

Ethnic and gender inequalities in postgraduate study STILL aren't being addressed

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Yet another new study highlighting marked ethnic and gender inequalities in the postgraduate sector has been released

The study, [Transition to higher degrees across the UK: An analysis of national, international and individual differences](#), reveals that women and people from Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi groups have markedly lower rates of progression onto research degrees.

Two key factors point to biases at the selection process in favour of selective universities and graduates from higher education institutions in London, creating both a north-south and ethnic divide in terms of social mobility.

Postgraduates enjoy enhanced career opportunities, higher levels of job satisfaction and higher earnings. A research degree is also now the main route to an academic career, therefore the under-representation of academics from Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi groups in academia (especially in professorial and other senior roles) can be seen as a direct consequence of the inequalities encountered at postgraduate level.

A complex matter

As the study acknowledges, progression to postgraduate study is a complex matter as several factors are involved, such as degree attainment. For, example, Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi students are less likely to get a first class degree at undergraduate level and Black Caribbean students are also less likely to get a 2:1 than other ethnic groups.

Black Caribbean students are also more likely to attend post-1992 universities, so when this is combined with lower degree attainment, their chances of accessing research degrees are significantly reduced.

It should also be noted that Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi women face a double disadvantage in terms of ethnicity and gender in progressing onto postgraduate study. This needs to be acknowledged by the higher education sector and policy changes need to be made to tackle this situation as a matter of priority.

Universities must do more

The lack of diversity within postgraduate study leads to a further lack of diversity in the academy. This feeds into the curriculum and has an impact on the student experience. Universities need to go beyond the inclusion of statements about 'valuing diversity' on their websites and in their glossy brochures.

They need to look closely at their schools and departments, the students on their courses

and the lecturers who teach them and ask themselves whether their universities are as diverse as they should be and if not why?

The study makes some useful recommendations, including case studies on universities with higher and lower rates of progression and retention to identify best practice. It also recommends further investigation into the transition from taught postgraduate courses to research degrees.

I would go further in calling for greater scrutiny and monitoring of selection and recruitment practices for research degrees. Whilst most universities eliminate the majority of graduates without a master's degree from the selection process for research studentships, the research councils that actually fund the bursaries – AHRC and EHRC only require a first or a 2:1 undergraduate degree for admittance onto a research degree.

This means that many bright graduates who cannot afford the cost of postgraduate study are overlooked and excluded. I am a case in point - as despite having eight years' professional experience, research experience, a teaching qualification and experience of teaching at undergraduate level, I applied for six PhD studentships between 2009 and 2010 and was rejected for all but one.

I am now months away from completing my PhD thesis within three years and have added to the reputation of my university by presenting my work at international conferences. I just wonder how many other dedicated women and ethnic minorities have lost out on the opportunity to progress to postgraduate research as a result of selection and recruitment practices that are anything but inclusive?

Universities could take a major step forward in this regard by developing dedicated programmes and reserving places on postgraduate courses for high-achieving undergraduates who did not happen to attend a selective university and who do not have a master's degree but who do have professional and/or research experience relevant to the proposed PhD.

I would like to see four-year Graduate Fellowship schemes being introduced that recruit outstanding graduates to undertake a master's degree and then progress directly onto a research degree.

There is also clearly a need for more mentoring programmes for female, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean students both at undergraduate and taught master's level to provide the necessary support, guidance and encouragement to facilitate their progression into the academy.

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