

## Topic briefing: Black and minority ethnic (BME) students

There are differences at every stage of the student lifecycle in the experiences of UK-domiciled students from different ethnic backgrounds. While there have been increases in the number of students from black and ethnic minority backgrounds participating in higher education, issues still persist in access to some types of higher education providers, and in retention, outcomes and progression, especially for the most socio-economically disadvantaged within these groups. Many providers have increased the scope of their work with students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds in their access agreements and access and participation plans to encompass the whole student lifecycle. However, greater nuance is needed across the sector in understanding and addressing the specific challenges faced by these students.

This briefing gives an overview of current challenges around access, success and progression for UK-domiciled BME students and highlights effective practice examples of how universities and colleges are working to support BME students through their access agreements. Particular emphasis is given to the importance of improving understanding of the issues faced by specific ethnic groups in different contexts and in relation to other demographic factors. The briefing includes examples of current work being undertaken across the sector, as well as questions that higher education providers can use to further develop their work in this area.

We hope this briefing will stimulate thinking and discussion about how BME students could be supported more effectively by universities and colleges, leading to more evidence-led approaches tailored to providers' own context and circumstances.

The Office for Students recognises the limitations of the term 'black and minority ethnic (BME)' groups, particularly in its homogenising of minority ethnic students. This briefing uses the term 'BME' to demonstrate and discuss patterns in student experience in relation to ethnic background. Where possible data has been disaggregated into more detailed ethnic groups. Higher education providers are encouraged to adopt this practice, as is detailed in the briefing.

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## **Why are disparities in BME experiences in higher education important?**

Evidence shows that there are differences at every stage of the student lifecycle in the experiences of students from different ethnic backgrounds. These are long standing, well documented issues across the sector, yet they continue to persist.

Under the public sector equality duty<sup>1</sup> which came into force in April 2011, publicly funded higher education providers are required to have due regard for the need to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic<sup>2</sup> and people who do not share it.

It is therefore important – both for providers and for the OfS – to understand more clearly the reasons behind these disparities in experience of higher education for some BME students, and to effectively target practices, activities and programmes in order to best address these issues.

### **The OfS's guidance on addressing issues relating to BME students in higher education**

It is an access and participation plan requirement that all institutions undertake an assessment of their performance<sup>3</sup> and set out steps to address their findings. We expect all providers to use their own internal data to investigate whether there are any disparities relating to access, success and/or progression for students from different ethnic groups. Where disparities in access, success and/or progression are identified, we expect providers to address these through their access and participation plans.

When assessing the experiences of students from minority ethnic backgrounds, providers should also consider other variables that may affect these students – for example whether they come from a low participation neighbourhood or from a low income family. Analysis of the intersection between different protected characteristics will help providers target activity effectively to reduce disparities in access, success and progression.

## **The current state of issues relating to BME students**

### **Entry to higher education varies between different ethnic groups, particularly to higher tariff providers**

As HEFCE reports<sup>4</sup>, the number of UK-domiciled BME students starting first degrees has increased by 34 per cent between 2010-11 and 2015-16. However, while access to higher education for BME students collectively has improved, the latest figures from the Department for Education<sup>5</sup> show that disparities persist at a granular level.

Data using high level ethnic categories suggests that the proportion of white pupils entering higher education is lower than any other ethnic group, including the proportion entering higher tariff institutions (Figure 1).

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<sup>1</sup> [www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/public-sector-equality-duty](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/public-sector-equality-duty)

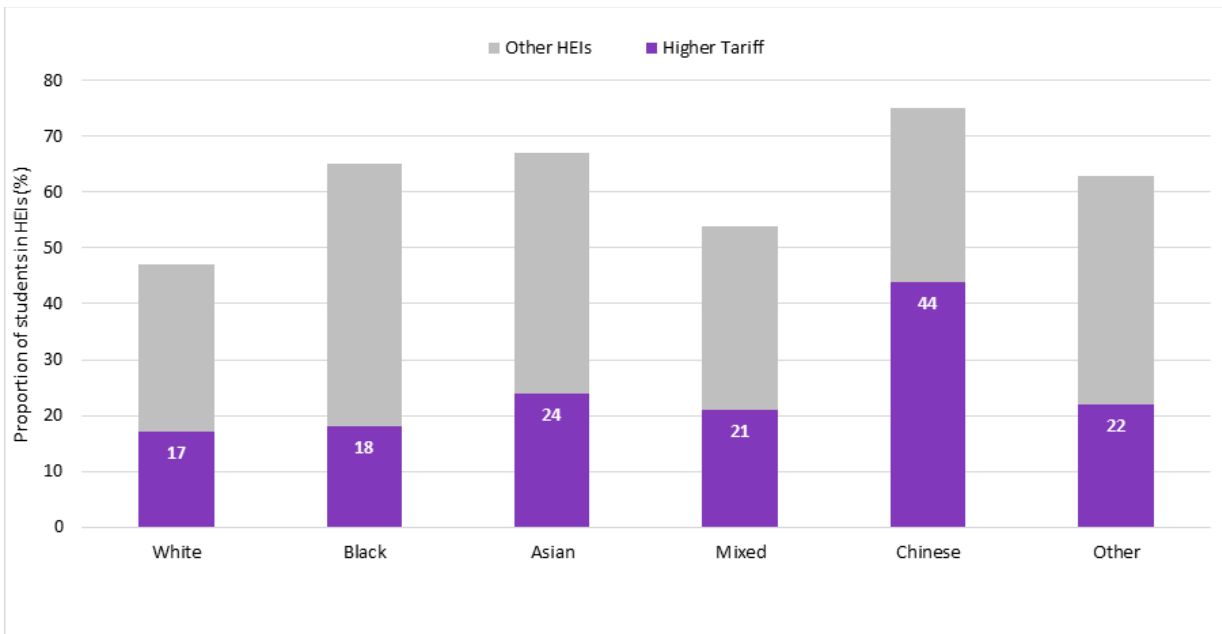
<sup>2</sup> [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/4](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/4)

<sup>3</sup> [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-guidance-on-access-and-participation-plans-for-2019-20/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-guidance-on-access-and-participation-plans-for-2019-20/)

<sup>4</sup> [www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/HEinEngland/students/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/HEinEngland/students/)

<sup>5</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-destinations](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-destinations)

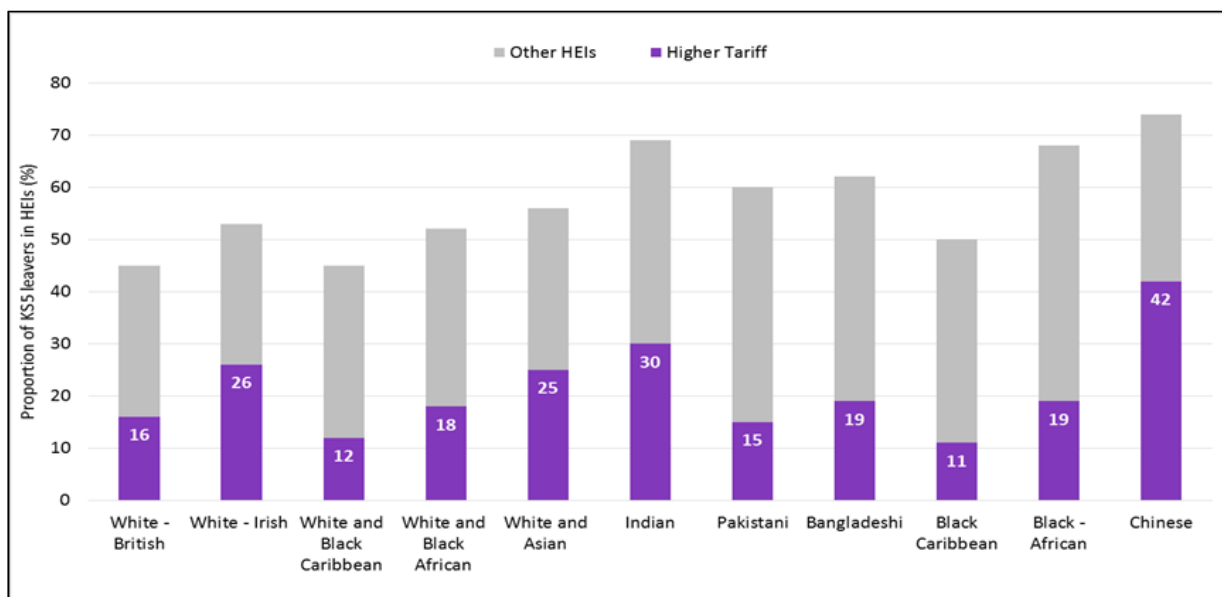
**Figure 1: Proportion of Key Stage 5 leavers entering a higher education institution in 2015-16, by high level ethnic groups**



**Source:** Department for Education, Statistics: destinations of key stage 4 and key stage 5 pupils<sup>6</sup> (2017)

However, an exploration of the detailed ethnic categories shows that this is not necessarily the case. The proportion of white and black Caribbean Key Stage 5 leavers entering higher education is the same as white British and lower than all other minority ethnic groups (Figure 2). Furthermore, the proportion of black Caribbean and white and black Caribbean students entering a higher tariff institution is the lowest of all groups, even lower than white British. Such disparities are masked if you only consider the high level aggregate groups of ethnicity.

**Figure 2: Proportion of Key Stage 5 leavers at a higher education institution, by detailed ethnicity, 2015-16**



**Source:** Department for Education, Statistics: destinations of key stage 4 and key stage 5 pupils<sup>7</sup> (2017)

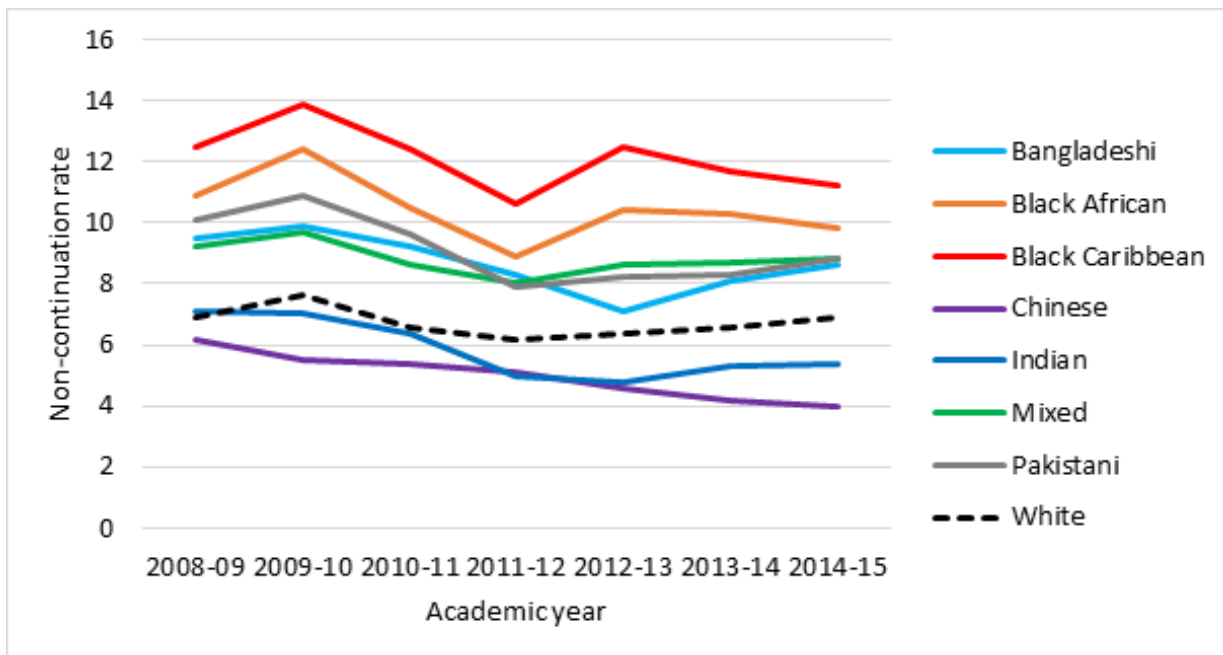
<sup>6</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-destinations](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-destinations)

<sup>7</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-destinations](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-destinations)

### There are stark differences between ethnic groups in terms of retention and the degree class they achieve

There are significant variations in the outcomes of higher education between BME and white students. Retention rates are lower<sup>8</sup> for all ethnic groups (apart from students of Chinese and Indian ethnicity) compared with their white peers. Furthermore students from a black Caribbean background have the highest non-continuation rates of all ethnic groups, demonstrating that issues for these students continue beyond entry to higher education (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Non-continuation rates among UK domiciled first degree students in English higher education institutions**



**Source:** HESA data published by HEFCE<sup>9</sup>

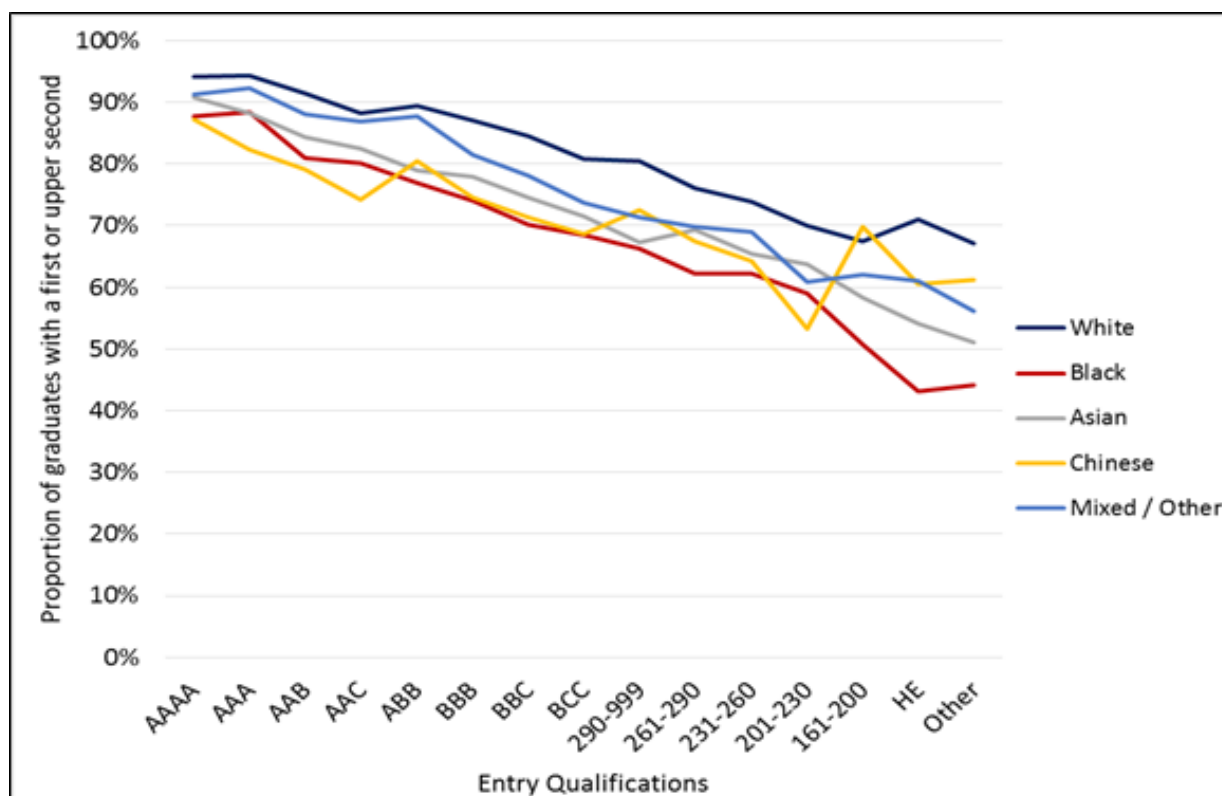
Degree outcomes also vary by ethnicity. Analysis of the latest data on degree classifications<sup>10</sup> shows that, regardless of entry qualifications, the proportion of BME students achieving a first or 2:1 is lower than their white peers. For the majority of entry qualifications the largest differentials exist between black and white graduates (Figure 4).

<sup>8</sup> [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/ethnicity/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/ethnicity/)

<sup>9</sup> [www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/ncr/timeseries/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/ncr/timeseries/)

<sup>10</sup> [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/ethnicity/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/ethnicity/)

**Figure 4: Degree outcomes by entry qualifications and ethnicity in England, 2015-16**



Source: HESA data published by HEFCE<sup>11</sup>

### Unexplained differences in degree outcomes persist even after controlling for other factors

The differences in degree outcomes between ethnic groups persist even when controlling for other factors which may affect attainment<sup>12</sup> such as the student's age, sex, course and qualifications on entry. Since the differences in outcomes cannot be explained by these common factors, this suggests that the cause of the underperformance of BME students may be associated with other factors such as institutional structures and curriculum.

### Disparities persist into employment and further study

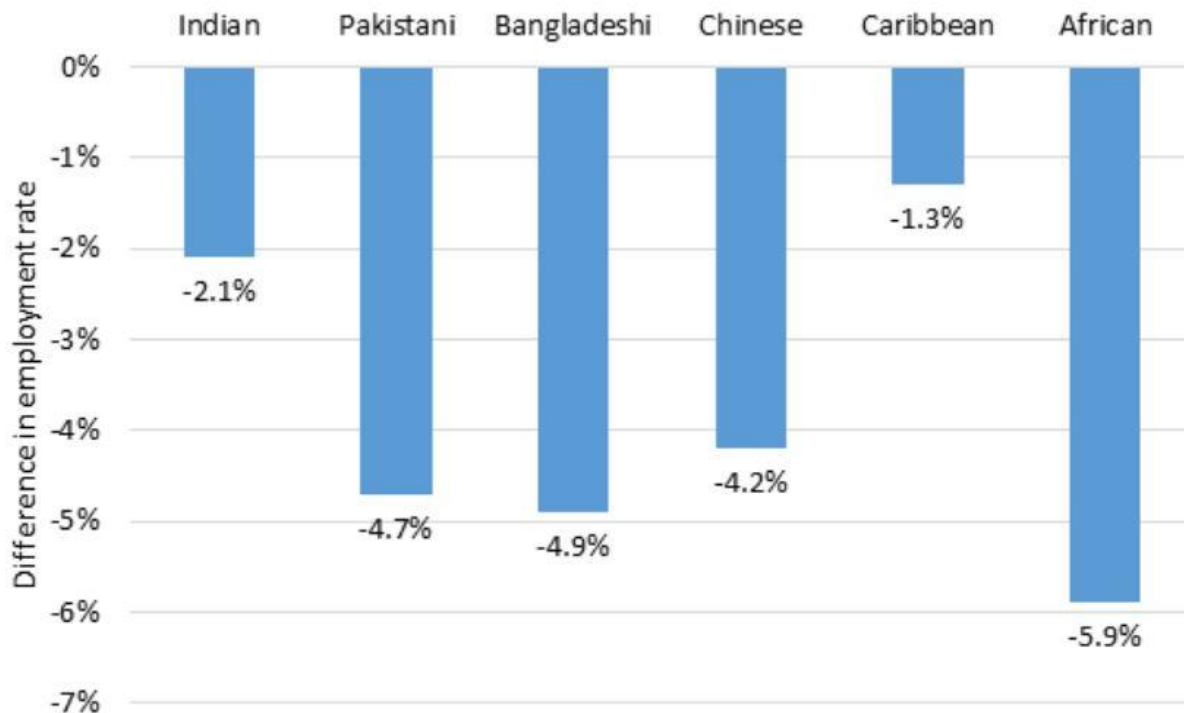
There is evidence to suggest that disadvantage also persists beyond higher education for some ethnic groups. There are unexplained disparities in the progression<sup>13</sup> of different ethnic groups from undergraduate study to employment (including professional employment) and further study. Regardless of entry qualifications, subjects studied, degree outcomes and other socio-demographic characteristics, differences in employment outcomes between white and BME graduates persist even three years after graduation. For example, Figure 5 shows that African students who graduated in 2010-11 were 5.9 per cent less likely to be in employment or further study three years after graduating than white students.

<sup>11</sup> [www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/ncr/timeseries/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/ncr/timeseries/)

<sup>12</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/474273/BIS-15-85-socio-economic-ethnic-and-gender-differences.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/474273/BIS-15-85-socio-economic-ethnic-and-gender-differences.pdf) (PDF)

<sup>13</sup> [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/ethnicity/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/ethnicity/)

**Figure 5: Differences in employment and further study rates three years after graduation, between UK-domiciled BME and White students who graduated in 2010-11**



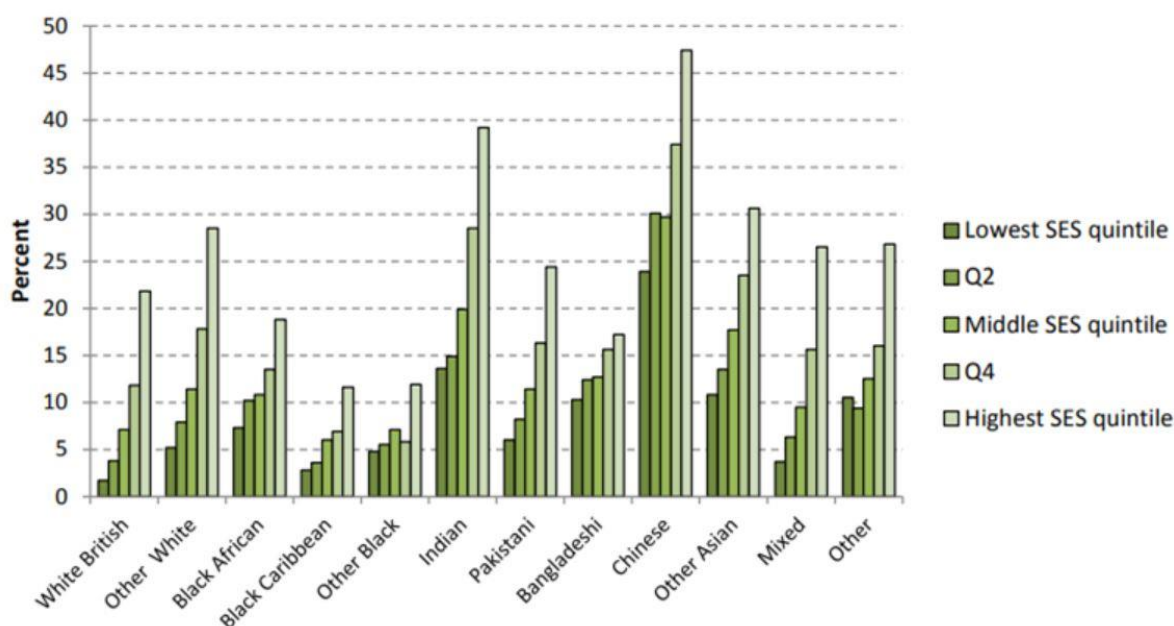
**Source:** HEFCE, Differences in employment outcomes<sup>14</sup> (2016)

**Disadvantage is multidimensional, and ethnicity is only one of the dimensions**

A range of social, economic, demographic and geographic factors need to be considered in order to better understand the extent of disadvantage individuals may face. For example, a more complex picture of disadvantage is presented when ethnicity is considered alongside a socio-economic indicator of disadvantage (Figure 5).

<sup>14</sup> [www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/employment/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/employment/)

**Figure 6: Participation at the most selective institutions at age 18 or 19 for the cohort taking their GCSEs in 2008, by ethnic and socio-economic quintile groups**



**Source:** Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Socio-economic, ethnic and gender differences in HE participation (2015)

When you consider ethnicity and socio-economic quintiles together you can see the importance of addressing the disadvantage experienced by individuals facing more than one disadvantaging factor (such as socio-economic barriers and cultural barriers). Figure 6 demonstrates that the most disadvantaged groups from nearly all ethnic minority backgrounds are seriously under-represented at highly selective providers.

While the white British and lowest socio-economic background<sup>15</sup> group has the smallest proportion of students entering a highly selective provider, this is closely followed by the lowest socio-economic groups of black Caribbean and mixed ethnicity.

### **Even among the highest socio-economic quintile, the black Caribbean and other black background groups have the smallest proportions of entrants into highly selective providers**

Figure 6 also demonstrates that there are significant disparities between the most and least socio-economically advantaged within every ethnic group, indicating that within every ethnic group there is a subgroup of individuals who are more disadvantaged or underrepresented in higher education than others in the group. Without considering multiple demographic factors together providers may be less effective at targeting interventions to those with the greatest need.

### **What is already being done through access agreements?**

In their 2017-18 access agreements, universities and colleges tell us that they are carrying out activity targeted at BME students across the student lifecycle. Around half of providers tell us that they are carrying out access activities targeted at BME students, and half of institutions report on success activity designed to support BME students. Only around 30 per cent of providers mention progression activity targeted at BME students.

<sup>15</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112407/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-white-british-students/>



## Access

- In their 2017-18 access agreements, around a quarter of providers mention targeting BME students with activities related to raising awareness and aspirations. **Leeds Beckett University** runs the Larkia programme, which seeks to raise the confidence and motivation of young Asian girls through a three day residential programme focussing on the creative arts.
- 12 per cent of providers talk about providing information, advice and guidance which specifically targets BME students in their access agreements. The **University of Bolton** works collaboratively with the Bolton Muslim Welfare Trust to offer advice to the community on courses offered by the university, careers and higher education funding.
- Around 10 per cent of providers tell us that they provide long-term outreach activities working with BME pupils at primary schools, and 14 per cent of providers report on activity aimed at secondary school age pupils. **Aston University** delivers intensive and long-term mentoring to secondary school learners, including in deprived wards where there is low rates of progression into higher education for BME pupils.

## Success

- Less than 40 per cent of providers discuss the attainment of BME students and the differences in attainment between BME and white students.
- Around 16 per cent of providers tell us about the tutorial or pastoral support they offer targeted to BME students. **King's College London** offers an Extended Medical Degree Programme (EMDP) which uses a contextualised admissions process. The majority of EMDP students are the first in their family to attend university and around 90 per cent are from BME backgrounds. The EMDP splits the first two years of the traditional medical degree across three years, enabling the implementation of additional academic and pastoral support programmes.
- 9 per cent of providers provide staff training to help staff better support BME students. The **University of Nottingham** is raising awareness amongst personal tutors of the differences in attainment between BME and white students and is providing resources to help tutors address the issue. This includes incorporating diversity awareness into personal tutor **training**.
- Around 8 per cent of providers tell us in their 2017-18 access agreements about activities designed to foster a sense of belonging for BME students. **Roehampton University's** analysis of student data has found that male BME students from lower socio-economic groups who are living off campus are at greater risk of non-continuation than other students. To mitigate this, the university is designing student timetables in a way that builds academic friendship groups and peer support and fosters a greater sense of belonging, as well as working collaboratively with the student union to support BME and off-campus students.

## Progression to employment and further study

- Around 30 per cent of providers talk about progression activities for students from BME backgrounds in their access agreements.
- Twelve per cent of providers with 2017-18 access agreements tell us they offer placements, work experience and internships to BME students. **Liverpool Hope University's Hope Internship Programme** provides opportunities to recent graduates to secure graduate level, paid experience via three month internships. The university built into the programme specific provision to attract participants with protected characteristics, and ensures that a minimum of 15 per cent of participants are from minority ethnic backgrounds.
- Around a tenth of providers report to us that they provide career advice and guidance specifically for BME students. The **University of Birmingham's** analysis of employment data highlighted an employment gap within the School of Law for locally domiciled, female BME students. This led to



targeted interventions at School level to address this, including introducing dedicated mentoring and updating reference materials to ensure they are relevant and relatable for the cohort.

## Targets

In their 2017-18 access agreements:

- Just over half of providers (52 per cent) have one or more outcomes targets relating to BME students. This amounts to 154 targets.
- Of these 154 targets only 19 (or 12 per cent) look at BME in conjunction with another student characteristic or criteria. These include household income, PCGEs and ITTs, and Nursing and Midwifery. No targets in the 2017-18 access agreements relate to a specific sub-group within 'BME'.
- Nearly two-thirds of these targets relate to BME access or entry rates to higher education. Nearly one-third relate to success and just 8 per cent of the targets relate to progression.
- Of the success targets, just over a third specifically address the BME attainment gap.

## Effective approaches

### Undertake targeted interventions

Providers should disaggregate BME students into different ethnicities and consider how students' ethnic backgrounds may intersect with other characteristics, such as low household income or coming from a low participation area.

For example, the **University of Liverpool** runs the '**Fast Trackers**' project<sup>16</sup> **working with Year 11 students from Somali and Yemeni backgrounds**. It is important to understand how students from different BME groups in your area identify within the education system, and learn about the specific issues that they may face.

Targeting their interventions will allow universities and colleges to develop and direct their activities to where they will have the greatest impact and so make the best use of resources. Targeted activities will also allow providers to measure their impact for particular student groups and so ensure they are having the intended outcome.

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) commissioned the Higher Education Academy and the Runnymede Trust to undertake research into understanding and overcoming the challenges of targeting students from under-represented and disadvantaged ethnic backgrounds<sup>17</sup>. This work has been taken forward by the OfS, and a written report and suite of practical guidance will be published in 2018.

### Use value added measures

Providers could use value added measures to explore the achievement of students from different BME groups on the basis of their entry qualifications and subject of study. These are useful measures to use alongside actual degree attainment in order to better evaluate an institution's individual context and challenges. For example, **Kingston University**<sup>18</sup> uses a range of strategic and operational approaches with the aim of reducing institutional BME attainment gaps, including aligning their access agreement target and an institution KPI to improve learner outcomes for BME students.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112400/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/offa-topic-briefing-bme-students/#effective>

<sup>17</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112323/https://www.offa.org.uk/egp/ethnicity/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112400/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/offa-topic-briefing-bme-students/#effective>

## Adopt a whole provider approach

Providers should adopt approaches to address disparities in BME students' access, success and progression that are embedded at all levels of an institution (including senior management), and engage across all areas of an institution's work, rather than being limited to a particular unit or department. This will facilitate a joined up approach to contribute to a provider's strategic priorities relating to BME student groups. In September 2017 OFFA published a piece of research to improve understanding of what a successful 'whole institution approach' to widening participation looks like<sup>19</sup>.

When addressing disparities in BME students' experiences, providers should assess whether there are systematic and institutional biases, as well as supporting students through interventions. For example, providers should also consider staff and provider facing interventions, such as reviewing their curriculum, pedagogy, staff training and the support services available, to ensure that these are inclusive.

**The University of Hertfordshire**<sup>20</sup> has examined institutional practices and pedagogy that could sustain the differential in degree attainment between BME and white students. This has included research into the impact of a 'compassion-focussed pedagogy' in group work.

There is an underrepresentation of BME staff at higher education providers, particularly at senior level. The Higher Education Statistics Agency has recorded<sup>21</sup> only five black academic staff as 'managers, directors and senior officials' employed at UK higher education providers in 2016-17.

## Collaborate with BME students to understand their experiences

We strongly encourage providers to engage their students (including student unions or associations) in the design, implementation and evaluation of their access, success and progression activities. Where interventions are intended to benefit a particular student group it is especially important that these students are consulted and are able to contribute to the providers' understanding of, for example, BME students' experiences in higher education.

**Queen Mary University London**<sup>22</sup> is undertaking a mixed methods study to understand the variety of BME student experiences at the university, where student interview participants are also involved in the organisation of the project's activities.

## Consider all stages of the student lifecycle

It is important to understand where there are disparities for students from different ethnic backgrounds across the student lifecycle in your own institution's context, and then address these specifically.

For example, **Brunel University London** has appointed a Student Success Project Manager to oversee a diverse range of activities related to awareness, curriculum, assessment, retention and support. One of the university's aims is to halve the attainment gaps in degree outcome from 22 per cent in 2014-15 to 11 per cent by 2020-21. Data for 2015-16 showed an improvement to 17 per cent.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112311/https://www.offa.org.uk/egp/whole-institution-approach/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112400/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/offa-topic-briefing-bme-students/#effective>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/18-01-2018/sfr248-higher-education-staff-statistics>

<sup>22</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112400/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/offa-topic-briefing-bme-students/#effective>

Furthermore, the **University of East London's Young Black and Ethnic Professional Programme (YBEP)**<sup>23</sup> includes a range of activities designed to improve students' employability.

## Questions to consider

1. How are you collecting evidence of possible differences in access, student success, and progression of BME students, particularly any attainment gaps between BME and white students at your institution?
  - a. Have you assessed strategic and structural factors across the whole provider, such as teacher bias or the curriculum content?
  - b. How do you disaggregate your disadvantaged BME students to ensure activities are effectively targeted?
  - c. Have you looked at the effects of ethnicity and other disadvantaging factors combined, for example, by categorising data using ethnicity and POLAR groups?
2. How could you better listen to and engage with your BME students, so that you can provide effective support and address any barriers facing them?
3. What systems do you have in place to robustly evaluate the impact of your work with groups of BME students, particularly in targeting gaps in attainment?
  - a. How will you disseminate your research findings to help inform effective practice across the sector?
  - b. Have you considered how you could share and disseminate the findings from smaller-scale activities and projects using sector networks such as the Higher Education Race Action Group (HERAG)?
4. How do staff members at your institution work flexibly and collaboratively with others at all levels across the institution to support BME students?
5. How do you work with external partners to build a shared infrastructure to support BME students?
  - a. What systems do you have in place to monitor and evaluate collaborative activity to ensure that your collective resources are having an impact on outcomes for BME students?
6. What systems do you have in place to develop and test new, impactful approaches to target students of different ethnicities in your unique institutional context?

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<sup>23</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112400/https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/offa-topic-briefing-bme-students/#effective>

## Related resources

1. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills report Socio-economic, ethnic and gender differences in higher education participation<sup>24</sup> (2015) is a large scale statistical analysis of socio-economic status, ethnicity and gender which seeks to understand how these demographic factors drive participation in higher education.
2. The HEFCE report Differences in degree outcomes: The effect of subject and student characteristics<sup>25</sup> examines how degree outcomes in 2013-14 varied between different groups of students, after accounting for student and course characteristics.
3. The HEFCE-commissioned report Causes of differences in student outcomes<sup>26</sup> explores why different types of student achieve different outcomes in UK higher education.
4. The Equality Challenge Unit's most recent annual statistical report Equality in higher education: statistical report 2017<sup>27</sup> provides information on the age, disability, ethnicity and gender of staff and students in higher education in the academic year 2015-16, as well as the interaction between these characteristics.
5. Our topic briefing on white British students gives an overview of the current information available to help inform and develop activities to support white British students from low socio-economic status groups.

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<sup>24</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-participation-socio-economic-ethnic-and-gender-differences](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-participation-socio-economic-ethnic-and-gender-differences)

<sup>25</sup> [www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2015/201521/HEFCE2015\\_21.pdf](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2015/201521/HEFCE2015_21.pdf) (PDF)

<sup>26</sup> [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2015/diffout/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2015/diffout/)

<sup>27</sup> [www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-in-higher-education-statistical-report-2017/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-in-higher-education-statistical-report-2017/)