



Black and Minority Ethnic Access to Higher Education
A Reassessment

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Introduction

This research revisits the contested issue of ethnic minority access to higher education. It is well established that candidates from black and minority ethnic groups go to university in good numbers, but we also know that candidates from some minority groups tend to be concentrated in less prestigious institutions. Access to high status institutions is important for several reasons, not least because it is likely to affect candidates' subsequent destinations and their ability to access elite professions.

The analysis was designed to address two key questions:

1. Are candidates from black and minority ethnic groups less inclined to apply to higher status institutions than white British candidates?
2. Are candidates from black and minority ethnic groups less likely to receive offers from university (and from higher status institutions in particular) than white British applicants?

Entry into higher education depends on a series of decisions made by individual candidates and the institutions to which they apply.¹ The decisions candidates make about where to apply may help to explain why some ethnic groups tend to be concentrated in high status institutions, while others tend to be concentrated in less prestigious institutions. It is also possible that candidates from some groups are disadvantaged by the decisions that institutions make: biases in the allocation of offers, for example, may mean that some groups are more reliant than others on gaining a place through 'clearing', filtering them into less prestigious institutions.

¹ Candidates may choose to apply to up to five institutions through the UCAS main scheme. Institutions then decide whether to offer the candidate a place on a course – with that offer most often conditional on achieving particular A level grades. Candidates can then decide to hold on to two of their offers as a 'firm' and an 'insurance' offer. If they achieve the A level grades required, they are able to take up a place on one of these courses. If candidates fall short of the grades required the institution may still accept the candidate onto the course.

The data

The analysis was based on data provided by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) covering the 2008 admission cycle. All the candidates included in the sample were applying for undergraduate degree courses and were taking two or more A-levels. The sample of 50,000 candidates was stratified by ethnicity: half the sample was made up of white British candidates and the other half was made up of candidates from 13 black and minority ethnic groups. Candidates from minority groups were oversampled, with a minimum of 1500 cases drawn from each group, where possible. Weights were applied to take account of this over-sampling where appropriate. For the purposes of our analysis, universities were split into four groups, based on their ranking in *The Times 2007 Good University Guide*, with an equal number of institutions in each group. These groups have been labelled 'elite', 'higher ranking', 'mid ranking' and 'lower ranking' institutions.

Patterns of application

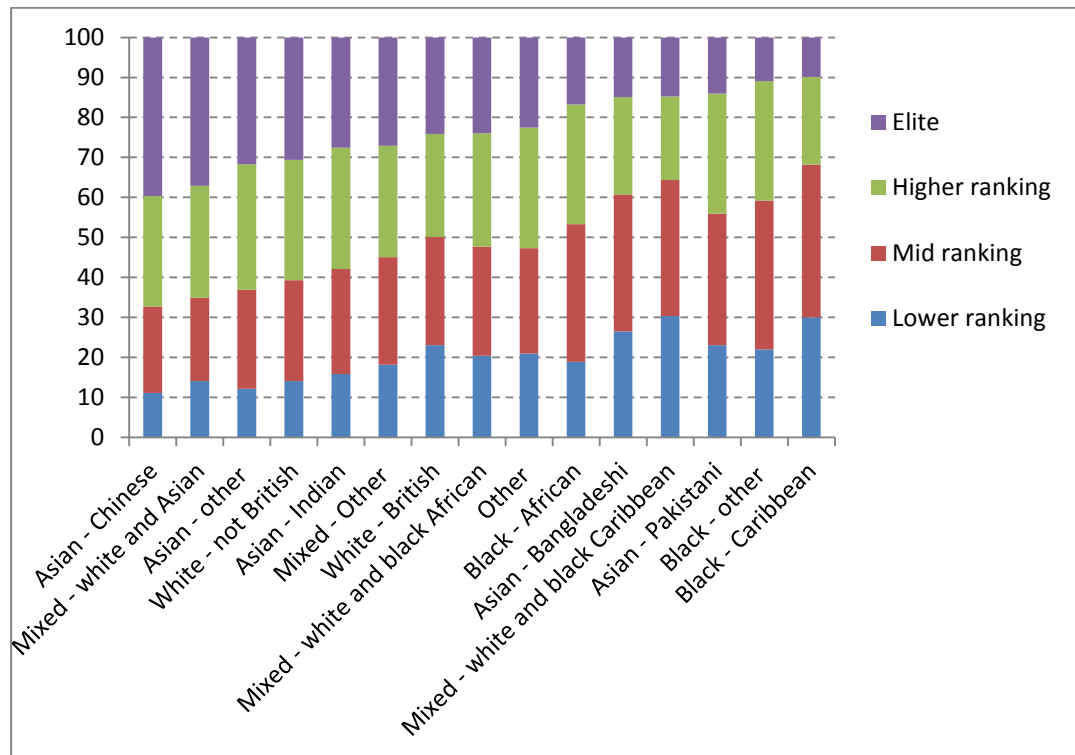
The extent to which candidates targeted their applications at more prestigious institutions varied between ethnic groups. Candidates from several minority groups applied to elite institutions at a *greater* rate than white British candidates, with those from Chinese and mixed white and Asian groups doing so at the highest rate (see Figure 1). At the other end of the spectrum, candidates from black Caribbean and black other groups were the least likely to target elite institutions, followed by those from Pakistani, mixed white and black Caribbean and Bangladeshi groups.

We examined whether these differences might be explained by other variables related to candidates' socio-economic status, their schooling, whether they applied only to local institutions and their qualifications². Once these variables were taken into account, a quite different picture emerged, with very little evidence that candidates from black and minority ethnic groups were reluctant or unwilling to apply to high status institutions.

Other things being equal, candidates from most black and minority ethnic groups were, if anything, more rather than less likely than their white British

² This analysis used multinomial logistic regression.

Figure 1 Main type of institution applied to by ethnicity (percentage of candidates)



counterparts to target high status institutions. This might be described as a picture of ambition among minority ethnic applicants:

- Candidates from ten of the minority ethnic groups were significantly *less* likely to apply to mid ranking or lower ranking institutions than elite institutions compared with their white British counterparts. These groups included candidates from the Bangladeshi, Indian, Chinese, Asian other, black African, mixed white and Asian, mixed other and other categories.
- In addition, black Caribbean and black other candidates were significantly less likely to apply to lower ranking institutions than elite institutions compared with white British candidates.
- Bangladeshi, Asian other, and mixed white and Asian candidates were less likely to apply to higher ranking institutions than elite institutions compared with their white British counterparts.

The only exceptions to this general pattern were provided by the mixed white and Caribbean group and the Pakistani group. Mixed white and black Caribbean candidates' patterns of application were not significantly different from those of the white British group once we controlled for other factors. Pakistani candidates were *more* likely to apply to higher ranking institutions than elite institutions compared with white British applicants.

One of the key messages to emerge from this study is that, in and of itself, ethnic minority status does not appear to be a barrier to applying to high status institutions. For those groups that tend not to target such institutions, the barriers appear to lie elsewhere - in attainment, schooling and, to some extent, social class. In terms of schooling, the type of school attended, the number of A-levels taken and the subjects studied were identified as important potential barriers.

Candidates' propensity to target high status institutions also varied according to their social class background, with those from higher managerial or professional family backgrounds targeting elite institutions at a much higher rate than those from less privileged family backgrounds. Although these patterns were linked to differences in attainment and schooling they could not be fully explained in this manner. Even when other variables were taken into account, candidates from all other social class groups were significantly more likely to target non-elite rather than elite institutions compared with their counterparts from higher managerial and professional family backgrounds.

Receiving an offer

We also examined whether applications made by candidates from black and minority ethnic groups were less likely to yield offers than those made by white British candidates.³ Applications from twelve of the fourteen minority groups were significantly less likely to result in an offer than applications from the white British group. The exceptions to this general pattern were Chinese, and mixed white and Asian candidates – they were the only groups for whom

³ The modelling for this analysis comprised cross-classified multi-level logistic regression models which took account of the fact that applications are clustered within candidates and also within courses. The analysis focused on whether applications yielded an offer, paying particular attention to possible differences between ethnic groups. Applications to courses that made offers to all applicants in the sample were excluded from the analysis. The analysis consequently examined 130,693 applications from 44,150 candidates to 2,326 selecting courses.

the probability of receiving an offer was not significantly lower than that for white British candidates.

From this starting point, we went on to control for a range of variables that might be expected to explain why different ethnic groups have different degrees of success when applying for university places. The first set of variables to be added were those related to the academic characteristics of an application⁴. For most minority ethnic groups the difference in the probability of receiving an offer, compared with the white British group, was much reduced, although differences remained statistically significant for all the non-mixed minority groups. Once academic variables were taken into account, Chinese candidates became significantly less likely to receive offers than white British candidates, suggesting that their reduced offer rates are masked by high levels of attainment.

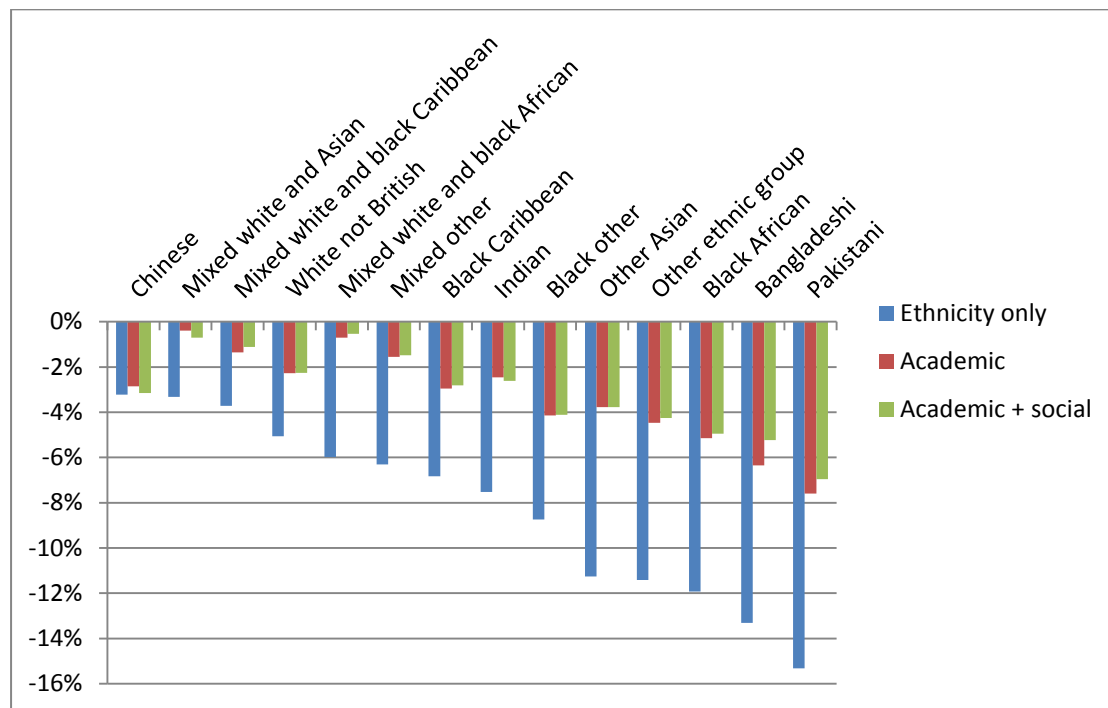
The next stage of the analysis investigated whether ethnic differences persisted when social factors were taken into account, comprising candidates' social class, sex and the type of school they attended. Applications from lower social class groups, men and candidates attending comprehensive schools were all less likely to yield offers. Controlling for these variables, differences between the non-mixed minority ethnic groups and the white British group remained statistically significant. For average applications from Pakistani candidates, the model predicted seven additional rejections per 100 applications compared with the number arising from comparable applications made by white British candidates. For applications from Bangladeshi and black African candidates five additional rejections per 100 were predicted by the model, while for black Caribbeans three additional rejections were predicted. These differences are shown in Figure 2. None of the differences between the white British and 'mixed' ethnic groups were significant in this model.

The probability of receiving an offer was also significantly linked to the type of school candidates attended and their A-level subjects. Having attended an independent or grammar school, rather than a non-selective school, increased the chances of receiving an offer. To the extent that these schooling variables

⁴ These included the application's tariff score (subsequently achieved in their A levels) compared with the mean tariff score of candidates who were subsequently accepted onto the course as well as the number of A levels taken, the contribution to the UCAS tariff score made by non-A level qualifications, the subject area of the course, and whether the candidate had previously applied through UCAS.

differ between ethnic groups, they may serve, indirectly, to advantage some ethnic groups, while disadvantaging others.

Figure 2 - Percentage point differences in the probability of receiving an offer compared with a white British applicant



Note: The ethnicity only bars show the raw difference in offer rates for candidates from the various minority ethnic groups compared with offer rate for the white British group. For the Academic and Academic + Social models differences have been estimated on the basis of the average candidate applying to the average course.

The analysis sought to assess whether the apparent effects associated with ethnicity varied between different types of university. Previous research reported that candidates from some black and minority ethnic groups faced particular difficulties gaining offers from ‘old’ universities⁵, which, it was suggested, helped to explain why candidates from some minority groups were concentrated in less prestigious institutions⁶. The Higher Education Funding Council for England responded to these findings by carrying out its own analysis and claimed there was no general ethnic penalty at work, although Pakistani candidates were found to have a lower than expected probability of

⁵ The term ‘old’ universities refer to higher education institutions that had university status prior to 1992.

⁶ Shiner, M. and Modood, T. (2002) ‘Help or Hindrance? Higher Education and the Route to Ethnic Equality’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23 (2): 209-232.

receiving an offer.⁷ The current study, employing a much larger data-set than has previously been used and utilising a cross-classified multilevel logistic regression model, found that candidates from some black and minority ethnic groups are less likely to receive offers than comparable white British candidates. But this appears to be a general effect across higher education as a whole, with no evidence of a specific bias in higher status institutions.

Although principally focused on ethnicity, this study also points towards some notable social class differences. Candidates from lower social class groups were less likely to receive offers than their more privileged counterparts and these differences persisted when other relevant variables were taken into account.

Conclusion

Previous research has reported that while black and minority ethnic groups are over-represented in higher education they tend to be concentrated in lower status institutions. This study has added to the picture of black and minority ethnic participation in higher education in several respects. We have shown that black and minority ethnic groups differ in their likelihood of applying to higher status institutions, with some being more likely to target high status institutions than white British candidates and some being less likely to do so. Our statistical modelling also indicates that when other variables are taken into account, candidates from most black and minority ethnic groups are just as, if not more, likely to target elite universities than comparable white British candidates.

In relation to the probability of an application yielding an offer, this study confirms that some black and minority groups appear to be disadvantaged in the allocation of higher education offers. Applications made by candidates from Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black African, Indian, Black Caribbean, Chinese and various 'other' groups were all found to be less likely to yield an offer than those made by white British candidates, controlling for a range of relevant variables including academic attainment. There was, however, no evidence that any apparent biases are stronger in higher status than lower status institutions.

⁷ Higher Education Funding Council for England (2005) *Higher Education Admissions: Assessment of Bias*, Hefce: Bristol.

It is striking that, according to our analysis, none of the mixed ethnic groups appear to be disadvantaged compared to white British candidates. The pattern of disadvantage highlighted by our analysis might be thought to be consistent with previous suggestions that direct discrimination on the basis of candidates' names could explain differences in offer rates. While this remains plausible, the difference in offer rates across social class groups suggests that we should be cautious when considering this potential explanation: that is, in the case of social class, direct discrimination on the basis of names is not a convincing explanation. There may be other differences between applications, including the perceived quality of personal statements and the apparent 'fit' between the applicant and the course, which may be relevant. The key finding from our analysis, however, is that ethnic and social class differences in offer rates could not be fully explained by differences in academic attainment or patterns of application.