

ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Why is there a disparity between the numbers of mature students from Ethnic minority backgrounds and white students returning to formal or higher education?

A HETEROGENOUS GROUP

The population of mature students is extremely diverse not only in terms of ethnicity but also religion, educational background and importantly, age. This creates problems for institutions in terms of engagement with students in the provision of student support services, events, and programmes. For students themselves, socialising with peers is more difficult and events and programmes often lack appeal as they are not directly tailored to such a diverse group. Places of higher education must now publish data on students such as age, educational background and ethnicity. What this data shows is that as age increases so too does the number mix of students from ethnic minority backgrounds. Survey data also indicates that those from BME groups typically return to further education to excel in their current career, to open up new career opportunities or because they missed the opportunity when they were younger.



REPRESENTATION

Whilst widening participation initiatives are in place across HE institutions, there is a lack of representation within academia. HESA found that in 2020/21 out of 224,530 staff, 166,010 were White. This disparity leads to an inaccessible place of learning. Such lack of diversity is a driving force in those from ethnic minorities choosing not to pursue further education in later life.

UK universities with the most students aged 25+, 2019/20				
All modes and levels				
Top 10 by number		Top 10 by percentage		
1	The Open University	102,480	1 The Institute of Cancer Research	84%
2	Anglia Ruskin University	13,985	2 The Open University	79%
3	University College London	11,495	3 London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	79%
4	Ulster University	11,145	4 London Business School	77%
5	The University of Oxford	10,005	5 Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine	77%
6	The University of Central Lancashire	9,805	6 Cranfield University	73%
7	King's College London	9,715	7 Birkbeck College	72%
8	University of the West of England, Bristol	9,455	8 Glyndwr University	68%
9	The University of Glasgow	9,335	9 The University College of Osteopathy	66%
10	University of South Wales	9,190	10 The National Film and Television School	65%
All UK universities		760,670	All UK universities 40%	

REGION

Statistics show that mature students tend to live at home whilst studying (80% of those 30+) as well as living closer to the HE institution (drive time 60 minutes or less). Several factors lead to this conclusion such as family responsibilities, employment, and cost. Differences in admissions can also be found when comparing urban and rural areas. For example, London has the highest rate of mature students from ethnic minorities. This can also be seen in cities such as Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds. The establishment of universities such as The Open University and Birkbeck allow mature students more flexibility that can cater to their more complex schedules.

OUTCOMES

Although record numbers of individuals from ethnic minorities are attending higher education, only 56% of black students achieved a First or a 2:1 compared to 80% of white students in the 2016/17 cycle. Educational achievement in HE is complex and different social, economic and cultural factors contribute to this such as family structure, career, geography and the wider community.

Million Plus (2018) Forgotten Learners: building a system that works for mature students. Accessed at: https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Forgotten_learners_building_a_system_that_works_for_mature_students.pdf

UCAS (2018) Admissions patterns for mature applicants. Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/175936/download?token=UVSBJLVD>

GOV.UK (2019) Universities must do more to tackle ethnic disparity. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-must-do-more-to-tackle-ethnic-disparity>

OFS (2020) Mature Students. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/mature-students/#:~:text=Research%20by%20million%2B%20and%20NUS,traditional%20qualifications%20than%20younger%20students.>

House of Commons Library (2021) Mature Students in England. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8809/>