# Widening Participation at the University of Birmingham

## Key Insight

It is clear from The University of Birmingham (UoB)’s data that action has been taken to widen participation, most clearly since 2018. This is in evidence in the distribution of ethnic groups attending the university.

Chart, line chart

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This graph illustrates how over time, especially since 2018, UoB’s intake of ethnic minorities – particularly the Black and Asian ethnic groups – has increased. This is interesting as the percentages for minority ethnic groups in the UK are already in excess of national numbers – to compare, according to current estimates[[1]](#footnote-1)\* 85% of the UK is White, compared with 59% of UoB students. Of course, the West Midlands are more ethnically diverse than the UK average, and the city of Birmingham even more so.

If UoB is making efforts to pull in members of its local population – by initiatives such as the ‘AtoB’ program[[2]](#footnote-2) and the University of Birmingham School[[3]](#footnote-3) – then it makes sense to be achieving this level of diversity. It seems that the numbers of White ethnic group students haven’t risen by much over this period, and the 54% growth in student numbers has largely come from the increase in non-White groups (who have increased by 216%).

The following graph represents the same data, but scaled for the population of the UK: Chart, line chart

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In this graph, you can use the black ‘Total’ line as a baseline; values underneath this line represent proportions below the UK-wide statistics.

We can see that in 2010, black ethnic group students were significantly under-represented at UoB at only 2.4% of students (compared to 3.3% of the UK in the 2011 census). The prevalence of Asian ethnic group students in the data speaks of the ethnic mix of Birmingham itself[[4]](#footnote-4), although the current value of 24% is in excess even of the latest available figures. In 2021, no ethnic group seems too far below the ‘Total’ line.

## How can Unifrog help this situation?

Clearly UoB has had successes in widening participation along the dimension of ethnicity.

However, there is gender gap:Chart, line chart

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UoB is more popular with women than men, and this has remained consistent over the data. This is possibly due to the range of courses popular at UoB; it is renowned for its humanities departments and its close links to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital close by give it a highly regarded medicine course, all of which are stereotypically more popular among women. Perhaps Unifrog could be implemented as a resource to open young people’s minds to alternatives they had maybe not considered, in order to break people out of gendered habits such as this, and reach greater gender equality across studies.

The same pattern of a marked change since 2018 can be seen in the POLAR4 data that aims to measure historic participation with higher education, which provides reason for more suggestions.

POLAR4 uses mass higher education rates from local areas in 2011. These local areas are then grouped into five quintiles: Q1 through to Q5, with Q1 having the lowest rate and Q5 the highest. Therefore, we can imagine that students living in Q1-Q3 areas come from a place where university is less likely to be the post-18 assumption. The POLAR4 rankings are not helpful when considering individual cases, as the areas they cover are too wide for this but can be useful in looking at admission numbers in retrospect, to see what the intake looks like.

By directly comparing Q5 and Q1, we can see that in 2010, Q5 students represented roughly 7 times the number of Q1 students. By 2011, this has fallen to just over three times the number.Chart, bar chart

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Whilst this still illustrates a large inequality between these two extremes, it illustrates a remarkable step towards a more inclusive intake. Clearly UoB have been hard at work to attract more students from these areas; especially where that work might intersect with the ethnic dimension considered above.

Unfortunately, it must be said that POLAR4 at best moderately correlates with income and contains many biases[[5]](#footnote-5). It is in fact quite poorly correlated with deprivation, and biases towards BAME students and London Residents among other groups. Unifrog would be able to help UoB by providing a better measure of inequality, such as IMD (which has standardisation problems within the UK), a commercial alternative such as ACORN, or by integrating Free School Meals data in some way.

Moreover, students who might be first-in-family to university have all sorts of barriers to face: they might have no-one close at hand with experience of writing a university personal statement; they may experience option paralysis when trying to create a list of potential universities; and they may be put off university by a financial situation. Unifrog may be able to help with these issues, both as a remote platform and as way to link and provide quality training to schools in order to help staff to help students. Being a key part of the careers system in schools could help cement a program of careers that is tried and tested, and successfully embedded in schools’ programmes of study from the start of Key stage 3 upwards.

1. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/populationestimatesbyethnicgroupandreligionenglandandwales/2019> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/teachers/year-12/pathways-to-birmingham/a2b/index.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://uobschool.org.uk/>; “The school has a ‘multi-nodal’ admissions policy whereby after priority admission for pupils with a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan or who are looked after, *half of the remaining places are allocated to pupils from three socially disadvantaged areas in the city and the other half from the school’s immediate surrounding area.*” (Emphasis mine). From 2018 OfStEd inspection, <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/2777279> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest#areas-of-england-and-wales-by-ethnicity> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Measuring-Disadvantage.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)