

NORTH EAST

RACE EQUALITY FORUM

RESEARCH BRIEFING

No.5



Ethnic inequalities in admission to highly selective universities

British ethnic minorities are generally more likely than their white British peers to go to university. But some ethnic minority groups remain strikingly under-represented among students attending the UK's most selective universities:

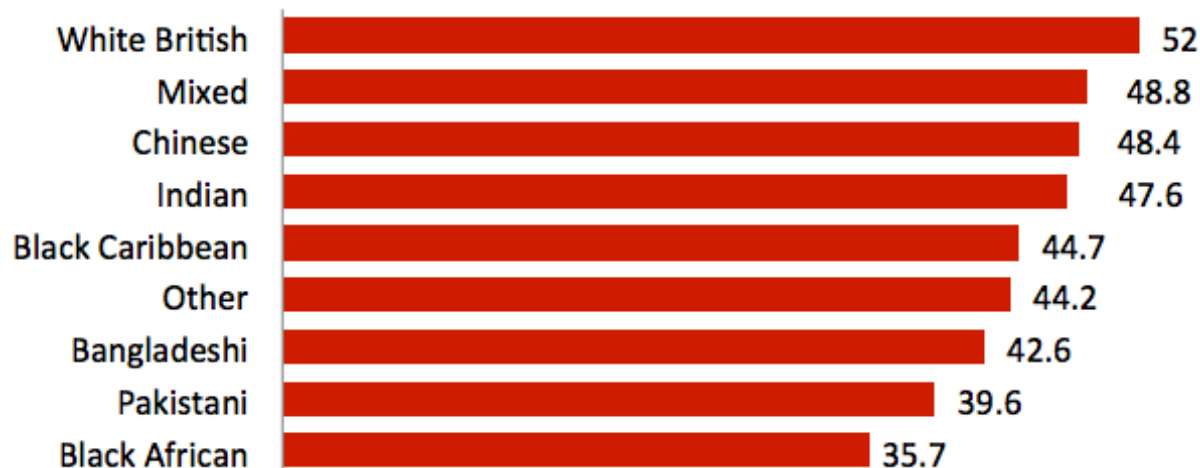
- Just 0.5% of students at Russell Group (research-intensive) universities (including Durham and Newcastle) are of Black Caribbean heritage compared to 1.1% of 15-29 year olds in England and Wales overall
- Just 1.8% of Russell Group students are from Pakistani backgrounds compared to 2.8% of young people nationally
- Just 0.6% of Russell Group students are of Bangladeshi origin compared to 1.2% nationally
- Those from Black African, Chinese, Indian, 'Mixed', and 'Other' ethnic minority backgrounds, in contrast, do not appear to be statistically under-represented at Russell Group universities.

Part of the reason for the under-representation of Black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students at highly selective universities is that these students are less likely to achieve the high grades required for entry. But research carried out by Durham University academic Vikki Boliver has also shown that **Black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi applicants to Russell Group universities are substantially less likely to be offered places than white applicants with the same grades and subjects at A-level.** Black African, Chinese, Indian, 'Mixed' and 'Other' minority ethnicity applicants were also

found to be less likely to receive offers from Russell Group universities than comparably qualified white applicants.



% of applications to Russell Group universities met with offers of a place, controlling for grades and 'facilitating subjects' at A-level North East Race Equality Forum



Source: Boliver, V. (2015) 'Why are British Ethnic Minorities Less Likely to be Offered Places at Highly Selective Universities?' Pages 15-18 in Alexander, C. and Arday, J. (eds.) *Aiming Higher: Race, Inequality and Diversity in the Academy*, London: Runnymede Trust.

Universities do not receive information about applicants' declared ethnicity until after admissions decisions have been made. But admissions selectors do see non-anonymised application forms containing applicants' names and other personal details, making it conceivable that ethnic group differences in admissions chances are the result of direct discrimination, possibly due to unconscious bias.

It is not just highly selective, Russell Group universities that disproportionately reject ethnic minority applicants; other 'Old' (pre-1992) and 'New' (post-1992) universities do so too, albeit to a lesser extent. For example, compared to white applicants who are equally well qualified at A-level, Black Caribbean applicants have a seven percentage points lower offer rate from Russell Group universities, and a four percentage points lower offer rate from both other Old and New universities.

These statistical findings came from an independent academic analysis of anonymised individual-level data by the Universities and Colleges Admissions

Service (aka UCAS data). **Alarming**ly, UCAS has since **decided that it will no longer allow independent researchers to access individual-level applications and admissions data**. UCAS's decision has been challenged



in a Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission report [link below]

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-and-public-policy-trying-to-make-social-progress-blindfolded>

and in a *parliamentary question* by *David Lammy MP*. UCAS's unwillingness to make anonymised individual-level university admissions data available for independent analysis is deeply concerning for a number of reasons:

- It flies in the face of the increasingly accepted norm that all data pertaining to public life should be **open data** [link below].
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-data-white-paper-unleashing-the-potential>
- It compromises the capacity of universities as public institutions to **ensure that they do not discriminate** [link below] against applicants on grounds such as ethnicity.
https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/what_equality_law_means_for_you_as_an_education_provider_further_and_higher_education.pdf
- It makes it impossible to delve deeper into the statistical evidence on ethnic disparities in university admissions chances – or even to simply monitor whether things are getting better or worse.

If we want to understand and remedy ethnic differences in university offer rates, two things must happen:

- Serious consideration must be given to whether aspects of the university admissions process need to be changed to reduce the possibility of unlawful discrimination
- Anonymised individual-level data on university applications and admissions must be made openly available so that it can be subject to rigorous independent analysis

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The North East Race Equality Forum is a Network of around 300 individuals and organisations in the North East Region committed to promoting racial equality in the context of social justice. No one organisation is necessarily committed to every idea published in the name of the Forum. The Forum is supported by the 'Race', Crime and Justice Regional Research Network, which includes researchers from each University in the region.