

Widening participation without widening attainment: The case of ethnic minority students

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The participation of people from ethnic minorities in UK higher education is greater than that of White people. Nevertheless, students from ethnic minorities are less likely to obtain 'good' degrees (those awarded with first or upper second-class honours) than are White students. This article discusses some possible causes and implications of this attainment gap. It is equally apparent in graduates who have taken courses by distance learning with the Open University, including those who graduate in psychology, and it is equally apparent in the grades awarded to students who have taken the courses that make up the psychology degree. This pattern may apply to other groups who are the focus of attempts to widen access to UK higher education. It is premature to promote the idea of widening participation in such groups unless they can be guaranteed equity in terms of their subsequent attainment.

Keywords: *academic attainment; degree classification; distance education; ethnicity; widening participation.*

UNTIL RECENTLY, much of the discourse about 'widening participation' within the UK has been concerned with increasing access to higher education, with little or no consideration being given to the students' subsequent attainment (e.g. Murphy & Fleming, 2003; Osborne, 2003). In the US, in contrast, it is appreciated that equal participation is not simply about gaining access to higher education but also about achieving parity in terms of educational outcomes (Boylan, 2004). In this article, I want to argue that it is premature to promote the idea of widening participation for particular groups unless they can be guaranteed equity in terms of their subsequent attainment. I take as an example the situation of ethnic minority students in UK higher education and more specifically on psychology courses in distance education.

The participation of ethnic minority students in higher education

The 'Call for Papers' for this Special Issue contained the following statement:

The term Widening Participation (WP) can be interpreted in many ways (e.g. students with low incomes, with a disability or from particular ethnic, gender or age groups). Papers are welcome which consider all interpretations and identify ways to reduce bias in access and participation and the promotion of inclusion and success for all under-represented groups.

Implicit in this statement is the idea that people from ethnic minorities are under-represented in UK higher education. This is indeed a fairly common assumption. For instance, a review of widening participation research by Gorard et al. (2006) maintained that 'Inequalities in HE [higher education] participation are evident throughout the life-course and include differences in terms of ... ethnicity ... The inequalities in HE participation, specifically, are clear in terms of ... ethnicity' (pp.22, 26).

More generally, it has been argued that structural inequalities in particular societies reduce both the achievement and the aspirations of children from ethnic minorities, and

that consequently they tend to be under-represented in higher education. Ogbu (1978) presented evidence in support of this idea from several countries, including the UK in the 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, very few people from ethnic minorities achieved the secondary-school leaving qualifications necessary for entry into the (then highly selective) higher education system (pp.241–263). Nevertheless, it no longer applies in the UK today when a far higher proportion of people from ethnic minorities achieve those qualifications.

The participation rate in UK higher education is defined as the percentage of people aged between 17 and 30 who have entered higher education for the first time in a particular academic year. It is calculated by comparing the number of entrants to higher education with the total number of people aged 17 to 30 in the population according to the most recent UK census. It does, of course, ignore the fact that there are in addition many older people who enter higher education in each academic year. For instance, in 2007–2008 people aged 30 and over constituted 14.1 per cent of all first-year undergraduates who were normally domiciled in the UK (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2009, p.20).

There are in fact three groups of people who have met the New Labour Government's target of a 50 per cent participation rate: women; the Scots; and people from ethnic minorities. For example, Connor et al. (2004, pp.42–43) estimated that the participation rate for people from ethnic minorities in 2001–02 was 56 per cent. More specifically, the participation rates for Asian people and Black people were 60 per cent and 61 per cent, respectively, whereas the participation rate for White people was only 38 per cent. In short, while there may be particular ethnic subgroups whose participation rates are lower than this, it is patently incorrect to assert that people from ethnic minorities are under-represented in higher education in general.

The attainment of ethnic minority students in higher education

Nevertheless, the high level of participation among ethnic minority students is not reflected in their subsequent academic attainment. The most common measure of attainment used in the literature is the proportion of 'good' degrees. In the UK, degrees awarded with honours are usually classified as first, second or third class, and the second class is normally categorised into an upper and a lower division. A 'good' degree is one awarded with either first-class or upper second-class honours. A number of studies have analysed data from all institutions of higher education and have found that White students are more likely than students from other ethnic groups to obtain good degrees (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Connor et al., 2004; Elias et al., 2006; Leslie, 2005; Naylor & Smith, 2004; Owen et al., 2000; Richardson, 2008). Table 1 shows data from the most recent of these studies by way of an example.

Information about students' ethnicity is based on their self-identification at the time of their registration: that is, choosing an ethnic group with which they most identified from a list such as that used in the UK census. Table 1 shows the six higher-order categories used in the census. The full classification also includes 17 subcategories, but the major variation in attainment is across the higher-order categories, and that is the focus of the present article.

Richardson (2008) found that the attainment gap in ethnic minority students tended to be greater in older graduates than in younger graduates, although it was apparent in every age band, even in the small number of students who were aged under 21 at the time of graduation. It tended to be greater in women than in men, although it was apparent in both groups. It also tended to be greater in graduates who had studied on a part-time basis than in those who had studied on a full-time basis, although again it was apparent in both of these groups. In other words, it is a highly consistent

Table 1: Percentage frequency distributions of classified honours degrees awarded by UK institutions of higher education in 2004–2005 to UK-domiciled students.

Ethnic group	N	Degree class				
		I	II(i)	II(ii)	III	Good
White	195,120	12.9	52.0	31.1	4.1	64.9
Mixed	3895	10.9	50.5	34.1	4.5	61.4
Asian or Asian British	18,545	7.1	40.7	43.3	9.0	47.8
Black or Black British	7580	3.7	34.2	49.8	12.3	37.9
Chinese or other	4375	8.8	42.0	39.8	9.4	50.9
Not known	11,785	9.0	40.8	39.0	11.2	49.8

Note: Adapted from Richardson (2008, p.37). I, first-class honours; II(i), upper second-class honours; II(ii), lower second-class honours; III, third-class honours; Good, good degrees (first class or upper second class).

phenomenon, regardless of age, gender and mode of study.

One reason for this attainment gap is that ethnic minority students tend to enter UK higher education with lower entry qualifications than White students (Shiner & Modood, 2002). This explains about half of the disparity in degree attainment between White and ethnic minority students; as Richardson (2008) concluded: ‘One might indeed argue that the under-achievement of adults from ethnic minorities in higher education is a legacy of their under-achievement as children in secondary education’ (p.44). Nevertheless, even when the effects of variations in entry qualifications and other demographic and institutional variables have been statistically controlled, White students are still more likely to obtain good degrees than students from other ethnic groups (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Naylor & Smith, 2004; Richardson, 2008). The reasons for this residual attainment gap are currently unclear, which has prompted the UK Higher Education Academy to commission research on this issue.

Richardson (2008) found that the trend for White students to be more likely to obtain good degrees than students from other ethnic groups was greater at some kinds of institution than others. In particular, the attainment gap was greatest at post-1992 universities (mainly former polytechnics that had acquired degree-awarding powers since

1992) and least at the ‘Russell group’ (consisting of older, research-intensive universities). Post-1992 universities are commonly thought to have a greater commitment to providing opportunities for ethnic minority students (e.g. Shiner & Modood, 2002), but Richardson noted that his own results suggested they were the least successful in enabling such students to achieve good degrees.

Richardson also found that the attainment gap was greater in certain subjects of study than in others. The Higher Education Statistics Agency classifies degree programmes into 19 major subject areas. Comparing White and Asian students, the attainment gap was greatest in the case of combined degrees and smallest in the case of medicine and dentistry. (The latter were intercalated or intermediate degrees taken midway through training. The degrees that qualify students to practice medicine or dentistry are not classified.) Comparing White and Black students, the attainment gap was greatest in the case of combined degrees and smallest in the case of agriculture. Unfortunately, degrees in psychology are not separately identified at this level of analysis but are subsumed within the broader field of biological sciences. The attainment gap in the latter field was broadly similar to that across all subjects taken together.

The attainment of ethnic minority students in distance education

One way of taking forward the investigation of the attainment gap in ethnic minority students is to focus on their progress within particular institutions of higher education. The UK Open University was created in 1969 to provide degree programmes by distance education. Most of the Open University’s courses are worth 30 or 60 credit points, on the basis that full-time study would consist of courses worth 120 credit points in a given year. Students may register for two or more courses up to a maximum of 120 credit points, but most register for just one course at a time, and all are regarded as studying on a part-time basis.

The Open University is an interesting example for the present purpose, because it has both an open admissions policy and a long-standing commitment to equal opportunities in education. It has also explored initiatives for supporting students from ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, Richardson (2009a) found that the attainment gap in ethnic minority students was equally apparent in Open University graduates. Table 2 shows data from all students who had been awarded honours degrees by the University from 2002–2003 to 2004–2005.

The demographic profile of Open University graduates is somewhat different from that of graduates from other institu-

tions. In particular, the University recruits large numbers of older students. The graduates represented in Table 2 varied in age from 19 to 91 with a mean age of 43.7 years and a median age of 42 years. Nevertheless, Richardson found that the attainment gap in ethnic minority graduates from the Open University was similar in older and younger students, including those aged under 30. Indeed, it was broadly similar to the attainment gap found among graduates who had studied part-time at other institutions. Once again, the attainment gap among Open University graduates remained statistically significant even when the effects of variations in their prior qualifications and other demographic variables had been statistically controlled.

The Open University awards a BA or BSc degree on the basis of the balance of arts and science courses that each student has passed, and degrees with honours are awarded on the basis of a minimum number of passed advanced-level courses. Since 2000, the University has introduced ‘named’ degrees based on the satisfactory completion of specific schemes of study, but many students still opt to receive the generic BA or BSc degrees. The graduates in Table 2 were awarded 32 different honours degrees, and there were apparent differences in the attainment gap in ethnic minority students across the different degrees. Table 3 shows

Table 2: Percentage frequency distributions of classified honours degrees awarded by the UK Open University in 2002–2005.

Ethnic group	N	Degree class				
		I	II(i)	II(ii)	III	Good
White	18,707	17.5	41.2	31.7	9.6	58.7
Mixed	39	28.2	30.8	23.1	17.9	59.0
Asian or Asian British	276	10.1	34.1	37.0	18.8	44.2
Black or Black British	296	3.7	17.2	45.6	33.4	20.9
Chinese or other	115	16.5	31.3	40.0	12.2	47.8
Not known	1512	11.2	36.0	35.3	17.5	47.2

Note: Adapted from Richardson (2009a, p.327). I, first-class honours; II(i), upper second-class honours; II(ii), lower second-class honours; III, third-class honours; Good, good degrees (first class or upper second class).

the classes of honours awarded to students who obtained the BA or BSc Honours in psychology from 2002–2003 to 2004–2005. (The relatively small numbers of ‘Mixed’ and ‘Chinese or other’ students have been combined into a single ‘Other’ category.) It would appear that the attainment gap in Asian and Black students is at least as great as that shown in Table 2.

Richardson found that there was significant variation across the 32 degrees in the proportion of students who were awarded good degrees and also in the proportion of students from different ethnic groups who were awarded each degree, but that the interaction between these two effects was not at all significant. This implies that the apparent differences among the different degrees were simply the result of chance variation from an underlying trend for White students to be more likely to obtain good degrees than ethnic minority students.

The attainment of ethnic minority students on psychology courses in distance education

At most UK institutions of higher education, the class of degree awarded to each student is determined by the distribution of marks or grades that he or she has achieved on individual course units or modules. Consequently, the factors that are responsible for variations in the proportion of good degrees

are likely to have affected attainment at the course level. At the Open University, some courses are assessed simply on a pass/fail basis, but on most courses at intermediate or advanced level the students are awarded grades between 1 (distinction) and 4 (bare pass). In determining the class of an honours degree, the boundary between Grades 2 and 3 maps onto the boundary between upper and lower second-class honours, and so Grades 1 and 2 can be regarded as ‘good’ grades that would subsequently merit the award of a good degree. Richardson (2009b) investigated the grades that had been awarded to students who passed Open University courses in 2003, and Table 4 shows an extract from his results.

The attainment gap in ethnic minority students is equally apparent in terms of the grades that they are awarded at the course level. In other words, the main reason why ethnic minority students are less likely to obtain good degrees at the Open University is that they are less likely to obtain the grades that would subsequently lead to the award of a good degree. More important, these results imply that the attainment gap in ethnic minority students is not restricted to those who are awarded honours degrees but applies to those working for other undergraduate awards such as certificates, diplomas, foundation degrees or ordinary degrees.

Table 3: Percentage frequency distributions of classified honours degrees in psychology awarded by the UK Open University in 2002–2005.

Ethnic group	N	Degree class				
		I	II(i)	II(ii)	III	Good
White	2477	15.5	42.5	31.3	10.6	58.1
Asian or Asian British	55	5.5	36.4	43.6	14.5	41.8
Black or Black British	46	0.0	15.2	47.8	37.0	15.2
Other	24	16.7	33.3	29.2	20.8	50.0
Not known	217	11.2	38.7	35.0	13.4	47.2

Note: Unpublished data from Richardson (2009a). I, first-class honours; II(i), upper second-class honours; II(ii), lower second-class honours; III, third-class honours; Good, good degrees (first class or upper second class).

Table 4: Percentage frequency distributions of grades awarded to students taking undergraduate courses with the UK Open University in 2003.

Ethnic group	N	Degree class				
		I	II(i)	II(ii)	III	Good
White	57,629	16.6	32.7	33.9	16.8	49.3
Mixed	327	16.8	25.7	33.6	23.9	42.5
Asian or Asian British	966	10.9	25.9	37.6	25.7	36.7
Black or Black British	1078	4.4	16.9	40.5	38.2	21.2
Chinese or other	520	12.3	30.8	35.2	21.7	43.1
Not known	6040	9.9	26.8	38.6	24.7	36.6

Note: Adapted from Richardson (2009b, p.31). Course grades vary from 1 (distinction) to 4 (bare pass); Grades 1 and 2 are 'good'.

Richardson also found that the attainment gap in ethnic minority students remained statistically significant even when the effects of variations in entry qualifications and other demographic variables had been statistically controlled. The students in Table 4 had taken 245 different courses, and there were apparent differences in the attainment gap across these different courses. Once again, however, the interaction between the effect of course and ethnicity was not significant. As before, this implies that the apparent differences among the different courses were simply the result of chance variation from an underlying trend for White students to be more likely to obtain good grades than ethnic minority students.

In 2003, there were four 'core' courses in the BA or BSc Honours in Psychology which, among other things, enabled the degree to be accredited by the British Psychological Society as providing the Graduate Basis for Registration, permitting graduates to proceed to professional training in psychology at a postgraduate level:

- DSE212 *Exploring psychology*;
- ED209 *Child development*;
- D309 *Cognitive psychology*;
- D317 *Social psychology: personal lives, social worlds*.

The first two courses were at an intermediate level, and the last two courses were at an

advanced level. Each of these courses was presented from February to October, was assessed both by coursework and by an unseen examination, and was equivalent to 50 per cent of full-time study. D309 included a week-long residential school. DSE212 was supplemented by a project course (also compulsory for the BA or BSc Honours in Psychology) that was supported by face-to-face tuition at a week-long residential school or by equivalent online activities.

Table 5 shows the distributions of grades awarded to students from different ethnic groups who passed each of these courses in 2003. (Once again, the 'Mixed' and 'Chinese or other' students have been combined into a single 'Other' category). White students were more likely to be awarded good grades than Asian or Black students in each of the courses. Indeed, it would appear that the attainment gap in Asian and Black students on these four psychology courses is at least as great as that shown in Table 4. Again, the main reason why ethnic minority students are less likely to obtain good degrees in psychology at the Open University is that they are less likely to obtain good grades on the courses that lead to such degrees. The results also imply that ethnic minority students will be less likely to obtain good grades in psychology courses even if they are eventually awarded degrees in other subjects.

Table 5: Percentage frequency distributions of grades awarded to students taking psychology courses with the UK Open University in 2003.

Ethnic group	N	Course grades				
		1	2	3	4	Good
<i>DSE212 Exploring psychology</i>						
White	1876	12.8	28.5	42.1	16.6	41.3
Asian or Asian British	39	2.6	15.4	51.3	30.8	17.9
Black or Black British	38	5.3	7.9	47.4	39.5	13.2
Other	35	0.0	17.1	60.0	22.9	17.1
Not known	204	4.4	18.1	50.5	27.0	22.5
<i>ED209 Child development</i>						
White	1512	12.7	30.8	33.9	22.6	43.5
Asian or Asian British	46	2.2	30.4	43.5	23.9	32.6
Black or Black British	26	0.0	11.5	42.3	46.2	11.5
Other	21	9.5	33.3	42.9	14.3	42.9
Not known	222	7.7	19.8	38.7	33.8	27.5
<i>D309 Cognitive psychology</i>						
White	1069	5.5	46.5	41.1	6.9	52.0
Asian or Asian British	33	3.0	33.3	54.5	9.1	36.4
Black or Black British	22	0.0	4.5	77.3	18.2	4.5
Other	11	9.1	36.4	45.5	9.1	45.5
Not known	114	7.9	41.2	41.2	9.6	49.1
<i>D317 Social psychology</i>						
White	1238	16.6	34.7	34.6	14.1	51.3
Asian or Asian British	34	5.9	20.6	50.0	23.5	26.5
Black or Black British	23	0.0	26.1	43.5	30.4	26.1
Other	13	23.1	38.5	23.1	15.4	61.5
Not known	133	6.8	33.1	39.8	20.3	39.8

Note: Unpublished data from Richardson (2009a). I, first-class honours; II(i), upper second-class honours; II(ii), lower second-class honours; III, third-class honours; Good, good degrees (first class or upper second class).

Conclusions

Over the last 40 years, it is clear that the participation of people from ethnic minorities in UK higher education has 'widened' to the point where the participation rates of Asian and Black people are at least one-and-a-half times the participation rate of White people. Nevertheless, Asian and Black students are less likely to be awarded good degrees at the conclusion of their studies. Richardson (2008) quantified this by noting that the odds of an Asian student being awarded a good degree were half of those of a White student being awarded a good degree, and that the odds of a Black student being awarded a good

degree were a third of those of a White student being awarded a good degree. The size of this attainment gap varies across different kinds of institution, but it is statistically significant at all kinds of institution. In particular, it is at least as great among graduates from the Open University as it is among graduates from other institutions.

The size of the attainment gap also varies across different subjects of study, but it is statistically significant in all subjects. In particular, it is as great in biological sciences (which includes psychology) as it is across all subjects considered together. Moreover, at

the Open University, it is as great in psychology as it is across all subjects considered together. Finally, given that the class of honours awarded to Open University graduates is determined by the grades that they have achieved in individual courses, it is unsurprising that the attainment gap is equally apparent in the grades awarded to students who have passed Open University courses. In particular, it is evident in the grades awarded to students who have passed the core courses that make up the psychology degree.

What this means is that neither the Open University nor any other institution of higher education in the UK can currently ensure that, other things such as entry qualifications being equal, the attainment of students from ethnic minorities will match that of White students. Increased participation has not been associated with parity in terms of educational outcomes. Further research is needed to establish whether this pattern applies to other social groups who are currently the focus of attempts to widen participation in higher education. In the absence of such research, it is premature to promote the idea of widening participation in such groups.

Indeed, one could argue that teachers of psychology (of all academic subjects) should be especially concerned to address this matter. After all, the British Psychological Society's (2009) *Code of Ethics and Conduct* states that psychologists should 'avoid

practices that are unfair or prejudiced' (p.10). At a national level, roughly half of the attainment gap in ethnic minority students can be attributed to the fact that they tend to enter higher education with lower entry qualifications than White students. Detailed analyses of graduate attainment data have been carried out (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Naylor & Smith, 2004; Richardson, 2008), but the factors responsible for the rest of the attainment gap have yet to be determined (as have the reasons why Black students tend to perform less well than Asian students). Even so, the implication is that these factors have nothing to do with the ability of ethnic minority students, as evidenced by their prior qualifications. This certainly looks like a practice that is unfair in terms of its consequences for the students' subsequent careers and livelihood.

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