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Barriers and facilitators to university access in disadvantaged UK adolescents by ethnicity: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Increasing access to university for those currently under-represented is a UK government priority. Understanding the views of under-represented students can help direct widening participation activities. In recent years, a positive trend finds increasing numbers of Black students attending university, but it is not clear why White disadvantaged student numbers have not increased. Thus, we aimed to explore the student viewpoint on barriers and facilitators to university access in disadvantaged adolescents and how this might differ by ethnicity. We used an online semi-structured interview with questions about applying to university. Seventy adolescents (mean 16.9 yr.) were recruited who are currently under-represented at university level, based on various measures of disadvantage. Black, Asian, and ethnic minority students (BAME) reported similar barriers and facilitators to applying to university as White disadvantaged students. However, there were some differences, for example, BAME participants stated 'having no choice' was a reason to apply to university while White participants did not mention this. Also ~60% of BAME students said they would prefer to study close by compared to far away, while only 46% of White participants said this. Our results support previous findings that financial issues are a key barrier to university access and that outreach activities can act as facilitators to increase university access. However, we compare the unique viewpoints on the barriers and facilitators to university access in Black, Asian and White under-represented students. Based on these views we also make recommendations for future widening participation events targeted at different ethnicities.

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University access; higher education; under-represented; BAME; students; disadvantaged

Introduction

University graduates on average earn more money over their lifetime, spend less time in unemployment and are more likely to live longer than their non-university educated peers (Hummer and Hernandez 2013; Krueger, Dehry, and Chang 2019; Pfeffer 2018). Thus, all universities are required by the Office for Students (OfS) to increase the proportion of students that are currently under-represented in higher education (HE). The OfS is the independent regulator of higher education in England and its strategic objective is that 'All students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education' (OfS 2018). Data taken from the 2020 Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS,

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a UK-based organisation that operates the application process for British universities) reports that those with low socio-economic backgrounds, with a disability, mature students, care leavers and ethnic minorities, are all under-represented at UK universities (UCAS 2020).

UCAS uses measures of socio-economic status such as the Participation of Local Areas in the UK (POLAR4) (HEFCE 2005) assessment. It is calculated by dividing the number of young people from a given area who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 by the young population of that area. The areas are then ranked by participation rate and split into five quintiles, each of which represents about a fifth of the young population. The 20% of areas with the lowest participation rates are designated as 'quintile 1' and considered the most disadvantaged whilst the top 20% are 'quintile 5' and considered the least disadvantaged. Another measure used is the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) (Ministry of Housing 2019) which classifies areas in England by level of deprivation based on measures, such as income, employment, health, crime, housing and services and living environment. The UK UCAS report released in Jan 2020 finds that those in quintile 5 of the POLAR4 measure are 2.24 times more likely to apply to university that POLAR4 quintile 1 (Figure 1) (UCAS 2020).

With regard to ethnicity, there have been positive increases in the numbers of Black students applying to university with entry rates changing from 21.6% in 2006 to 44.5% in 2019. However, White pupils from state schools had the lowest entry rates for 13 consecutive years since (and including) 2007 (UCAS 2019). In total numbers, White students, of all social backgrounds, are the biggest group going to university, show figures from the UCAS admissions service. But in terms of a proportion of the population, White adolescents are less likely to go to university than Asian or Black teenagers (Figure 2) (UCAS 2019).

As more females apply and attend university than boys this means that White, working-class males become among the most under-represented groups in university (Crawford and Greaves 2015). Together, this data clearly highlights the gap in access and the need for ongoing outreach and widening participation work to increase university applications for those considered most

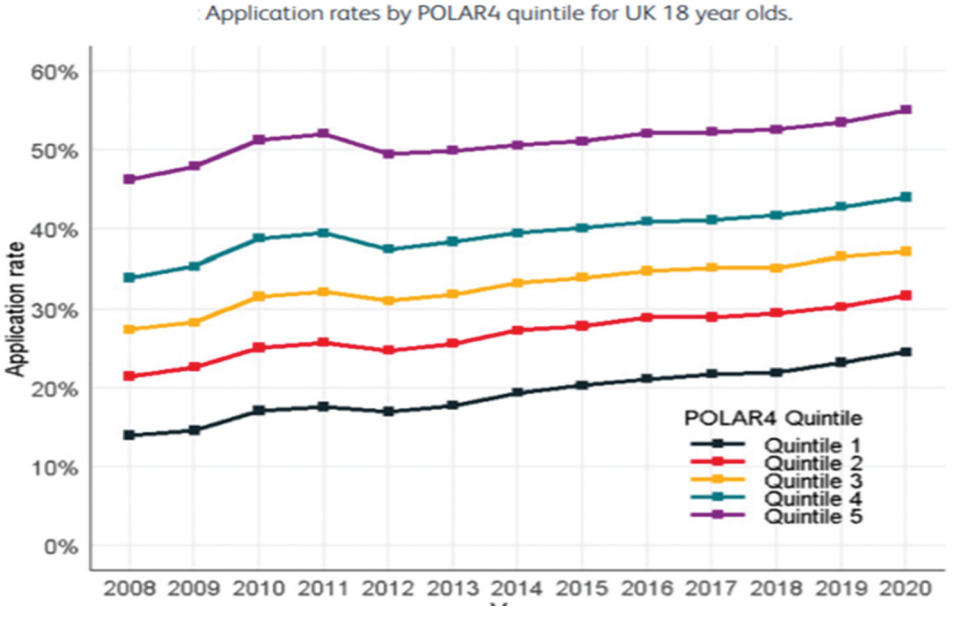

Figure 1. Application rates by POLAR4 quintile for UK 18 year olds. Figure reproduced with permission from UCAS (2020, 447).

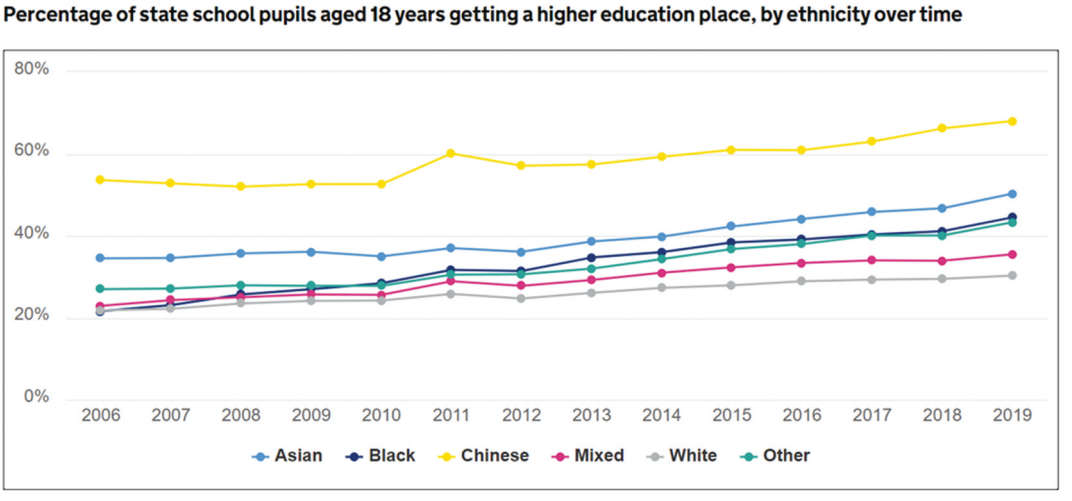

Figure 2. Percentage of state school pupils aged 18 years getting a higher education place, by ethnicity over time. Figure reproduced with permission from UCAS (2019).

disadvantaged. In line with this, the University of Reading has outlined in its 5-year plan (2020/21 to 2024/5) that increasing access for full-time first-degree entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds is their main focus.

Previous studies have tried to understand the views of students in relation to university applications in those that are under-represented in higher education particularly at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Morrison, Machado, and Blackburn 2019; Stegers-Jager et al. 2012; Lynam et al. 2019; Woolf et al. 2013, 2016). UCAS ran a large survey in 2016 (UCAS 2016) on 16,000 UK domiciled applicants aged 18 or 19 who were applying to university about their perception of higher education and what influenced their choices and ultimately if they were successful. Levels of advantage were characterised by POLAR4 data. Ethnicity, age and gender were also recorded. The main findings from the survey were that students had firm perceptions about the challenges they were likely to face at university. Some of these perceptions were different between advantaged and disadvantaged learners. 64% of applicants thought that the right accommodation is as important as the right course, with 70% of disadvantaged applicants agreeing with this statement. Advantaged applicants were 18% more likely to say that fitting in at university is an important thing to consider. Worries about making friends, homesickness, loneliness, taking responsibility for yourself, and coping with being away from home were all mentioned frequently by all students. However, advantaged applicants tended to focus more on developing networks of friends, while the most disadvantaged groups were more concerned about practicalities like transport and accommodation. The study also reported that 49% of advantaged applicants said that 'nowadays, almost everyone goes to university compared to 35% of the most disadvantaged group. 82% of respondents said their peers had not applied to university instead opting to get a job or apprenticeship, and 58% said it was because they were not going to get good enough grades. There were also greater concerns about the affordability of accommodation and living costs, and a desire to not move away from home among disadvantaged applicants. Common themes also emerged with applicants reporting concerns about university incurring debt and a lack of clarity about the real entry requirements for a course. Applicants also reported limited access to widening participation programmes in general.

Taken together, the UCAS report (UCAS 2016) highlighted the need for continued and increased numbers of widening participation programmes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds with the aim of increasing access to HE. The survey suggested that the generic advice and guidance

already provided by schools and colleges are targeted at those who need it least i.e. the high achievers already aspiring to higher tariff universities (UCAS 2016). Secondly, the report concluded that current interventions provided by schools tend to be targeted at a narrow group of young people, already close to making the decision to progress to HE. A much larger group has been left behind, disaffected, and disenfranchised. Therefore, there is a real need to target those most disadvantaged and to do this guided by their specific needs, this would allow more effective activities to be developed. UCAS used a mixture of mostly forced-choice and tick-all-that-apply questions that was unable to reveal any potential differences in views *between* disadvantaged White students and ethnic minorities. Therefore, the aim of our study was to examine the viewpoints of students on the barriers and facilitators to university access both using a more qualitative approach and examining views between ethnic minority students and disadvantaged White students. We hypothesised that young people would have similar views on the barriers (money worries) and facilitators (visit days) to university access across ethnicities based on the UCAS report (UCAS 2016) but that there might also be different viewpoints *between* ethnicities. Knowing this could allow the development of activities targeted to specific disadvantaged groups.

Methods

Participants

Seventy participants (Mean 16.9 yrs.) were recruited from the Reading Scholars Widening Participation programme at the University of Reading (University of Reading 2020) in July 2020. The Reading Scholars overall aim is to increase the number of university applications from disadvantaged students (Read the full selection criteria for the programme).

Most students were female (F = 55, M = 12, preferred not to say = 3). The participants identified themselves as Black African (N = 18), Asian (N = 20), Minority Ethnic (N = 4) and White (N = 28) (Figure 3, this sample is also typical of the wider Reading Scholars programme). For the programme participants needed to be on track or have potential to achieve at least three B grades at A-Level or equivalent and be in one of the university priorities groups. Students in priority Group A met at least one of the following 1) in or have been in care of local authority for at least 13 weeks since age of 14, 2) an Asylum seeker/refugee, 3) be estranged from family (in Friends and Family Care), 4) be a carer for family member who may be sick, disabled or has mental health problems, or is misusing drugs or alcohol

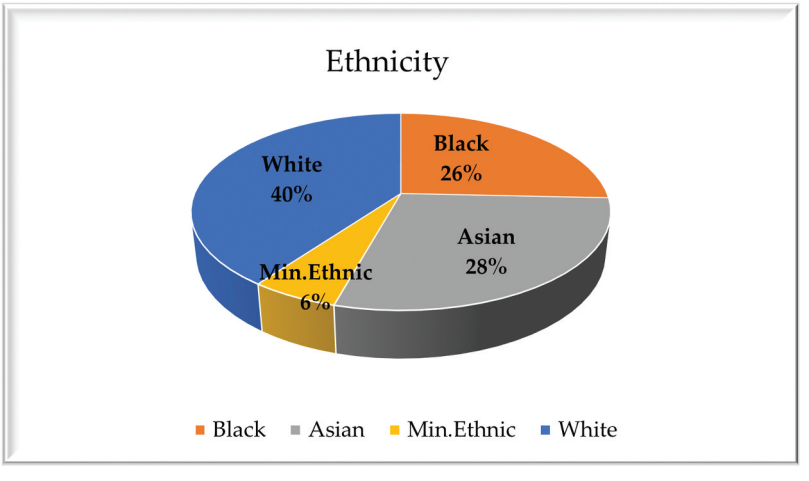

Figure 3. Demographic information of participants.

(Young Carer), 5) live in POLAR4 quintile 1 neighbourhood, 6) have a home postcode in IMD quintile 1 or 2. If all places were not allocated to those in group A then some from Group B could be selected, Group B criteria include 1) be eligible for free school meals and/or discretionary school payments, 2) have a family income of less than £25,000, 3) be Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic, 4) live in POLAR4 quintile 2 neighbourhood, 5) have a disability, 6) be an existing participant on Reading Scholars programme. If places were still available than those in Group C the lower priority group could be selected, group C criteria include, 1) no parental attendance at HE (in case of two parent household this to mean both parents), excluding mature students 2) could provide additional relevant information on application form. Most Reading Scholars participants fell into the highest priority groups, but how each individual student met each of these criteria was not known for this study.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee (2020–085-CM). Participants were sent a link to a webpage with the study information and a box to tick to give consent to take part. Participants were informed that the data would be stored anonymously with no names or emails attached. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time, without providing any excuse and that the data would be stored and disposed of according to the Data Protection Act and Quality Assurance procedures of the University.

Study design

A qualitative case study research design was used. Case studies are exploratory research designs that provide an overview of why the case is the way it is, and what to focus on for future greater depth analysis (Hancock and Algozzine 2017; Davey 1990).

Procedure

The researchers created an online link that contained the information sheets and the consent form for the study which was sent to all those on the Reading Scholars programme. Once students gave their consent they could then respond to the open-ended structured qualitative questions. A topic guide and qualitative questions were developed by the researchers guided by the UCAS 2016 survey on university applicants perceptions of higher education (UCAS 2016). The questions used in the study are in Table S1.

Data analysis

Data obtained via the Google form were analysed using the Nvivo qualitative research software programme. We examined the Black, Asian and Minority ethnic data together as one group (BAME) and the White data as another group and compared the results. We also then compared the responses specifically from the Black, Asian and White participants (see supplementary doc). All analyses were performed through qualitative content analysis to derive codes, categories, and patterns to understand very detailed expressions (Grbich 2013). In this respect, researchers read and re-read the data to get acquainted with the information, take notes, and create some meaningful units. In this respect, the themes emerged in line with the research questions posed to the participants and the answers given to these questions. For example, the question *'Are you thinking to apply to university? Why? Can you give some reasons'* and the responses to this question contributed to the emergence of both *'Reasons to Apply to University'* and *'Barriers to Applying to University'* themes. These and other themes, which aim to clarify and summarise the participants' statements, are taken from the data and tagged with a code. For example, in the main theme 'Reasons to Apply to University', we showed codes in a 'bold' form to exemplify the codes derived from the expression of one of the participants. Subsequently, these codes

are then compared in terms of similarities and differences and grouped into categories and sub-categories that make up the content (Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017). The content analysis not only contributes to the qualitative analysis of the data but also simultaneously helps in the quantification of the data (Grbich 2013). The key argument at this stage is that the frequencies presented in the text do not indicate the number of participants rather they simply show how often the participants express each category. Therefore, in this research, frequencies and percentages were given in tables for quantifying qualitative data through Nvivo. Finally, the participants' answers were sometimes shown in the text with direct quotations. In the citation of direct quotations, participants' numbers, categories, and gender were abbreviated for e.g. '1BAME-F' means that this quotation came from the first female 'BAME' participant, while '2White-M' stands for the second participant who is male and White. Text highlighted in blue is a category that is mentioned by one group and not the other.

Results

Reasons to apply to university

As might be expected, there was a lot of overlap between the BAME and White students' reasons for applying to university such as to gain a qualification and to pursue a career for e.g.

> *'. . . I would like to have the experience of being independent and not living dependent on my parents. Secondly, I would love to study the subject I am passionate about, in depth and revolve my life around it. Finally, I think it is the right life path for my future and career . . . ' (67White-F).*

However, 'having no choice' was a reason listed by the BAME but not White students for e.g.

> *'simply sometimes because we are forced to or expected to do so by (our) parents, family and friends' (42BAME-F)*

> *'to please their parents/families, because 'everyone else does it', to get a good job' (37BAME-F)*

> *'I want to make my mum proud . . . People chose uni to impress their family or get the job they want' (43BAME-F)*

BAME participants also emphasised 'social life' as a reason for going to university, while White participants did not for e.g.

> *'People also enjoy the social aspects of university because you get to spent time with many different people that you would never see if you didn't go university (people with various different backgrounds and course interests)' (13BAME-F).*

However, White participants mentioned 'for fun' as a reason while BAME participants did not for e. g. White participants described these reasons as follows:

> '*to further (my) education and to have fun' (2White-F).*

Barriers to Applying to University

As expected, there was also a lot of overlap between the BAME and White students reasons for not applying to university such as financial difficulties, apprenticeships, being uninterested, not meeting the required criteria and not wanting to move away from home for e.g.

> *'Very expensive. Studies that show many people who go to university and acquire a degree do not use it during their career. Also, there are other avenues which people will see more fit for them such as apprenticeships which could be better as one is getting direct training on the job they want to get in the future, rather than studying a course which has slight relevance to that career path' (13BAME-F)*

> *'Lots of people don't go to university as they may not be able to afford it and don't want to spend their life with debt. Another reason is another opportunity may be better for their life plan such as an apprenticeship' (67White-F)*

A third of BAME participants stated that 'it is not worth it' when asked about the reasons not to apply to university whilst no White students reported this for e.g.

> '*It is a waste of time as what you learn/gain from it doesn't add up to how much you're in debt once you're done.*' (68BAME-F)

> *'Financial issues. Family reasons. Personal reasons. Have other pathways such as apprenticeship. Don't have the opportunity to attend uni maybe because of previous qualifications. Distance. Don't think it will be useful or worth it. Not aware of the benefits of attending uni' (15BAME-F)*

Facilitators to applying to university

For the question about what the university could do to encourage university applications both BAME and White students gave identical categories of answers only differing in the frequency rankings. For example, 'Facilities' was mentioned more often by White vs. BAME students as something the university could advertise/show-case more while 'Open Days/More events' was reported more often by BAME than White students as something that would encourage applications. Interestingly, many students in both groups suggested more support with finances would encourage university applications. This also fits with previous responses whereby both groups rated 'Financial difficulties' as the main barrier to applying to university. However, few students in either the BAME or White groups mentioned 'Reduce cost and entry grades' as something the university could do to encourage applications. Both groups also suggest more 'Guidance for career path' as something that could be done to encourage university applications for e.g.

> *'Show us the amazing benefits of going to university, why is it still valued by employers and how university can provide great experience/guidance for the career path people want to go into. Also, what people can do to help with the student finance' (13BAME-F)*

Participants' preference for a university close by or far away

Approximately 60% of BAME participants prefer to attend a university close by, compared to 46% of White participants (Table S5).

When examining the reasons for wanting to go to a university close to home (Table S6) both BAME and White participants report 'wanting to stay close to family' and 'safety, medical reasons' for e.g.

> *'So that I can still visit my family, so they don't get lonely. I would like to stay in London or Oxford as I prefer the area and I know it well. If I go to a university that's quite far away, travelling back home or to other areas that I usually visit will be too hard/expensive. (6BAME-P)'*

> *'It would be easier and nicer to return home when I am struggling to cope – covid 19 has proven to me how much I use my family as a support system'. (49White-F)*

BAME participants also mention going to a university closer to home as being a 'cheaper' option, however, this was not mentioned by the White participants.

When examining the reasons for wanting to go to a university far away both BAME and White participants report wanting to have 'new experiences, to gain independence, to explore different areas and to get away from family' for e.g.

> *'Chance to experience life away from strict parents and annoying siblings. Also, for a change of scenery as I've spent all my life so far in the same area' (68BAME-F).*

Participants plans if not to go to university

Both BAME and White participants responded similarly to being asked about plans other than university (Table S7). The most frequent response was to take an apprenticeship followed by options such as taking a gap year and finding a job e.g.

> *'If I don't get to uni I would like to get an apprenticeship or take a gap year for work experience and travelling, then apply again the next year' (6BAME-P).*

Is the reading scholars widening participation programme useful?

Most participants (85–89%) stated that they found the programme useful and emphasised that their motivation increased with this programme for e.g.

> *'Definitely . . . ! Encouraged me to apply to a university as the events were very enjoyable and it gives you a good insight to what university life may be like . . . (35White-M)'*

> *'Yes, it has shown the process is not as complicated as it seems, and that university is a great place to learn and experience things' (37BAME-F).*

The frequency of statements by all participants regarding if the Reading Scholars programme was useful was analysed with the word cloud in Nvivo and results are given in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Demographic information of participants.

Outcomes for participants of the reading scholars programme in 2018 and 2019

The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) reviewed in 2020 the evidence for The Impact of Interventions for Widening Access to Higher Education and recommended that greater tracking of the progression outcomes of participants should be implemented (The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) 2020). Therefore, we report that since the programmes inception in 2013 university application by the students have increased over the years culminating in the highest levels in 2018 when 35% of the 220 participants in the programme applied to the University of Reading and 21 students enrolled in 2019. Along with increasing awareness about university life the programme delivers evidence of increased applications form those under-represented. This can then be used as a benchmark against which the impact of the widening participation programme can be assessed and improved going forward.

Close Family Member at University

Approximately 80% of the participants in the study said they already had a close family member at or who went to university. The rates were also similar across BAME and White (BAME = 81%; White = 78.6%) as can be seen in Table S9.

Although there were only a few participants with no close family member at university (N = 8 BAME N = 6 White) we also examined how having a family member may have influenced responses (please see supplementary doc). An interesting finding from this was that students who had a family member at university were more likely to mention apprenticeships as an option other than university. While those without a family member were more likely to mention getting a job as an alternative to university.

Discussion

In this study, we were interested in the views on university access of ethnic minority students and disadvantaged White students that are underrepresented at university. Most of the work on ethnicity and university education focuses on the attainment gap whereby White students gain higher degrees than Black and minority ethic students (Smith 2017; Frumkin and Koutsoubou 2013). Studies trying to explain the gap reports that Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students perform less well at A-Level which impacts higher education progression (Shiner and Modood 2002), that the experience of teaching and learning at university is different for Black and ethnic minority students (OFFA 2015), that Black ethnic groupings are more likely to choose an alternative route to HE (not A-Levels) (Trust 2010) and also that BAME students are less likely to apply to low/mid ranking Higher Education institutions than White students and are more likely to apply to institutions closer to home (Shiner and Modood 2002; Taylor 1992; Ball, Reay, and David 2002; Noden, Shiner, and Modood 2014). However, there has been much less work on examining how BAME students views on access to higher education might differ from those of White disadvantaged students.

The good news is that over the years the numbers of Black and Asian students attending university has been increasing. Although university student populations are predominantly White, proportionally speaking there are more Black and Asian students attending. The most under-represented students at university are White students considered working-class and of these males are more under-represented than females. Yet there is very little data on the views of these young people about university access and how these views might differ from those of ethnic minorities. This is important as one study finds that candidates from lower social class groups are less likely to receive offers than their more privileged counterparts and these differences persist

when other relevant variables are taken into account (Noden, Shiner, and Modood 2014). The authors note that ethnic and social class differences in offer rates could not be fully explained by differences in academic attainment or patterns of application (Noden, Shiner, and Modood 2014).

Therefore, in our study, we examined the views of students who are considered under-represented at university, BAME students and White disadvantaged students. We found that both groups reported similar reasons for applying to university like getting a good qualification and career, consistent with previous reports. Also, both groups reported similar reasons for *not* applying to university such as financial difficulties. However, there were some differences too, for example BAME participants reported 'having no choice' as a reason they applied to university while under-represented White participants did not. This fits with the afore-mentioned data that proportionally more ethnic minorities are going to university compared to White students. Further it is consistent with a report by the Education and Youth development 'think and action tank' in 2016 (Baars, Mulcahy, and Bernardes 2016) that White working-class boys don't see university as such a good option. Rather they report non-graduate employment opportunities as more attractive compared to their Black and minority ethnic counterparts (Bowes et al. 2015; Hillman and Robinson 2016). Further Bowes et al. (2015) found that low socio-economic status (SES) White males were more likely to hold the view that 'the best jobs do not necessarily go to University graduates'(Bowes et al. 2015). It is thought that these views might also be related to the parents of White disadvantaged pupils who are more likely to hold the belief that leaving education at 16 or 18 yrs. does *not* limit career opportunities, compared to parents of other ethnicities and advantaged pupils (Bowes et al. 2015). In support of the important influence that parents might be having on young people's aspirations Goodman and Gregg (2010) found that 37% of low-SES mothers wanted their 9 year-old to go to university compared to 81% of high-SES mothers (Goodman and Gregg 2010). However, it is important to note that in this study when asked in a different way (*about plans other than university*) some under-represented White students did mention university as being 'the only option'.

In our study, we found that BAME participants also reported that if they did not apply to university, it would be because they thought university was not worth it, which was not reported by White students. Further BAME students reported not applying to university because of the need to look after family.

Some White students reported not applying to university because of being lazy or overwhelmed which is relevant to recent debates over the terminology used by leaders to describe the educational plight of White working-class students. For example, in 2018 Amanda Spielman, the chief inspector of schools (Ofsted, Office for Standards in Education), has been quoted as saying White working-class children have 'low aspirations and drive' which proved contentious given that its thought aspirations are highly influenced by economic and societal factors including external expectations and perceptions (Gorard and Davies P 2012). Further the Sutton Trust and Oxford University educational department found evidence suggesting that 'drive' was not a limiting factor as 46% of White disadvantaged boys in affluent areas go on to post-16 education vs. only 29% of White boys in deprived areas (Sammons, Toth, and Sylva 2015).

When asked about studying at a university close by or far away BAME students more frequently mentioned studying closer to home and gave financial reasons.

When asked about what would encourage the young people to consider applying to university both BAME and White students mentioned similar things such as more open days, more knowledge about the facilities that universities had to offer and more financial support.

We also examined if there were differences in views between Black Asian and White students (supplemental data). We found that Asian students were more likely to mention 'pursuing a career' as a reason to go to university compared to both Black and White students. This fits with the UCAS data showing that of all the ethnic minorities Asian students enter university in the highest proportions (UCAS 2019). This also fits with data showing that Asian students are more likely to choose degrees that have established career trajectories such as law and medicine (*jobs for life idea*) (UCAS 2019). As these types of careers can usually only be achieved via a university degree this might also fit with the

data that Asian students are the most likely of all ethnicities to apply to university. However, this might also be detrimental for some Asian students as these degree courses are very competitive and could reduce the student's chances of acceptance.

Students from all ethnicities mentioned financial difficulties as barriers to university access. However Black and Asian students also mentioned how university may not be worth it whilst White students were more likely to mention not being interested in university. These viewpoints could be further explored in future outreach activities that focus on university benefits vs. burdens.

Regards facilitators there was a lot of overlap between Black, Asian and White under-represented students views. One possible area for future work is in career guidance for White students as they were less likely to mention needing career guidance compared to the other students. This might reflect their reduced interest in university and their reduced interest in a traditional career compared to Asian students.

Regards the reasons one might have for studying close by or far away Black students were less frequently reporting family as a reason to stay close to home compared to Asian and White students. Also, Asian and White students mentioned studying close by for safety or medical reasons more so than Black students, why this might be could be further explored in outreach events. Finally, when asked about plans other than university White students did not mention apprenticeships as often as Black and Asian students, therefore this too could be discussed further in widening participation activities going forward.

Taken together, these results show that there is a real need for outreach events that focus on the barriers and facilitators to university access for under-represented students. As hypothesised, we found different viewpoints from different ethnicities on the barriers and facilitators to university access. We recommend that future widening participation/outreach events could be improved for under-represented students by encouraging discussion between advantaged and disadvantaged students and parents about university access to increase student aspirations via peer-to-peer sharing. We recommend that widening participation activities should discuss with students university gains vs. university financial burdens in more depth with under-represented students. We recommend that universities should think about how they can further support under-represented students who have multiple disadvantages, such as being from an ethnic minority and also have caring responsibilities. We recommend that future widening participation activities, particularly with White under-represented students should focus on raising aspirations in this group and perhaps engaging with their parents. And finally, we think it is important to ensure that widening participation activities with Asian students can discuss careers outside of traditional ones and the advantages and disadvantages of choosing universities close to home.

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