



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England

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## Summary

This paper looks at equality in undergraduate education in England. It summarises the latest data from the Department for Education (DfE), the Office for Students (OfS) and UCAS on access and outcomes before looking at Government policy, the role of the OfS, and the actions and responsibilities of universities.

The classification of groups based on ethnicity, gender, disability and socio-economic status here are based on the categories used by the DfE, the OfS, and UCAS.

### Patterns in access and educational outcomes

#### Gender

Women are much more likely to go to university than men and have been for many years. They are also more likely to complete their studies and gain a first or upper second-class degree. However, after graduation, men are more likely to be in 'highly skilled' employment or further study just after graduation. Male graduate average earnings are around 8% higher than female earnings one year after graduation. This earnings gap grows substantially over their early careers and reaches 32% ten years after graduation.

#### Ethnicity

White pupils are less likely than any other broad ethnic group to go to higher education. Pupils from Chinese, Indian and Black African backgrounds have the highest entry rates. Black Caribbean pupils have particularly low entry rates to more prestigious universities.

Black students are more likely to drop out from higher education than other ethnic groups and least likely to achieve a first or upper second-class degree. In contrast, White students are least likely to drop out and most likely to achieve a first or upper second-class degree.

White graduates have the highest employment rates of any ethnic group. Chinese, Black and graduates from 'Other' ethnic groups have the lowest. Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean graduates earn the least, whereas Chinese, Indian and Mixed White and Asian graduates earn the most. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has said subject choice is important when looking at differences in graduate earnings by ethnic group. It said Asian students tend to choose "higher-return subjects than their Black and White peers."

#### Disability

Students with reported disabilities are more likely to drop out from higher education and less likely to achieve a first or upper second-class degree. Those who reported a mental health disability have the highest drop-out rates. Disabled students are also less likely to be in highly skilled employment or higher study soon after completing their first degree. Students who reported a 'social and communication' disability (such as Autistic Spectrum Disorder) have particularly low rates.

#### Socio-economic status

Pupils eligible for free school meals are much less likely than other pupils to go into higher education, particularly to more prestigious universities. They are also almost twice as likely to drop out before the start of their second year in higher education. Graduates who were eligible for free school meals are slightly less likely to be in employment or further study and they earn around 10% less than other graduates.

There is a very clear pattern showing that students from areas with higher levels of deprivation are more likely to drop out of university. There are also clear links between deprivation and achievement of first or upper second-class degrees and progression to

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highly skilled employment or higher study. Students from areas with higher deprivation levels have poorer outcomes than those from areas with low deprivation.

Analysis of entry rates shows a clear link between current and past levels of higher education in the area the pupil comes from. The entry rate in the top (POLAR – ‘Participation of Local Areas’) group - the areas with the highest levels of participation in the past - is more than twice that in the lowest one. There are also higher levels of drop out and poorer attainment among those from the lower POLAR areas. These students, however, have slightly higher levels of employment and/or further study, than those from higher POLAR areas. However, this does not continue to average salaries which are 16-18% higher in the top POLAR group than in the lowest one at both one year and ten years after graduation.

IFS research highlights the advantages that those from a particularly privileged social group have and its impact on their earnings: "...elite social networks are likely to be important in explaining the exceptional returns of some men who went to private schools."

Intersectional analysis White boys eligible for free school meals are less likely to go to higher education than any other groups when analysed by gender, free school meal eligibility and broad ethnic groups. White boys who were **not** eligible for free meals (and hence from less disadvantaged backgrounds) are also less likely than average to go to higher education.

Drop-out rates are higher among minority ethnic groups (combined) than for White students and this does not change based on the level of deprivation in the local areas they come from. The gap in drop-out rates between male and female students was greater for those from more deprived areas, with male students from more deprived areas more likely to drop out.

White students from the lowest POLAR groups have a higher level of attainment at university than students from minority ethnic groups. This is true even for those from the top three POLAR groups (combined). The gap between male and female students was greater for those from less deprived areas.

The gaps in progression rates (graduates entering highly skilled employment or higher study) between White and minority ethnic students from similarly deprived areas have fallen over the past five years. Progression rates for minority ethnic students are the same for those from both higher and lower POLAR groups at around 70%. Similarly, around 70% of White students from lower POLAR groups have entered highly skilled employment or higher study. Progression rates for White students from higher POLAR groups were higher at around 74%.

IFS analysis of earnings data concluded:

...among students from different socio-economic or ethnic groups but with the same prior attainment and other background characteristics, university education can help level the playing field in the labour market. However, substantial unexplained differences remain even for graduates. In particular, graduate men from all ethnic minority groups have lower earnings than male White British graduates even after controlling for prior attainment and a host of other background characteristics."

### Barriers to equal access, participation, and outcomes

Several factors have been identified as barriers to greater equality in higher education for students from different backgrounds. These include the prior attainment of students, insufficient advice and support both before and during university, financial concerns that

deter young people from applying and can have a detrimental impact on experiences of higher education, and the prevalence of sexual and racial harassment on campus.

## Policy approaches

The Government, the OfS, and individual higher education providers (HEPs) all play a role in improving access, participation, and outcomes for students.

### The Government

The Government established the OfS in 2018 as the regulator of higher education in England. It inherited the responsibility for promoting fair access to higher education that had previously fallen to the Office for Fair Access (OfFA). The OfS is also responsible for ensuring that students, whatever their background, are supported to succeed in and progress from higher education.

The Government sets out its priorities for the OfS in an annual letter. This informs the levels of funding that it sets for the Student Premium, the Disabled Student Premium, and the Uni Connect programme, which aim to support student access and success. The Government's indicative funding totals for 2021/22 show the main Student Premium and Disabled Student Premium are to be maintained at £216 million and £40 million respectively. Funding for Uni Connect has been cut by £20 million to £40 million.

### The Office for Students

In 2018, the OfS introduced Access and Participation Plans (APPs) as a registration condition for HEPs in England that want to charge higher level tuition fees. APPs show that HEPs undertake a range of activities to increase representation, including creating partnerships with local schools and colleges, running mentoring and ambassador schemes, and facilitating summer schools.

Planned spending on APPs from 2020/21 to 2024/25 is to increase from just over £550 million to around £565 million. Around 60 per cent of this is for financial support (mainly bursaries and scholarships), and the remainder is for outreach activity aimed at increasing access among disadvantaged groups.

### Higher education providers

Many HEPs use contextual admissions data when making offers to applicants, in an attempt to widen participation among disadvantaged groups. This process involves considering an individual's socioeconomic background and their school performance data, among other things, rather than relying solely on their results in exams and coursework.

Providers have also looked to improve the attainment and future success of disadvantaged students. Measures include making reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled students can fully participate in higher education, and using careers services to reduce differential employment outcomes for individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds and those with low-socio-economic status.

# 1. Background

For many decades there have been wide variations in the take-up of higher education (HE) among different groups of students depending on their ethnic groups, gender, disability, and socio-economic status.

The HE sector has tried to reduce these discrepancies and to widen access and participation through strategies which aim to address the imbalance in student numbers between groups.

Students from under-represented groups might face barriers to entry to higher education and difficulties in progression through higher education. 'Widening participation' schemes attempt to remove these barriers and to improve access to education, progress within higher education and to improve graduate outcomes, such as degree classification, employment and further study.

Widening participation in higher education is currently delivered by institutions and the Office for Students (OfS) which approves and monitors HE institutions' plans for widening access and participation and disseminates best practice.

This briefing analyses available data to assess the current situation with regard to access, progression and outcomes for specific under-represented groups. It looks at the actions taken by institutions, Government and the Office for Students (OfS) to promote equality and recent issues around equality in higher education.

It also looks at the intersection of some groups (such as gender and ethnicity) where the data are available. It does not look at geographical variations, but it does include analysis of local areas based on their past levels of participation in higher education.

There are many reasons for the difference in participation between areas and this should be viewed as a 'cross-cutting' issue, covering different aspects of educational disadvantage. Similarly, the paper includes some data on part-time and mature students who are more likely to have characteristics linked to disadvantage and under-representation in higher education.

## 1.1 Further reading and resources

### House of Commons Library briefing papers

- [Oxbridge 'elitism'](#), 25 May 2021
- [Part-time undergraduate students in England](#), 3 March 2021
- [Higher education student numbers](#), 26 February 2021
- [Mature students in England](#), 24 February 2021
- [Support for disabled students in higher education in England](#), 22 February 2021
- [Race and Ethnic Disparities](#), 27 September 2020
- [Support for students with mental health issues in higher education in England](#), 17 December 2020

### Publications and data from the Office for Students:

- [Annual report 2019-20](#)
- [Access and participation dashboard](#)
- [Equality and diversity data](#)
- [Young participation by area](#)
- [Differences in student outcomes](#)
- [Access and participation plan data](#)

### UCAS data undergraduate end of cycle data resources 2020:

- [Sector level](#)
- [Provider level](#)

### Higher Education Statistics Agency data:

- [Student numbers, personal characteristics and widening participation](#)
- [Widening participation performance indicators](#)
- [Advance HE Equality in higher education: statistical report 2020](#)

## 2. Differences in higher education access and outcomes between groups

This section introduces some of the main indicators of differences in access, continuation and outcomes between different groups. It is not an exhaustive analysis of all the data related to the issues. There are a very large number of groups and sub-groups and intersection of different characteristics, different indicators, geographical variations, trends over time or groups of higher education institutions which could be included.

This paper summarises some of the main data and highlights the most important patterns in these. It includes links to more detailed data and other indicators for further information.

### Box 1: Groups included in this analysis

#### Sex

- Male
- Female

#### Ethnicity

- White -where available broken down into: British, Irish, Gypsy/Roma, Traveller of Irish heritage, and other.
- Mixed -where available broken down into: White and Asian, White and Black African, White and Black Caribbean and other
- Asian -where available broken down into: Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese and other
- Black -where available broken down into: African, Caribbean and other
- Other

Note that the charts in this paper display broad ethnic groups sorted from smallest to largest on the value of the indicator in question. This is to help view patterns in the underlying data. Similarly detailed ethnic groups are sorted within their broad heading where this data is available.

#### Disability

- Disability reported -where available broken down into type of disability reported
- No disability reported
- Special Educational Needs Status is used as a proxy for data on pupils as disability is not recorded

#### Age

- Young students -age under 21 when they start their undergraduate course
- Mature students -age 21 or older when they start their undergraduate course

#### Socio-economic disadvantage

- Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) -Quintile (20%) groups based on the deprivation of the area the student comes from. Group 1 is the most deprived, group 5 the least deprived.
- Participation of local area (POLAR4) - Quintile (20%) groups based on past levels of young participation in higher education in the area the student comes from. Group 1 had the lowest levels of participation, group 5 the highest. Includes entrants aged under 21 only.
- Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility – Pupils broken down by FSM eligibility at school when aged 15. Includes pupils at state-funded schools in England only.

## 2.1 Access to higher education

Equality in access to higher education is important as the financial returns to higher education are high on average. There are also many non-financial benefits to higher education and graduates report: better general health, better mental health, longer life expectancy and greater life satisfaction than non-graduates. Graduates are also more likely to participate in society through voting and volunteering.<sup>1</sup> Higher education is arguably a key way to improve social mobility and fair access to higher education is important for ensuring social equality.

The charts below breakdown higher education entry (progression) rates for different groups. These data only cover English state school pupils and look at whether they had started higher education by age 19.

Access to higher education was:

- Higher among women than men
- Lowest among the White population, highest among those from Chinese and Asian backgrounds.
- Much lower in those who had identified Special Educational Needs at school, especially those with the most severe needs (who had a statement/EHCP)
- Lowest in the lowest POLAR group (areas with the lowest historical levels of participation) and higher at each subsequent group
- Much lower among those who were eligible for free school meals.

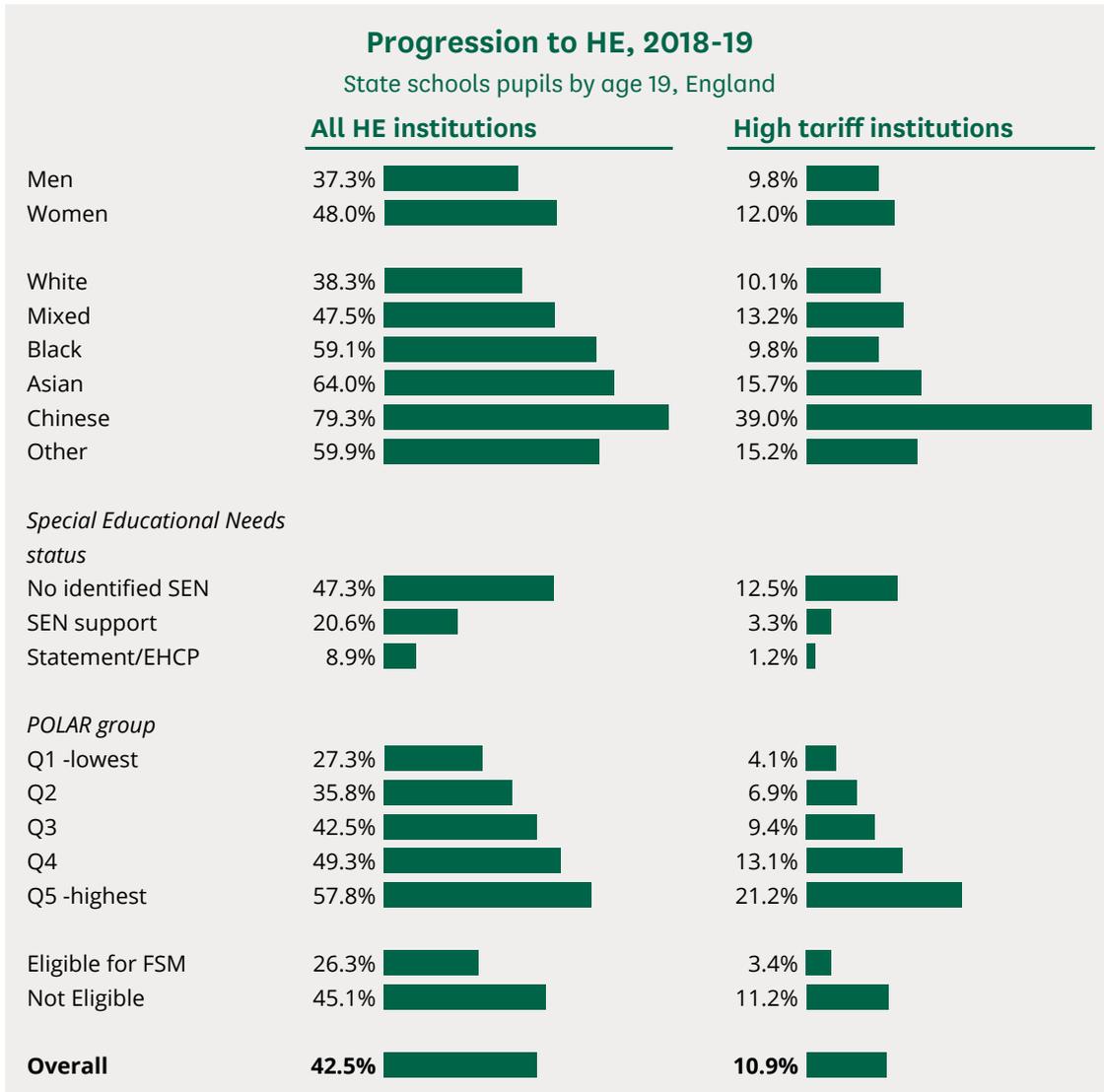
The right hand side of the graphic looks at access to 'high tariff' higher education institutions - these are the third of institutions with the highest entry qualifications among its students. These institutions are the hardest to get into and generally viewed as the most prestigious.

Compared to the overall entry rates the patterns for high tariff institutions are similar, but more extreme with larger gaps between groups. This is particularly true for the breakdown by SEN status, POLAR group and FSM eligibility.

Chinese students stand out from other ethnic groups with a much higher entry rate for high tariff institutions. In contrast Black students had the lowest entry rate for high tariff institutions, despite being well above average on the overall rate. Only 17% of Black entrants went to a high tariff institution compared to 49% of Chinese students and 25% of all students.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on this subject see the briefing paper [returns to a degree](#)

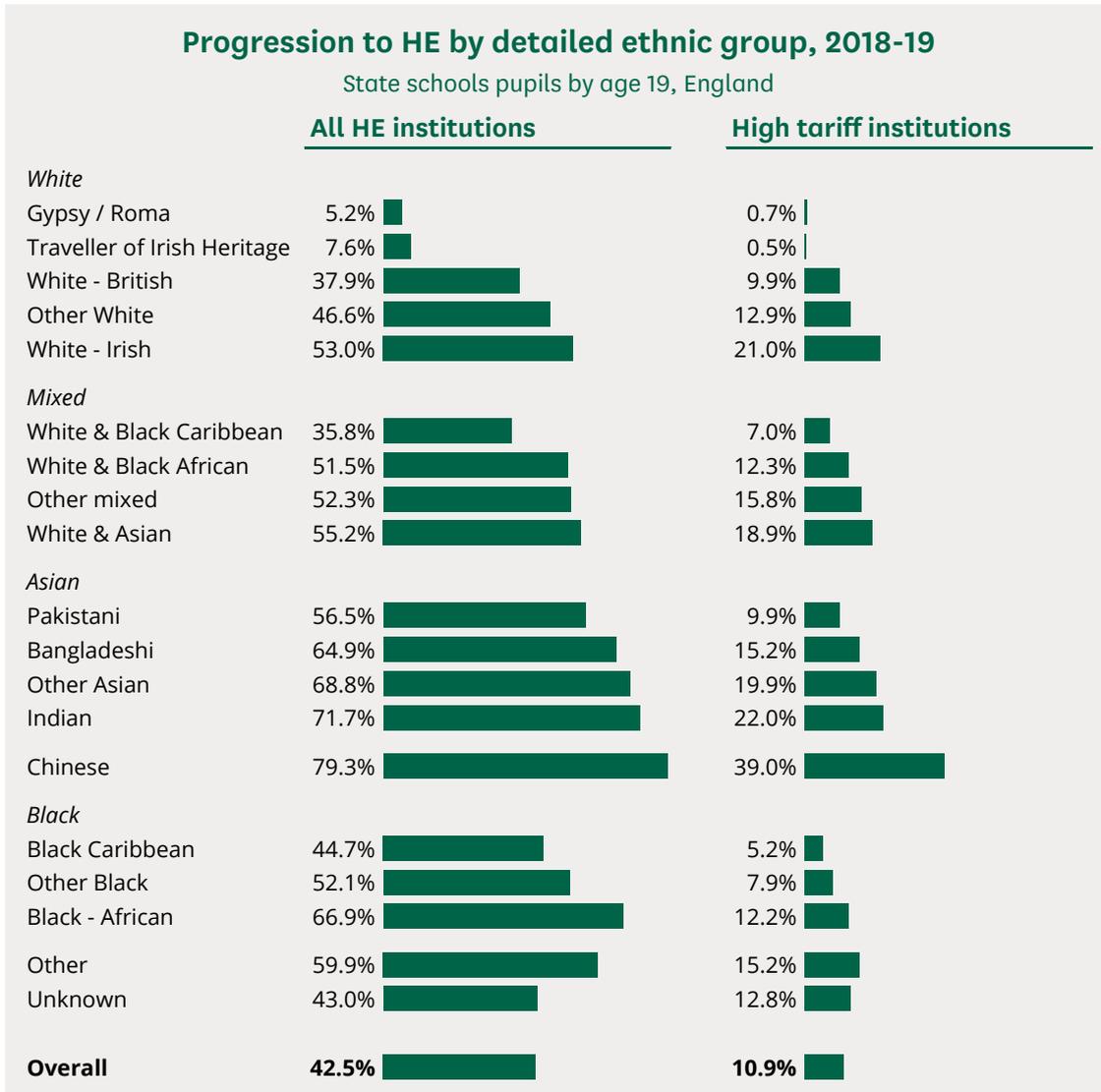


Source: [Widening participation in higher education: 2020](#), DfE

The next chart gives progression rates for more detailed ethnic groups. This highlights the extremely low progression rates among pupils from Gypsy/Roma or Traveller backgrounds. Around 38% of White British pupils went to higher education by age 19. This was lower than any other (non-White) ethnic group shown here other than Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils. Indian pupils had the highest progression rates within the Asian group (and second overall to Chinese pupils) and Pakistani pupils the lowest. Black African pupils had a higher progression rate than Black Caribbean pupils, but both were still above average.

White British and Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils were less likely to go to HE than any other major ethnic group

Only just under 12% of Black Caribbean pupils who progressed to higher education went to a high tariff institution. This was less than half the average across all pupils.



Source: [Widening participation in higher education: 2020](#), DfE

The following table looks at progression rates for the intersection of sex, free school meal eligibility (FSM) and broad ethnic group. It is shaded to highlight patterns in the data. Taken overall it shows information we might expect given the earlier results, however it also reveals some interesting patterns:

- Gaps by FSM eligibility are much bigger for White and Mixed ethnicity pupils than those for pupils from other ethnic groups.
- More females than males go to higher education in all ethnic groups, but the gap was largest among Black, White and Mixed ethnicity pupils. The gap by gender is somewhat larger among pupils who were eligible for FSM
- Only 13.6% of White boys who were eligible for FSM went to higher education the lowest figure of any group in this table and one-third of the overall average.
- Pupils eligible for FSM (and hence from more economically disadvantaged backgrounds) from Asian, Black, Chinese and Other ethnic groups were all more likely to go to higher education than White pupils who were not eligible for FSM.

White males eligible for free school meals -so-called 'White working class boys' had lower HE participation rates than any other group when analysed by sex, ethnicity and FSM.

### Progression to HE by ethnic group, gender and free school meal eligibility

Percentage of pupils from state-funded schools starting HE by age 19, England, 2018/19

	Eligible for FSM			Not eligible for FSM			All pupils		
	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All
White	20.5%	13.6%	16.9%	46.7%	36.0%	41.2%	43.6%	33.3%	38.3%
Mixed	34.6%	24.3%	29.5%	57.8%	46.0%	51.9%	53.2%	41.8%	47.5%
Asian	57.9%	47.4%	52.4%	72.3%	61.5%	66.7%	69.5%	58.8%	64.0%
Chinese	79.2%	67.1%	72.8%	83.5%	76.2%	79.8%	83.2%	75.5%	79.3%
Black	57.9%	42.4%	50.1%	70.7%	53.5%	62.2%	67.5%	50.7%	59.1%
Other	60.2%	52.2%	55.9%	66.5%	56.6%	61.3%	64.9%	55.4%	59.9%
Total	30.6%	22.3%	26.3%	50.8%	39.7%	45.1%	48.0%	37.3%	42.5%

Source: [Widening participation in higher education: 2020](#), DfE

A version of this table with detailed ethnic groups is included in the [appendix](#) to this paper.

The next table gives higher tariff progression rates for the same groups. It shows that the gap by FSM eligibility was much higher among White pupils and lowest among Chinese, Mixed ethnicity and Black students. Black boys had the lowest progression rate to high tariff institutions among pupils not eligible for FSM.

### Progression to high tariff HE by ethnic group, gender and free school meal eligibility

Percentage of pupils from state-funded schools starting HE by age 19, England, 2018/19

	Eligible for FSM			Not eligible for FSM			All pupils		
	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All
White	2.7%	2.1%	2.4%	12.3%	10.0%	11.1%	11.2%	9.0%	10.1%
Mixed	5.5%	4.9%	5.2%	16.8%	13.5%	15.2%	14.6%	11.9%	13.2%
Asian	9.9%	8.4%	9.1%	17.9%	16.7%	17.3%	16.3%	15.1%	15.7%
Chinese	33.3%	24.1%	28.5%	43.1%	36.6%	39.8%	42.4%	35.7%	39.0%
Black	8.3%	5.4%	6.8%	13.2%	8.4%	10.8%	11.9%	7.7%	9.8%
Other	11.1%	11.1%	11.1%	18.2%	15.3%	16.7%	16.4%	14.1%	15.2%
Total	4.6%	3.6%	4.1%	13.2%	10.8%	12.0%	12.0%	9.8%	10.9%

### Subject choice

The UCAS [End of cycle data resources 2020](#) includes a breakdown of subject choices of new full-time undergraduates. This is broken down to detailed subject level. Some key patterns at a broad subject level are summarised below. This analysis looks at the proportion of each groups studying each broad subject compared to the proportion of all students studying it. The result is an 'odds ratio' which shows how much more, or less likely each group is to choose each subject than average. The table below lists the subjects with the highest/lowest 'odds ratio' in order of importance. Only a few subjects are listed for each group of students. These are the most important variations from the overall

pattern of subject choice, not all that are slightly different. This data covers all home students other than the IMD figures which are England only and POLAR data which are for entrants aged under 21 only.

### What subjects were different groups of students more or less likely to study?

Full-time home students starting undergraduate courses in 2020

Group	More likely to study	Less likely to study
Women	Education, subjects allied to medicine, languages/classics, vet. science/agriculture, law	Engineering, computer science, technologies, maths, architecture/planning, physical sciences
Men	Engineering, computer science, technologies, maths, architecture/planning, physical sciences	Education, subjects allied to medicine, languages/classics, vet. science/agriculture, law
Young	Physical sciences, maths, languages/classics, history	Education, subjects allied to medicine, languages/classics, vet. science/agriculture, law
Mature	Education, subjects allied to medicine, languages/classics, vet. science/agriculture, law	Physical sciences, maths, languages/classics, history
Asian	Medicine & dentistry, engineering, computer science, law, business/admin	Vet. science/agriculture, languages, creative art & design, history
Black	Subjects allied to medicine, social business/admin	vet. science/agriculture, languages, history, maths, physical sciences
Mixed	Non-European languages, other languages, arts	Education, vet. science/agriculture, subjects allied to medicine
White	Vet. science/agriculture, education, creative art & design, languages, history	Medicine & dentistry, engineering, computer science, law, subjects allied to medicine
<i>Disability</i>		
Autistic disorder	Computer science, technologies, maths	Medicine & dentistry, subjects allied to medicine, business/admin
Blind/partial sight	History, social studies, European languages	Technologies, not european languages, architecture, subjects allied to medicine
Deaf/partial hearing	Non-European languages, history	Technologies, maths, medicine & dentistry
Learning difficulty	Creative art & design, vet. science/agriculture	Law, languages, maths
Long standing illness	Subjects allied to medicine, non-european languages	Engineering, architecture, business & admin
Mental health	Non-European languages, linguistics/classics, creative art & design	Medicine & dentistry, engineering, business/admin, architecture
Multiple disabilities	Non-European languages, creative art & design, veterinary science/agriculture	Medicine & dentistry, engineering, business/admin, architecture
Wheelchair/mobility	Non-European languages, mass communication & documentation,	Medicine & dentistry, maths, engineering, subjects allied to medicine
<i>IMD quintile</i>		
1 <i>Most deprived areas</i>	Subjects allied to medicine, education, computer science, law, business & admin	Languages, history, maths, vet. science/agriculture, medicine & dentistry
5 <i>least deprived areas</i>	European languages, history, medicine & dentistry, maths, physical sciences	Subjects allied to medicine, education, computer science

Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020](#)

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It is important to realise that the qualifications needed for entry can vary considerably between subjects<sup>2</sup> and school exams results play an important role in subject choice. Graduate earnings vary considerably by degree subject, so the choice of course is an important factor in social mobility and wider equality.

### Further information

- [Widening participation in higher education: 2020](#) includes additional analysis by other categories of pupils, region and gives trends over time.
- [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020](#) has data on 18 year old entry rates for various different groups of young people back to 2011.
- [UCAS undergraduate provider-level end of cycle data resources 2020](#) includes data on applications and acceptances of different groups of students at individual higher education institutions.
- [Who's studying in HE?](#) from HESA gives recent trends in the overall number of students with different characteristics. HESA's [Widening participation performance indicators](#) includes data for all universities on entrants from state schools and low participation areas and students in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance in 2018/19 median earnings for those who graduated five years earlier varied from around £21,000 a year for performing arts and £22,000 a year for creative arts and design to £35,000 or more for architecture, engineering and economics. See [Graduate outcomes \(LEO\): outcomes in 2018 to 2019](#), DfE

## 2.2 Continuation at university

The latest data on non-continuation rates are given opposite. Non-continuation is defined as full-time first year students who are not continuing their studies 12 months later (24 months for part-time students). The average non-continuation rate across all groups was 9.9%.

The groups of students with the highest non-continuation rates were:

- Mature (15.6%)
- Black (15.1%)
- From the lowest POLAR groups (12.4-14.0%)
- Other ethnic group (12.6%)
- Formerly eligible for free school meals (12.1%)
- Men (11.3%)

Over the previous five years the only gap between groups where there was a statistically significant change was that between young and mature students which increased.

Within the group who reported a disability those with a mental health disability had the highest non-continuation rate at 13.0%

The data on intersections of groups show that non-continuation rates were higher among minority ethnic groups (combined) than White students when analysed by deprivation (IMD). The gap is 1-2 percentage points. The same is true when analysed by POLAR group. The gap between male and female students was larger for those from more deprived areas.

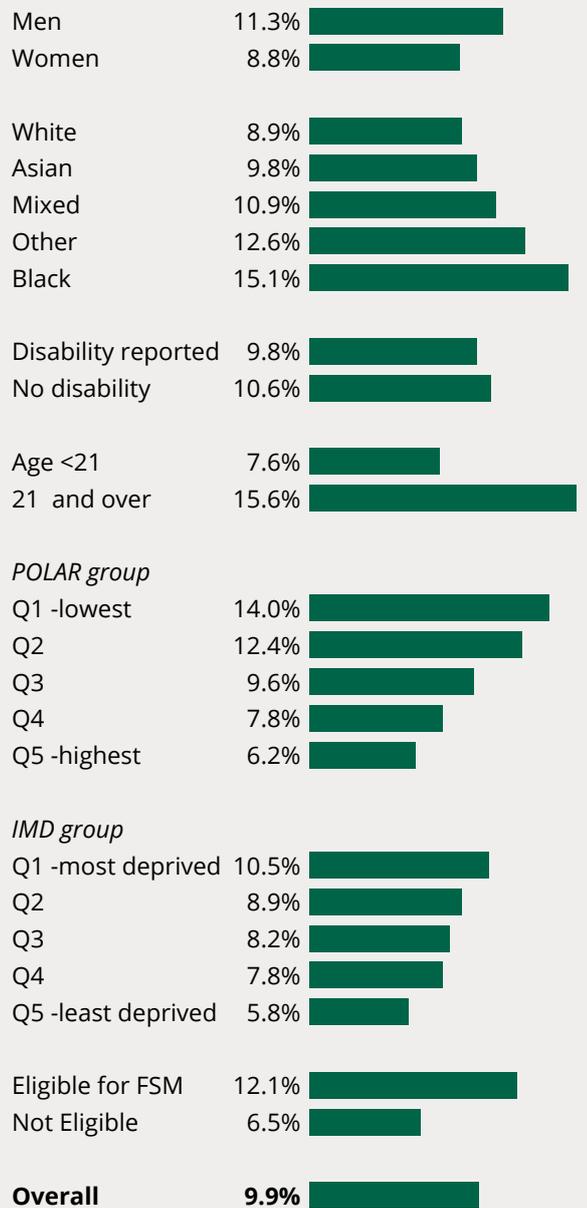
Non-continuation rates were substantially higher for part-time students at 33% in 2018-19.<sup>3</sup>

### Further information

The OFS [Access and participation dashboard](#) gives this information over the previous five years and includes more detail on gaps between groups and intersection of some groups. It also allows users to look at these data for individual institutions. The HESA [non-continuation performance indicators](#) give data for all UK universities including a benchmark figure to compare these with which is adjusted for the subject, qualifications and age-mix of students. They also give separate figures for students from low POLAR areas.

### Non-continuation rates 2018-19

#### Full-time undergraduates in England



Source: [Access and participation dashboard](#), OfS

<sup>3</sup> Part-time students not continuing their studies 24 months after starting

## 2.3 Attainment

The latest data on attainment is given opposite and shows the proportion achieving a first or upper second class degree. These rates increased substantially for all groups of students in 2019/20 which is thought to be due to the 'no detriment' approach to assessment<sup>4</sup> adopted by many universities in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The proportion of students achieving a first or upper second class degree across all groups was 83.4%.

The groups of students with the highest proportion achieving a first or upper second class degree were:

- Women (84.4%)
- White (86.6%)
- Young (85.2%)
- From the highest POLAR (88.7%) and IMD (89.4%) groups

The large increase in 2019/20 meant that the gaps between groups generally fell in 2019/20 with those in the groups with lower levels 'catching up' somewhat in 2019/20

The data on intersections of groups show that attainment rates were lower among minority ethnic groups (combined) than White students when analysed by POLAR group. White students from the lowest two POLAR groups had a higher level of attainment than minority ethnic students from the top three POLAR groups (combined). The gap between White and minority ethnic students was larger for those from the higher POLAR groups. The gap between male and female students was greater for those from less deprived (IMD) areas.

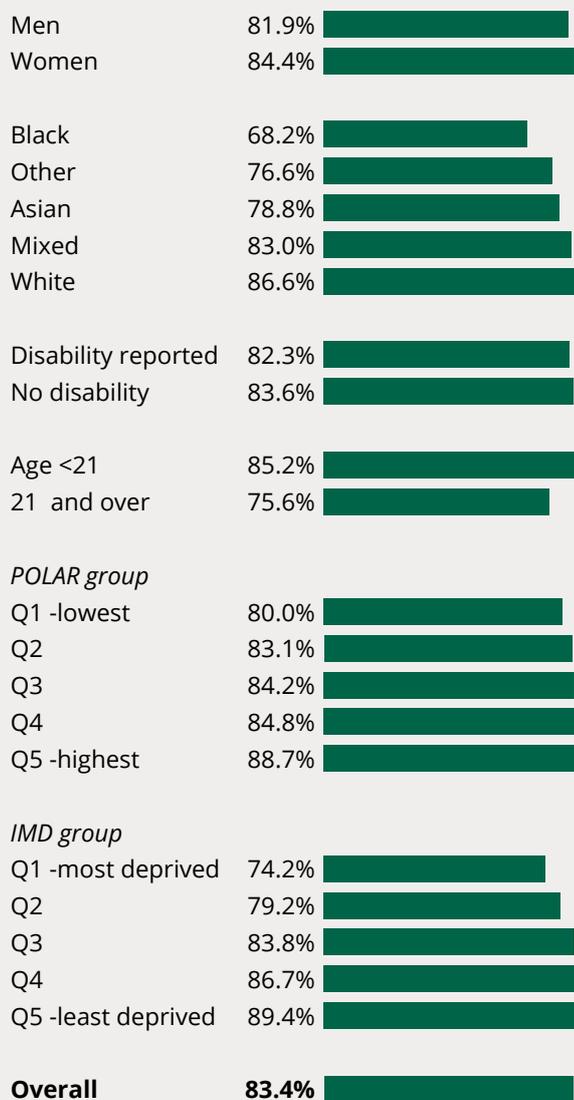
Only 59% of part-time students achieved a first or upper second class degree. Attainment among minority ethnic part-time students were particularly low at around 35% overall in 2019-20.

### Further information

The OFS [Access and participation dashboard](#) gives this information over the previous five years and includes more detail on gaps between groups and intersection of some groups. It also allows users to look at these data for individual institutions.

### Students achieving a first or upper second class degree, 2019-20

#### Full-time students in England



Source: [Access and participation dashboard](#), OfS

<sup>4</sup> According to HESA "This typically ensured that students would be awarded a final grade no lower than the most recent provider assessment of their attainment. The impact can be seen in the increase in the proportion of first class degrees awarded in 2019/20 compared with 2018/19."

## 2.4 Outcomes after graduation

### Activity after finishing study

The latest OfS data on progression are given opposite. This shows graduates who progress on to highly skilled employment or study at a higher level six months after graduation. The average across all groups of graduates was 73.1%.

The groups of students with the highest progression rates on this measure were:

- Men (73.3%)
- White (74.0%)
- Not disabled (73.3%)
- Mature (75.7%)
- From the highest POLAR (74.8%) and IMD (76.1%) groups

While the gap between men and women is relatively small it contrasts with the indicators on access, continuation and attainment where women all have higher rates. Black students were least likely to progress on to highly skilled employment or study at a higher level. There was relatively little difference between the other minority ethnic groups, all of which had clearly lower rates than White students.

Within the group who reported a disability those with a 'social and communication' disability had substantially lower progression rates at 61.8%.

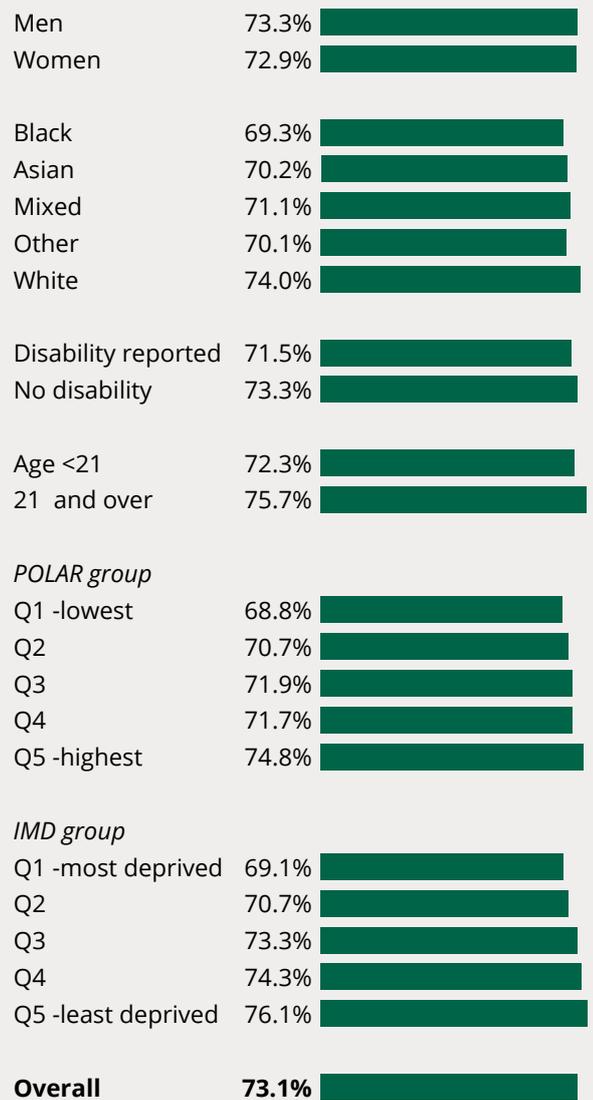
Over the previous five years the gaps between young and mature students, White and minority ethnic students and between those from the most and least deprived areas all fell significantly.

The data on intersections of groups show progression rate gaps between White and minority ethnic students from similarly deprived areas have fallen over the past five years. There was very little difference in minority ethnic progression rates when analysed by POLAR group. They were around 70% in 2016-17 for groups 1-2 and 3-5. White students from lower POLAR group areas also had progression rates of around 70%, while those from higher groups were around 74%. There was little difference between male and female progression rates when broken down by deprivation (IMD). Male progression rates were around 1.5 percentage points higher than female ones for those from similar POLAR groups.

Progression rates for part-time students were very similar at 73.4% overall in 2016-17.

### Graduates in higher study or highly skilled employment, 2016/17

Former full-time undergraduates in England



Source: [Access and participation dashboard](#), OfS

The Department for Education's Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset links administrative datasets from the higher education sector with those from further education, schools, HMRC earnings and employment records and the Department for Work and Pensions' National Benefit Database and Labour Market System. It allows detailed information on graduate outcomes (employment and earnings) to be analysed by a wide range of different student/graduate characteristics. It does not include information by disability.

The latest LEO data is for the 2018/19 tax year and looks at the following first degree graduates from English higher or further education institutions:

- 2016/17 graduating cohort one year after graduation
- 2014/15 graduating cohort three years after graduation
- 2012/13 graduating cohort five years after graduation
- 2007/08 graduating cohort ten years after graduation

The LEO data presented in this paper looks at home students who studied a first degree in England. The following table gives the proportion of graduates in sustained employment<sup>5</sup> and/or further study<sup>6</sup>. It shows relatively little difference between groups on most measures. This was in contrast to analysis by prior attainment where there were large gaps. Some of the more important patterns in the groups covered in this paper were:

New female graduates were more likely to be in employment or further study than men, but this gap falls over time.

Young graduates were more likely to be in employment or further study than mature graduates. This gap increases over time from around one percentage point among those one year after graduation to around four points ten years after graduation.

Graduates from a Chinese ethnic background were least likely to be in employment or further study.<sup>7</sup> White graduates had higher employment/study rates than all other ethnic groups and this gap increased with time since graduation.

There was relatively little difference in employment/study rates by POLAR group.

Graduates who were eligible for free school meals at school had lower employment/study rates than other graduates by around three percentage points.

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<sup>5</sup> Defined as employed for at least one day for five out of the six months between October and March or have a self-employment record

<sup>6</sup> A graduate is defined as being in further study if they have a valid higher education study record at any UK HE institution. This does not have to be at postgraduate level

<sup>7</sup> A relatively large proportion of Chinese graduates were classified as 'activity not captured'. They have been matched to DWP records but they do not have any employment, out-of-work benefits or further study records in the tax year of interest.

## What do different groups of graduates do after leaving university?

% in sustained employment and/or further study 2018/19

	Years after graduation...			
	One	Three	Five	Ten
Men	87.3%	86.4%	85.7%	84.6%
Women	89.9%	88.7%	87.4%	85.1%
Young	89.0%	88.3%	87.2%	86.1%
Mature	88.1%	86.3%	85.3%	82.0%
White	89.6%	88.6%	87.7%	86.1%
Mixed	85.9%	84.3%	83.4%	81.8%
Asian	87.1%	85.9%	84.0%	81.4%
Black	87.4%	85.8%	83.4%	80.4%
Chinese	81.6%	80.3%	75.2%	70.5%
Other	82.4%	80.0%	78.3%	76.3%
<i>POLAR group</i>				
Q1 -lowest	90.0%	88.9%	87.6%	87.3%
Q2	89.6%	88.8%	87.6%	86.7%
Q3	88.9%	88.9%	87.7%	86.1%
Q4	89.3%	88.0%	87.4%	86.1%
Q5 -highest	88.6%	87.8%	86.6%	85.6%
Eligible for FSM	86.3%	85.9%	84.4%	n/a
Not Eligible	89.1%	88.7%	87.9%	n/a
<b>Overall</b>	<b>88.8%</b>	<b>87.7%</b>	<b>86.7%</b>	<b>84.9%</b>

Source: [Graduate outcomes \(LEO\): outcomes in 2018 to 2019](#), DfE

## Earnings

LEO data on median earnings among graduates in sustained employment is given in the following table and charts.

Median earnings for men were 8% higher than for women one year after graduation, but this gap increases substantially over time and was 32% ten year after graduation. Young graduates start their career earning less than mature graduates, but were earning more three years after graduation and 19% more ten years after graduation.

Chinese graduates earned more than any other ethnic group. Black graduates and those from Other ethnic groups earn the least soon after graduation and fall further behind over time since graduation.

The second chart looks at detailed ethnic group and shows that within Asian graduates those from an Indian background earn the most, almost as much as Chinese graduates. Pakistani and Bangladeshi graduates earn much less at the start of their careers. Earnings growth over time was particularly small for Pakistani graduates. Their median earnings 10 years after graduation were £25,200 which was 19% below the average across all graduates. Black Caribbean graduates had the next lowest median earnings.

Black graduates earn less than other graduates soon after graduation. This gap gets larger at three, five and ten years since graduation.

There is a very clear earnings pattern by POLAR group with those from areas with higher levels of past participation earning more. This pattern is sustained over the ten years following graduation. Graduates who were eligible for free school meals at school earned less than others and this gap increases from 10% one year after graduation to 12% five years after graduation.

The differences between these groups are much smaller than differences between graduate earnings by subject of study or prior attainment.

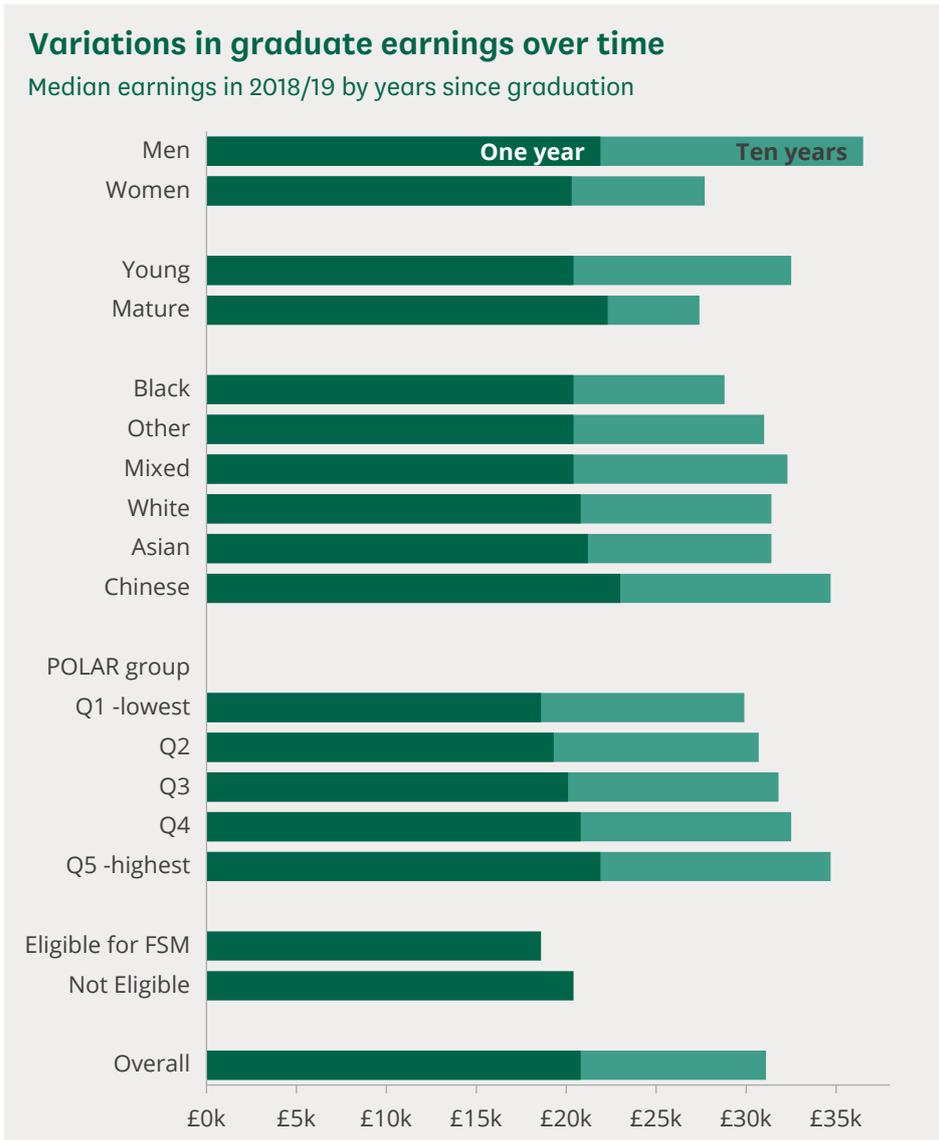
### What do different groups of graduates earn after leaving university?

Median earnings 2018/19

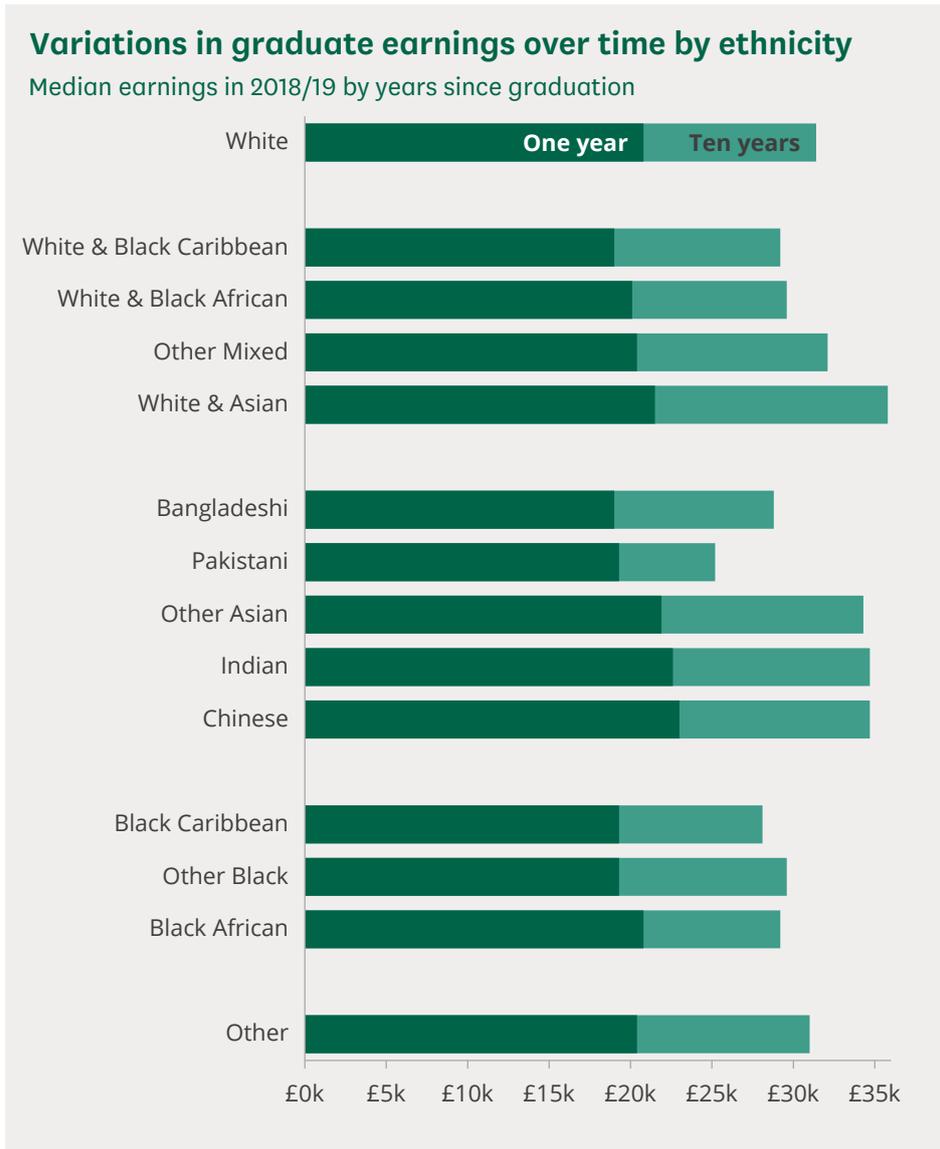
	Years after graduation...			
	One	Three	Five	Ten
Men	£21,900	£26,300	£29,900	£36,500
Women	£20,300	£23,700	£25,900	£27,700
Young	£20,400	£24,800	£27,700	£32,500
Mature	£22,300	£24,100	£25,600	£27,400
White	£20,800	£24,500	£27,400	£31,400
Mixed	£20,400	£24,500	£27,700	£32,300
Asian	£21,200	£25,200	£27,700	£31,400
Black	£20,400	£23,700	£25,900	£28,800
Chinese	£23,000	£27,000	£29,900	£34,700
Other	£20,400	£24,800	£27,700	£31,000
POLAR group				
Q1 -lowest	£18,600	£23,400	£25,900	£29,900
Q2	£19,300	£24,100	£26,600	£30,700
Q3	£20,100	£24,500	£27,700	£31,800
Q4	£20,800	£25,200	£28,100	£32,500
Q5 -highest	£21,900	£25,900	£29,600	£34,700
Eligible for FSM	£18,600	£22,600	£24,800	n/a
Not Eligible	£20,400	£24,500	£27,700	n/a
<b>Overall</b>	<b>£20,800</b>	<b>£24,500</b>	<b>£27,400</b>	<b>£31,100</b>

The earnings gap between men and women grows substantially in the ten years after graduation

Source: [Graduate outcomes \(LEO\): outcomes in 2018 to 2019](#), DfE



Source: [Graduate outcomes \(LEO\): outcomes in 2018 to 2019](#), DfE



Source: [Graduate outcomes \(LEO\): outcomes in 2018 to 2019](#), DfE

These data show variations in employment and earnings for different groups of graduates - questionably some these observed differences may be 'explained' by factors linked to outcomes, such as prior attainment, degree subject or where they live in the country? Any remaining 'unexplained' differences are, as far as we can tell, down to being part of that group alone.

A [recent IFS report](#) attempted to answer questions around employment and earnings using LEO data to estimate financial returns to a degree up to age 30.<sup>8</sup> It looked at the earnings premium in percentage terms broken down by gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity. Its focus was therefore on the financial returns to a degree for members of each group compared to not going to higher education, rather than absolute differences in earnings. The socio-economic status measure used a combination of free school meal eligibility and local area deprivation and had a separate category for privately-educated graduates. Their

<sup>8</sup> Britton J. et al, [The returns to undergraduate degrees by socio-economic group and ethnicity](#), Research report March 2021, Institute for Fiscal Studies

modelling took prior attainment, home region, selectivity of university and degree subject into account. The key findings of [The returns to undergraduate degrees by socio-economic group and ethnicity](#) were:

**Average returns to undergraduate degrees at age 30 are positive for people from all socioeconomic and ethnic groups we study, but there is substantial heterogeneity across groups.** Returns are especially high for privately-educated graduates, whose median earnings at age 30 are the highest of all groups. However, we find that the groups with the lowest graduate earnings, such as Pakistani students or state-educated students from the poorest families, also have relatively high returns from going to university. The reason is that the earnings prospects of these groups are very low on average if they do not attend university.

**Besides high returns for privately educated students, returns vary relatively little by socio-economic status.** At age 30, we find gross earnings returns of around 6% for state-educated men and around 27% for state-educated women. If anything, returns are somewhat higher for state-educated students from the poorest 20% of families, with returns at around 7% for men and 31% for women. Returns for privately educated students are much higher at around 29% for men and 36% for women.

**By ethnicity, we see especially high returns for South Asian students.** In particular, we find returns of 27% for Indian women, 40% for Pakistani women and 30% for Bangladeshi women, as well as 16% for Indian men, 36% for Pakistani men and 14% for Bangladeshi men. Strikingly, Pakistani graduates have the highest returns of all ethnic groups, even though they have the lowest median age-30 earnings at £23,000 for men and £19,000 for women.

**Returns for Black women are somewhat lower than for White British women.** Estimated returns are 9% for Black Caribbean women, 20% for Black African women and 23% for Other Black women, compared with 28% for White British women. For Black men, estimated returns differ widely between different subgroups: returns for Black African men are large at 15%, but returns for Black Caribbean men are similar to returns for White British men at 7%, and returns for Other Black men are low at 4%.

**Some but not all of the differences in returns can be explained by variation in subjects chosen and institutions attended.** Subject choice explains little of the variation in returns by socio-economic status, but a substantial amount of the variation in returns by ethnicity: Asian students systematically choose more lucrative subjects than White British students. Conversely, institution choices can partly explain why private school students get higher returns from university than those who attended state schools; however, institution choices do not explain much of the variation in returns by ethnicity.

**Unexplained differences in earnings between groups are mostly smaller among graduates than among non-graduates.** This implies that differences in the returns to higher education 'even out' some of the earnings differences between non-graduates that cannot be explained by other factors. However, large unexplained earnings gaps between socio-economic and ethnic groups remain. In particular, controlling for

According to the IFS  
"...differences in the returns to higher education 'even out' some of the earnings differences between non-graduates that cannot be explained by other factors"

background conditions, prior attainment, and university and subject choice, graduate men from all non-White ethnic groups earn significantly less than White British graduates.

The report also estimated the present value<sup>9</sup> of the lifetime earnings premiums of a degree, after tax and student loan repayments, for these groups. These results are subject to a greater degree of uncertainty. The authors found that:

**Lifetime returns by socio-economic status follow a U shape.**

For women, the average return varies between £140,000 for the bottom quintile and £70,000 for the top state quintile. For men, the returns are similar to the estimates for women for the bottom four SES quintiles, but higher at around £110,000 for the top state SES quintile, while for the privately educated the returns are much higher at around £250,000.

**Lifetime returns by ethnicity follow a similar pattern to gross returns at age 30.** Returns for South Asian students are relatively high at around £200,000 for men and around £170,000 for women. Estimated returns for Black students are relatively low at around £50,000; an exception is Black African women, for whom we estimate a lifetime return of £175,000 on average. White British, White Other, and Other students have middling returns of roughly £100,000 for both men and women.

The report concluded:

These differences are partly driven by university and subject choices. There is a clear socioeconomic gradient in university choices, with privately educated students and students from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds studying at higher-return institutions. In explaining differences between ethnic groups, subject choice plays a larger role: ethnic Asian students tend to choose higher-return subjects than their Black and White peers.

Remaining differences in estimated returns between groups stem from differences between graduates and non-graduates of different groups that are not explained by their institution and subject choices, prior attainment or other observable background conditions. These will include the access to social networks, rates of part-time work, unobserved non-cognitive skills, and the effects of labour market discrimination. For instance, elite social networks are likely to be important in explaining the exceptional returns of some men who went to private schools. Differential rates of part-time work by socio-economic status may be an important factor behind the high estimated returns of women from poorer families.

Notably, unexplained differences in estimated returns between groups are, to some extent, the mirror image of unexplained differences in non-graduate earnings conditional on prior attainment and other background conditions. This suggests that, among students from different socio-economic or ethnic groups but with the same prior attainment and other background characteristics, university education can help level the playing field in the labour market. However, substantial unexplained differences remain even for graduates. In particular, graduate men from all ethnic minority groups have lower earnings than male

“...elite social networks are likely to be important in explaining the exceptional returns of some men who went to private schools” (IFS)

<sup>9</sup> After discounting

White British graduates even after controlling for prior attainment and a host of other background characteristics

### **Further information**

The OFS [Access and participation dashboard](#) gives the highly skilled employment/higher study information over the previous five years and includes more detail on gaps between groups and intersection of some groups. It also allows users to look at these data for individual institutions.

[Graduate outcomes \(LEO\): outcomes in 2018 to 2019](#) from the DfE gives the employment/further study and other destinations and earnings data for other groups including by prior attainment, subject studied, mode of study and home region. It also includes more detail on the groups covered here including more detailed ethnic and age groups. It also gives data for earlier tax years.

HESA's [HE Graduate Outcomes Data](#) provides data from a survey of graduates 15 months after completing their course. It looks at graduate activities and salary bands by personal characteristics as well as data for the whole graduate population on graduates' thoughts about the activities they are doing and their subjective wellbeing.

### 3. Barriers to equal access, participation, and outcomes

Several factors have been identified as important social, cultural, and financial barriers to greater equality in access, participation, and outcomes across higher education for students from different backgrounds

#### 3.1 Prior attainment

Students from the poorest 20 per cent of families are almost equally as likely to go to university as their peers from the wealthiest 20 per cent of families, when they achieve comparable GCSE grades.<sup>10</sup> This suggests attainment at Key Stage 4 is a key predictor of participation in higher education, regardless of background.

A Russell Group [report](#) in May 2020 identified gaps in prior attainment as a significant barrier to university access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The report also found that teacher shortages, a lack of extracurricular support structures, and differences in parental expectations can hinder the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and reduce their ability to progress to higher education.<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.2 Insufficient advice and support

In July 2020, the Government established the [Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities](#) to review inequality in the areas of poverty, education, employment, health, and the criminal justice system. The Committee published its [report](#) in March 2021. The report cited data that showed that although White students were the least likely aggregated ethnic group to go to university, they were far more likely to attend high-tariff universities compared to their Black peers.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, once at university, students from minority ethnic backgrounds were generally more likely to drop out before completing their course, have lower levels of attainment, and lower earnings after graduating.<sup>13</sup>

The Commission's report suggested that this data might reflect the fact that such students did not have access to sufficient advice when applying to university and thinking about their career options, and that this had long term consequences for their subsequent level of employment:

Ethnic minority students, and especially Black students, from lower social status backgrounds are not being well advised on which courses to take at university. About 40% of Black African people and 39% of people from the Bangladeshi ethnic group are

"Gaps in prior attainment in school (and even differences in cognitive development in the early years, with disadvantaged pupils falling behind their peers early on) shape people's life chances for years to come."

**Russell Group, Pathways for Potential, p12.**

<sup>10</sup> Office for Fair Access, [Topic briefing: Raising attainment in schools and colleges to widen participation](#), December 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Russell Group, [Pathways For Potential: How universities, regulators and Government can tackle educational inequality](#), May 2020, p12.

<sup>12</sup> The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, [The Report](#), March 2021, p95.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp96-97.

overqualified for their roles, compared with 25% of White workers.<sup>14</sup>

The Russell Group has also [highlighted insufficient advice and support as a barrier to access and participation](#), particularly for students who were the first in their family to attend university:

Lack of knowledge about higher education and a lack of practical support in decision-making can impact negatively on the confidence of under-represented students and undermine their expectations that they can fulfil their ambitions. Without good quality careers advice and guidance, students who are the first in their family to go to university can find it difficult to navigate the choices available to them.<sup>15</sup>

Two other reports published in March 2021 by [UCAS](#) and the [Social Mobility Commission](#) came to similar conclusions about the need to ensure that young people had access to careers advice.<sup>16</sup> The UCAS report noted that “disadvantaged students are more likely to consider HE later, which can limit their choices, especially for more selective subjects and higher tariff providers.”<sup>17</sup> The report noted that advantaged students were [1.4 times more likely to think about higher education at primary school](#) than their disadvantaged peers<sup>18</sup> and it recommended that the Government should introduce statutory requirements for careers information and guidance in primary school education.

Furthermore, the Social Mobility Commission found that there was an ‘earnings penalty’ for disadvantaged women of four to five percentage points as a result of their choices about post-16 courses.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.3 Financial concerns

Research has shown that financial concerns deter young people from applying to university, and also impact on their experiences of higher education.

The Centre for Learning and Life Chances, published a [report](#) in 2017 that showed that debt aversion among young people from working-class backgrounds was far more likely to deter them from applying to university than students from other backgrounds.<sup>20</sup> The report also showed that the reluctance of this group to enter higher education because of the associated costs had increased since 2002.<sup>21</sup>

“Low participation rates (or absence of a tradition of going to certain institutions) can mean there is a lack of tacit knowledge and role models to draw on.”

**Russell Group,  
Pathways for  
Potential, p12.**

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp97-98.

<sup>15</sup> Russell Group, [Pathways For Potential: How universities, regulators and Government can tackle educational inequality](#), May 2020, p12.

<sup>16</sup> UCAS, [Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#), March 2021; The Social Mobility Commission, [The road not taken: The drivers of course selection](#), March 2021.

<sup>17</sup> UCAS, [Where next?](#) p4.

<sup>18</sup> UCAS, [Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#), March 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Social Mobility Commission, [The road not taken](#), pp26-28.

<sup>20</sup> Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances, [Does student loan debt deter Higher Education participation? New evidence from England](#), research paper 58, June 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

In May 2019, a [literature review](#) was carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies on behalf of the Department for Education to consider the impact of the student finance system on young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. It found the following:

- Concerns about whether the benefits of HE outweigh the costs are more common among individuals who have no parental experience of HE and/or have low prior attainment.
- The limited research on the decision-making of those not planning to go to HE, or considering not applying, suggests that financial issues are a key factor in this process.
- For students at university, concerns about living costs and the day-to-day management of finances can affect retention and the student experience and can lead students to consider dropping out.<sup>22</sup>

The financial concerns of students have become more acute during the Covid-19 pandemic. A survey commissioned by the National Union of Students in May 2021 revealed that 60 per cent of students had seen their income impacted by the pandemic and 70 per cent of students had been [worried about their ability to manage financially](#):

- One in three students have cut back on food for lack of money
- One in ten students have turned to food banks
- Two in three students have found their loans do not cover their living costs.<sup>23</sup>

## Regional mobility

A 2020 Russell Group report [Pathways for Potential](#) found that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to attend universities in their local area and to live at home because of financial concerns:

Financial concerns can cause disadvantaged students to restrict their higher education choices to institutions in their local area, with many choosing to live at home rather than move away to study. This can also be exacerbated by a lack of understanding of the student loans system.<sup>24</sup>

The Sutton Trust has [argued that student mobility is a major dimension of inequality](#) within higher education choice and experience.<sup>25</sup>

Comparisons between high-attaining advantaged students and high-attaining disadvantaged students who choose to study close to home, show that high-attaining disadvantaged students are less likely to attend a high-tariff Russell Group university, and are more likely to attend a less

“Social class is a key factor which drives the mobility choices of young people... leaving home and attending a distant university is too often the preserve of white, middle class, privately educated young people.”

**Sutton Trust,  
Home and  
Away, p4.**

<sup>22</sup> DfE, [Impact of the student finance system on participation, experience and outcomes of disadvantaged young people](#), May 2019.

<sup>23</sup> NUS press release, [“NUS calls for a student support package as one in three students cut back on food to make ends meet”](#), 17 May 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Russell Group, [Pathways For Potential](#), p12.

<sup>25</sup> The Sutton Trust, [Home and Away. Social, ethnic, and spatial inequalities in student mobility](#), February 2018.

prestigious post-1992 institution; a phenomenon known as 'undermatching'.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.4 Harassment on campus

There is evidence to show that harassment suffered by students during their time at university can have a detrimental impact on their participation, attainment, and outcomes.

#### Sexual harassment

The Library briefing [Sexual harassment in education](#) (30 April 2021) provides a detailed overview of the prevalence and consequences of sexual harassment, misconduct, and violence on university campuses, and the response of the Government, regulators, and universities to the issue.

Numerous studies have shown that female students are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment and misconduct during their time at university. A 2018 survey carried out by the campaign group Revolt Sexual Assault and the Student Room [found that while 26 per cent of male respondents had experienced sexual violence](#) during their time in higher education, this figure rose to 70 per cent for female respondents.<sup>27</sup>

Students reported that experiences of sexual harassment had significant impacts on their studies, self-confidence, mental health, and social life. 25 per cent of respondents to the Revolt Sexual Assault survey said they had considered or engaged in "skipping lectures, tutorials, changing or dropping certain modules to avoid the perpetrators", while 16 per cent said they had considered or engaged in suspending their studies or dropping out of their degree.<sup>28</sup>

#### Racial harassment

In 2019, an [inquiry into racial harassment](#) in publicly funded universities in England, Scotland, and Wales by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) found that racial harassment was a common experience for many students. The EHRC survey revealed that 24 per cent of students from minority ethnic backgrounds had experienced racial harassment since starting their course, which is 13 per cent of all current students in British universities.<sup>29</sup> The figures were highest for Black students (29 per cent) and Asian students (27 per cent).<sup>30</sup>

The EHRC found that verbal abuse, including racist name-calling, insults, and jokes, was the most common form of harassment experienced at universities. A portion of students also experienced physical attacks and regular microaggressions, which are characterised as behaviours "based on stereotypical assumptions made about students and staff because of

"Racial harassment of students doesn't just take place online. It is most likely to happen in teaching settings and on campus and is most commonly from fellow students or academics."

**EHRC, Tackling racial harassment, p26.**

<sup>26</sup> Nuffield Foundation, [Mismatch in higher education: prevalence, drivers and outcomes](#), December 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Revolt Against Assault, [Students' Experience of Sexual Violence](#), 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> EHRC, [Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged](#), October 2019, p26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

their race or appearance.”<sup>31</sup> The EHRC’s report noted that experiences of harassment “can seriously affect an individual’s mental health, sense of belonging and progress, as well as their decision to remain in education.”<sup>32</sup>

A report published by Universities UK in November 2020 also found that students who experienced racial harassment during their time at university [suffered significant negative impacts on their mental health](#), such as feeling angry, upset, depressed, anxious, and suicidal.<sup>33</sup> Five per cent of students surveyed for the report had left their studies as a result of their experiences of racial harassment.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p29.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p26.

<sup>33</sup> Universities UK, [Tackling racial harassment in higher education](#), November 2020, p25.

## 4. Government policy and actions

### 4.1 Widening participation

In 2018, the Office for Students (OfS) was established as the regulator for HE in England, under provisions in [the Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#). As part of the reforms the OfS took over the responsibility for promoting fair access to higher education that had been undertaken by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).

The Government sets out its priorities for the OfS in an annual guidance letter. The letter in [February 2021](#) set out the Government's ambitions on fair access and equal opportunity, these included consulting on a post qualification admissions system, encouraging students onto high quality courses, looking into socio-economic status and geographical inequality, and encouraging disadvantaged students to participate in the Turing scheme. The guidance letter stated, however, that the OfS has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity not of outcomes:

I would like to remind the OfS that it has a statutory duty to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome. The OfS must be a champion for the importance of academic and technical excellence in all aspects of the student lifecycle, from selection to graduation. Throughout all of its work, including access and participation, the OfS should be guided by the approach to equality of opportunity set out by the Minister for Women and Equalities in her speech of 17 December, one that is rooted in liberty, agency, and fairness. The OfS should reflect upon the extent to which its policies and procedures are aligned with this approach as it plans its future activity.

Government policy on widening participation between 2010 and 2018 is discussed in the Library briefing, [Widening participation strategy in higher education in England](#), 24 January 2018.

### 4.2 Funding

The Government does not directly allocate funding to higher education institutions for widening participation and student success, rather it determines total funding for teaching which the OfS then allocates between different priority areas as set out by Government. Most of the funding allocated by the OfS goes towards the cost of teaching high cost subjects, the next most important area of funding is to support access and student success. This funding currently consists of the Student Premium, the Disabled Student Premium and Uni Connect. More detail on how the OfS allocates this funding is given in the next section.

In the Spending Review 2015, the Government announced that what was then known as the student opportunity fund would be reduced by

“Fair access to and success in higher education is critical to levelling up and providing equality of opportunity: it provides students with access to new skills and better paid jobs and is fundamental to this Government's ambition of enabling every person to fulfil their potential.”

**Guidance to the OfS, February 2021**

## 32 Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England

“up to half” by 2019-20 and that the funding would be focused on institutions with the most effective outcomes.<sup>34</sup>

In response to the coronavirus pandemic the Government gave universities flexibility over how they could spend the £256 million of Student Premium and Disabled Student Premium funding in 2020/21. Under the new flexibilities institutions were able to divert this funding to other areas such as student hardship funding and mental health services.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Gov.UK press release, [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills' settlement at the Spending Review](#) 2015, 25 November 2015

<sup>35</sup> OfS, [Provider guide to coronavirus -Provider FAQ](#).

## 5. Role of the Office for Students

Since 1 January 2018, the Office for Students (OfS) has been responsible for promoting fair access to HE and ensuring that students, whatever their background, are supported to succeed in and progress from HE.

### Equality Act 2010

The OfS, as both an employer and a provider of public services, is bound by requirements in the [Equality Act 2010](#) to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation
- advance equality of opportunity between people who do and do not share a protected characteristic
- foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not share a protected characteristic.

The duty to comply with the Act is referred to as the 'public sector equality duty' (PSED). The OfS is expected to publish information each year showing how it complies with the PSED on its website. The EHRC monitors the OfS to ensure its compliance and can enforce the PSED through judicial review.

### 5.1 Regulatory framework

The OfS is required under [section 75 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 \(HERA\)](#), to publish a regulatory framework. The [framework](#) states how the OfS intends to perform its various functions, and to meet its primary objectives. It also sets out the registration conditions for higher education providers (HEPs).

#### **Box 2: The four primary regulatory objectives of the OfS**

The OfS seeks to ensure that "all students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake higher education:

- are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education,
- receive a high-quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure,
- are able to progress into employment or further study, and their qualifications hold their value over time,
- receive value for money."<sup>36</sup>

These objectives are underpinned by the OfS's general duties under [section 2 of HERA](#), which include "the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education provided by English higher education providers."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> OfS, [Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England](#), February 2018, p14.

<sup>37</sup> The [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#), section 2 (1) (e).

## Consultation on access and participation

In 2018, the OfS [undertook a consultation to determine how best to meet the access and participation duties](#) set out in HERA. The review focussed on how the OfS could:

- Achieve significant reductions in the gaps in access, success and progression over the next five years.
- Ensure that... access and participation regulation and funding are outcome-based, risk-based, underpinned by evidence and joined up with other OfS regulatory activities.<sup>38</sup>

The consultation revealed levels of inequality across the student lifecycle, and the OfS set itself and the HE sector four long-term targets to address this:

- To eliminate the gap in entry rates at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups by 2038-39.
- To eliminate the unexplained gap in non-continuation between most and least represented groups by 2024-25, and to eliminate the absolute gap (the gap caused by both structural and unexplained factors) by 2030-31.
- To eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students by 2024-25, and to eliminate the absolute gap by 2030-31.
- To eliminate the gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between disabled students and non-disabled students by 2024-25.<sup>39</sup>

“We have stated an ambition that future generations should have equal opportunities to access and succeed in higher education, and to achieve successful and rewarding careers.”

**OfS, Consultation outcomes, p5.**

The OfS has regulatory levers to ensure that it meets its access and participation targets, these include targeting funding towards supporting activity that institutions have committed to through their Access and Participation Plans (see below) and ensuring that sector data is transparent.

## 5.2 Funding for student access and success

As previously mentioned, (section 4.2) the Government sets the overall teaching funding envelope for the OfS and provides guidance on how it wants this funding to be spent in its annual funding letter to the OfS. The OfS then decides how to distribute this funding between different priority areas and, within each, between higher education providers. Funding to help with measures on access and student success are among a wider range of targeted allocations made by the OfS.

As stated in section 4.2 the Government planned to cut teaching grant over the five years to 2020 and this was largely to be done by reducing

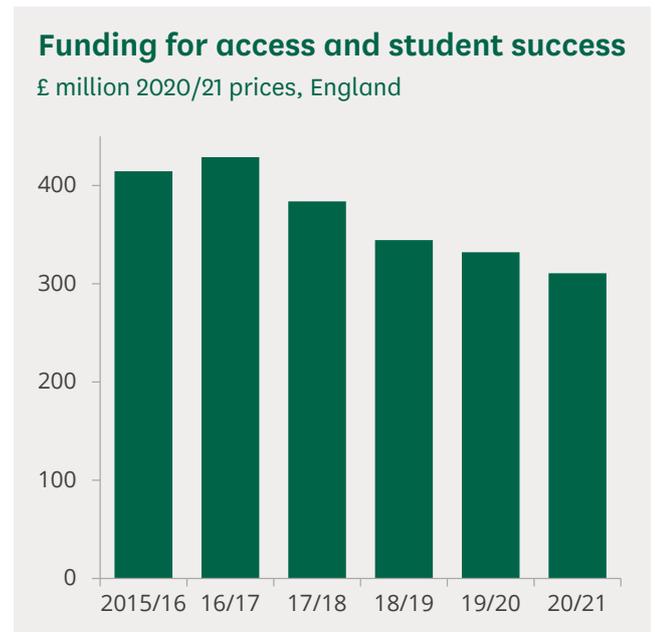
<sup>38</sup> OfS, [A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education: Consultation outcomes](#), December 2018, p3.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p4.

student opportunity funding and increasing institutions' responsibility for widening access and social mobility.<sup>40</sup>

The Government will work with the Director of Fair Access to ensure universities take more responsibility for widening access and social mobility, and ask the Higher Education Funding Council for England to retarget and reduce by up to half the student opportunity fund, focusing funding on institutions with the most effective outcomes.

In academic year 2015/16 the funding council distributed a total of £380million in student opportunity funding to providers in England. This *increased* to £403 million in 2016/17 as cuts in some allocations were outweighed by the increase in funding for disabled students from £20 million to £40 million and £30 million for the new National Collaborative Outreach Program (now Uni Connect). Since then the total has fallen in each year and was £316million in 2020/21. The real terms trend is shown opposite. The real cut in total funding for access and student success between 2016/17 and 2020/21 was around 28%.<sup>41</sup> <sup>42</sup> This funding has also had to provide support for an increased number of students over this period.



Within the overall total the allocation for disabled students (now the 'Disabled Student Premium') was kept at £40 million in each year from 2016/17 and Uni Connect increased to £60 million. Other elements of funding for access and success were cut. In 2020/21 the 'mainstream' student premium for full-time and part-time students was £216million compared with £360million in 2015/16 on access and retention.

The latest funding letter from Government gives indicative totals for 2021/22. These show the main Student Premium and Disabled Student Premium maintained at £216million and £40million respectively. Funding for Uni Connect is cut to £40 million. Final allocations from the OfS may be somewhat different from these totals.<sup>43</sup>

### 5.3 Access and Participation Plans

In 2018, the OfS made [Access and Participation Plans](#) (APPs) a condition of registration for HE providers in England wanting to charge higher level tuition fees.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Gov.UK press release, [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills' settlement at the Spending Review](#) 2015, 25 November 2015

<sup>41</sup> Academic year figures adjusted using financial year GDP deflators. The 2020/21 deflator is derived from the OBR's forecast for financial years 2020-21 and 2021-22, averaged across the two years to smooth the distortions caused by pandemic-related factors.

<sup>42</sup> [Guide to funding 2020-21 How the Office for Students allocates money to higher education providers](#) (and earlier editions), OfS

<sup>43</sup> [Allocation of higher education teaching grant funding in the 2021-22 financial year](#), DfE

<sup>44</sup> The [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#), section 12.

APPs replaced the annual access agreements that had previously been required by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Following the dissolution of OFFA, a new regulatory approach for access and participation was adopted, which took account of the findings from the 2018 consultation. It entailed more ambitious targets for APPs and a move from one to five-year timescales.

APPs must be approved by the OfS's Director for Fair Access and Participation. They set out the actions that providers are taking to increase access to, success in, and progression from higher education by students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. APPs should contain:

- the provider's ambition for change
- what it plans to do to achieve that change
- the targets it has set
- the investment it will make to deliver the plan.

The OfS publishes regulatory guidance to support providers in creating their APPs and then monitors progress to ensure that they honour their commitments. The OfS can also intervene if necessary. The APPs for individual providers are [set out on the OfS website](#).

### Spending and outcomes

Institutions must provide annual returns to the OfS which report on progress against their APP targets and their expenditure on widening participation. The financial data is broken down into spending funded by the OfS through the Student Premium and that set out in their Access Agreements. The data is also broken down by type: access to higher education, student success (ie. continuation at university and qualifications), and progression (after graduation). The latest complete data is for 2017/18.<sup>45</sup>

In 2017/18 institutions met 59% of access targets, 51% of student success, 65% of progression and 41% of multiple (stages of the HE 'lifecycle') targets.

Institutions spent £784 million on areas covered by their access agreements and a further £340 million which was funded through the Student Premium and Disabled Student Premium. The largest overall type of expenditure was on financial support (including hardship) which accounted for around 36% of total spending, followed by spending on 'success' at 34%.<sup>46</sup>

In 2018/19, access agreement spending was £770 million with an additional £308 million through the Student Premium and Disabled Student Premium. The pattern of spending by type was broadly similar

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<sup>45</sup> Financial returns were made for 2018/19 but monitoring and validation was suspended in 2020 at the start of the pandemic which means the 2018/19 financial data are not comparable to earlier figures and there are no 2018/19 data on targets

<sup>46</sup> [Access and participation plan data. Monitoring data and outcomes 2017-18](#), OfS

to 2017/18.<sup>47</sup> More detail, including spending by individual institutions, can be found on the OfS [Access and participation plan data](#) pages.

The latest APPs set out planned spending on access and participation from 2020/21 to 2024/25. Over this period spending is planned to increase from just over £550 million to around £565 million. Around 60% of this is financial support (mainly bursaries and scholarships), the remainder is access activity.<sup>48</sup>

## Evaluation of reforms

In 2021, the OfS commissioned the Nous Group to undertake an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of its regulatory reform to APPs. The evaluation found [greater commitment from providers to the new plans](#), which were also increasingly ambitious in their scope. In light of feedback from across the HE sector, this increased engagement and ambition was attributed to the reforms of the OfS.

However, there were some concerns raised regarding the resource burden placed on smaller higher education providers by the new APPs, and the OfS's approach to communication was not always collaborative. The Nous Group published a report that outlined eight key findings:

- The reforms have accelerated shifting culture at the sector level
- Governing body engagement has been a driver for change
- Stretching and broad-ranging targets have focused minds
- The five-year plans provided a framework for a more ambitious and strategic approach
- Student engagement has been challenging
- The approach has disproportionately affected smaller providers
- The level of expectation from the OfS for stretching targets created concerns
- Providers raised concerns with the OfS's communication.<sup>49</sup>

The OfS published a response to the evaluation report that [set out how they would address some of the concerns](#) raised by the sector.<sup>50</sup>

## 5.4 Uni Connect

Uni Connect, formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), is one of the programmes funded by the OfS to help meet its access and participation targets. The programme brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges, and other local partners to offer activities, advice, and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college.

“Consultations with staff stakeholders and representative bodies across the sector suggested that the ongoing condition of registration and increased expectations for governing bodies to engage with the plans had increased accountability at senior levels.”

**The Nous Group, Effectiveness in implementation of access and participation plan reform, p32.**

<sup>47</sup> [Access and participation plan data. Monitoring data and outcomes 2018-19](#), OfS

<sup>48</sup> [Access and participation plan data. Data from access and participation plans](#), OfS

<sup>49</sup> The Nous Group, [Effectiveness in implementation of access and participation plan reform](#), March 2021, pp5-9.

<sup>50</sup> OfS, [Effectiveness in implementation of access and participation plan reforms: OfS response](#), March 2021.

The Uni Connect programme is targeted at young people in years 9 to 13 who live in one of 997 geographic areas where HE participation is lower than might be expected given local GCSE results.

During 2018 /19, over 180,000 young people and 1,613 schools and colleges took part in HE outreach through Uni Connect. More information is available on the [OfS website](#) and [Uni Connect](#) websites.

## Funding

The OfS provided £60 million per year for the Uni Connect programme from 2017/18 to 2020/21. The January 2021 guidance letter from the Secretary of State for Education directed the OfS to [reduce the funding allocation by a third to £40 million](#) in 2021/22.<sup>51</sup>

## 5.5 Addressing Barriers to Student Success programme

The Addressing Barriers to Student Success (ABSS) programme helps HE providers tackle issues that can prevent students from succeeding in their studies and going on to graduate-level jobs or further study. The OfS provides £7.5 million in funding for projects addressing the following areas:

- Inclusive and active teaching and learning practices
- Well-being for students
- Progression to postgraduate study
- Graduate employability

A total of [17 projects encompass 59 higher education providers and 28 other organisations](#) such as charities, employers, and local enterprise partnerships.

### Box 3: Diversity and Inclusion Student Ambassador Project

The [Diversity and Inclusion Student Ambassador project](#) at the University of Manchester, University of Birmingham, and Manchester Metropolitan University was designed to address differences in experience and outcomes for disabled students, students from low socio-economic groups, and students from minority ethnic groups. The project engages with students to:

- create safe spaces to dialogue on inclusive learning and teaching environments, academic support and wellbeing
- increase students' sense of belonging and ability to build meaningful relationships with each other and between students and staff (academic, PSS and others) through the development of internal and external networks
- empower students to tackle the negative effects of stereotyping and micro-aggressions and to safely challenge racism, sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination on campus.

Student ambassadors receive training and support to undertake activities that promote inclusive learning environments. The project has received £768,390 in funding.

<sup>51</sup> [Guidance to the Office for Students — Allocation of the Higher Education Teaching Grant funding in the 2021 -22 Financial Year](#), 19 January 2021.

## Evaluation of the programme

An [independent evaluation of the ABBS programme](#) in 2020 highlighted lessons learned and examples of best practice from individual projects.<sup>52</sup> These include the importance of academic staff engagement, the effectiveness of one-to-one support, and the benefits of technology.

## 5.6 Issues

Data shows inequalities both in access to high tariff universities and in outcomes following graduation for students from different backgrounds.

The [Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities](#) report addressed the issue of disparities and recommended that the OfS should play a central role in improving the quality of careers advice for young people. This should include issuing stronger guidance on funding outreach programmes and placing university outreach staff in schools to help reduce disparities in applications at an earlier stage. It also recommended that funding should be targeted at the [Gatsby benchmarks](#) of good careers guidance.

### Box 4: The Gatsby benchmarks of good careers guidance

On behalf of the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, Sir John Holman undertook a review of career guidance and wrote the [Good career guidance report](#) in 2014.<sup>53</sup> He set out a framework of eight benchmarks in the report that schools can use to improve their career guidance system. The eight benchmarks are:

- A stable careers programme.
- Learning from career and labour market information.
- Addressing the needs of each pupil.
- Linking curriculum learning to careers.
- Encounters with employers and employees.
- Experiences of workplaces.
- Encounters with further and higher education.

The Commission's report also stated that the OfS "should look to regulatory or legal changes to ensure improved access and participation to higher education institutions."<sup>54</sup>

[Commenting on the Commission's report](#), the director for fair access and participation at the OfS, Chris Millward, said "we will consider carefully the Commission's advice on the priorities and approach for university outreach, which builds on the findings of our own evaluative work and the steps we are taking to strengthen this."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Warwick Economics & Development, [Evaluation of the OfS Addressing Barriers to Student Success Programme](#), July 2020.

<sup>53</sup> J. Holman, [Good career guidance](#), April 2014, p7.

<sup>54</sup> The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, [The Report](#), March 2021, p99.

<sup>55</sup> OfS, "[OfS responds to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report](#)", 31 March 2021.

## 6. Actions and responsibilities of higher education providers

### 6.1 Access and outreach work

Information set out in Access and Participation Plans show that institutions undertake a wide range of activities to increase representation such as arranging summer schools for post-16 students, creating partnerships with local schools, running mentoring and ambassador schemes and creating outreach programmes. A report by the Russell Group, [Supporting under-represented students to access and succeed in higher education](#), gives an overview of some of the access work done by Russell Group universities to increase access to higher education for students from under-represented groups.

### 6.2 Contextual admissions

Many HEPs when assessing students for admission use additional information alongside an individual's prior attainment to gauge their potential – this information may include socioeconomic background and school performance data. This practice is known as contextual admissions. Using contextualised information aims to widen participation among disadvantaged groups by mitigating the impact that factors beyond a student's control can have on their performance in exams and coursework.

Contextual admissions have been seen as controversial, but the practice was endorsed in the 2004 [Schwartz Report Fair Admissions to Higher Education](#), and is now widely accepted. A report by the Fair Education Alliance in 2018, argued that the issue is no longer whether contextualised data should be used in admissions but [how to do it most effectively](#).<sup>56</sup> The OfS has also called on HEPs to [be more ambitious](#) when using contextual data.<sup>57</sup>

Universities are independent, autonomous bodies responsible for their own admissions decisions, however the Government has made clear that it [supports the adoption of contextual admissions practices](#).<sup>58</sup>

201 access and participation plans were approved by the OfS by the end of November 2019 for the academic year 2020-21, 55 referenced using contextual admissions.<sup>59</sup>

“A-level grades can only be considered to be a robust measure of potential if they are considered alongside the context in which they are achieved.”

**Chris Millward,  
OfS Director of  
Fair Access and  
Participation.**

<sup>56</sup> Fair Education Alliance, [Putting fairness in context: Using data to widen access to higher education](#), July 2018.

<sup>57</sup> OfS, [Be more ambitious on contextual admissions, says the Office for Students](#), July 2018.

<sup>58</sup> [PO HL1177](#) [Universities: Admissions] 30 January 2020.

<sup>59</sup> OfS, [Topic Briefing: Contextual Admissions](#), July 2020.

## How do contextual admissions work?

Research published by the University of Exeter in 2018 showed that [different providers take different approaches](#) to the use of contextual data and that these approaches are not always clear to applicants.<sup>60</sup>

Some of the things that universities might consider include:

- the school an applicant attended
- where they live
- family income
- if they are the first to go to university in their family
- if they have done an access programme
- if they have been in care or are/have been a carer themselves

Most universities automatically receive the information that they need for awarding contextual offers directly from UCAS. An individual's specific circumstances might also be flagged on their reference form.

Universities that use contextualised data might have an admissions policy that permits making lower offers to some students based on their personal circumstances. These offers may be one or more grades lower than the standard offer for a particular course.

### Box 5: Durham University policy on contextual offers

On their [website](#), Durham university state that they use information from UCAS applications to take account of the individual backgrounds and experiences of applicants for all their undergraduate courses. To be eligible for a contextual offer, applicants must meet at least two of the following criteria:

- Their home address postcode is classified as Quintile 1 or 2 of [POLAR4 LPN](#)
- Their home address postcode is classified as [ACORN](#) 4 or 5
- Their current or most recently attended school is classified as a UK state school
- They are in receipt of free school meals

The university also considers the information included in applicants' personal statements and references, and applicants must meet any other admission requirements needed by the course to be considered.

## The use of area level data

The most commonly used contextual measure by HEPs is 'POLAR' (Participation of Local Areas) data, which quantifies how likely young people are to participate in HE according to where they live. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups – or quintiles – based on the proportion of young people who enter HE aged 18 or 19 years old.

An article published by researchers at the University of Durham, however, has argued that the use of area level measures, including POLAR, to identify disadvantaged learners [risks not reaching the intended beneficiaries](#) of contextualised admissions policies:

The use of area-level measures to identify contextually disadvantaged individuals carries a high risk of error due to what is known as the ecological fallacy; the average characteristics of

<sup>60</sup> University of Exeter Centre for Social Mobility, [Research into use of contextual data in admissions](#), June 2018.

individuals living in a given area do not necessarily reflect the characteristics of specific individuals.<sup>61</sup>

In order to avoid missing disadvantaged students who do not live in disadvantaged areas, or making contextual offers to students who live in an area of disadvantage but who are not themselves disadvantaged, the researchers argued that individual level metrics should be used to identify contextually disadvantaged learners.

These would be “officially verifiable individual-level measures of contextual disadvantage, such as free school meal status as confirmed by the applicant’s school, or lower household income as verified by DWP or HMRC records.”

### 6.3 Disability support

Publicly funded education providers have a duty under the Equality Act not to discriminate against potential or current students if they have a disability, which is defined as:

a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.<sup>62</sup>

The duty requires HEPs to make **reasonable adjustments** to ensure that disabled students can fully participate in education and enjoy the other benefits, facilities, and services provided for students. Aside from one or two specifically identified reasonable adjustments, the Equality Act does not define ‘reasonable adjustment’. Adjustments can be changes to policies and procedures, changes to buildings to make them physically accessible, or the provision of additional equipment and support. The aim is to prevent disabled people being from disadvantaged and to encourage greater equality in participation and outcomes among all students.

Disability Rights UK has a [factsheet on some common adjustments for disabled students](#).<sup>63</sup>

#### Box 6: Imperial College London Disability Advisory Service

The Disability Advisory Service at Imperial College London supports students “who have an impairment or disability, specific learning difficulties and other short and long-term conditions.” They provide confidential and impartial advice and support to students and can help identify disability-related needs before organising the appropriate support. They also provide study skills support sessions and workshops for small groups of students.

##### Adjustments

Once students have met with a disability advisor at the university, a Suggested Reasonable Adjustments Document (SRAD) is created. This lists what support the student is eligible to receive. Common adjustments include the provision of specialist equipment, extra time or rest breaks in exams, inclusive technology training, peer support groups, and library support services.

Further information is available on Imperial’s [Disability Advisory Service](#) website.

<sup>61</sup> V. Boliver, S. Gorard, and N Siddiqui, “[Using contextual data to widen access to higher education](#)”, Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education 25.1 (2001), pp7-13.

<sup>62</sup> Disability Rights UK, [Factsheet F56. Understanding the Equality Act: Information for disabled students](#), June 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Disability Rights UK, [Factsheet F11. Adjustments for disabled students](#), April 2020.

## 6.4 Improving graduate outcomes

Historically, attempts by universities to improve equality for disadvantaged students in higher education have focussed on access and admission. Emphasis has now shifted towards improving students' participation and attainment, however a report published by Universities UK in 2019 argued that [insufficient attention has been paid to the "third phase"](#) of higher education's impact on social mobility, namely graduate outcomes and success.

The report called for a greater focus on the specific challenges faced by disadvantaged students in progressing to postgraduate education, or building the skills valued by employers:

universities should contemplate the value of implementing programmes to develop individuals' specific skills in communications, networking and cross-disciplinary thinking, which are inclusive, intra-curricular and personalised. Further, the measurement of the impact of initiatives, and the judgement of their success, should also emphasise their consistency with academic skills, and look at benefits beyond 'employability' and earning power. Evaluation of initiatives must also be built in from the start.<sup>64</sup>

### Current initiatives

To address the disparity for some social groups between academic attainment and graduate success, the Universities UK report argues that HEPs have the opportunity to:

- raise the ambitions of graduates
- improve skills of graduates in areas such as communication, cross-disciplinary thinking, and networking that optimise career opportunities
- engage with employers to encourage them to contextualise academic achievements.<sup>65</sup>

Many HEPs have programmes that enable students to develop supplementary skills – sometimes referred to as 'soft' skills – to enhance their employability. These programmes are often delivered through a university's careers services, which might also facilitate professional mentoring opportunities, placements and internships, industry partnerships, and careers fairs.

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<sup>64</sup> Universities UK, [Widening opportunity in higher education - The third phase: beyond graduation](#), November 2019, p3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p23.

## 7. Appendix

### Progression to HE by ethnic group, gender and free school meal eligibility, England

Percentage of pupils from state-funded schools starting HE by age 19, 2018/19

		Eligible for FSM			Not eligible for FSM			All pupils		
		Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All
White	White - British	19.4	12.7	16.0	46.4	35.6	40.9	43.2	32.9	37.9
	White - Irish	24.4	16.9	20.9	63.9	51.9	57.9	58.5	47.5	53.0
	Gypsy / Roma	3.2	4.4	3.8	5.8	6.5	6.1	4.7	5.7	5.2
	Traveller of Irish Heritage	6.7	5.9	6.3	11.5	8.7	10.2	8.5	6.8	7.6
	Any Other White Background	43.4	31.3	37.2	53.0	42.9	47.9	51.9	41.5	46.6
Mixed	White and Asian	34.3	32.2	33.2	64.0	54.4	59.1	59.5	51.0	55.2
	White and Black African	46.8	32.0	39.9	63.5	45.4	54.7	59.8	42.6	51.5
	White and Black Caribbean	26.2	15.9	21.1	47.0	33.4	40.3	42.2	29.3	35.8
	Any Other Mixed Background	40.0	27.4	33.6	61.6	51.4	56.4	57.7	47.1	52.3
Asian	Indian	61.6	53.5	57.2	77.5	68.8	73.0	76.3	67.5	71.7
	Pakistani	52.5	42.1	47.1	65.8	53.6	59.5	62.5	50.8	56.5
	Bangladeshi	64.8	52.6	58.6	74.2	61.5	67.8	71.3	58.7	64.9
	Any Other Asian Background	62.5	53.0	57.1	75.8	65.7	70.5	74.2	63.9	68.8
Chinese		79.2	67.1	72.8	83.5	76.2	79.8	83.2	75.5	79.3
Black	Black - African	66.4	51.6	59.0	77.4	61.8	69.7	74.6	59.1	66.9
	Black Caribbean	40.3	23.7	31.8	58.7	38.0	48.5	54.6	34.6	44.7
	Any Other Black Background	49.0	32.0	40.8	64.6	47.9	56.0	60.4	44.0	52.1
Other	Any Other Ethnic Group	60.2	52.2	55.9	66.5	56.6	61.3	64.9	55.4	59.9
	Unknown	36.2	22.5	28.6	51.1	40.7	45.8	48.8	37.6	43.0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>30.6</b>	<b>22.3</b>	<b>26.3</b>	<b>50.8</b>	<b>39.7</b>	<b>45.1</b>	<b>48.0</b>	<b>37.3</b>	<b>42.5</b>

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