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Ethnic diversity in UK economics



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Executive summary

Economists are central to policymaking in the UK, and to providing the research that underpins that policymaking. Despite having this important role in society, economists are not very representative of society, with a well-documented under-representation of women in the profession.

In this briefing note, we examine the ethnic diversity of academic economists who provide much of the research that ultimately feeds into policymaking. We use data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to look at which groups are more or less well represented as academic economic researchers. We then examine economics students, to understand both the source of current under-representation and the prospects for change. Finally, we study some of the barriers faced by economics students. We are not able to examine diversity among the large number of economists who work outside academia, due to a lack of data. Our key findings are as follows.

Key findings

- 1 Ethnic diversity among academic economists is increasing over time. The share of (non-White) ethnic minority academic economists doing research and teaching has increased from 19% in 2012–13 to 24% in 2018–19. This is higher than in UK academia generally (17% in 2018–19) and in the UK population (13% among individuals aged 25–64 as of 2011).
- 2 However, there are large differences in representation across different ethnic groups. Individuals of Chinese and Indian ethnicity are heavily over-represented, while Black individuals are under-represented relative to their share of the UK population. This reflects a broader pattern within the academic sector in the UK.

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- 3 These differences are even larger when focusing on the most research-intensive (Russell Group) universities, again mirroring a pattern across academia more generally. While 50% of White academic economists work in Russell Group universities, less than 30% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi academic economists do so, and less than 20% of Black academic economists do so. Ethnic minority economists who do work in Russell Group universities are 45% less likely to hold a professorial or managerial level job, compared with their White counterparts.
- 4 Ethnic diversity among economics students is greater than other Social Sciences and STEM fields, and is increasing: since 2012, the share of non-White students among British economics undergraduates has increased by 4 percentage points.
- 5 Among current undergraduates, around 20–25% of students with an economics A Level study economics depending on ethnicity, compared with 0.6–1.5% of those without A Level economics. Differential take-up at A Level is a key factor in the economics pipeline.
- 6 Ethnic minority students are less likely to study at Russell Group universities. While nearly 50% of White students study in Russell Group universities, less than 20% of Black students (and less than 25% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi students) do so, again paralleling patterns for staff. This creates an additional barrier to progression into academia.
- 7 There are large and persistent ‘attainment gaps’ between White and ethnic minority economics students: ethnic minority students are 7 percentage points less likely to get at least an upper second class honours degree and 11 percentage points less likely to get a first class honours degree. These gaps are wider than in 2012–13.
- 8 Looking at the student experience in searching for jobs, Government Economic Service recruitment data show that at every stage of the application process, ethnic minority applicants are less likely to be successful. In 2018, of those who passed the initial online test for the

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Fast Stream programme, only 8% of ethnic minority candidates ended up receiving a job offer, compared with 22% of White candidates.

- 9 Progress in tackling the barriers faced by ethnic minority individuals who are considering a career in economics requires a better understanding of what those barriers are. Further quantitative approaches to understanding barriers to progress are limited by a lack of data: in many cases, these data are not being collected, and where collected they are not analysed or made available for analysis.

1. Introduction

Recent months have seen the economics profession in reflection. Protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, at the same time as a global pandemic that has disproportionately harmed ethnic minority communities, have brought ethnic and racial inequalities to the fore of public discourse across society. The economics profession has an important role to play in understanding the forces that underpin and sustain these inequalities, and in formulating policy solutions. However, it has become apparent that such issues have received limited attention from leading research in the field when compared with the rest of the social sciences (Advani et al., 2020).

Economic research is hugely influential in public policy and commercial decision-making. Increasingly, other disciplines cite economic research in the production of their own research (Angrist et al, 2020). Economists are at the heart of key decision-making outfits, including the Government Economic Service (GES), Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), and Chief Economists at regulators and in major firms. Thus, it matters who studies, researches and practises economics.

In this briefing note, we survey ethnic diversity in economics at UK universities. While this provides only a partial picture of the profession as a whole, thus far our attempts to obtain data on diversity among professional economists have been unsuccessful. Nonetheless, universities are a crucial element of the picture to consider as they are typically at the frontier of the production of new knowledge in the field, as well as training the (academic and non-academic) economists of the future.

First, we consider the ethnic profile of *researchers* in UK economics departments – those largely responsible for the production of economic research. We examine the representation of different ethnic groups relative to other disciplines and the population overall, as well as the average employment characteristics of different groups.

We then turn to the ethnic make-up of higher education students who are taking economics courses to shed light on the ‘economics pipeline’. In parallel to the study

of staff, we investigate differences in representation across ethnic groups, and reflect on potential challenges to more equal representation across the profession. In particular, we study the role of four potential barriers to progression, both in academia and outside it: the types of institution ethnic minority students attend; access to role models in the form of similar teaching staff; differences in degree completion and attainment; and employment prospects after graduating.

This briefing note provides a first view of ethnic diversity in economics in the UK. In future work, we hope to shed more light on diversity amongst professional economists and to provide a fuller picture of where obstacles exist in the education system in order to inform concrete policy changes.

2. The producers of research

Who produces economic research matters for society as a whole. Economists from different backgrounds have different views across a range of dimensions (May, McGarvey and Whaples, 2014; May, McGarvey and Kucera, 2018). A more diverse pool of researchers would therefore directly affect the production of knowledge, with diversity encouraging competition and innovation in research, and thus potentially increasing research quality (Parotta, Pozzoli and Pytlikova, 2014; Freeman and Huang, 2015; Parotta, Pozzoli and Sala, 2016). Diverse research may also be inclusive research: if some groups feel important issues are not represented in their field of study, they may be less likely to pursue further study in that field (Bayer, Bhanot and Lozano, 2019; Bayer et al., 2020). Similarly, the characteristics of those who contribute to policymaking with economic analysis and advice are important. Evidence suggests that diverse groups change the process and outcomes of decision-making for the better (Clots-Figueras, 2012; Hoogendoorn, Oosterbeek and Van Praag, 2013).

In this section, we examine ethnic diversity in the production of economic research, focusing on university faculty.¹ For this purpose, we primarily consider academic staff on a full-time equivalent (FTE) basis whose contract includes a research component, as opposed to teaching-only positions. In the data used, individuals self-report their ethnicity according to the coding frame recommended by the Office

¹ As described earlier, it would be interesting to study also the diversity of economists in policymaking and the private sector, but despite our best efforts – including requests via the Royal Economics Society – we were not able to obtain data on the employees or members of any other organisations.

for National Statistics for UK-wide data collection. As providing this information is optional, and some individuals may identify with groups not explicitly represented in the coding frame, ethnicity information is sometimes missing in the data: for 2018–19, this is the case for 7% of all academics and 8% of economists.² We exclude such cases from our analysis but it should be noted that this might affect the representativeness of the overall sample to some degree.³

Ethnic diversity among academics

Before considering ethnic diversity in economics specifically, it is important to recognise that within academia overall, there are significant inequalities in the representation of ethnic minorities.⁴ Figure 2.1 shows that Chinese academic researchers are far more numerous than their population share, and Indian and mixed ethnicity researchers are also relatively well-represented overall.⁵ However, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Black African researchers are evidently under-represented among academics in the UK. There is also intersectionality: in most (but not all) cases, the under-representation of ethnic minority women is especially stark. Bangladeshi and Pakistani women account for only 0.25% and 0.58% of research staff, respectively. Black Caribbean men account for only 0.12%. It is clear that the economics discipline functions within a system characterised by deep inequalities of access and voice. Addressing these requires bigger societal and structural changes, but how does the economics discipline compare in terms of diversity within this system?

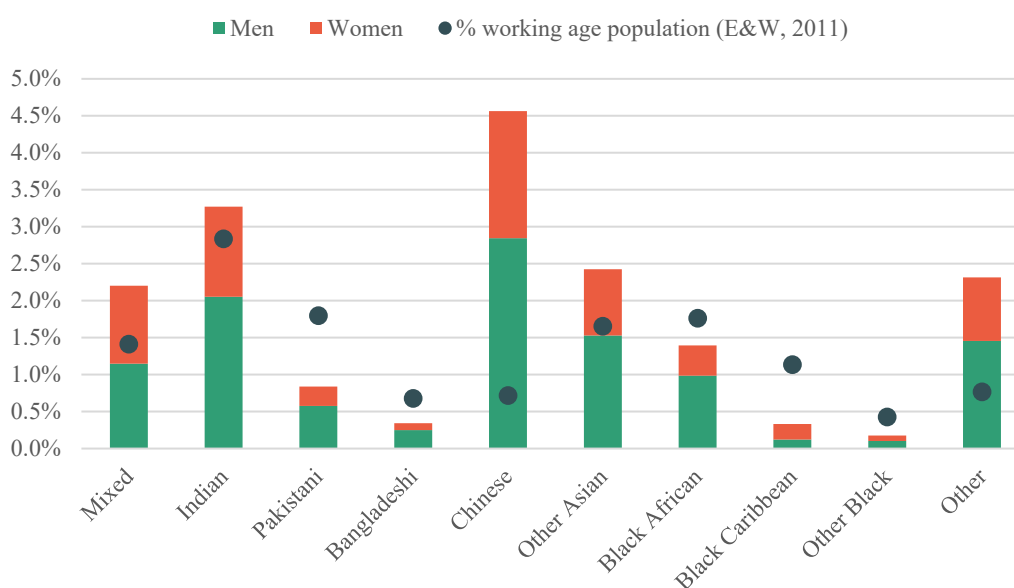
² There are some variations in the degree of missingness depending on the sample. For instance, among academic economics faculty members, ethnicity is missing for 6.9% of UK nationals and 8.6% of non-UK nationals.

³ Detailed information on data definitions can be found at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/staff>.

⁴ Ethnic minority here is defined as any non-white ethnicity; for the purpose of this briefing note, white individuals from different ethnic backgrounds are included together in the majority group.

⁵ For ease of exposition, we use terms such as Indian and Chinese to refer to individuals who report Indian and Chinese ethnic backgrounds. This is not intended to imply anything about their nationality.

Figure 2.1. Ethnic minority representation in UK academia overall (2018–19)



Note: This figure uses FTE staff and includes only staff with a research component to their contract: ‘teaching and research’ (a typical academic contract), or ‘research only’ (for example, post-doctoral researchers). For 7% of staff, ethnicity is missing; these are excluded. For 0.03% of staff, sex is ‘other’; these are excluded. Working age is defined as aged 25–64. Population comparison is to England and Wales (E&W) only because ethnic minority categories are different in the Scottish and Northern Irish censuses.

Source: HESA and 2011 Census of England and Wales. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Ethnic diversity among economists

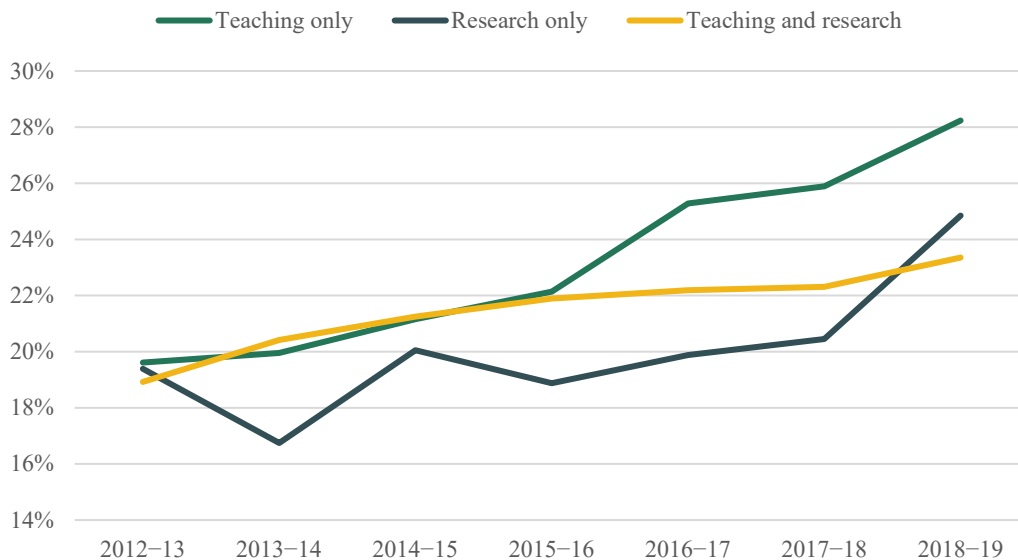
In 2018–19, 24% of FTE academic economists were from a non-White ethnic group, an increase of 5 percentage points since 2012–13.⁶ The majority of economics faculty (72%) have both teaching and research responsibilities, with 12% having research-only contracts and 18% having teaching-only contracts. As Figure 2.2 shows, ethnic minority representation remains slightly lower in academic economics posts that have a research component; ethnic minority economists are relatively more prevalent in pure teaching roles. As this section is concerned with

⁶ ‘Academic economists’ are staff employed by the university whose primary or secondary discipline is economics, who are involved in teaching or research, and who hold a contract level K0 or above.

the production of research, it will focus on staff with some research responsibilities – we return to those with teaching responsibilities later.

It is also worth noting that this composite non-White share reflects very different patterns between British and non-British academic economists doing research. This is significant given that only 40% are UK nationals. Among non-UK nationals, 29% are non-White. By contrast, among UK nationals 16% are non-White. Thus, the majority of ethnic minority academic economists doing research in the UK are not from the UK. Ethnic diversity among UK academic economists is primarily driven by bringing in individuals from abroad.

Figure 2.2. Ethnic minority representation among academic economists



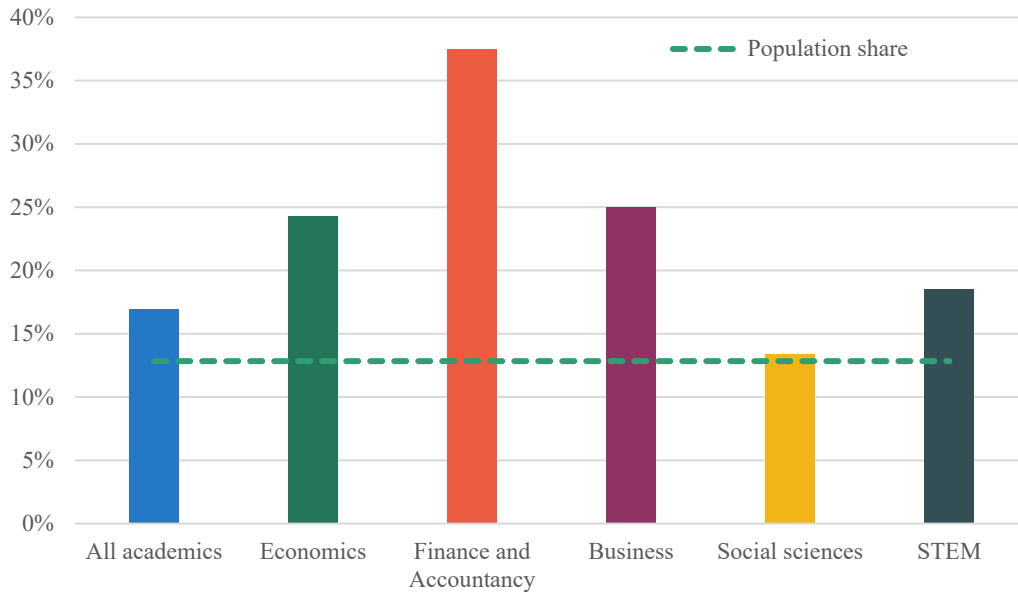
Note: This figure uses FTE staff. For 8% of staff, ethnicity is unknown; these are excluded. Economics staff defined as those whose primary or secondary academic discipline is economics.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Figure 2.3 compares economics with other academic disciplines and shows that ethnic minority representation among research staff varies substantially by subject area. Overall, academics researching economics have a higher degree of minority representation than the rest of the Social Sciences and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), two subject areas that share similarities with the discipline in some respects. In contrast, among staff whose research relates primarily to Finance or Business Studies, ethnic minority representation is higher

than in Economics. It is also notable that overall ethnic minority representation in research roles in universities is higher than the population share of ethnic minority groups in the country.

Figure 2.3. Ethnic minority representation in research positions in different academic disciplines (2018–19)



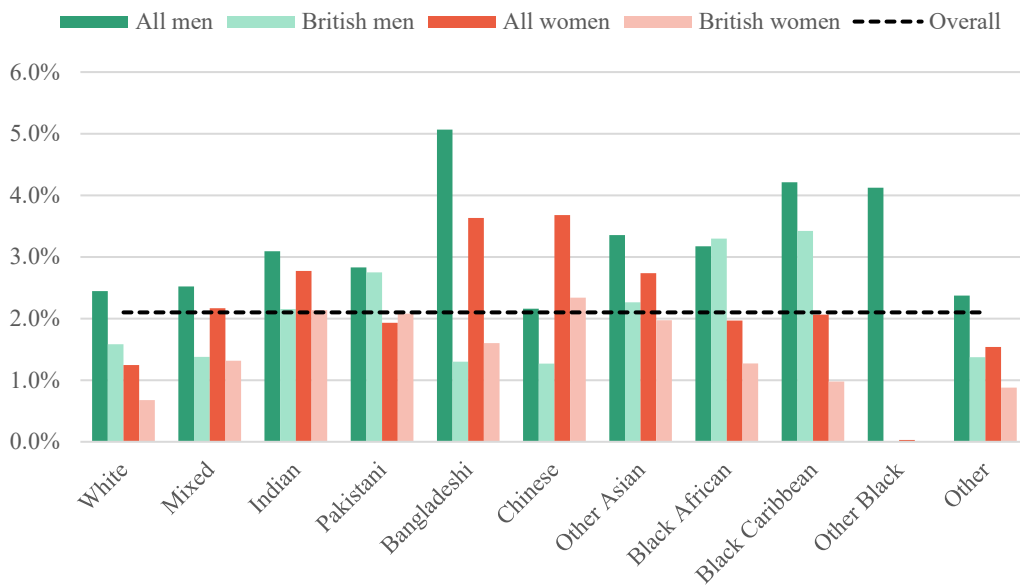
Note: This figure uses FTE staff and includes only staff with a research component to their contract: “teaching and research” (a typical academic contract), or “research only” (for example, post-doctoral researchers). For 7% of staff, ethnicity is missing; these are excluded. Individuals are assigned to subject areas according to primary or secondary academic discipline, such that they may appear in multiple subject areas. Working age is defined as aged 25–64. See Appendix D for subject list.

Source: HESA, and 2011 Census of England and Wales, Scotland Census 2011, and 2011 Census of Northern Ireland. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

This overall ethnic minority representation masks big differences between different minority ethnic groups. Figure 2.4 shows, among university research staff, the percentage of each ethnicity–sex group that is involved in economics, overall and for UK nationals only. This comparison accounts for differences in the overall likelihood of working in academia across groups, as shown in Figure 2.1, allowing us to focus on the relative representativeness of economics compared with academia more generally. If all groups were equally well represented as they are in academia more generally, all bars would be the height of the black dashed line (around 2%).

It is clear that there are big differences in what one might interpret as the ‘success’ of economics as a discipline in attracting or retaining researchers. Notably, there is a consistent pattern that, overall, women from any ethnic group are less likely to work in economic research than men, with the exception of Chinese women. White women and ‘other Black’ women appear particularly unlikely to do so. Ethnic minority men are also more likely to work in economics than their White counterparts, conditional on being an academic researcher. Although this must be viewed in the context of differential academic representation between groups overall, this evidence suggests that economics does appeal to minority researchers, though disproportionately to men.

Figure 2.4. Percentage of research academics from each ethnic group working in economics, by sex (2018–19)



Note: This figure uses FTE staff and includes only staff with a research component to their contract: “teaching and research” (a typical academic contract), or “research only” (for example, post-doctoral researchers). For 8% of staff, ethnicity is missing; these are excluded. For 0.03% of staff, sex is ‘other’; these are excluded. Individuals are assigned to subject areas according to primary or secondary academic discipline, such that they may appear in multiple subject areas.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

However, it is important to note that much of the ethnic diversity is coming from international staff. This is most striking among Bangladeshi individuals: while 1 in

20 Bangladeshi men in academia research economics overall, this is fewer than 1 in 75 among British Bangladeshi men.

Beyond headline statistics

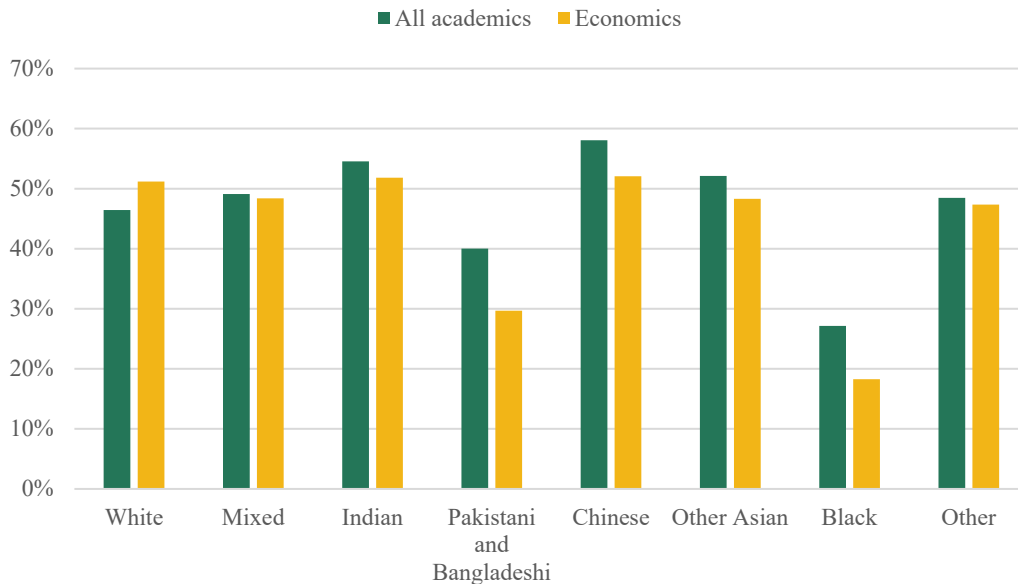
Although these results provide an overview of ethnic diversity among academic economists, they miss other important differences in staff position, such as research intensity and seniority.

Research-intensive institutions, such as those that make up the Russell Group, are seen as a key source for influential economic research. To examine how ethnic diversity varies with research intensity, we study the share of academics from different ethnic groups who work in Russell Group universities, both among economists and across all disciplines.

Figure 2.5 reveals striking differences between ethnic groups in the likelihood of working in the Russell Group, for both economics and academia more generally. Almost half of White economists work in Russell Group universities, compared with 30% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi economists, and less than 20% overall for Black economists. While the pattern across groups for economists is similar to academia overall, the under-representation of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black individuals in Russell Group universities is especially pronounced in the discipline.

Given evidence that members of staff at Russell Group institutions spend more of their time on research (Court, 2012), this suggests that some groups may be even less represented in research time and research output than FTE staff numbers suggest. This is even before accounting for the fact that research output from higher-ranked institutions is more likely to be published and receives more citations – something reflected in the higher ‘REF scores’ received by these universities.⁷ However, with the data available, it is difficult to say what drives these differences.

⁷ See <https://www.ref.ac.uk/2014/> for details of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and also Boliver (2015) for a discussion of differences in research output across university types.

Figure 2.5. Percentage of each ethnic group in Russell Group universities (2018–19)

Note: This figure uses FTE staff and includes only staff with a research component to their contract: “teaching and research” (a typical academic contract), or “research only” (for example, post-doctoral researchers). For 7% of staff, ethnicity is missing; these are excluded. ‘Pakistani and Bangladeshi’ and ‘Black’ ethnic groups aggregated due to small sample sizes in line with HESA rounding and suppression requirements.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

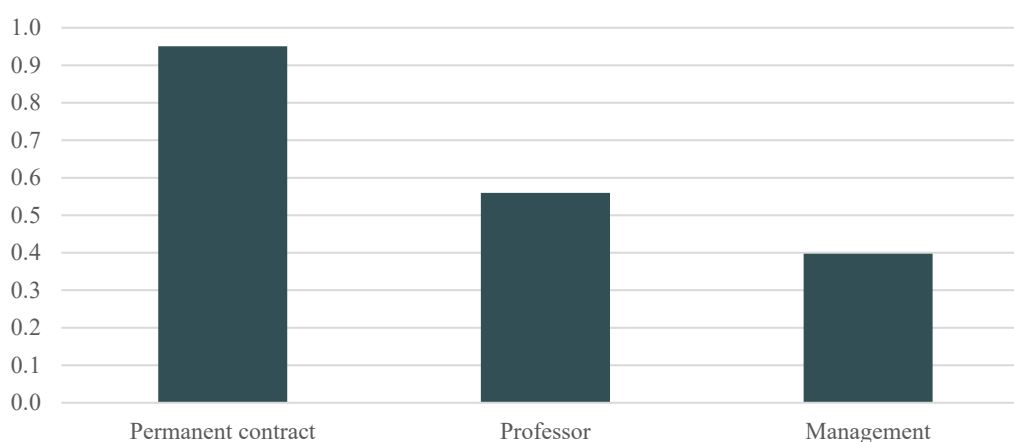
Even among staff at Russell Group universities, there are differences between groups in the type and stability of employment held (Figure 2.6). Ethnic minority individuals are less likely to hold permanent positions, with fixed term or atypical contracts relatively more prevalent compared with their White counterparts.

Minority individuals are also less likely to occupy senior academic and management positions: overall, they are 45% less likely to hold a professorial or management position. Such patterns might be partially explained by ethnic minority individuals on the staff being younger on average, for instance. With the data available, we cannot shed any light on this; regardless, such an explanation would not change the fact that ethnic diversity is lower in senior roles.

Overall, these data paint a mixed picture for the field in terms of inclusivity and diversity for academics from different backgrounds. While comparisons with other fields of study may suggest that those researching economics come from relatively more diverse ethnic backgrounds, there are notable inequalities between groups in

terms of the prestige of institutions at which they are employed, and the stability and seniority of employment for ethnic minorities. All of this may have consequences for the research output produced and disseminated in the discipline, including the relative dearth of economic research on issues of racial and ethnic discrimination and inequality, relative to other social sciences (Advani et al., 2020).

Figure 2.6. Prevalence of ethnic minority individuals among economics staff in different employment categories within Russell Group universities, relative to White individuals (2018–19)



Note: This figure uses FTE staff and includes only staff with a research component to their contract: “teaching and research” (a typical academic contract), or “research only” (for example, post-doctoral researchers). For 10% of staff, ethnicity is missing; these are excluded. Management positions defined as groupings A–E as defined at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/staff#contract-levels>.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

3. The economics pipeline

The previous section documented clear differences between different ethnic groups in their representation among those producing academic economic research. To understand why this comes about and how likely things are to change, in this section we consider the ‘economics pipeline’: the experience of different groups in studying and progressing through an education in economics. We use data on students studying economics at UK universities in recent years to explore patterns of access, diversity and representation, and to discuss some of the obstacles that ethnic minority students face.

Diversity among students

In this section, we focus on students of British nationality, who account for 58% of those studying economics and 67% of undergraduate economics students in the most recent year of data, 2018–19. This is partly for practical reasons, as ethnicity information is not available for a majority of international students.⁸ In addition, it is for British students where UK policy can most obviously play a role in terms of the decisions made prior to university. We study the same ethnic groupings as in Section 2 and all analysis in this section weights students by their course components. For instance, if a student is enrolled on a degree which is 50% Economics and 50% Mathematics, they are equally represented (with a 0.5 weight) in each subject area.

In England, ethnic minority children are more likely to attend university than their White counterparts (UCAS, 2020). This follows a striking trend in recent years

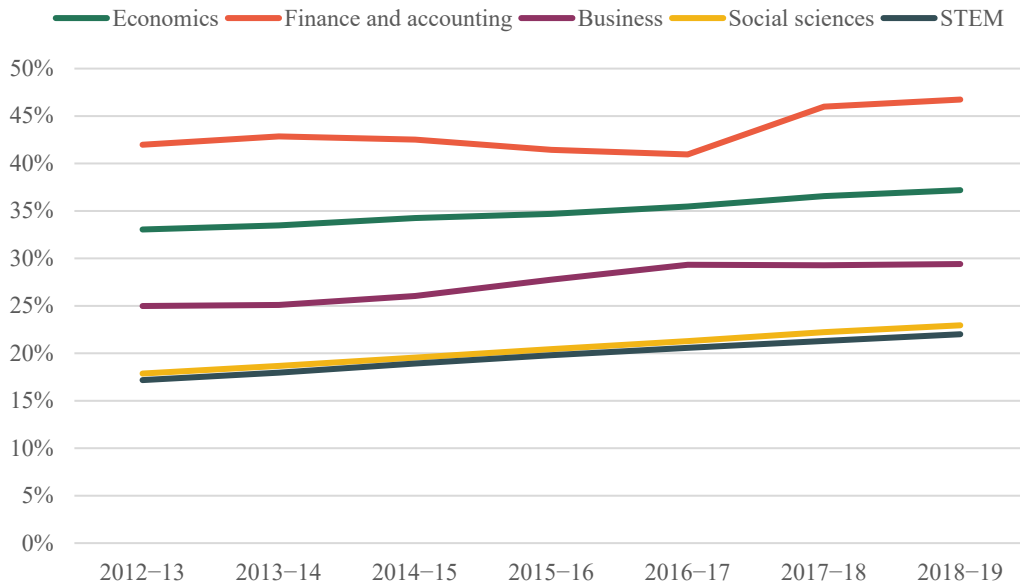
⁸ For UK national students overall, 2.4% have missing ethnicity information in 2018–19. For non-UK students, it is 69%.

where children from most ethnic minority groups have closed, and even overturned, gaps in educational attainment in GCSEs and A Levels (Strand, 2015; Cabinet Office, 2019 and 2020). As a result, among UK national undergraduates, most ethnic minorities are actually over-represented compared with their population sizes.

This over-representation of ethnic minorities as a whole is even larger among British undergraduate economics students.⁹ As shown in Figure 3.1, in 2018–19 37% of UK national undergraduate economists were from a non-White minority ethnic background, compared with 23% of those in other social sciences and 22% in STEM courses. By way of comparison, 19% of individuals aged 18–24 came from an ethnic minority in the 2011 Census of England and Wales.

⁹ In this section, ‘undergraduate’ refers to *first degree* undergraduate students in economics, who account for over 99% of total undergraduates in economics.

Figure 3.1. Ethnic minority representation in undergraduate economics and other subject areas

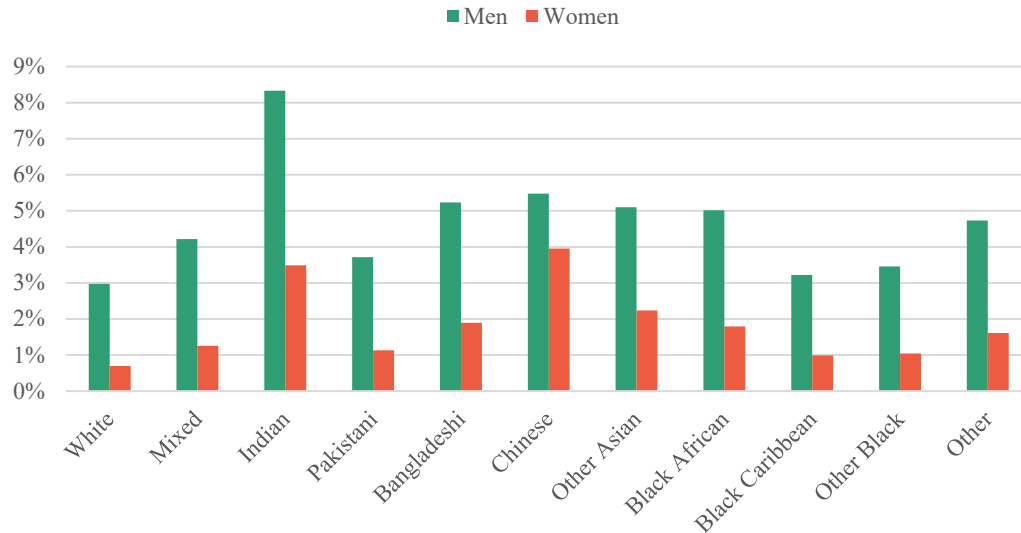


Note: UK nationality students only. Ethnic minority includes all non-White ethnic groups. For 1.9% of students, ethnicity is unknown; these are excluded. See Appendix D for subject list.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Conditional on attending university, White students (both male and female) are less likely than any other ethnic group to opt to study economics (Figure 3.2). Overall, men are much more likely to choose to study economics than women (Advani, Griffith and Smith, 2019). 1 in 29 British men study economics for their first degree, compared to 1 in 105 for women. However, for some groups the gaps are smaller, most notably among the Chinese ethnic group. A caveat to note is that with the data available, we cannot say anything about those who take economics at A Level (or who do not) but do not go on to higher education in the UK.

Figure 3.2. Among undergraduate students, share of each ethnic group studying economics, by sex (2018–19)



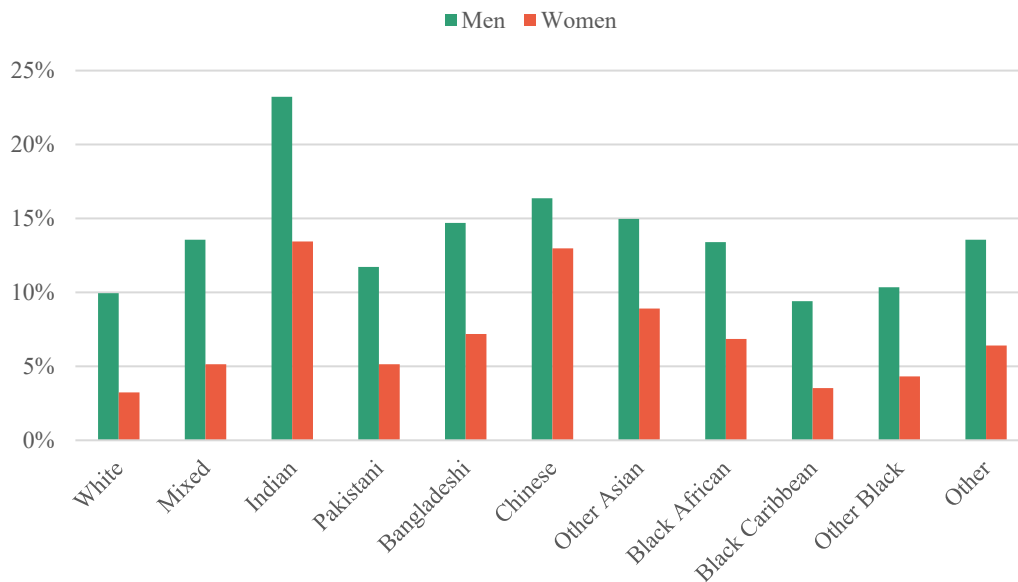
Note: UK nationality students only. Student instances weighted by course component. Ethnicity information is unknown for 2.6% of students: these are excluded. In 0.03% of cases, sex is 'other': these are excluded.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

It starts at school

The economics pipeline starts at school: 70% of British undergraduate economics students in 2018–19 studied economics at A Level. Many of the differences between groups in their propensity to study economics at university appear to derive from their subject choice at school. Figure 3.3 shows that among undergraduate students as a whole, there are substantial differences across ethnic groups in the share of students with an A Level in economics, ranging from under 6% for Black Caribbean students to 18% for Indian students overall. For all groups, women at university are less likely to have an A Level in economics.

Figure 3.3. Among all undergraduate students, the share with an A Level in economics (2018–19)



Note: UK nationality students only. Student instances weighted by course component. Ethnicity information is unknown for 1.9% of students: these are excluded.

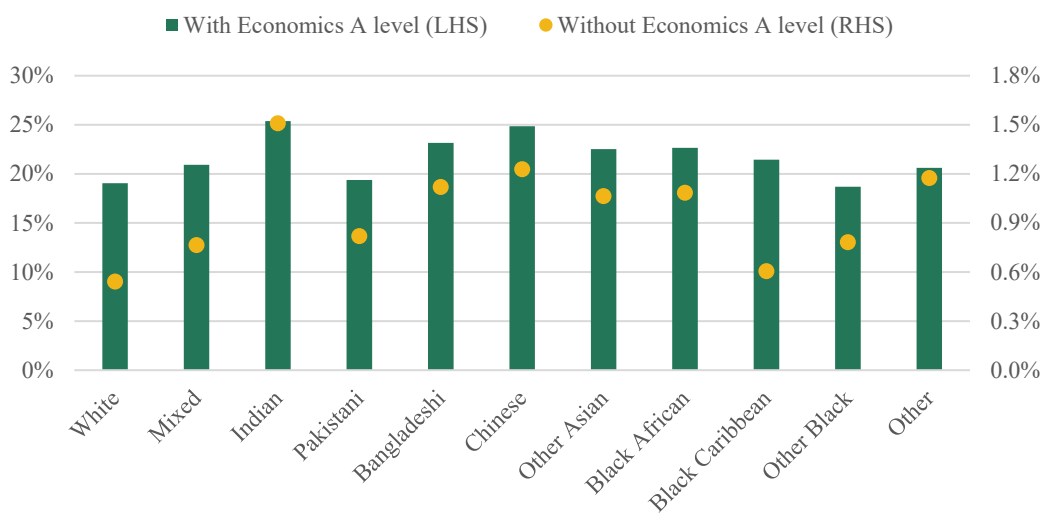
Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

However, conditional on taking economics at A Level and going on to an undergraduate degree, the probability of that degree being an economics course does not vary substantially by ethnicity (Figure 3.4). Across most ethnic groups, around one in five students who take economics at A Level and go on to university choose to study economics – one in four among Indian and Chinese students. Among those who did not study economics at A Level but who go to university, less than 1% (around one in 150) go on to study economics. Again, there is some variation by ethnicity, with White students and Black Caribbean students least likely to take the step to study economics at university.

In contrast with the relatively poor ability of economics to attract women (Advani, Griffith and Smith, 2019), economics appears successful at attracting students from ethnic minority backgrounds if they have studied economics. The larger problem here is that economics is often not available at A Level, particularly in the state sector (Crawford, Davies and Smith, 2018). As of 2017, half of comprehensive schools offered economics at A Level, compared with 77% of independent schools and 83% of grammar schools (Gill, 2018). Because economics is also not taught to

most students at any earlier stage in the curriculum (fewer than 5% of comprehensive schools offer economics at GCSE; Gill, 2015), this leads to many students having little idea what it is about, reflected in the low take-up of economics at undergraduate level among those who did not study economics at A Level. The implications of this for different ethnic groups, and for other dimensions of diversity in the profession, are an important margin for further study.

Figure 3.4. Among undergraduate students, the share with and without an Economics A Level who are studying economics, by ethnicity (2018–19)



Note: UK nationality students only. Student instances weighted by course component. Ethnicity information is unknown for 1.9% of students: these are excluded.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Climbing the educational ladder

At first glance, economics appears to be doing relatively well in terms of attracting ethnic minority students. However, this pattern does not continue as one moves up the educational ladder.

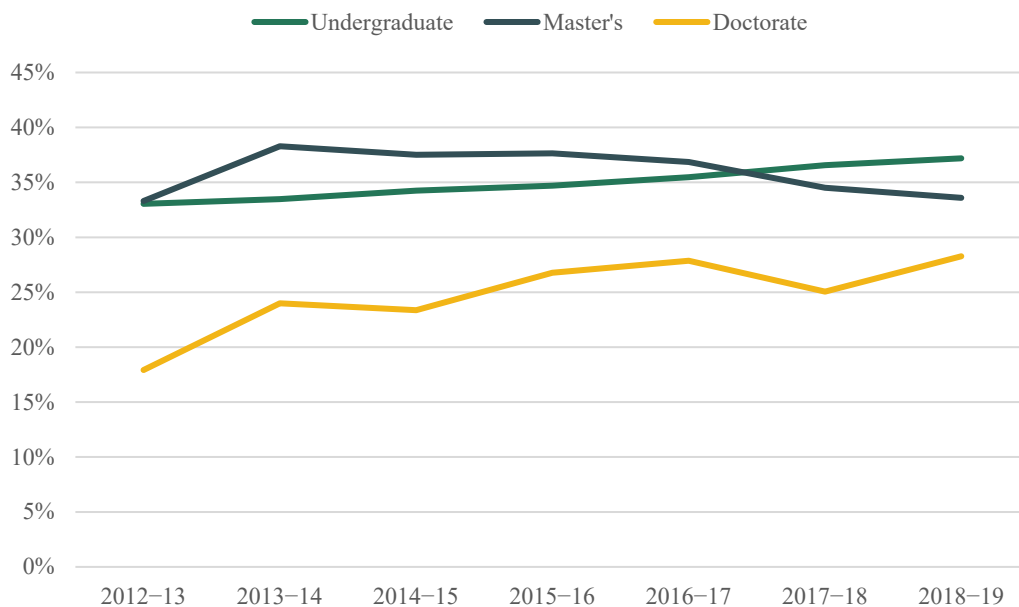
Undergraduate economics students make up 84% of the overall economics student population, but a large majority of these students who enter the job market will find careers in fields such as finance, accounting and consulting (Higher Education Careers Services Unit, 2019). Students who undertake a Master's degree are more likely to go on to do research, or to become practising economists in the public or

private sectors. At this level, we see a similar aggregate pattern to undergraduates: students from ethnic minorities are about as likely as White students to transfer to Master's degrees in economics in the UK, although this share appears to be flat or declining over time (Figure 3.5).

Historically, conversion to a PhD has been much worse: in 2012–13, students from ethnic minorities made up around 33% of economists at the undergraduate and Master's levels, but only 18% of economics PhDs. This is *lower* than the overall share of academic economists who are from ethnic minority backgrounds, though it is comparable to the ethnic minority share of academic economists (in research roles) who are UK nationals (16%).

Over the past six years, there has been a rapid rise in the share of ethnic minority students taking a PhD in economics. However, it is still some way behind the shares at undergraduate and Master's levels, suggesting some differences either in the barriers faced or the desire to work in research.

Figure 3.5. Ethnic minority representation in different levels of economics courses

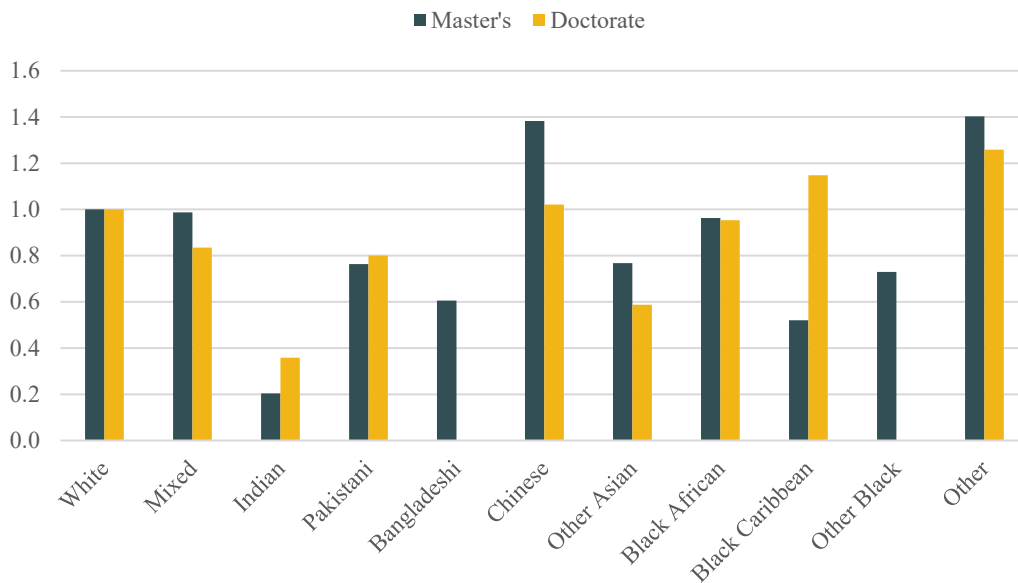


Note: UK nationality students only. Ethnic minority includes all non-White ethnic groups. For 3.1% of students, ethnicity is unknown; these are excluded. Student instances weighted by course component.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Figure 3.6 gives a sense of progression into postgraduate economics courses across disaggregated ethnic groups. For each ethnic group, we measure the share of all economics students who are on either Master's or doctorate courses, and compare this with the share of White students on these courses. We normalise within education level here because the share of economics students on doctorate courses (0.8%) is much lower than on Master's courses (4.5%). For many minority groups, progression to higher-level economics courses is less common than among White students. This is particularly stark for Indian students, who are much more prevalent among the undergraduate population than at higher levels. Of course, the current population of Master's and doctorate students reflects previous cohorts of undergraduates, so it may be that this picture will change somewhat in the coming years.

Figure 3.6. Share of economics students on postgraduate courses from each ethnic group, relative to White students on these courses (2018–19)



Note: UK nationality students only. For 3.1% of students, ethnicity is unknown; these are excluded.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Overall, this evidence, alongside that on the characteristics of academic economists in the UK, indicates that some ethnic minority groups are less likely to progress within the discipline (see Appendix B for the absolute share of students at each stage from each ethnic minority background). There are numerous potential reasons

behind this that will differ by individual and perhaps across groups too. In the rest of this section, we reflect on a few relevant issues to consider.

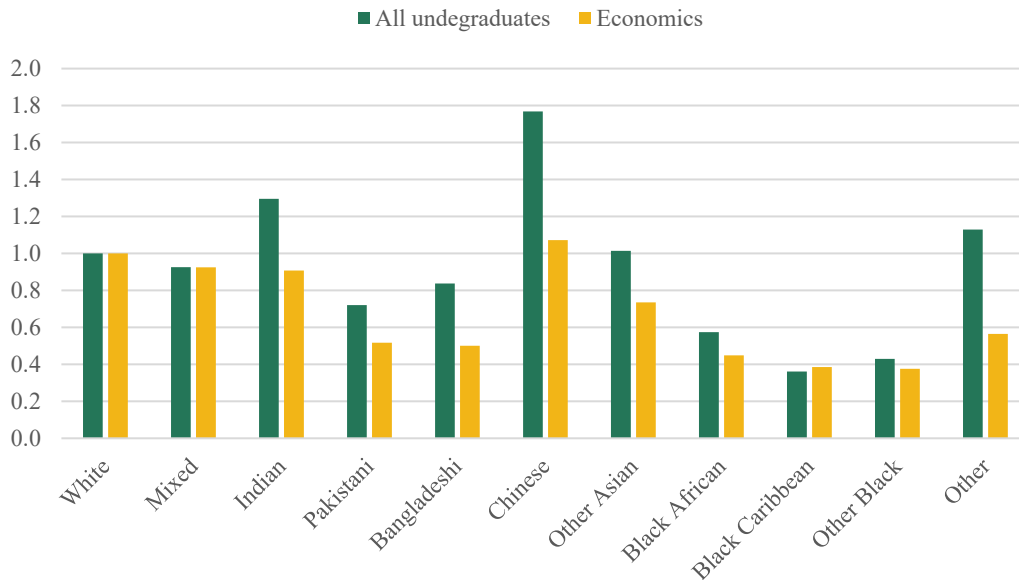
Type of institution

While ethnic minority groups are generally well represented among UK economic students overall, as with academic staff there are big differences across institutions. To assess differences across institution types, we examine the share of students from different ethnic groups who are studying in the Russell Group institutions. In Figure 3.7, we display these shares relative to the share of White students who study in the Russell Group. We show this relative to White students because economics students are much more concentrated in Russell Group institutions overall, with 49% of all economics undergraduates at these universities in 2018–19, compared with 26% of total undergraduates, so it is difficult to compare absolute shares.

The pattern for economics undergraduates broadly mirrors differences across the undergraduate population as a whole, though some inequalities are even starker. Pakistani and Bangladeshi economics students are half as likely as White students to be enrolled at Russell Group universities, with Black students around 60% less likely. Indian and Chinese students do not exhibit the same over-representation in Russell Group institutions for economics as in other subjects.

Although economics does not seem to be doing badly at attracting students from a range of ethnic minority backgrounds, at least among those who had access to an A Level in economics, for some groups their representation among the ‘top’ universities is very limited. This has implications for professional progress and representation further along the economics pipeline, including in research positions, as Russell Group universities are typically the most research-intensive and prestigious universities.

Figure 3.7. Representation in undergraduate courses at Russell Group universities by ethnicity, relative to White students (2018–19)

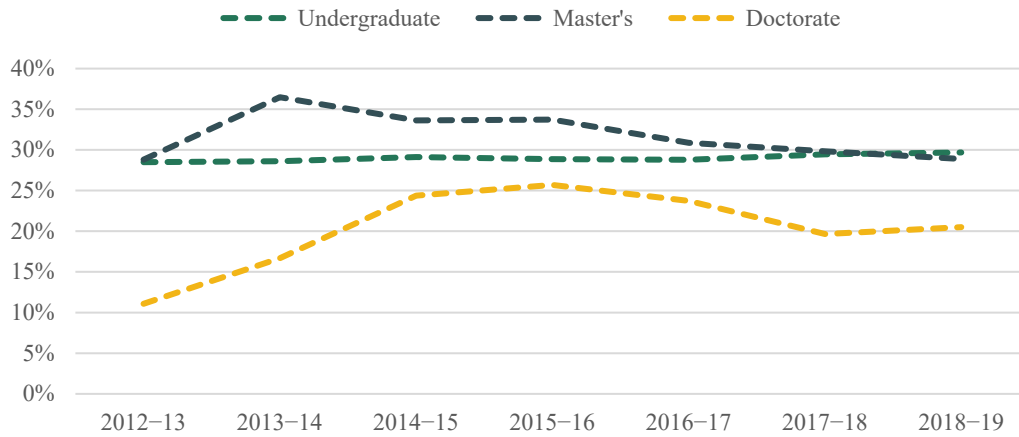


Note: UK nationality students only. For 1.9% of students, ethnicity is unknown; these are excluded. Student instances weighted by course component. Pre-92 universities are those founded before 1992 but not in the Russell Group.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Looking specifically at ethnic minority representation among economics students in Russell Group universities suggests that less has changed in this group than in the rest of economics in higher education in the UK (Figure 3.8). The share of minority students on economics courses at Russell Group universities is approximately the same for undergraduate and Master's students as it was in 2012–13. It is also substantially lower than among economics students as a whole: less than 30% of British economics students in the Russell Group are from an ethnic minority, compared with 43% outside the Russell Group. For doctorate degrees, the share has increased overall in this period but still lags behind overall ethnic minority representation in economics PhDs and has actually fallen slightly since a peak in 2015–16.

Figure 3.8. Ethnic minority representation for different levels of economics courses at Russell Group institutions



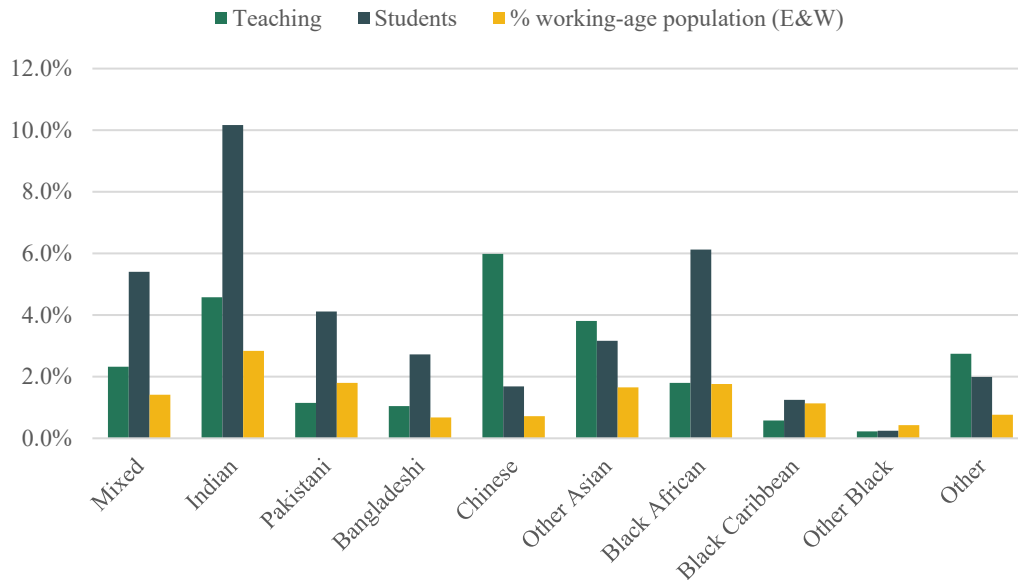
Note: UK nationality students only. Ethnic minority includes all non-White ethnic groups. For 3.9% of students, ethnicity is unknown; these are excluded. Student instances weighted by course component.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Teaching staff

Section 2 showed differences in the representation of groups within the economic research community. However, diversity in who teaches economics also matters. Students will interact more frequently with those who teach and such instructors may provide role models and advice for those from under-represented backgrounds, offering a realistic pathway to success in the field. In addition, previous studies show that ethnic diversity and having an instructor of the same ethnic or racial background reduces performance gaps between White and ethnic minority students (Fairlie, Hoffmann and Oreopoulos, 2014; Lusher, Campbell and Carrell 2018). While a majority of individuals in academic economics staff (72% in 2018–19) have both teaching and research responsibilities, teaching-only contracts account for more than half of the remaining positions, and thus representation in teaching positions may differ.

Figure 3.9. Ethnic minority representation among economics teaching staff and students (2018–19), and working-age population



Note: This figure uses FTE staff and includes only staff with a teaching component to their contract: “teaching and research” (a typical academic contract), or “teaching only” (specialist teaching staff). For 7.4% of staff, ethnicity is missing; these are excluded. Student instances weighted by course components and include only UK nationality students at all levels of university education. Working age is defined as aged 25–64. Population comparison is with England and Wales only because ethnic minority categories are different in the Scottish and Northern Irish censuses.

Source: HESA, and 2011 Census of England and Wales. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Figure 3.9 reveals clear differences across groups when comparing the composition of staff teaching economics with the overall working-age population of England and Wales. Members of staff who have Chinese, Indian and ‘other Asian’ ethnicity are well represented among those teaching economics. In contrast, there are relatively few Pakistani and Black Caribbean instructors. These are two of the minority ethnic groups from which economics also does relatively less well in attracting students.

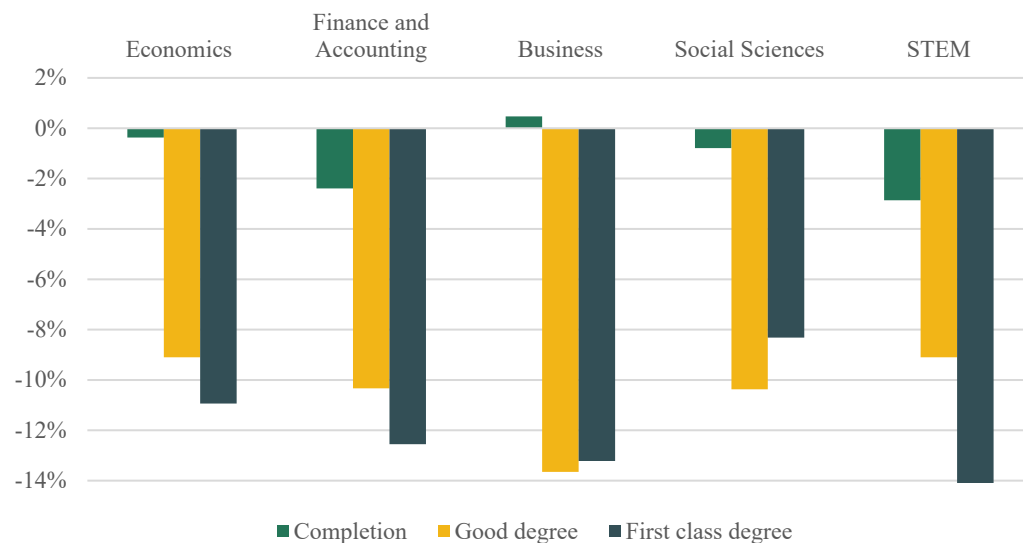
Student attainment and dropout

Across the university system as a whole, there are significant inequalities between ethnic groups in student attainment (Universities UK, 2019). These have

implications for later progression in the education system and academia, as well as for entering professional roles.

Figure 3.10 shows differences in degree completion and attainment between White and ethnic minority students, for economics and other disciplines. The probability of finishing a degree is higher for White students in all disciplines except Business; in some subjects, White students are nearly 3 percentage points more likely to complete their degrees than minority students. There are also substantial attainment gaps for those who do finish, across all the disciplines that we examine. Attainment gaps range from 9 percentage points in Economics to 14 percentage points in Business when it comes to the probability of achieving a ‘good’ degree (i.e. an upper second class honours degree or higher). There is a similar pattern for the probability of achieving a first class honours degree.

Figure 3.10. Differences in degree completion and attainment across disciplines between ethnic minority students and White students



Note: UK nationality students only. Ethnic minority includes all non-White ethnic groups. For 1% of students, ethnicity is unknown; these are excluded. See Appendix D for subject list. Data are for students starting university in the 2015–16 academic year for the probability of completing a degree and in the 2017–18 academic year for attainment of a degree. A ‘good’ degree is defined as an upper second class honours degree or higher.

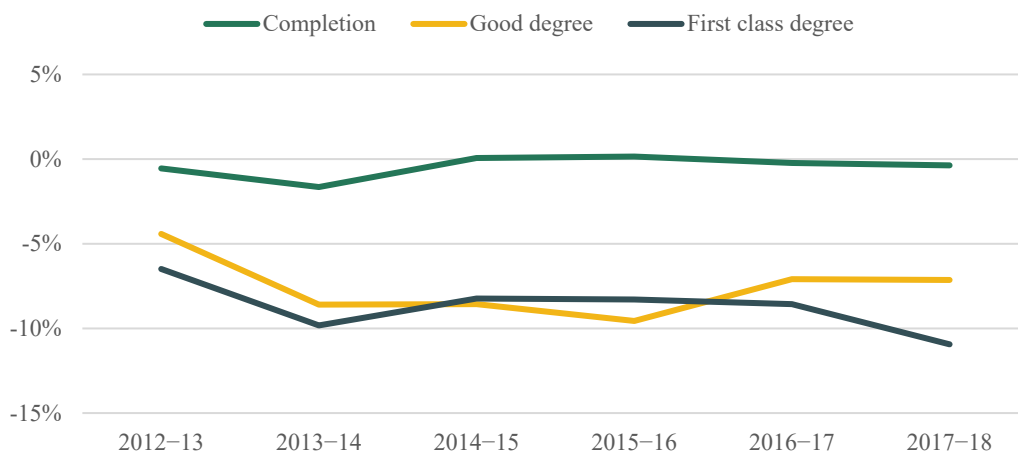
Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

These gaps are also present in economics and are persistent. Figure 3.11 shows the percentage point difference between White and ethnic minority students in the

probability of completing a degree, attaining a good degree, and attaining a first class honours degree over time.

There are three points to note. First, the overall difference in completion rate has narrowed. White and ethnic minority students are now equally likely to complete their degrees in economics. Second, attainment gaps – differences in the probability of a particular degree classification between White and non-White students – are large and persistent. As of 2017–18, ethnic minority students were 7 percentage points less likely to achieve a good degree, and 11 percentage points less likely to achieve a first class honours degree. Finally, these attainment gaps have not been narrowing, and both are wider in the latest year than in 2012–13, the first year for which we have data.

Figure 3.11. Differences in degree completion and attainment over time between ethnic minority students and White students



Note: UK nationality students only. Ethnic minority includes all non-White ethnic groups. For 1% of students, ethnicity is unknown; these are excluded. Data are for students starting university in the 2015–16 academic year for the probability of completing a degree and in the 2017–18 academic year for attainment of a degree. A ‘good’ degree is defined as an upper second class honours degree or higher.

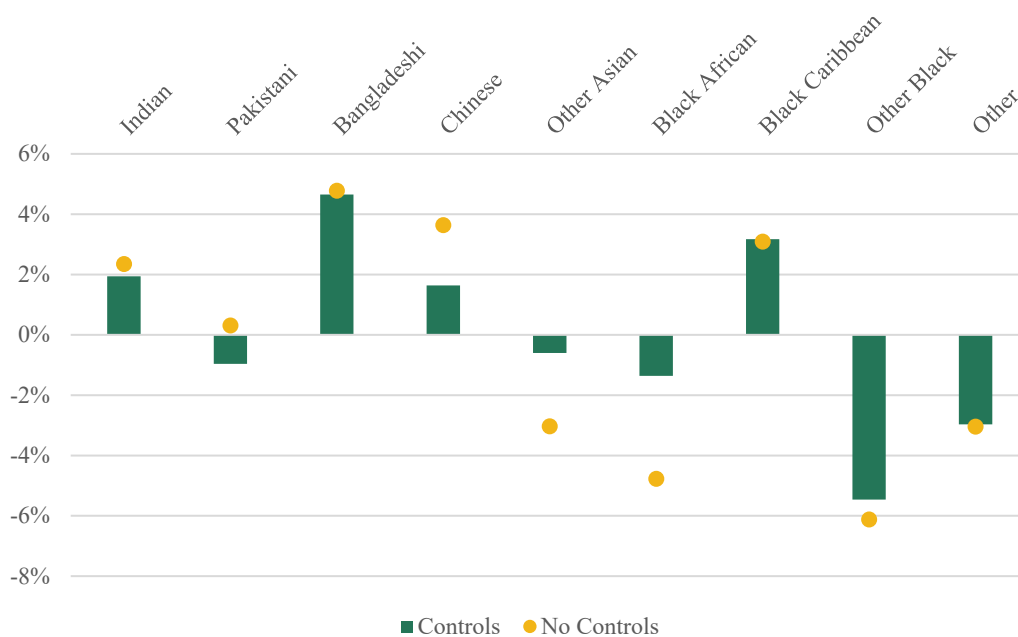
Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Some of this difference may relate to the different profile of institutions attended, as shown previously, as well as other background characteristics relevant to attainment. To understand how much of the difference in attainment and dropout comes from such factors, we compare ‘raw’ attainment gaps with ‘adjusted’ gaps.

These adjusted gaps come from a (linear) regression of the outcome on a range of potentially relevant characteristics.

Figure 3.12 considers the probability of degree completion. Black African and ‘other Black’ economics students are less likely to complete their degree than their White counterparts; in contrast, Black Caribbean, Indian, Bangladeshi and Chinese students are more likely to do so. The inclusion of controls makes a substantial difference to the estimated attainment gap for a number of groups. However, they change results in different directions across groups. Various financial, emotional and social factors could drive dropping out of university but among the factors we observe, the most important explanatory variables are grades and socio-economic status. However, more in-depth quantitative and qualitative research is required to understand how these relate to those of different backgrounds in economics.

Figure 3.12. Percentage point differences in degree completion between ethnic minority and White students for those who started degrees in 2015–16



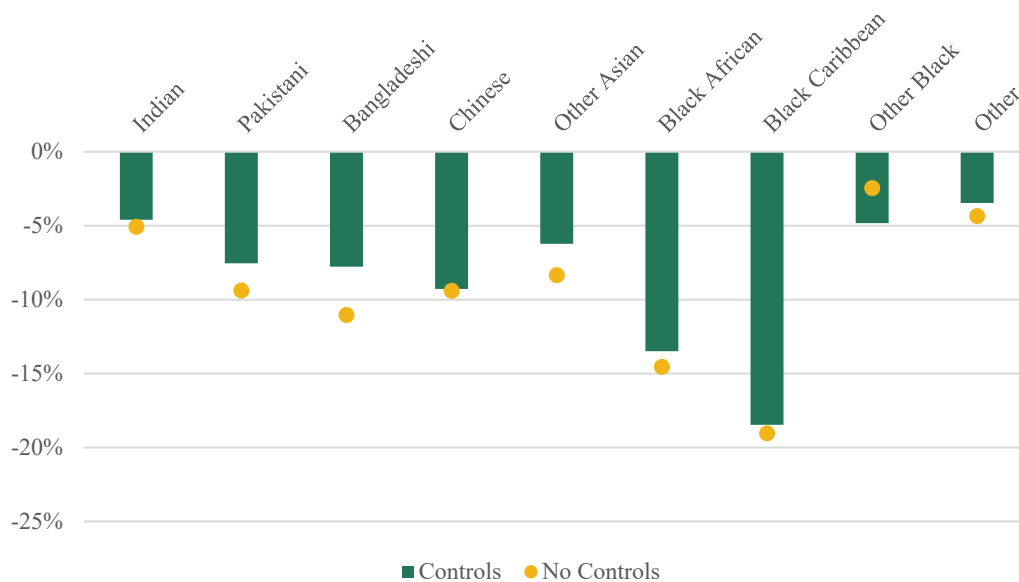
Note: These data were provided with the ‘other’ and ‘mixed’ ethnic groups combined, so we are unable to separate them here.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Figure 3.13 shows attainment gaps in achieving a good degree – an upper second class honours degree or higher for different ethnic groups, both raw and after

controlling for the above characteristics. First, for all ethnic minority groups, there are significant attainment gaps relative to White students. Second, accounting for observable characteristics slightly reduces these differences, but they remain substantial: most of the differences cannot be explained by the characteristics we can see. Third, there is also significant variation across ethnic groups: Black African and Black Caribbean students are respectively 13 and 18 percentage points less likely to achieve a good degree outcome than White students are, while ‘other Black’ and Indian students are ‘only’ 5 percentage points less likely to do so.

Figure 3.13. Percentage point differences in achieving a good degree outcome between ethnic minority and White students, 2017–18

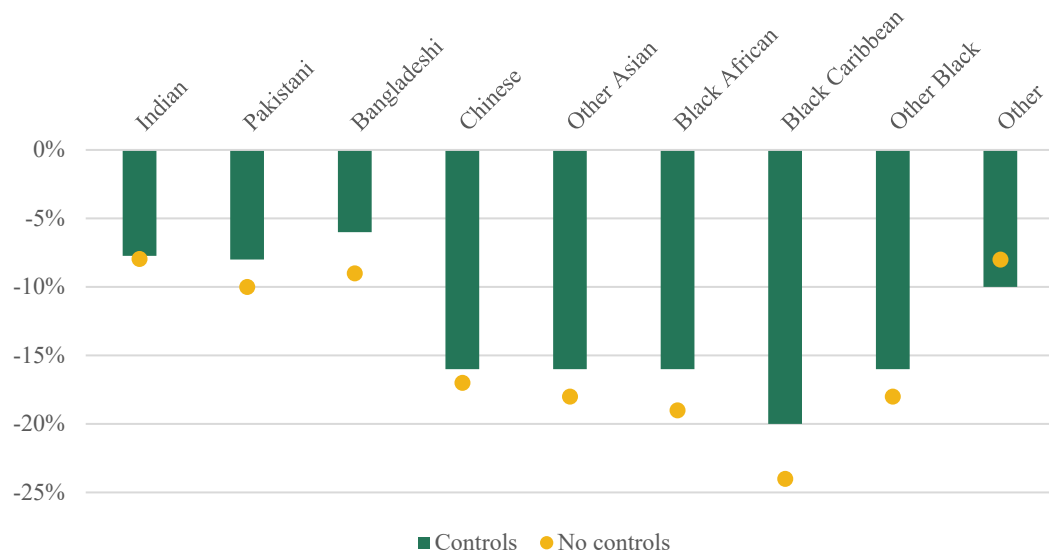


Note: These data were provided with the ‘other’ and ‘mixed’ ethnic groups combined, so we are unable to separate them here.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Figure 3.14 shows similar results, this time focusing on the probability of achieving a first class honours degree. Again, we see the same three facts: attainment gaps exist for all minority ethnic groups and these are usually larger than for a good degree; controlling for observables makes little difference; and differences are largest for Black African and Black Caribbean students. There may also be differences by sex in ethnic achievement gap. When looking at the achievement gaps by sex, we see that some heterogeneity exists (see Appendix C for graphs).

Figure 3.14. Percentage point differences in achieving a first class honours degree between ethnic minority and White students, 2017–18



Note: These data were provided with the 'other' and 'mixed' ethnic groups combined, so we are unable to separate them here.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

One dimension of interest is whether ethnic diversity and the existence of potential role models from a similar background affect the performance of ethnic minority students. Previous studies show a positive effect on student outcomes of having an instructor from the same ethnic group (Fairlie et al., 2014; Lusher et al., 2018; Universities UK, 2019) To provide some suggestive evidence on this, we consider the correlation between the attainment of economics students from a given ethnic group and the share of economics teaching staff at that institution from that same group. In these data, we do not find any statistically significant correlation between the share of teaching staff from the same ethnic group and student completion or attainment. However, our data do not allow us to match students with the instructors who taught their specific classes. This creates measurement error, which makes it hard to accurately identify any effect that may be present. Our data also do not capture any possible benefits from the presence of teachers from a similar background besides their effects on completion and attainment.

Overall, the evidence on student attainment is strongly suggestive that the experience of ethnic minority groups during their undergraduate economics degrees is an important blockage to greater diversity in senior research positions in the

profession. Academic attainment is an important factor in selection for prestigious postgraduate and graduate programmes, and a good degree is often a requirement to apply for a graduate-level role. Poor outcomes in course assessments are also likely to dissuade students from further study.

Recruitment

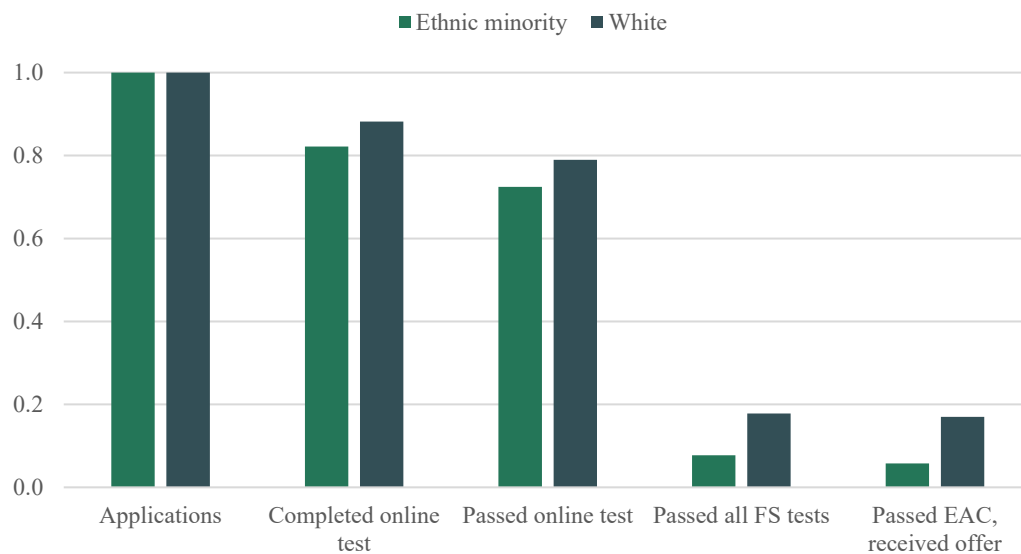
A further challenge for students who complete a degree in economics concerns the roles they can subsequently access. The attainment gaps in their education described above make it hard for them to compete for interviews. But even once they get past this initial screening, there is ample evidence of the difficulties faced by ethnic minorities in the UK labour market, including racial discrimination in hiring practices (Heath and Di Stasio, 2019) and pay gaps for most ethnic minorities (ONS, 2020). These problems are particularly pressing in the current climate, given evidence that both pay gaps and discriminatory attitudes may be heightened in economic downturns (Johnston and Lordan, 2016).

Ideally we would have data on recruitment processes in the full range of potential employers of economists, to study their importance for economics students entering the world of work. However, such data are not available. Instead, we are able to use data from the Government Economics Service (GES) on the recruitment of new economists into the GES. While recruitment processes clearly differ in the selection of economists for professional posts, as the GES is the single largest employer of economists, information from the GES recruitment process is instructive as to some of the challenges faced by ethnic minorities. The GES recruits primarily through the Fast Stream (FS) graduate programme and through Main Stream recruitment. Via both routes, applications are ethnically diverse overall, with 43% of Main Stream and 41% of FS applications coming from ethnic minority applicants across 2018 and 2019 combined, higher than the share of ethnic minority undergraduate economists.

However, the share of ethnic minority applicants who are successful in receiving an offer is substantially lower than White candidates. The FS application process contains a number of stages, including an online test and in-person assessments, the last of which is held at an Economic Assessment Centre (EAC) focusing on core economic competencies and the application of economic principles to policy. As Figure 3.15 shows, ethnic minority candidates in 2018 were less likely to complete the initial test used to sift candidates. Conditional on taking the test, there is a

similar pass rate between ethnic minority and White candidates (88% and 90%, respectively), but after this there is a steep drop-off in success at each subsequent stage for ethnic minority applicants. Of those who passed the initial online test, only 8% of ethnic minority candidates went on to pass the EAC assessment (resulting in a job offer), compared with 22% of White candidates.

Figure 3.15. FS GES application success, by ethnic minority status (2018)



Note: Total applications normalised to 1 by group. There were 1,060 initial ethnic minority applicants and 1,331 initial White applicants. Ethnicity information was not available for a further 99 applicants.

Source: GES.

Applications through Main Stream recruitment show wide variation in success rates among ethnic minority candidates conditional on application. In 2019, 18% of White applicants eventually received an offer. For Black, Asian and other ethnic minority applicants, these figures were 5%, 10% and 18%, respectively.¹⁰

With the data available, the causes of these differences are unclear. As we have shown, there are big differences between groups in the type of institution attended

¹⁰ The ethnic categories used here reflect the breakdown available to us in these data.

and average student attainment, and this may drive different success rates throughout the application process. The role of differential access to resources and information that may benefit applicants is something we currently know little about in this context. Further research – both qualitative and quantitative – is needed to shed light on this, as well as on any subsequent differences in promotion across groups.

4. Discussion

The economics profession has an important role to play in discussing and addressing ethnic and racial inequalities, given the crucial role of the discipline in decision-making across society. However, it is clear that economics can do much more, and an important starting point is to ensure inclusivity and access within the profession.

In this briefing note, we have provided a broad overview of ethnic diversity within the economics profession in the UK with the data currently available. Unfortunately, in this respect we are limited to those working in the higher education system. While this is an important population with respect to the production of economic research, which feeds in to policymaking, diversity amongst economists working in other research and policy institutions, government and the wider public sector, and in the private sector, is also important. The lack of data from such sources limits our understanding of the overall profile of the profession and thus is an obstacle to designing interventions to improve inclusivity.

There are significant inequalities in the degree of representation of different ethnic groups at different levels of UK economics. This starts at school: differences in take-up of an A Level in economics translate into unequal representation in undergraduate economics. Although well represented at undergraduate level overall, ethnic minority students are less likely to attend research-intensive institutions, achieve an upper second or first class honours degree, or continue onto Doctoral study. Such factors represent clear barriers to greater representation in economic research roles.

Identifying these patterns is merely a first step. Tackling them requires a better understanding of the precise barriers faced at each stage of an education and career in economics, which requires better and more accessible data. It also requires a willingness to make changes to remove these barriers. It remains to be seen whether the economics profession can translate this research into policy.

Appendix A: staff statistics

Table A.1. Share of each group by field, mission group, contract type and employment level

	White	Mixed	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Chinese	Other Asian	Black African	Black Caribbean	Other Black	Other	Any ethnic minority
E&W	86.4%	1.4%	2.8%	1.8%	0.7%	0.7%	1.7%	1.8%	1.1%	0.4%	0.8%	13.2%
Academia	90.6%	1.6%	2.0%	0.6%	0.2%	1.6%	1.0%	0.8%	0.5%	0.1%	1.1%	9.4%
Economics	86.9%	1.6%	3.2%	1.1%	0.3%	1.9%	1.5%	1.6%	0.6%	0.0%	1.4%	13.1%
Other Social Sciences	91.2%	2.3%	1.7%	0.6%	0.3%	0.6%	0.7%	0.7%	1.0%	0.1%	0.9%	
Finance and Accounting	81.3%	0.9%	4.1%	1.8%	0.7%	2.8%	2.2%	3.5%	0.6%	0.1%	2.0%	18.7%
Business	87.6%	1.4%	2.4%	1.1%	0.2%	2.2%	1.2%	1.6%	0.8%	0.2%	1.3%	12.4%
STEM	89.5%	1.5%	2.4%	0.7%	0.3%	2.1%	1.2%	0.7%	0.4%	0.1%	1.2%	10.5%
Pre-92	86.9%	1.1%	3.7%	0.9%	0.5%	2.1%	1.4%	1.1%	0.5%	0.1%	1.7%	13.1%
Post-92	81.1%	2.4%	3.1%	1.7%	0.4%	3.0%	1.7%	3.2%	1.3%	0.0%	2.2%	18.9%
Russell Group	90.4%	1.5%	2.8%	0.8%	0.1%	1.2%	1.5%	0.9%	0.3%	0.0%	0.6%	9.6%
Permanent	86.9%	1.5%	3.2%	1.2%	0.3%	2.1%	1.5%	1.6%	0.5%	0.0%	1.4%	13.1%
Fixed term	87.3%	2.1%	0.1%	3.1%	0.7%	0.2%	1.5%	1.5%	1.1%	1.3%	1.2%	12.7%
Atypical	83.3%	2.6%	2.7%	2.1%	0.0%	1.4%	0.7%	2.3%	0.9%	0.0%	3.8%	16.5%
Senior Management	91.8%	0.0%	3.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%
Head of School	95.0%	0.2%	3.3%	0.2%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	5.0%
Professor	89.7%	0.5%	3.0%	1.4%	0.5%	1.6%	1.5%	0.4%	0.4%	0.0%	0.9%	10.3%
Reader	85.8%	0.8%	4.7%	0.4%	0.0%	2.3%	2.0%	1.3%	0.7%	0.0%	1.9%	14.2%
Lecturer	83.4%	3.0%	2.7%	1.4%	0.5%	2.4%	1.1%	2.9%	0.6%	0.0%	2.0%	16.6%
Research/teaching	87.2%	1.8%	2.1%	1.2%	0.1%	1.9%	1.5%	2.1%	0.9%	0.1%	1.1%	12.8%

Note: These statistics are for the years 2012–13 to 2018–19. All panels except the top one are for economics only. Excludes those with unknown ethnicity (around 7% overall). Population comparison is to England and Wales only because ethnic minority categories are different in the Scottish and Northern Irish censuses. Source: HESA. See Appendix D for the list of data sources.

Appendix B: student statistics

Table B.1. Share of each group by field, mission group, degree class and level of study

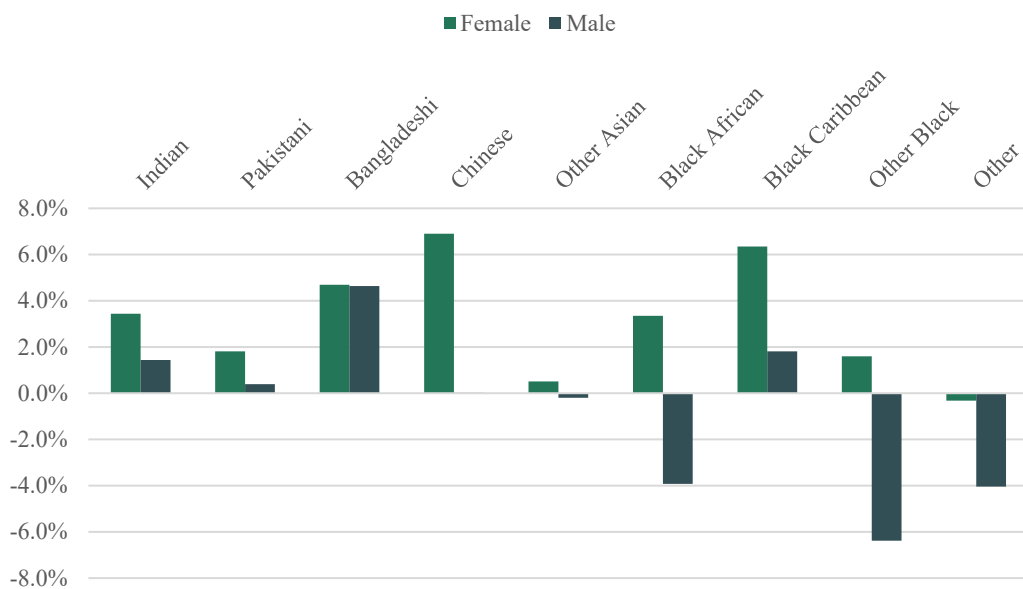
	White	Mixed	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Chinese	Other Asian	Black African	Black Caribbean	Other Black	Other	Any ethnic minority
E&W	81.7%	3.3%	2.8%	2.6%	1.1%	1.7%	1.8%	2.0%	1.1%	0.1%	1.2%	18.3%
Economics	65.6%	4.9%	10.5%	3.7%	2.0%	1.9%	2.6%	5.7%	1.2%	0.2%	1.6%	34.4%
Finance and	55.5%	3.5%	10.7%	10.4%	3.6%	2.0%	3.6%	7.0%	1.7%	1.8%	0.3%	44.5%
Other Business	72.2%	4.1%	5.0%	4.0%	2.2%	0.9%	1.7%	5.9%	2.2%	0.4%	1.5%	27.8%
Other Social Sciences	79.5%	3.9%	3.8%	3.2%	1.2%	0.8%	1.5%	3.3%	1.4%	0.2%	1.1%	20.5%
STEM	80.0%	4.3%	3.2%	2.9%	1.3%	0.6%	1.1%	3.5%	1.8%	0.3%	1.0%	20.0%
All	79.5%	4.0%	3.6%	3.1%	1.3%	0.8%	1.5%	3.5%	1.5%	0.2%	1.1%	20.5%
Russell Group	70.8%	5.2%	10.6%	2.3%	1.2%	2.5%	2.4%	3.0%	0.5%	0.1%	1.2%	29.2%
Other Pre-92	63.3%	4.6%	9.7%	4.4%	2.4%	1.6%	2.8%	7.5%	1.4%	0.3%	1.9%	36.7%
Post-92	56.3%	5.1%	10.8%	6.1%	3.2%	1.2%	2.6%	9.8%	2.4%	0.4%	2.0%	43.7%
Undergraduate	62.8%	5.4%	10.4%	4.2%	2.8%	1.6%	3.2%	6.1%	1.3%	0.2%	1.9%	37.1%
Master's	66.4%	5.6%	7.8%	3.3%	1.7%	2.5%	2.6%	6.2%	0.7%	0.2%	2.9%	33.5%
Doctorate	71.7%	5.1%	4.2%	3.8%	0.0%	2.0%	2.1%	6.7%	1.6%	0.0%	2.9%	28.4%
Completion	64.0%	NA	11.0%	4.0%	2.0%	2.0%	3.0%	6.0%	1.0%	0.0%	7.0%	36.0%
Good degree	67.0%	NA	11.0%	3.0%	2.0%	2.0%	3.0%	5.0%	1.0%	0.0%	6.0%	33.0%
First class honours	71.0%	NA	11.0%	3.0%	2.0%	1.0%	2.0%	3.0%	1.0%	0.0%	5.0%	28.0%

Note: All the results in the top two panels and the bottom panel are for students studying for a first degree. All panels except the top one are for economics only. The degree outcomes are for students graduating between 2012 and 2017 and completion is for students entering university between 2010 and 2015. Excludes students with missing ethnicity (2.5% overall). Population comparison is for those aged 16–24 and is for England and Wales only because ethnic minority categories are different in the Scottish and Northern Irish censuses.

Source: HESA and 2011 Census of England and Wales. See Appendix D for list of data sources.

Appendix C: student outcomes by sex

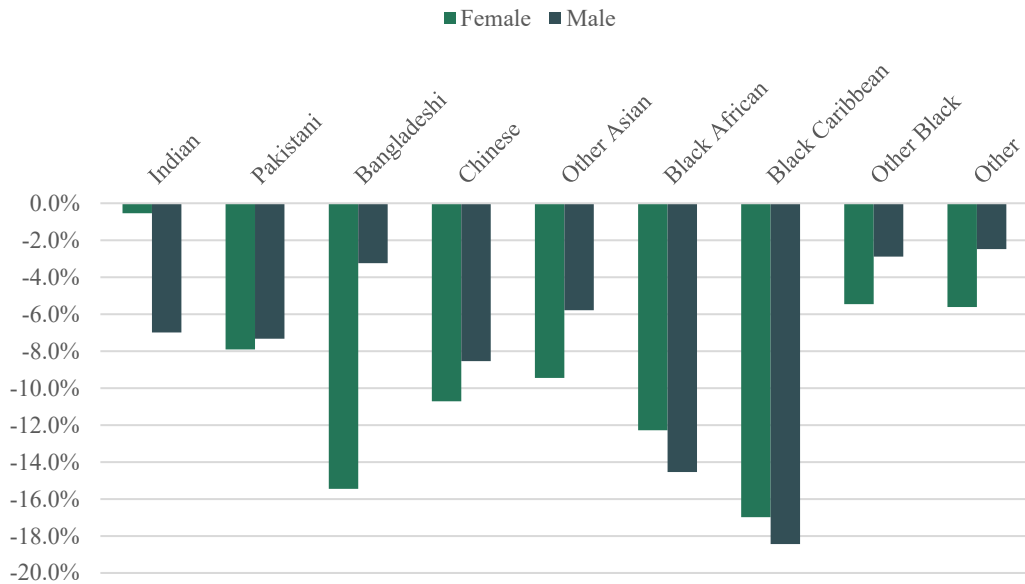
Figure C.1. Percentage point difference in degree completion relative to White students, by sex



Note: These data were provided with the 'other' and 'mixed' ethnic groups combined, so we are unable to separate them here. Data are from students entering their degree in 2015–16.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

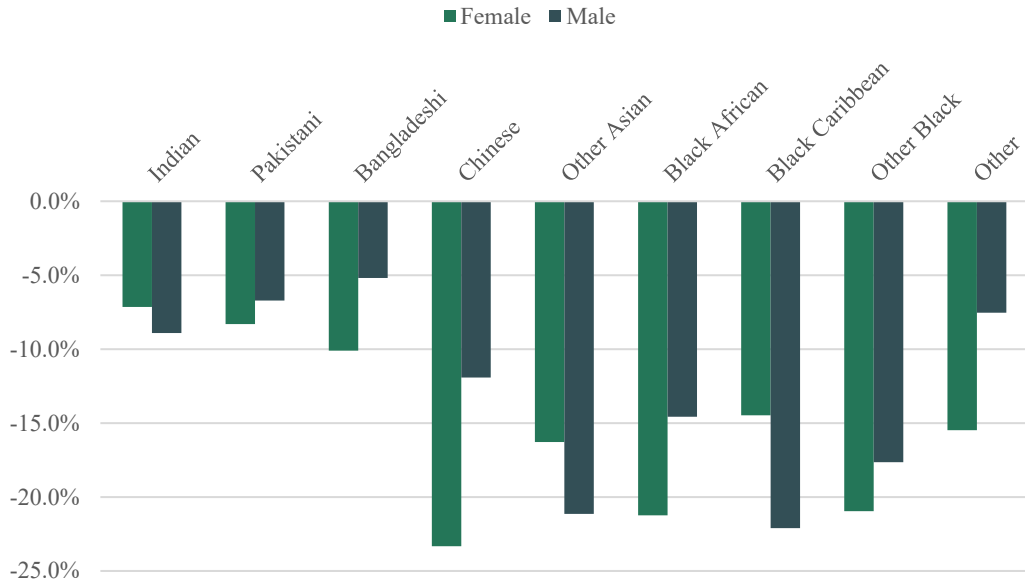
Figure C.2. Percentage point differences of achieving a good degree outcome relative to White students, by sex



Note: 'Good' degree defined as an upper second class honours degree or higher. These data were provided with the 'other' and 'mixed' ethnic groups combined, so we are unable to separate them here. Data are from students completing their degree in 2017–18.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Figure C.3. Percentage point differences of achieving a first class honours degree outcome relative to White students, by sex



Note: These data were provided with the 'other' and 'mixed' ethnic groups combined, so we are unable to separate them here. Data are from students completing a degree in 2017–18.

Source: HESA. See Appendix D for full list of datasets.

Appendix D: data definitions and sources

Data definitions

Social Sciences includes: Anthropology, Geography, Psychology, Politics, Social Policy and Administration, Social Work, and Sociology.

STEM includes: Medicine and Dentistry, Subjects allied to Medicine, Biological Sciences, Veterinary Sciences, Agriculture and Related Subjects, Physical Sciences, Mathematical Sciences, Engineering and Technology, Computer Sciences, Architecture, and Building and Planning.

Head of School also includes: Senior Function Head.

Reader also includes: Senior Lecturer.

Lecturer also includes: Principal Research Fellow and Senior Research Fellow.

Data sources

Staff data come from: HESA Staff Record 2012–13, HESA Staff Record 2013–14, HESA Staff Record 2014–15, HESA Staff Record 2015–16, HESA Staff Record 2016–17, HESA Staff Record 2017–18, HESA Staff Record 2018–19.

Student data come from: HESA Student Record 2012–13, HESA Student Record 2013–14, HESA Student Record 2014–15, HESA Student Record 2015–16, HESA Student Record 2016–17, HESA Student Record 2017–18, HESA Student Record 2018–19.

Controls in regression analysis

Student characteristics for outcomes: Sex, Socio-economic Status, Mature Student Status, Measure of Higher Education Participation in Area of Origin, Entry Qualifications (and whether these are A Level or BTEC) and University Attended.

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