



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Note of speaker meeting: “BME students and social mobility”

Speakers:

Professor Anna Vignoles, Professor of Education and Director of Research,
University of Cambridge

Professor Geoff Layer, Vice-Chancellor, University of Wolverhampton

Anne-Marie Canning, Director of Widening Participation, King’s College London

Niaomi Collett, Deputy Director of Widening Participation, King’s College London

Rt Hon David Lammy, MP for Tottenham

Professor Anna Vignoles noted that there had been a significant change in recent years for some groups of students. Pupils from all minority ethnic groups are, on average, more likely to go to university than White British pupils, except in the richest fifth of households, where Black Caribbean and Black Other students are less likely to attend higher education than White British students. Minority ethnic students are also more likely than a comparable White British student to attend the most selective higher education institutions, except in the case of Black Caribbean and Black Other pupils.

Professor Vignoles noted that her research, focusing on young students progressing from school to higher education, had shown that the principle driver of whether someone participates in higher education was dependent on their socio-economic background. In addition, ethnicity and socio-economic status were interlinked, with ethnic minority students more likely to come from poorer households. She also noted that where inequalities do exist these begin to emerge in primary school and are also found in the job market.

She closed her comments by remarking on where government and sector policy should focus to counter these distinctive problems, suggesting that there needs to be a focus on low achievement of poorer children earlier in the school system and a focus on progression of BME students throughout their higher education studies and onto employment.

Professor Geoff Layer opened his comments by questioning whether the phrase Black and Ethnic Minority was helpful as the barriers to and in higher education is varied in a more nuanced way. He then went on to discuss whether access to higher education was or should be the main focus of social mobility, arguing that social mobility should refer to how somebody moves between points in their life and while access to university can be a major part of it, it was only one part. Professor Layer noted that most of the data collected on BME participation in higher education referred to three year full time study by 18 year olds and not to mature or part-time study. He argued that this means the sector is missing a large section of the full picture which, if considered, would help to understand where university can make positive interventions.

He then went on to describe the ‘social model’ through which he feels is the lens that this issue should be looked at. The social model suggests that it is society, as opposed to intrinsic

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personal causes, that has created the barriers to higher education. He argued that for the sector to address this issue and increase social mobility for BME students these barriers must be removed. For example, universities need to be able to fill gaps where they are occurring. Students wishing to study medicine, whose school doesn't provide a chemistry teacher at A-Level, could be encouraged to pick up this qualification as part of a foundation degree at university.

Professor Layer finished his comments by describing what his aspirations for the system were. Beginning with a school structure that fully prepared all students for the course they wished to study, for all to have their costs for attending higher education supported in some way and for a fair and proportionate regulatory system.

Anne-Marie Canning and **Niaomi Collett** opened their presentation by flagging that the Prime Minister's goal for BME students and social mobility is a challenging one that requires 50,000 additional entrants by 2020. They reiterated the point made by Professor Layer that the description of BME is not nuanced enough, noting that there has been an increase in students referring to themselves as mixed race, which was not captured by the BME definition.

Ms Canning described the K+ programme that King's College London had put in place, a two year programme of events, activities and academic workshops created to support student's applications to university. She noted that the programme isn't only promoted in schools but in local libraries, community centres and to the children of King's own Grade 1 and 2 staff. The students that participate were requested to go back to their local school or area and speak about the project. Ms Collett then went onto reiterate the importance of a community approach, the success they had found by getting in touch with councillors, civil society organisations and youth organisations. She also described another programme that has shown success in encouraging attendance by this group at university. The Black Achievement Conference is aimed at parents and students in Years 10, 11 and 12 who had not or would not have taken part in any other widening participation schemes.

Finally, they argued that the narrative around this topic should be reframed, beginning with success stories rather than making comparisons with the number of young people in prisons. They noted that the debate should also be wider than just access but that it should focus on outcomes including the gap in achievement at university and in employment.

Rt Hon David Lammy MP approached the topic of the meeting from both his time as a higher education Minister and more recently his experience as a parliamentarian. He questioned why a lower percentage of minority applicants to Oxbridge and Russell Group universities were offered places compared to white applicants, despite the fact that the number of BME students achieving 3 'A' grades continue to rise each year.

He noted that in the early 2000s, the discussion in this area focused on the AimHigher initiative, looking at increasing access for students from a low socio-economic background. He argued that this was successful but since then complacency and vested interest had crept

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into the system. He felt there had been a sense that BME and low socio-economic students only went to certain institutions and that the focus should be on fair access, not just access.

He described the successes that had occurred internationally in this area, including the US where universities allow the brightest students from deprived areas into top institutions with lower grades than those from affluent regions, stressing that this policy was not one that would be acceptable in the UK. Instead Mr Lammy placed emphasis on the number of BME students who get the top grades at A Level and therefore merit a place at research-intensive universities. He argued that there was an unconscious bias in the UK system and that higher education by not recognising this was perpetuating stereotypes. He closed his comments by noting that the lack of BME figures further up the pipeline in higher education was also an issue. He suggested that it is difficult to raise aspirations for students when there were so few BME Vice-Chancellors or senior professors that they could look to emulate.

Q&A and Discussion

The discussion began by focusing on the subject of **community engagement**. Attendees agreed that it was important where possible to reach further than schools and into other parts of communities as some students may not have a positive relationship with their school. The conversation then turned to **UCAS data and name blind admissions**, with one attendee arguing that it would be useful for universities to see all data that UCAS collects from students when they apply so that institutions were able to make conscious decisions, particularly with courses where there was BME under-representation. This led to a discussion about name blind admissions where it was noted that it was not possible to maintain a name blind approach to admissions onto courses or institutions that required an interview as part of the application process, and that this was true of a number of the subject areas BME applicants traditionally applied to..

It was suggested that there were two options that the sector and government could look at to alleviate this issue while the sector waits for the attainment gap to equalise. These could be a fix in the **school system** working to raise achievement and aspiration for all students or for universities to bring in students with **lower grades**. It was then noted that the conversation had slipped back to considering those students entering higher education at school leaver age and through UCAS, and the sector should work to consistently remind itself that a large number of BME students come through other routes and study part-time.

Attendees agreed that **each institution has its own issues to tackle** and that these might be so disparate that the same solutions may not be successful in different areas. One attendee noted that having a diversity of academics and teaching staff not only helps to raise aspiration but can, by feeding into it, help create an improved curriculum. As the meeting drew to a close **UCAS data** was again raised, suggesting that having access to some of its contextualised data would help universities focus their outreach projects. Finally the attendees noted the positive and unique opportunity that the **Social Mobility Advisory Group** had in tackling this issue, bringing together for the first time schools, practitioners, academics, vice-chancellors, employers to make recommendations directly to government,

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universities and other bodies, acknowledging that collective responsibility and collective action was essential if faster progress was to be made.

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