

C-SAP PROJECT 2005/6

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Project Reference and Title

PG05-13: Postgraduate study in sociology, anthropology and politics: what is the effect of ethnicity?

Key words

Anthropology, diversity, ethnicity, politics, postgraduates, social science, sociology

Summary

We conducted a quantitative investigation of the ethnic background of postgraduate students in sociology, anthropology and politics. We found a higher proportion of ethnic minority students on higher degrees than among first degree graduates in these subjects, although there were differences between taught and research postgraduates. Under-representation of minority ethnic groups at postgraduate level alone is therefore not a plausible explanation for under-representation among academic staff in sociology, anthropology and politics. However patterns of first degree attainment and institutional location by ethnic group give some cause for concern and suggest that the overall picture of higher participation in research degrees may mask underlying inequalities in accessing the 'track' to an academic career.

Activities

Our project centred on secondary analysis of existing data about the ethnicity of postgraduate students in sociology, anthropology and politics. Our activities comprised specification of data requirements, analysis of the data; and presentation of the findings across various outlets.

Following analysis, we sought to publicise our findings widely, using a variety of outlets (see the references section for a full list). We have presented at academic conferences; talked about the findings to professional associations and the ESRC; generated press coverage; and at the time of writing we are in the process of drafting articles on our findings for scholarly and professional journals and newsletters.

Finally, the datasets are being put to further use in spin-off research projects looking at ethnicity in postgraduate study in general, gender and doctoral study in selected European nations (with Prudencia Gutiérrez Esteban of the Universidad de Extremadura, Spain); and social class and postgraduate study.

Outcomes

Our starting point was the apparent disjuncture between the representation of students from minority ethnic groups (MEGs) in undergraduate study in sociology, anthropology and politics and their much lower representation among academic staff in these subjects. It struck us as odd that in the social sciences - the very disciplines where 'race' and ethnicity are key concepts for understanding difference - there

should be such an ‘ethnic gap’. Might postgraduate study be the ‘missing link’, we wondered? And what would this mean for the teaching of social science subjects – could MEG students of sociology, anthropology and politics be shunning postgraduate study in their subject because the disciplines’ curricula excluded them, as some have suggested? We were also aware, through our own postgraduate research and via the Political Studies Association Graduate Network that there was little analysis of the ethnicity (or indeed other characteristics) of postgraduate students.

Establishing the ethnicity of academic staff is not easy. Recent reports suggest that MEG representation has steadily increased since 1995/6 at all levels of seniority. The number of MEG professors, for instance, grew by 218% over the period 1995 – 2003 (albeit from a low base) compared to 83% growth among white staff (HEFCE, 2005a). The problem is that these statistics may be ‘artificially’ inflated by overseas academics who have been employed as part of the ‘brain gain’ associated with increased research competitiveness and the RAE. Fenton *et al* (2000) found that only 5% of UK-born academic staff in social science aged 25 – 44 were from MEGs in 1996/7.

Table 1: Ethnicity of UK-domiciled first degree graduates in sociology, anthropology and politics, 2003/4

Graduate’s ethnicity	Sociology		Anthropology		Politics	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
White	3,570	88.4	480	91.6	2,775	89.1
Black Caribbean	60	1.4	5	0.6	20	0.7
Black African	55	1.4	5	0.9	35	1.2
Other Black background	15	0.3	0	0.2	10	0.3
Indian	110	2.7	10	1.5	80	2.6
Pakistani	65	1.6	0	0.4	40	1.4
Bangladeshi	40	1.0	5	0.6	30	0.9
Chinese	15	0.4	0	0.4	10	0.3
Other Asian background	15	0.4	0	0.2	20	0.7
Other including mixed	90	2.2	20	3.5	90	2.9
<i>Total valid</i>	<i>4,035</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>525</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>3,110</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Missing	165	3.9	15	2.9	105	3.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>4,200</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>540</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>3,215</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Note: in this and subsequent tables, figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 to comply with HESA’s data protection strategy. This may lead to some totals not summing correctly. All proportions are calculated using actual, not rounded figures.

We began by looking at the size of the population of first degree graduates and postgraduate students for each subject. Whilst students’ ethnicity was missing in some cases, the proportion of missing data was not particularly large and it should be noted that the postgraduate data comes from a census, so representativeness is good. It is evident that the numbers for some MEGs in some of the subjects are really quite small. We can compensate for this for first degree graduates by pooling observations across

academic years; this is not possible for the postgraduate dataset since the observations are not independent (i.e. a postgraduate can appear in more than one year as they continue their course and could therefore be double- or triple-counted).

Following earlier studies (Connor *et al*, 2004) we found that MEGs were represented in a higher proportion amongst the 2003/4 graduates than in the general population but that this both varied within our three subjects and did not match the levels seen in some areas, such as medical subjects (27.5%), law (19.8%) and some of the natural sciences (e.g. mathematical and computing sciences, 26.1%). At the undergraduate level, anthropology had the greatest proportion of white students of the three and sociology the lowest, although all had a greater proportion of white students than other social science subjects. But each has seen an increase in MEG representation over the period 2001/2 – 2003/4. Furthermore, there was variation between the three disciplines as to the representation of different MEGs. Hence even amongst such cognate subjects as sociology, anthropology and politics there is heterogeneity of ethnic composition, bearing out earlier findings about the complexity of the distribution of ethnic groups across subjects.

Table 2: Ethnicity of UK-domiciled taught higher degree students in sociology, anthropology and politics, 2003/4

Student's ethnicity	Sociology		Anthropology		Politics	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
White	1,380	84.4	325	83.5	1,955	83.0
Black Caribbean	40	2.3	5	1.5	25	1.0
Black African	50	3.1	5	1.3	80	3.3
Other Black background	10	0.5	0	0.5	15	0.7
Indian	35	2.2	10	2.6	80	3.3
Pakistani	20	1.3	5	0.8	40	1.7
Bangladeshi	5	0.3	5	0.8	15	0.6
Chinese	15	0.9	0	0.3	20	0.7
Other Asian background	15	0.8	10	2.0	45	1.8
Other including mixed	65	4.1	25	6.8	90	3.8
<i>Total valid</i>	<i>1,635</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>390</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>2,355</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Missing	150	8.4	25	5.8	325	12.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,785</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>415</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>2,680</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Our next step was to look at the ethnic group composition of the three subjects at postgraduate level. Our approach here was to concentrate on higher degrees as opposed to other postgraduate qualifications such as diplomas and certificates (such courses tend to be less common in sociology, anthropology and politics comprising 10.6%, 0.8% and 4.3% of the 2003/4 postgraduate student body respectively). Connor *et al* (2004) noted simply that MEG students were more likely to proceed to a masters degree and less likely to proceed to a research degree than their white peers. In cognisance of this, and of the different balance between taught (PGT) and research

(PGR) studies in sociology anthropology and politics, we looked at PGT and PGR students separately.

At PGT level, we found that the proportion of students from the white ethnic group declined in comparison to the first degree graduates (see Table 2). This shift occurred in all three subjects but was particularly sharp in anthropology. The Black African group saw a large growth in representation in each subject, as did the proportion from ‘other’ backgrounds. For PGR students there was also a shift in ethnic group composition, with a decline in the proportion of white students in comparison with first degree graduates, although smaller than for PGT. It might be more appropriate to compare PGR representation with PGT rather than first degree graduates as the typical pattern of progression to PhD study in these subjects – at least for full-time students and certainly for those with ESRC support – is BA, MA, PhD. It would seem that the low representation of MEG groups among social science academic staff is not simply a continuation of their proportion of the postgraduate population in sociology, anthropology and politics.

Table 3: Ethnicity of UK-domiciled research degree students in sociology, anthropology and politics, 2003/4

Student's ethnicity	Sociology		Anthropology		Politics	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
White	950	88.8	240	86.7	730	86.4
Black Caribbean	10	0.9	5	1.8	5	0.8
Black African	20	2.1	0	0.4	20	2.2
Other Black background	0	0.1	0	0.0	5	0.5
Indian	25	2.4	10	3.1	10	1.4
Pakistani	10	0.8	5	1.5	10	1.2
Bangladeshi	0	0.2	0	0.0	0	0.2
Chinese	5	0.7	0	0.0	10	0.9
Other Asian background	20	1.6	5	1.1	15	1.5
Other including mixed	25	2.4	15	5.5	40	4.7
<i>Total valid</i>	<i>1,070</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>275</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>845</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Missing	195	15.5	65	19.3	150	15.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,270</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>340</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>995</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Earlier research has shown that there is internal differentiation in the HE system by institution, with some groups of institutions having higher entry requirements and being more socially exclusive (in terms of social class and ethnicity) than others (Ball *et al*, 2002; Modood and Shiner, 1994; Reay *et al*, 2001; Shiner and Modood, 2002). We investigated whether there was an institutional dimension to postgraduate study and ethnicity which might affect progression to an academic career. Our data show that MEG students are concentrated in a fairly small number of institutions (looking now at all subjects). Figure 1 shows that there are a large number of institutions with very few MEG postgraduates. There is a regional pattern with Scottish, Northern Irish

and Welsh institutions having very few MEG students and London having all those with the highest number of students from such backgrounds.

Figure 1: Number of UK domiciled non-white postgraduate students in each UK HEI, 2003/4 (where known), ranked in ascending order (excluding the Open University)

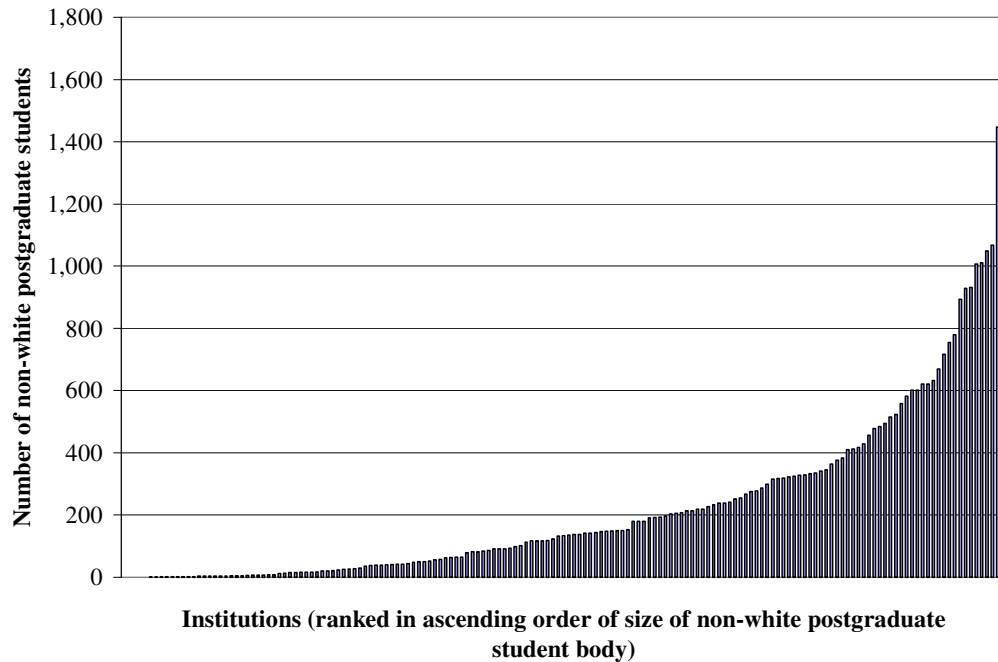
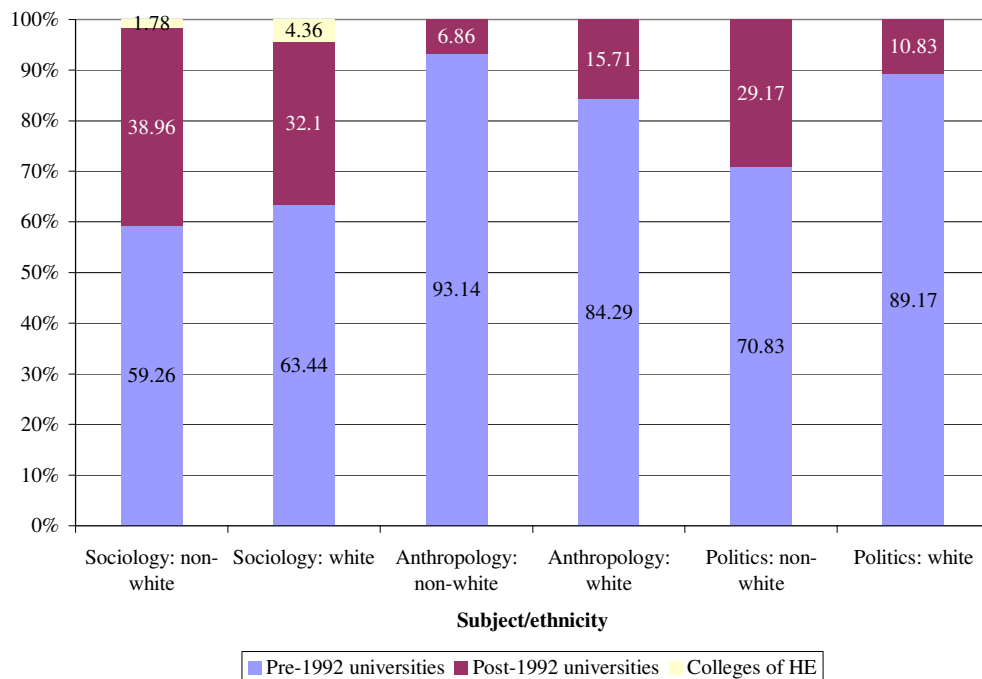


Figure 2: Sectoral location of UK-domiciled research students in Sociology, Anthropology and Politics, 2003/4: comparison of white and non-white students (where ethnicity known)



The departments in sociology, anthropology and politics with the strongest research performance (according to official measurements) are concentrated in old (i.e. pre-1992) universities: only 17%, 12% and 11% of departments rated 4 or better in RAE 2001 are in new universities in, respectively, Sociology, Anthropology and Politics and International Relations. With MEG undergraduates generally concentrated in new universities and old universities tending to have the highest-rated research departments where PhD students tend to congregate, we might reasonably expect to find a differential distribution of MEG postgraduates across institutional type and that this could partially account for the faculty ethnic gap because PhDs of the ‘best’ departments are more likely to be hired, *ceteris paribus*.

Figure 2 shows the institutional distribution of white and non-white PGR students in the three disciplines. Although there is a general shift towards the old universities for all students at postgraduate level, both the starting point and the extent of the change vary by subject. White PGR students in both sociology and politics are more likely than non-white PGR students to be in old universities, although the difference is greater in politics. In anthropology this trend is reversed.

Another academic factor we examined was first-degree attainment. There is some evidence in the literature that ethnic differences in entry patterns to different types of university are related to attainment in A-levels and equivalent examinations (HEFCE, 2005b; Leslie *et al*, 2002; Modood and Shiner, 1994; Shiner and Modood, 2002). The same process could be evident after completion of first degree, with attainment in the degree (denoted by degree classification) affecting progression to postgraduate study. We examined attainment by ethnic group for each subject across the three years, 2001/2 – 2003/4. The results are presented in Figures 3, 4 and 5.

Figure 3: Per cent of UK-domiciled first degree students awarded first or upper second class honours in sociology by ethnic group, 2001/2 - 2003/4 (where ethnicity known)

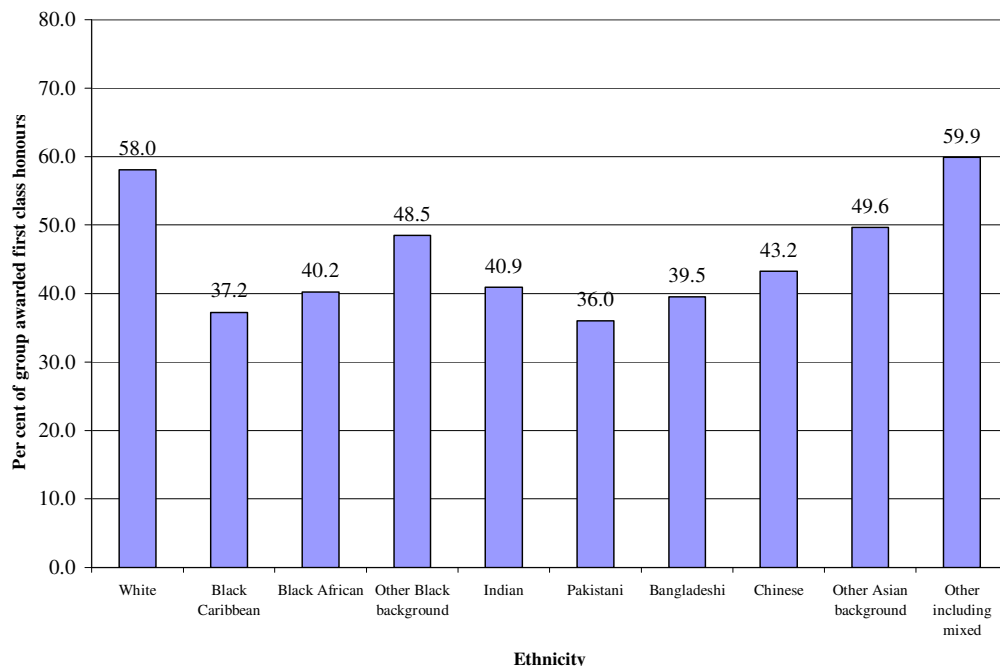


Figure 4: Per cent of UK-domiciled first degree students awarded first or upper second class honours in anthropology by ethnic group, 2001/2 - 2003/4 (where ethnicity known)

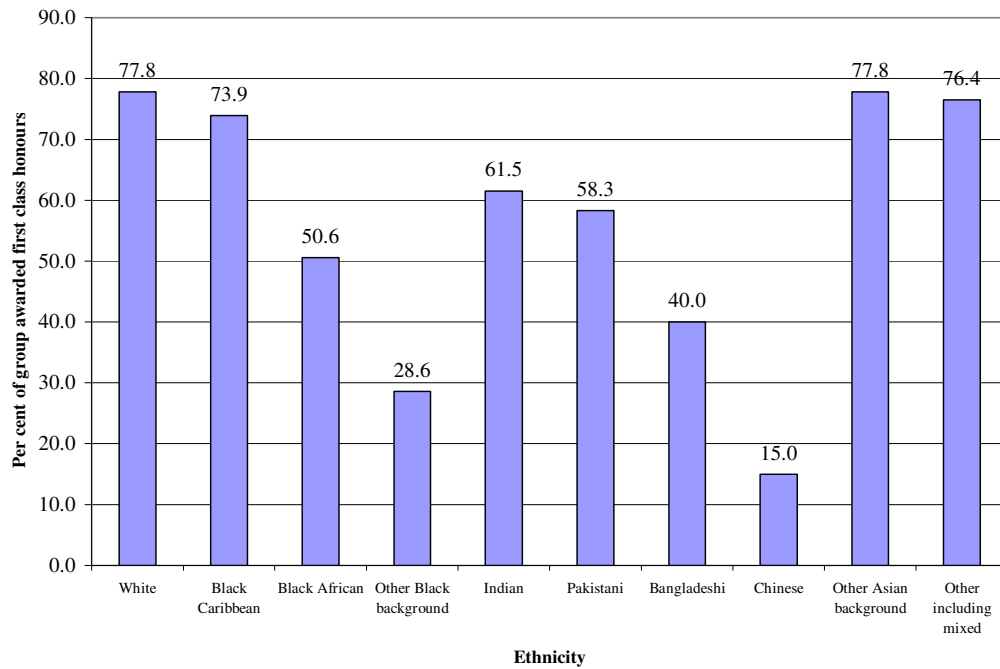
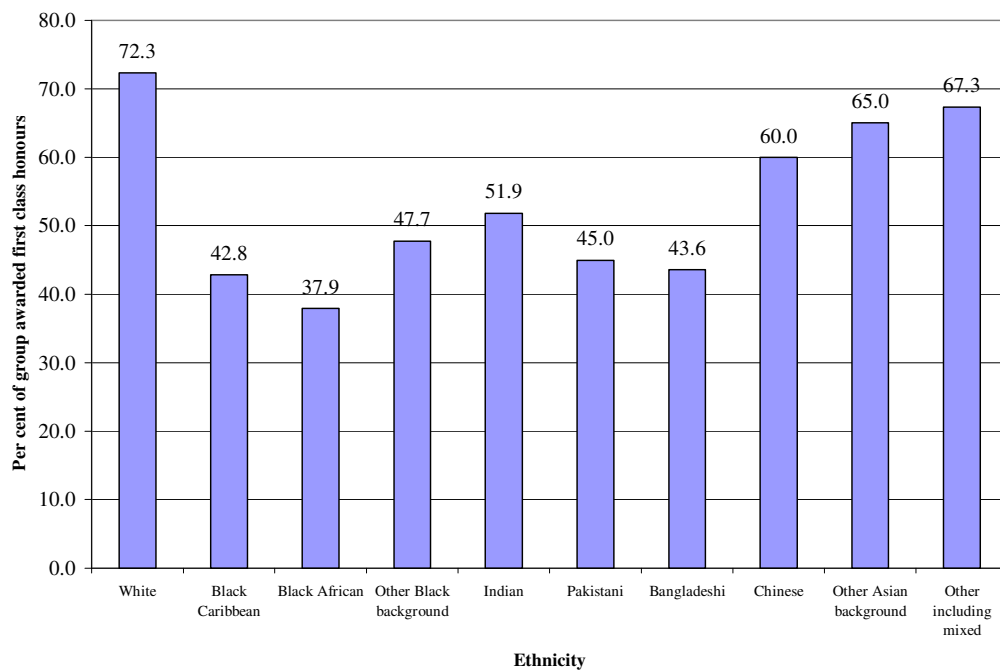


Figure 5: Per cent of UK-domiciled first degree students awarded first or upper second class honours in politics by ethnic group, 2001/2 - 2003/4 (where ethnicity known)



Here we can see that students from the White, Other Asian and Other ethnic groups are the most likely to gain an upper-second or first-class honours degree across all

three subjects. Black and Asian ethnic groups are less likely to gain a good degree although the extent of the 'achievement gap' varies by discipline as does the performance of specific ethnic groups. For instance, the Chinese group exhibits the worst results in Anthropology, with a gap of 62.8 percentage points compared to the White and Other Asian groups. However in Politics the Chinese group fares much better, with only 12.3 percentage points' difference compared to the highest achieving group (White). For some ethnic groups, no students achieved first class honours during the period in either Anthropology or Politics.

We specified a multivariate logistic regression model using the destination data where the dependent variable represented whether a graduate progressed to a research degree and the independent variables were ethnicity, social class, degree classification, gender, type of institution attended for first degree and age. Only degree classification proved a significant predictor of progression, suggesting that the effect of ethnicity on progression to postgraduate study is indirect, operating through these observed differences in first degree classification.

Implications

Whilst some of our findings show MEG students in sociology, anthropology and politics to be well represented, others are more troubling and have implications for those engaged in teaching, research and recruitment in the three disciplines.

At undergraduate level, the proportion of white students is around the national average for all subjects (except in Anthropology) and black students tend to be 'over' represented. For all three subjects at taught postgraduate level there is an increase in the proportion of students from MEG backgrounds.

However for sociology and politics the position deteriorates for MEG students at research degree level. Although there are marginally more MEG research students than there are first degree graduates, the representation of different MEGs changes somewhat, with Black and Asian groups being displaced by those of an 'Other' ethnic background. We know also that the MEG figure drops off sharply when considering representation among academic staff.

Our investigation of the detail of White and MEG participation show differences in the type of institution attended and degree classification attained. Both of these factors are likely to influence entry to research degrees and eventually an academic career. On the face of it there is some support for the allegations levelled at the social sciences by black scholars who have migrated to the USA to find a more conducive environment (e.g. Christian, 2005), although qualitative research would be required to confirm this.

Although under-representation of MEGs among faculty is not unique to sociology, anthropology and politics (see, for example, Jones and Elias, 2005), it is troubling that these three disciplines, where consideration of ethnicity as a key dimension of social inequalities is a central theme, are themselves the apparent site of such inequalities. Perhaps, as some have suggested, the curricula of these subjects need to be carefully and reflexively reviewed, a process which is encouraged through C-SAP's events on 'race' and social science teaching.

Resources

The datasets used were obtained from the Higher Education Statistics Agency. HESA is a limited company which collects data from and on behalf of all publicly-funded UK higher education institutions (HEIs). HESA can provide a range of data about the staff, students, graduates and finances of UK HEIs each academic year.

Detailed information about HESA's datasets is available via their website (www.hesa.ac.uk). However it should be noted that some aspects of their data can be complex and we benefited here from previous experience in using the data both in an administrative and research capacity. HESA are able to advise and assist the new user with data queries and a named liaison officer is assigned to each data request. Our thanks are due to our contact, Kate Lang, who helpfully guided us through the process. Potential users should also be aware that data can be expensive to procure. Some summary data is freely available via HESA's website; some is published in compendia which university and college libraries usually stock (see reference list for examples). For more detailed enquiries charges are made, which are liable for VAT and can be quite high, depending upon the complexity and level of detail of the request. A large discount is applied to academic research project data requirements.

Our datasets identify sociology, anthropology and politics students separately and cover, for 2001/2 – 2003/4:

- (i) all UK-domiciled postgraduate students in UK HEIs;
- (ii) all UK-domiciled first degree graduates from UK HEIs and their 'first destination'

Students from overseas (whether from the EU or other countries) are excluded from our datasets.

A number of variables are included in the datasets, including, but not limited to gender, broad subject of study, mode of study, ethnicity, source of funding, level of postgraduate qualification, age and institution attended.

Due to the nature of the agreement between HESA and the researchers it is not possible to make the datasets available to a third party.

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Useful website

Higher Education Statistics Agency <http://www.hesa.ac.uk>

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