular ethnic subgroups with low participation rates, it is patently incorrect to assert that people from ethnic minorities are under-represented in UK higher education in general.

More fundamentally, it is ethically dubious to promote the idea of widening participation in such groups if they cannot be guaranteed equitable outcomes.



It has been known for at least 16 years that students from ethnic minorities are less likely to obtain good degrees (with first- or upper second-class honours) than White students. Connor et al. (1996) surveyed students who had graduated from four UK institutions of higher education in 1993: 65% of the White students had obtained good degrees, but only 39% of the non-White students had obtained good degrees. Subsequently, this pattern was confirmed in datasets based on all UK-domiciled graduates from all UK institutions.



- Owens et al. (2000): 1997-98 and 1998-99
- Naylor and Smith (2004): 1997-98
- Connor et al. (2004): 2001-02
- Leslie (2005): 1998 to 2000
- Elias et al. (2005): 1996-97 to 2001-02
- Richardson (2008a): 2004-05*

*Subsets of these data were analysed by Broecke and Nicholls (2007) and Fielding et al. (2008).

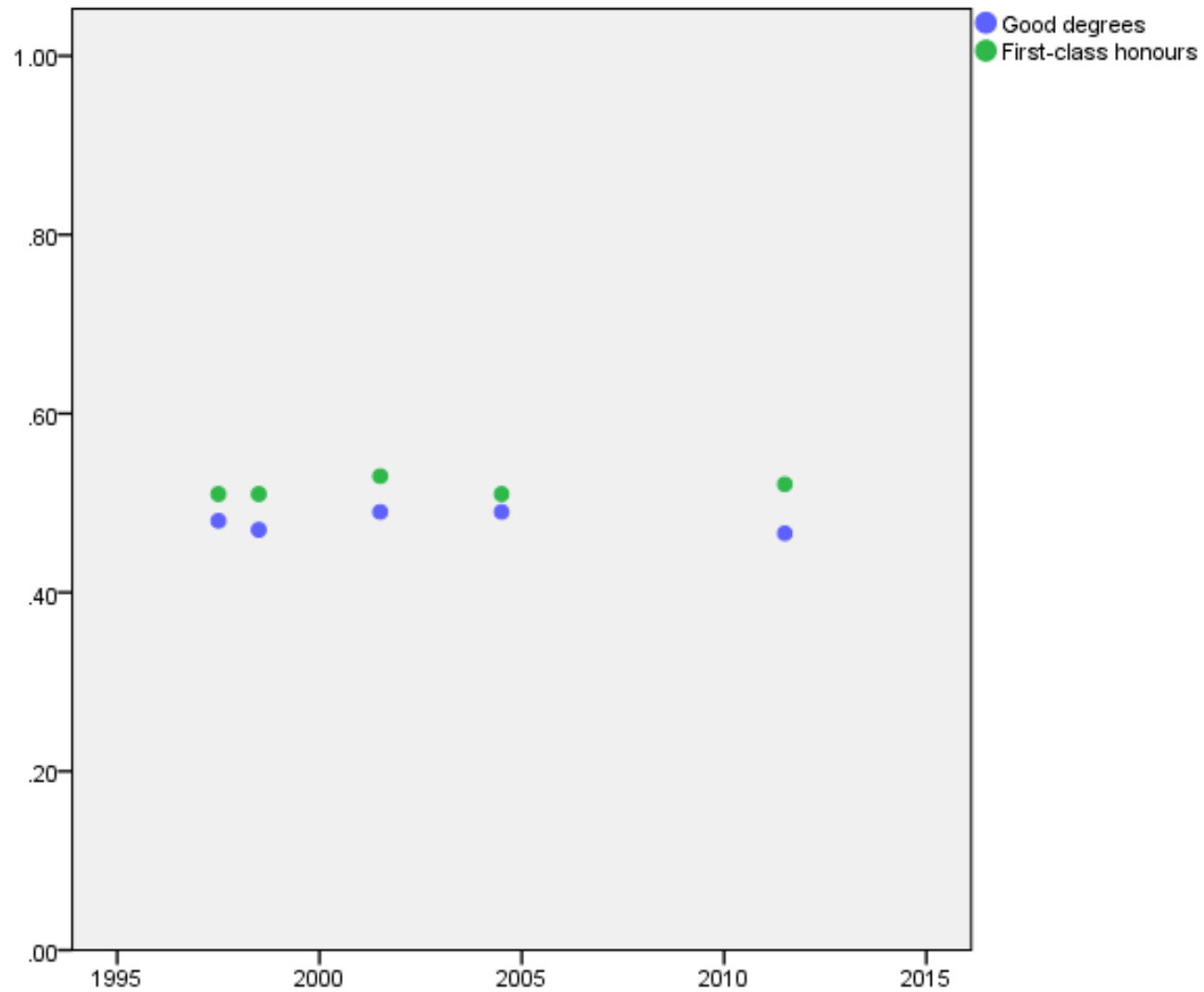


The odds of a non-White student obtaining a good degree are half those of a White student obtaining a good degree. Similar odds ratios arise in the attainment of first-class honours.

This pattern has been broadly consistent from one year to another (Richardson, 2008b).



Odds ratios comparing the likelihood of non-White and White students obtaining good degrees and first-class honours





The attainment gap is greater in Black students than in Asian students.

It is greater in Asian students than in students of Chinese, Mixed or other ethnicity.



The trend for Asian and Black students to be less likely to obtain good degrees than White students

- is greater in older students than in younger students;
- is greater in women than in men; and
- is greater in some subjects than others.



The attainment gap in Asian students is greatest in those who take combined degrees and least in those who take medicine and dentistry.

The attainment gap in Black students is greatest in those who take combined degrees and least in those who take agriculture.



The attainment gap in all ethnic minority students

- is greater at post-1992 universities than at Russell group universities;
- is only partly explained by variations in entry qualifications; and
- is greater in part-time students than in full-time students.



Demographic and course-related variables (especially entry qualifications) explain about half of the attainment gap in ethnic minority students.

If entry qualifications are a proxy for academic ability, then about half of the attainment gap is attributable to differences in academic ability.



Nevertheless, the other half of the attainment gap is not attributable to differences in academic ability.

So ethnic minority students are being awarded poorer degrees for reasons that have nothing to do with their academic ability.



One explanation for the relatively poor attainment of Asian and Black students is that their experience of higher education is inferior to that of White students.

Connor et al. (2004) interviewed full-time students at 29 institutions. They concluded:

“There was no consistent message from our student survey that any group of minority students felt more disadvantaged than White students.”



In the National Student Survey, White students do tend to give more favourable ratings of their programmes than Asian or Black students.

However, the effects are small and only achieve statistical significance because of the very large sample size. They are also inconsistent from year to year (SurrIDGE, 2008).

Fielding et al. (2008) obtained similar results for the Assessment and Feedback scale in the 2006 Survey.



Three groups of students merit particular attention:

- medical students
- postgraduate students
- distance-learning students



In medicine, dentistry and veterinary science, degrees qualifying students to practise are not classified.

Many students take intercalated or intermediate degrees which *are* classified. They are more likely to obtain first-class or good degrees than those taking other subjects.



In 1994, 10 out of 230 final-year students at the University of Manchester's medical school failed. All were male and had Asian surnames (Dillner, 1995).

McManus et al. (1996) analysed finals results from two cohorts of students at London medical schools. Among the UK nationals, ethnic minority students were twice as likely to fail one or more examinations than were White students.



Woolf et al. (2011) carried out a systematic review and meta-analysis on the performance of medical students in the UK. They found that non-White students consistently performed less well than White students. They concluded: “Ethnic differences in academic performance are widespread across different medical schools, different types of exam, and in undergraduates and postgraduates. They have persisted for many years and cannot be dismissed as atypical or local problems.”



Woolf et al. (2013) obtained questionnaire data from 587 medical students in Year 3 and followed them up to their final examinations in Year 5.

Students from ethnic minorities obtained poorer scores in both the written examinations and the practical examination.

These differences could not be explained by differences in demographic or psychological factors and were just as large when these factors were taken into account.



Most research has focused on the under-attainment of ethnic minority students at the first-degree level.

Given that a good degree is normally a prerequisite for postgraduate study, this should have consequences for their representation at the postgraduate level.



Wakeling (2009) found that, based on their completion of first degrees, students from ethnic minorities were underrepresented among research students and teacher-training students but not on Master's programmes.

Little is known about the attainment of postgraduate students from ethnic minorities. However, the results obtained by Woolf et al. (2011) suggest that there may well be significant under-attainment at this level, too.



Most research has focused on the under-attainment of ethnic minority students in face-to-face institutions.

One possibility is that it results from the nature of their interactions with their teachers and with other students.

In distance education, there is a geographical, social and personal separation between students and teachers.

The effects of factors arising from interactions between students and teachers may be attenuated in the context of distance education, as at the UK Open University.



The Open University is an interesting case:

- It has an open admissions policy.
- It has a long-standing commitment to equal opportunities in education.
- It has also explored initiatives for supporting students from ethnic minorities.



Richardson (2009) found that the under-attainment of ethnic minority students who graduated from the Open University was similar to the under-attainment of ethnic minority students studying part-time at other institutions.

Asian graduates who had studied with the Open University tended to perform better than their counterparts elsewhere.

Black graduates who had studied with the Open University performed on a par with their counterparts elsewhere.



Most research has focused on the under-attainment of ethnic minority students at the first-degree level.

But at most institutions a student's class of degree is determined solely by the marks or grades achieved on individual course units or modules.



Richardson (2012) compared White and ethnic minority students taking Open University courses in 2003.

Most groups of ethnic minority students were less likely than White students to complete their courses.

Most groups of ethnic minority students were less likely than White students to pass courses that they completed.



Most groups of ethnic minority students were less likely than White students to obtain good grades on the courses that they passed.

Ethnic minority students are less likely than White students to be awarded good degrees because they are less likely to achieve the grades that would merit good degrees.



I repeated these analyses for all students taking Open University courses in 2009, and the picture was similar.

The attainment gap in terms of the proportion of good grades varied across different subject areas.

This suggests that it results at least in part from teaching and assessment practices in particular subject areas.



Institutional surveys at the Open University have found that the attainment gap in ethnic minority students is not attributable

- to variations in their ratings of their courses
- to variations in their academic engagement
- to variations in their approaches to studying
- to variations in their conceptions of learning

(All assessed using self-report questionnaires.)



A final point: the attainment gap in ethnic minority students is a finding that is correlational in nature.

Ethnicity *per se* is almost certainly not the effective variable influencing students' academic attainment.

Rather, it is a proxy for other factors that have yet to be identified.



What do we know?

Ethnic differences in academic attainment are widespread and have persisted for many years.

They are only partly explained by ethnic differences in entry qualifications.

They vary from one institution to another and from one subject area to another.

This suggests that they result in part from teaching and assessment practices in different institutions and subjects.



What do we not know?

We do not really know whether ethnic differences in attainment are reflected in the student experience.

We do not know what factors are responsible for the ethnic differences in attainment that remain when differences in entry qualifications have been taken into account.

We do not know what aspects of teaching and assessment practices are responsible for variations in the attainment gap. However, Stevenson (2012) would be a good place to start.



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