Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

# POINTS FOR DEBATE

The editors would particularly welcome, in the Points for Debate section, readers' comments on or responses to articles which have appeared in earlier issues of the Journal. These may be in the form of a short paper or letter and should be sent to Stephen Rowland, Department of Education and Professional Studies, University College London, 1–19 Torrington Place, London WC1E 6BT. Selected contributions will be published at the earliest opportunity.

# Ethnicity, Muslims and higher education entry in Britain[1]

Tariq Modood
*University of Bristol, UK*

It is unfortunate that for many academics and educationalists ethnic minorities in Britain continue to be more associated with educational underachievement than success. This is specially reinforced when it comes to Muslims and especially Muslim men, about whom there is so much fear and demonization at the moment. The latter is not just to do with terrorism but also about religious fanaticism and closed, inward-looking communities. These associations are a very partial—in both senses of the word—picture of how things actually are. Moreover, there are real questions of bias in the selection of university entrants.

Higher education in fact is a major success story for non-White ethnic minorities. This has been apparent since university entry data recorded ethnicity in 1990 (data is not recorded by religious affiliation) though it has not greatly disturbed sociological analyses that assume non-Whiteness ('race') means educational underachievement.[2]

A manifestation of this success is the achievement of entry into higher education. A few years ago the Government set itself the target of getting 50% of young people into higher education by the age of 30. Table 1 shows the state of play by ethnicity. It shows that by the year, 2001–2002, the likelihood of Whites entering higher education was only 38% and this was not just much lower than that of the ethnic minorities taken together but also lower than every single minority group. Sometimes it was not much lower (cf. Bangladeshis and Black Caribbeans) and sometimes it was nearly half as low (cf. Black Africans and Indians).[3]

So we have the extraordinary situation in Britain where White people are far from achieving the Government target but all the minority groups except two have very nearly achieved it or greatly exceed it. Indeed ethnic minorities now represent almost one in six of home undergraduates in England, almost double their share of the population.

This is a real achievement of ethnic minority families. One has to add, however, that there are some complications. Not only are there very significant differences between minority groups as we have already seen but ethnic minorities are less likely to enter

Table 1. Higher education initial participation rates (HEIPRs) for England, ft and pt, 2001–2002

| Ethnic group | Male | Female | All |
|---|---|---|---|
| White | 34 | 41 | 38 |
| All minority ethnic groups | 55 | 58 | 56 |
| Black Caribbean | 36 | 52 | 45 |
| Black African | 71 | 75 | 73 |
| Black other | 56 | 72 | 64 |
| Indian | 70 | 72 | 71 |
| Pakistani | 54 | 44 | 49 |
| Bangladeshi | 43 | 33 | 39 |
| Chinese | 47 | 50 | 49 |
| Asian other | 74 | 94 | 83 |
| Mixed ethnic | 35 | 44 | 40 |
| All (known ethnicity) | 37 | 43 | 40 |

Source: Connor *et al.* (2004).

the more prestigious universities, are more likely to drop out and if they last the course they are less likely to get a high grade degree (though all these things are less true of the Indians and Chinese than of the other groups). Moreover, Black groups are more likely to be part time or mature students—qualities that do not produce the kind of high-flying careers that some associate with graduate status. Moreover, ethnic minorities are very unevenly distributed across subjects. They feature disproportion-ally in medicine and health-related subjects, law and business, engineering and ICT but are under-represented in the pure sciences and the humanities. So, only a few universities and not all disciplines can truly claim to be multi-ethnic.

The causes of such disparities are due to many factors—students' pre-entry attainment levels, education choices at 16, subject preferences, geographical distribution and aspirations are all key ingredients and all worth discussing. I would just like to discuss two factors, socio-economic class and institutional filtering.

Socio-economic class is a strong factor in a determining who gets where; for the White population it is a strong predictor of educational outcomes. For example, two-thirds of White students come from non-manual backgrounds. But class does not always work in the same way for ethnic minorities. Two-thirds of Pakistani and Bangladeshi students (nearly all of whom are from Muslim families) come from homes where the parents are in manual work or unemployed. One consequence of this is that while, as Table 1 shows, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are among the less successful of ethnic minority groups (and indeed are disproportionately in the less selective institutions and subjects) they are doing much better than their White working class peers, some of whom are not likely to be in university at all.

Nevertheless, when all the main factors are controlled for, there has been shown to be a bias against ethnic minorities in the pre-1992 universities and in their favour in the new universities. Table 2 shows the probability of an offer to candidates with identical attainment scores, type of school background, age, gender, parental occupation, etc, and applying to the same course in the same type of institution[4].

Table 2. Institutional 'bias'. Rates of success/universities' pecking order

| Old universities | New universities |
|---|---|
| *Most preferred:*<br>Whites (0.75)* | *Most preferred:*<br>Indians (0.85)<br>Chinese (0.83)<br>Bangladeshis (0.82) |
| *Less preferred:*<br>Chinese (0.68)<br>Black Caribbeans (0.65) | *Less preferred:*<br>Pakistanis (0.77)<br>Black Africans (0.76)<br>Black Caribbeans (0.75)<br>Whites (0.73) |
| *Least preferred:*<br>Indian (0.58)<br>Bangladeshis (0.57)<br>Black Africans (0.57)<br>Pakistanis (0.57) | |

*Probability of initial offer to identical candidates for equivalent courses
Source: Shiner & Modood (2002)

It reveals that even when all these things are controlled for there are ethnic biases in the likelihood of a university offering a place to a candidate. These biases vary across groups and are radically different across universities.

If we divide Britain's 100-plus universities into those that have always been universities ('old universities') and those that were polytechnics till 1992 ('new universities', which are less wealthy and less selective than the old), we see that in the former, Whites are more likely to get an offer than other identical candidates. For example, while a White student has a 75% chance of receiving an invitation to study, a Pakistani candidate, identical in every way, has only a 57% chance of an offer. In the new universities, however, ethnic minorities are actually preferred though the scale of bias is less. British universities, then, clearly need to review their methods of selection to identify and eliminate the sources of these biases.

It should be noted that about a third of non-Whites in the UK are Muslim (though most Middle Easterners identify themselves as White). About two-thirds of Muslims are of South Asian origin, mostly Pakistanis. By most socio-economic measures Asian Muslims are amongst the most disadvantaged of the ethnic minorities. For example, over 60% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi households are in poverty—compared to 20% of Whites—and have the highest proportions of school leavers without any qualifications. Even that solid proportion of these two groups that are entering higher education are most likely to be in the less resourced institutions. Nevertheless, what the above analysis shows is that there is and continues to be a large scale familial and personal investment in education and a determination to achieve social mobility by means of higher education.

Interestingly, qualitative studies, including the one I am currently involved in,[5] suggest that for many young Asians Islam is appealed to—both by girls and boys—as a source of educational aspirations and the motivation to improve oneself and lead a disciplined, responsible life. It is particularly used by girls to justify and negotiate educational and career opportunities with conservative parents, often of rural backgrounds with little knowledge of the scriptures; and by boys to distance themselves from the temptations of street youth culture, a primary obstacle to an academic pathway. Those boys that do not follow academic paths are not less but more likely to be assimilated into White working class lifestyles.

Hence, we must be careful in making any generalizations about Muslim cultures encouraging separatism, incapable of motivating youngsters to aspire to horizons beyond the ghetto or failing to encourage participation in British institutions. Islam in Britain is finely poised between a religion of a ghetto and a religion of social mobility—a kind of 'Protestant ethic'—capable of sustaining the hope and discipline that the taking up of opportunities requires. For the latter trajectory to be actualized, mainstream Islam requires encouragement not demonization.

## Notes

1.  This is a revised version of a paper from the ISIM (International Institute for the Study of Islam) *Review*, 16 August 2005, The Netherlands.
2.  See Modood (2005).
3.  Not to mention the 'Asian Other', a term which includes disparate groups such as Sri Lankans, Vietnamese, Malaysians but which are relatively small in absolute terms and so working out the proportion of the age group in higher education is less reliable. The same may apply to the Chinese in Table 1 for their representation is much lower than all other data has suggested so far (see Modood, 2005).
4.  The dataset in question was reanalysed recently with results showing that 'bias' against ethnic minorities was confined to Law for all groups and to Pakistanis in most subjects (see HEFCE 2005). Why the HEFCE analysis differs from Shiner and Mood 2002 has not yet been established.
5.  The Leverhulme Migration and Ethnicity Research Programme Project on gender, social capital and differential outcomes. See www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/Sociology/leverhulme.

## References

Connor, H., Tyers, C., Modood, T. & Hillage, J. (2004) *Why the difference? A closer look at higher education minority ethnic students and graduates*, DfES research report RR552. Available online at: www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB552.pdf .

HEFCE (2005) Higher Education Admissions: assessment of bias. HEFCE research paper 2005/47, December.

Modood, T. (2005) *Multicultural politics: racism, ethnicity and Muslims in Britain* (Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Press).

Shiner, M. & Modood, T. (2002) Help or hindrance? Higher Education and the route to ethnic equality, *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 23(2), 209–232.