

# White students get better degrees than minority peers with same entry grades

Research raises concerns that English universities are failing to adequately support black and Asian undergraduates

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Students celebrate their graduation by throwing their mortars in the air. Photograph: Rosemary Roberts / Alamy / Alamy

White university students at English universities receive significantly higher degree grades than their peers from minority ethnic backgrounds with the same entry qualifications, research from the Higher Education Funding Council for England has revealed.

The report found that 72% of white students who have grades BBB at A-level went on to gain a first or upper second-class degree, compared with only 56% of Asian students and 53% of black students. The figures – from the most comprehensive study of its kind – raise concerns that universities in England are failing to support black and Asian undergraduates during their student career, despite improved efforts to recruit them.

Hefce's research also showed gaps in degree classes between students from wealthy and poorer areas, and confirmed previous research showing state school pupils outperform

those from independent schools with identical A-level results.

"This is important new research. People will focus above all on the gaps between state and independent school pupils. But that would be a shame as there are much bigger gaps by ethnic background," said Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute and a former special adviser to the universities minister, David Willetts.

"Universities need to think very carefully about how they can best support their students with different ethnic backgrounds, as many are underperforming against their classmates."

The Hefce study tracked the progress of 130,000 students in England who entered fulltime study in 2007 until graduation in 2011, and compared their final degree result with A-level grades gained at school. White students with three B grades at A-level were more likely to be awarded a 2:1 or first-class honours degree than students from ethnic backgrounds with the same A-levels. A similar gap remained between students with somewhat higher and lower grades, such as AAB and CCC, although there was fluctuation at the very top and bottom rungs of A-level results, involving very small numbers of students.

Rachel Wenstone, the NUS's vice president for higher education said the figures showed universities needed to give more help for those from diverse backgrounds.

"It's a national shame that black students and students from low participation backgrounds are appearing to do worse in degree outcomes than other students even when they get the same grades at A level," Wenstone said.

A recent NUS study found 16% of black respondents said they had experienced racism at their institution, and many linked those experiences with a drop in confidence and motivation, reporting that they felt marginalised and socially excluded.

Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of Universities UK, said: "It is clear that the gap in attainment between black and minority ethnic students and white students has been a cause for concern for some years. It is a serious and complex issue, and one that the higher education sector is working to address." The Hefce study also confirmed that state school pupils outperformed those from independent schools with the same A level results – and revealed that those from non-selective state comprehensives received very similar degree results compared with those from state selective or grammar schools.

"If you look at those who gain BBC grades at A level, 65% of those from state schools go on to get a first or upper second, compared to 53% from independent schools," said Mark Gittoes, Hefce's research director.

Students who remained in the state sector for their entire time at school also did better

than those who switched from the independent to state sector such as a sixth form colleges.

The Independent Schools Council described the findings as flawed and misguided, noting that Hefce's figures also showed that 67% of independent school pupils got an upper second or above, compared with 62% of pupils at other schools.

"It is widely recognised by serious researchers into school education that dividing the school population into 'state' and 'private' is too crude to yield anything of value," said Barnaby Lenon, the ISC's chairman.

However, independent school pupils entered university with better qualifications: ABB on average, compared with BBC for state school pupils.

There was better news for universities from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, showing that state schools pupils made up 89.3% of young British university entrants in 2012 – the highest rate ever – and an uptick in entry by those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"I am pleased to see rising proportions of people from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education, both young and mature. This means we're moving closer to a student body that reflects the wider population rather than just those who were born into a particular social group," said Les Ebdon, director of the Office for Fair Access.

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