

# Mixed messages

Statistics show that young people from ethnic minorities are now more likely to go to university than their white friends. But the figures conceal a disturbing array of problems, argue Tariq Modood and Helen Connor

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**Tuesday July 13, 2004**

**The Guardian**

Burgeoning student numbers in higher education are one of the ethnic minority success stories. Ethnic minorities now represent almost one in six home undergraduates in England, a higher share than in the population at large. Their HE participation rate (the likelihood of entering higher education by the age of 30) is 56%, substantially higher than the 38% for the white population and exceeding the government target of 50%.

This is a real achievement of ethnic minority families but it is not the full picture. Our new report has provided a reality check. It shows how participation statistics can mask enormous variations between minority groups, and also between getting into higher education and getting on from there.

Although every minority ethnic group shows higher HE participation rates than whites, the figures range from 39% for Bangladeshi to over 70% for black African, Indian and some other Asian groups. You are much less likely to find minority ethnic undergraduates in the more selective universities and some subjects (such as some sciences and the humanities). Only a few universities can claim to be multi-ethnic. Many have minority representation in single figures.

There are also significant differences in the student profiles of minority ethnic groups. For example, Bangladeshi women and black Caribbean men both have lower than average participation rates. The causes of such disparities are due to many factors - students' A-level attainment, education choices at 16, subject preferences, geographical distribution and aspirations are all key ingredients. Added to these are institutional differences in access and equal opportunities policies.

Socio-economic class is, as always, a factor in determining who gets where, but it is also capable of springing surprises. Ethnic minority degree students are more likely to come from lower social class groups than white students. This means they are generally doing better in accessing higher education than their socio-economic class would suggest.

Nevertheless, when all the main factors are controlled for, research shows a bias against ethnic minorities in the pre-1992 universities and in their favour in the new universities.

Some universities have at last started to review their admissions procedures. Recent race legislation and the proposed work of the Office for Fair Access should help to underpin this work, but for some universities, minority ethnic under-representation is not a priority. The government also should give greater priority to improving prior attainment, especially at A-level, of ethnic minority groups.

There is a real risk of an even greater social divide opening up between a small band of multi-ethnic universities (new, large inner-city institutions) and those that remain white-dominated (mainly the more traditional, research-led universities). This has wider social and economic consequences but for individuals, it means some will continue to miss out on getting into institutions that give them the best opportunities.

The problem is not simply to do with access. Given their starting points and the kinds of institutions and courses some groups are particularly concentrated in, they are more likely to drop out and less likely to get a good degree. This raises questions about whether going to university is a good career investment - questions that become acute as students accumulate debt in the hope of improving their earnings potential.

Universities need to reflect on their policies for supporting students, in particular those coming from vocational routes into highly academic programmes. Also, those with financial problems or who have to undertake high levels of term-time working need to be given adequate support. Next year's new national student survey provides a good opportunity to get insights into student satisfaction, but it will need an adequate ethnic dimension to be included by universities.

Progression into the labour market is perhaps the most serious problem. Ethnic minority students feel disadvantaged by the recruitment practices of many large employers. These focus on the more prestigious universities where minority ethnic students are less likely to be, and use high A-level points as a first sift on applications.

Often the first in the family to have gone to university, ethnic minority students lack networks and also confidence in their personal abilities. In particular, they lack awareness of the importance of work experience. Such students need support from employers and universities in their transition to the world of work. There are clear paybacks for those employers who do get involved in outreach activities with schools and universities. But numbers taking part are still relatively small. Unless more concerted action is taken, the ambitions of many students who have worked hard to become degree-educated, and expect this to improve their life chances, will not be realised.

That is the real danger - that disillusionment might set in, that hopes for better jobs will not be realised, and that messages will get back to schools that HE is not worth doing.

Making change is not easy or simple. The complexity of some of the issues and the variability between minority ethnic groups highlighted in the research mean strategies need to be designed carefully with specific groups in mind and with full knowledge of their needs. Responsibilities for making improvements go wider than the universities. The government, employers, schools and families also have crucial roles.

• Why the Difference?: A closer look at higher education minority ethnic students and graduates, H Connor, C Tyers, T Modood, J Hillage. DfES Research Report RR552  
[www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk)