# 25 YEARS OF UNIVERSITY ACCESS

How access to higher education has changed over time

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THE SUTTON TRUST

## About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is a foundation which improves social mobility in the UK through evidence-based programmes, research and policy advocacy.



## About the authors

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This report summarises data and analysis produced by dataHE for the Sutton Trust, by a team led by Dr Mark Corver, Managing Director – Data and Analytics

Slides are available on the Sutton Trust website.

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## Key findings

- Over the last 25 years there has been a substantial increase in the number of young people going to university, with 50% going on to higher education for the first time in 2017. This increase in student numbers has helped many more from groups traditionally underrepresented in Higher Education (HE) to attend. However, in most cases while there has been an increase in the total number of students from these groups going to university, considerable access gaps between groups have remained, as well as large gaps remaining at the most prestigious institutions.

- For example, while the entry rate for POLAR Q1 (young people from areas with the lowest historic progression to HE) has increased from 11% to 24%, the gap between Q1 and Q5 (areas with the highest historic progression) has only closed very slightly, from 29 percentage points (pp) in 2006 to 26pp in 2022. At Russell Group universities, levels of access for young people from low participation POLAR groups were 35% below the sector average in 1997, which increased to 45% in the early 2010s, but has since improved to 38%. Despite progress in the last decade, levels remain lower than the late nineties.

- Access to university for young people who attended state schools has seen some of the largest improvements since 1997, increasing from just 82% of all students at English providers to 90% in 2020. There are also some signs of a more even 'spread' of state school students across the sector. However, there are still 4,700 'missing' state school students at top universities - students who have the grades to attend, but are still missing out on places - a figure which is similar proportionally (given the overall increase in student numbers) to the 3,000 students missing from these institutions in 1997.

- While progress in the number of state school students going to university is positive, they comprise the majority of young people, and themselves come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Looking at parental occupation, there has been much less progress. While the proportion of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds increased slightly, from 27% in 1997, to 33% in 2014, considerable gaps remain. And at Russell Group institutions, the proportion of students from this group actually fell between 1997 and 2014.

- Application and entry rates differ considerably between different UK nations and English regions, with London pulling far out ahead of other areas. In 2006, 29% of young people in London went on to HE, a figure which had increased to 51% by 2022. In comparison, while 22% of young people from the North East went on to HE in 2006, this had only increased to 30% in 2022.

- Black young people are the most likely to go on to HE (53%), having started 2006 as the least likely group to attend. Entry rates for White students have fallen further behind other ethnicities, at only 34%. This gap has grown considerably since 2006. However, while White students are generally underrepresented in higher education, this is less pronounced at the Russell Group.

- Access gaps between men and women have widened over this time period, increasing from 7 percentage points in 2006 to 13pp in 2022. In 2022, just over half of women applied to HE, compared to only 38% of men.

- The lack of progress on widening participation, despite substantial effort from government, universities and the third sector, could be at first glance disheartening. However, it is notable that many of the measures examined here which have worsened over this period, for example London moving further ahead of the rest of the country, men falling further behind women, and entry rates for White young people lagging behind other ethnic groups, are all areas which have had much less focus in widening participation efforts. Widening participation efforts appear to have been a case of 'running to stand still', and where those efforts have not been present, inequalities have worsened. Furthermore, the share of students from low participation areas at top universities has improved significantly since 2011, during a period of the most concerted effort in widening participation.

# Introduction

In 1997, the incoming Labour government set out their priorities as "Education, education, education". In the same year, the Sutton Trust was established with the purpose of widening access to higher education. Our very first summer schools opened their doors to young people that summer. In the two and a half decades since, there has been considerable and growing focus on access to higher education in the UK. Research from the Sutton Trust during this time has consistently shown the inequality in access to university, and helped to drive a growing consensus that action was required.

Alongside this scrutiny, there has also been a large and concerted effort from government, universities and third sector organisations to try to move the dial on access. The government has tasked several regulatory bodies, including the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), and most recently the Office for Students (OfS), with promoting and regulating fair access in the sector. From 2011 to 2019, universities were required to set aside a proportion of their income from increased tuition fees to spend on access and support from under-represented groups. This led to a boom in widening participation activity, with universities often now having considerable widening access departments, with teams of staff members working to improve access. Third sector bodies, including the Sutton Trust, as well as organisations like Brilliant Club, IntoUniversity, the Access Project among others, have also run programmes to help widen access to students across the UK.

In the same time period, there has been a substantial increase in the number of young people going to university. In 1999, then Prime Minister Tony Blair set a goal for 50% of young people to go on to high education "in the next century", a target which was met in 2017, when for the first time, 50% of young people went on to HE by the time they were 30. Annual acceptance numbers through UCAS increased from 336,000 in 1997 to 563,000 in 2022, an increase of 68%.[1]

With so many young people going on to HE, and so much effort put into widening participation, what has happened to fair access over the last few decades? Has all this effort and focus effectively improved access?

This matters not just in access to higher education generally, but also in who is going to "top" institutions, those that are the most prestigious, have the highest entry requirements, and tend to have the best labour market outcomes for their students. While such institutions are not necessarily the 'best' all things considered, they are nonetheless important, as how they are viewed matters. As well as building knowledge and skills, higher education is also a 'positional good', which helps young people to differentiate themselves in a competitive market for jobs after graduation. Has increased participation in the sector overall made an impact on access to highly competitive universities?

This report looks at trends since 1997, uniquely combining several data sources to give the most comprehensive view available on how patterns in access to higher education have changed in the years between 1997 and 2022. This piece provides a summary of analysis conducted by dataHE for the Trust.

[1] Bolton, B. (2023). *Higher education student numbers.* House of Commons Library. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf

## Methods

Very few public data sources run across the full timescale being examined in this piece. The data shown here focuses on data from the Higher Education and Funding Council for England (HEFCE, which closed in 2018) and Higher Education Student Data (HESA), as well as data from the Universities and Colleges Application Service (UCAS).

dataHE put together a consistent dataset for the Sutton Trust running from 1997-2020 using archived data from the HEFCE and HESA performance indicators for measures of relative distribution of students across universities - 'fair access'. This includes a consistent measure of 'low participation neighbourhoods', equivalent to POLAR4, extended backwards in time, encompassing earlier versions of POLAR, as well as 'Super Profiles'.

POLAR is sometimes used as a proxy for socio-economic background, however it is poorly correlated to family income, particularly for ethnic minority students,[2] and is better seen as a measure of low participation in higher education by local area. It has also been historically the most commonly used measure of HE under-representation over this time period.

Where data is from UCAS, it covers a period between 2006 and 2021, with 2022 figures estimated from historic trends. Only 18 year olds are included in the data.

The following rates are used throughout the report, and are calculated as follows:

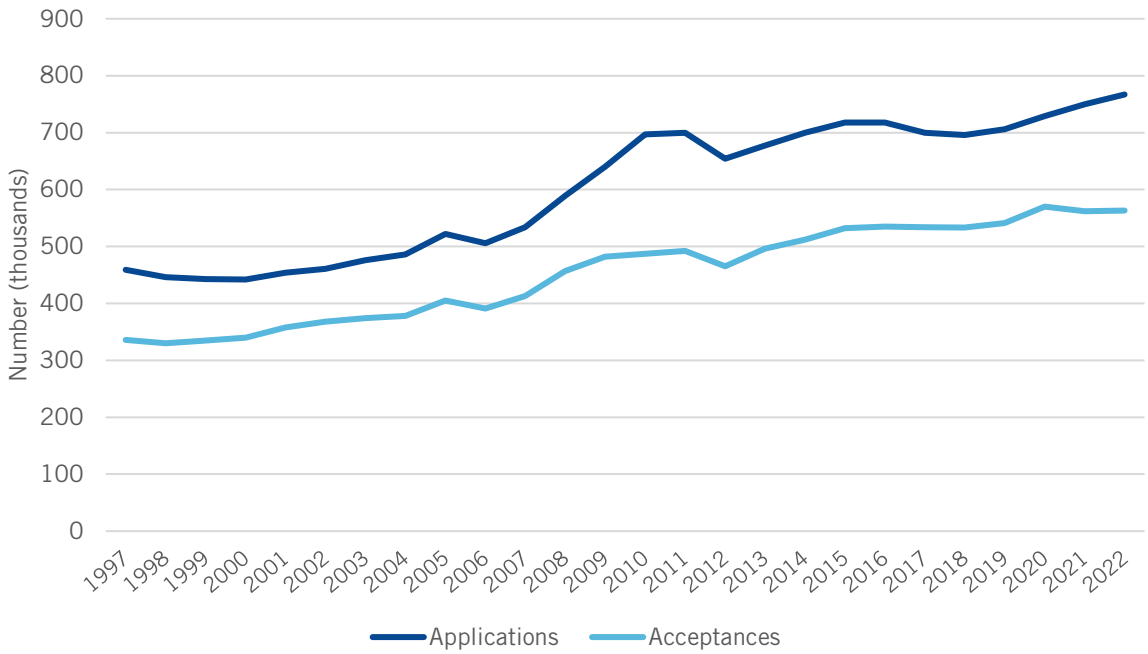
- Application rate (AR) = Applications/Population
- Success rate (SR) = Acceptances/Applications
- Entry rate (ER) = Acceptances/Population

[2] Jerrim, J. (2021). *Measuring Disadvantage*. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Measuring-Disadvantage-Report.pdf

## Trends over time for different groups of young people

The period since 1997 has seen a significant expansion in student numbers at UK universities. In 1997 there were 459,000 applications for full time undergraduate places, and 336,000 acceptances. By 2022, this was 767,000 and 563,000. This equates to growth of 68%. The key question for this research is how this growth has been spread, both in terms of groups within the population of young people, as well as across different types of institutions.

**Figure 1: Applications and acceptances to UK universities (1997-2022)**



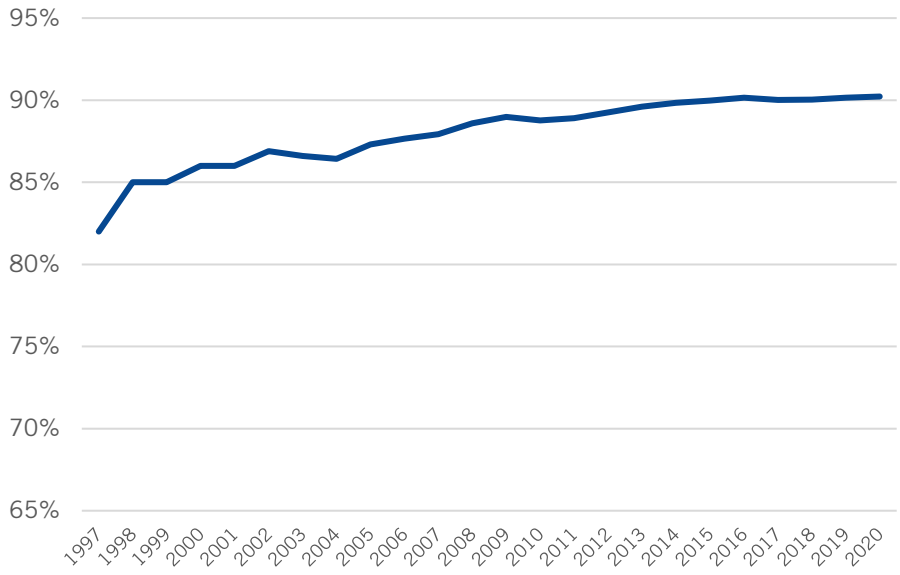

Source: UCAS and House of Commons Library

### 1. *School type*

Access for young people attending state schools has seen some of the largest positive changes since 1997. In that year there were 238,350 state school entrants to university. By 2020, this was 402,880. While some of this reflects an increase in the population, the share of state school students among those attending university has also increased (Figure 2).

While state school students made up just 82% of students going on to English universities at the start of the period, this had increased to 90% in 2020. The proportion of students attending private schools has remained consistent at around 7% since the 1960s, meaning that universities as a whole are now largely representative by school attended, of the wider population.

**Figure 2: Proportion of students at English providers from state schools (1997 – 2020)**




Source: dataHE analysis of HEFCE/HESA

*Highly selective universities*

Selective universities have tended to have lower proportions of students from state schools. However, the data shows that as well as the number rising with the general increase of state students in the sector, there has been some 'redistributive' effect across institutions. In the fifth of institutions with the lowest rates of state school access, the proportion of state students in 1997 was around 20% below the sector average.

In 2020 this was 15%. For Russell Group institutions specifically,[3] the state school gap decreased from about 15% below the average in the sector, to 12% below. While some individual institutions such as King's College London, Oxford and Cambridge have seen proportional increases in this time of 30-46%, this is not consistent across the group, and so changes in the spread of state and private school students across the sector has been relatively modest.

School attainment has consistently been shown to be the biggest driver of differences in progression to university. To take this into account, HEFCE created the 'Performance Indicators' dataset which gave each university a benchmark for under-represented groups based on the numbers of pupils achieving an equivalent grade and in similar subjects to other entrants.[4] In 2004, the Trust used this data to identify the 'missing 3,000' state school students who had the grades to study at the most selective institutions,[5] but were not getting in. New analysis allows us to see trends over time in access to these universities accounting for grades on entry.

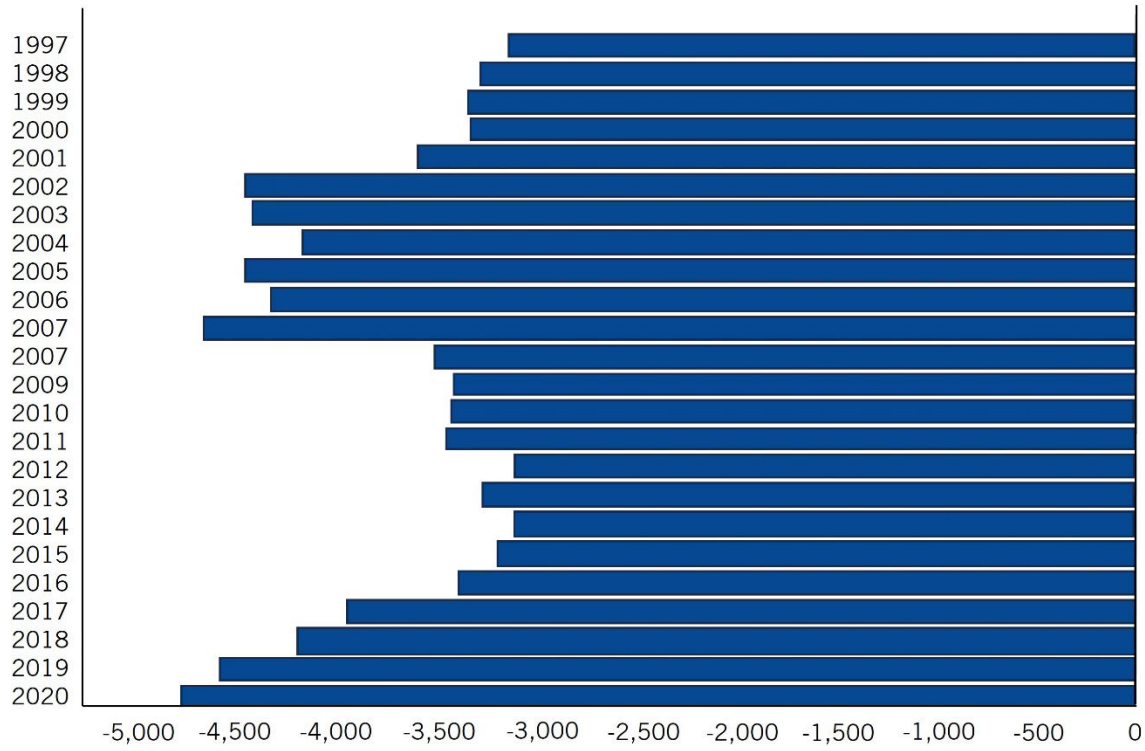
[3] The Russell Group (RG) is one of the most common groups used to measure access to "top" universities in the UK. RG universities are some of the most academically selective, however membership of the group is not defined by any set criteria, and does not include some universities which are highly competitive and academically selective. Nevertheless, it is broadly accepted as a proxy for "top" institutions.

[4] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/benchmarks

[5] Sutton Trust (2004). *The Missing 3000*. Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/missing-3000-state-schools-represented-leading-universities/

In 1997, there were about 3,000 young people 'missing' from the 30 most selective universities (the 'Sutton Trust 30').[6] There has been very little progress on this measure over time, with many young people still missing out on places at top institutions. The number actually rose to 4,500 in the early 2000s, before falling to 3,000 in 2012, and then rising once again to reach 4,700 in 2020. This is the highest number of 'missing' students recorded.

**Figure 3: State schools and colleges, "missing" students from benchmark (1997 – 2020)**




Source: dataHE analysis of HEFCE/HESA

However, this number is in large part dependent on the total number of students in the sector, a figure which has risen over time. To take this into account, the proportion of students missing from the benchmark was also examined. This figure has been broadly consistent since 1997, at around 6%, showing a stubborn under-representation of state school students at top institutions.

Overall, the sector as a whole has made good progress on state school access during this time, with the sector now much closer to representing the population of young people, but more work is still needed in top institutions. It is also important to bear in mind when looking at state school access that young people who attended state schools make up the vast majority of their age group, and come from a wide range of different backgrounds and circumstances, so represents the progress of the majority in comparison to the small number of independent school pupils. While progress in the number of state school students going to university is welcome, it is vital to also look at progress by other measures.

[6] The 'Sutton Trust 30' are 30 leading institutions selected in 2011 as the 30 most selective according to the Times University Guide. https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/sutton-trust-he-destination-report-final-1.pdf

### 2. *Socio-economic background*

In this research, socio-economic background is primarily measured by parental occupation, with data also coming from HEFCE/HESA records. However, it should be noted that data on this measure is limited, due to changes made to the measure in the mid-2010s.

Since 1997, the proportion of young people at English universities from lower socio-economic backgrounds has increased slightly, from around 27% in 1997, to over 33% in 2014. However, there are still considerable gaps in access.

Much of the difference by socio-economic background can be explained by differences in attainment between these groups, resulting from wider educational and social inequalities. However, looking again at the HEFCE benchmarks for these students at a group of 30 selective universities, there are still far fewer students from lower socio-economic backgrounds than you would expect from their grades alone. In 1997, there were 16% fewer such students than would be expected by their benchmark, a figure which had only reduced slightly, to 14%, in 2014.

Looking at access to Russell Group universities, young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are also under-represented in these institutions. While the proportion increased from 19% to 21% between 1997 and 2014, their share compared to other institutions actually decreased, from 38% below the rest of the sector to 45% below.

### 3. *POLAR*

Participation of local areas (POLAR) is a measure commonly used in widening participation, which classifies small areas across the UK into five groups (Q1 to Q5), based on historic rates of participation in higher education.

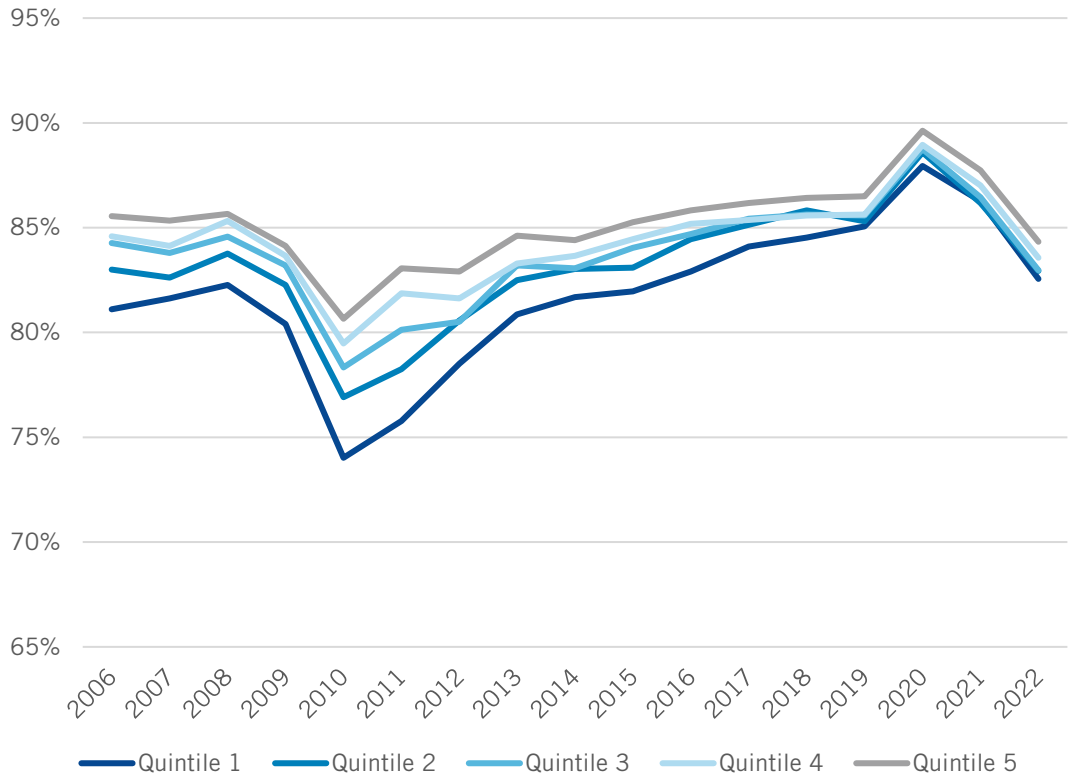
Using published HEFCE and HESA data, dataHE created a new harmonised measure of POLAR over time, to allow an examination of trends on a broadly like for like basis back to 1997. In absolute terms, it shows that participation has improved over this time. The number of young people from Q1 (lowest participation areas) attending university has almost tripled since 1997, and the proportion of this group in the university population has increased from 7% to 12%.

Using UCAS data to look in more detail at some of these trends in application and entry rates over time compared to the population of young people, application rates have risen for all POLAR groups, but the absolute gap in application rates between Q1 (lowest historic rates of HE participation) and Q5 (highest historic rates) has remained stable at around 30 percentage points.[7] Around 60% of young people from Q5 areas applied to HE in 2022, compared to just 29% from POLAR Q1 areas.

More positively, the success rate for students from Q1 has been catching up with those from Q2 to Q5, with differences in success rates between these groups now relatively small, falling from a gap of 4 percentage points in 2006, to 2pp in 2022.

[7] The relative gap during this time has improved however, as the Q1 group have improved from a lower base, and have thus seen a greater proportional increase.

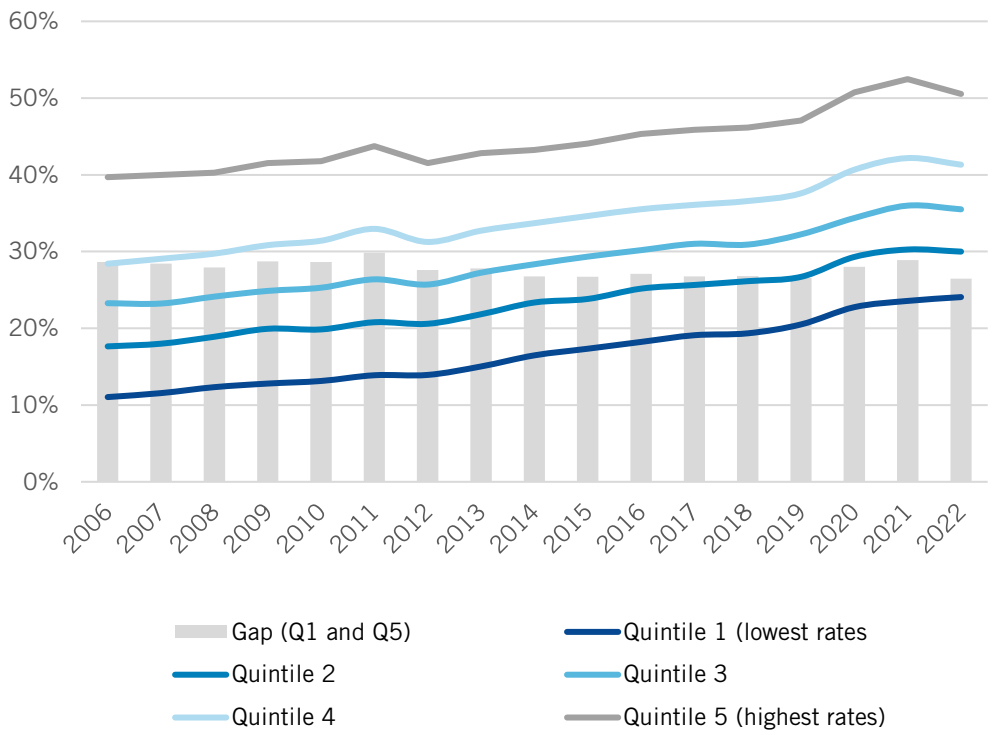
Figure 4: Success rates for applicants by POLAR group (2006 – 2022)




Source: dataHE analysis of published UCAS data

As a consequence of changes in application and success rates, entry rates have closed slightly between POLAR groups (reducing from 29pp in 2006 to 26pp in 2022). In 2006, young people from areas with the lowest access rates (Q1) had an entry rate index of 40, relative to the rate across POLAR groups 2 to 5 being 100. By 2022 this had increased to a value of 60, reducing the inequality between groups by a third. However, a considerable gap in access between these groups still remains.

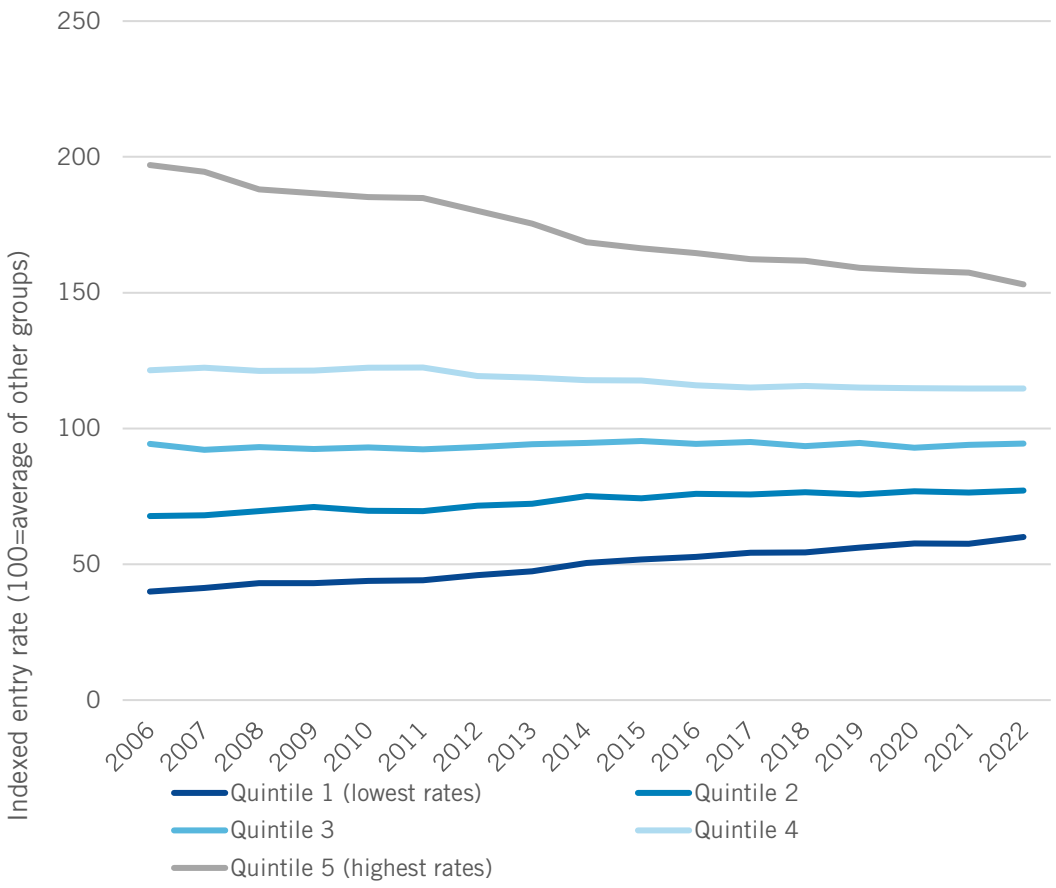
Figure 5: Entry rates by POLAR group (2006 – 2022)




Source: dataHE analysis of published UCAS data

To better see trends in access over time between groups, researchers at dataHE created an 'isolation index' for each group, so for instance, indexing the entry rate for POLAR Q1 to the entry rates for all other POLAR groups. The resulting graph helps to better illustrate where rates are either staying stable, or converging over time, here illustrating a tightening between Q5 and Q1, progress that cannot be seen by looking at the raw gap between Q1 and Q5 alone.

Figure 6: Entry rates indexed, POLAR (2006 – 2022): 100=average of all other groups




Source: dataHE analysis of published UCAS data

*Selective universities*

Looking at the spread of students from low participation areas across the sector, there has been less change over this time than in the state school measure. The gap between the fifth of institutions with the highest and lowest proportions of low participation students has been relatively flat. Taking grades into account, at the 30 most selective universities, there are 1,000 'missing' students every year from the lowest participation POLAR group who have the grades but do not attend, compared to the HEFCE benchmark, though taking into account the growth in population, proportionally this has had an increase from around 10% below the benchmark in 1997, to 14% in 2020.

Russell Group universities have a share of students from disadvantaged backgrounds far below the sector average by POLAR. In 1997, this was 5%, rising to 7.5% in 2020. However this growth has lagged the growth in the sector more widely. Levels of access for young people from low participation POLAR groups were 35% below the sector average in 1997, which actually increased to 45% in the early 2010s, but has since improved to 38%. However, this is still lower than it was in the late 90s. There has also been more progress in Russell Group universities by POLAR than by socio-economic background, potentially due to a focus on POLAR from the Office for Students, with a particular increase coming in the last decade when widening participation activity accelerated.

### 4. *Region and Nation*

Young people from London are the most likely both to apply, and to go on to higher education than those from any other region.

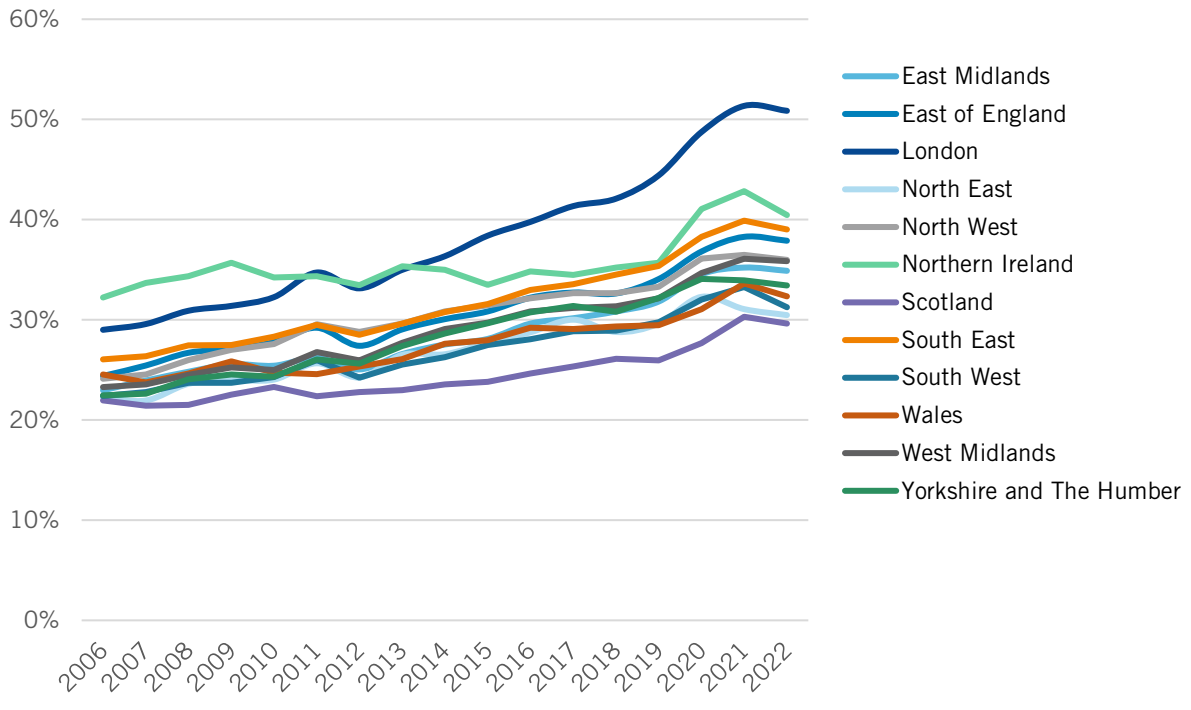
Looking at UCAS data, back in 2006, London has the highest application rate in England, with about 34% of young people from the region applying to HE. However, this was only slightly above the next closest region in England, with around 31% from the South East applying, about 29% in the East of England, and the lowest rates in the North East at around 26%. Northern Ireland had the highest in the UK, with a rate of 43%.

However, by 2022 the gaps between different regions had widened considerably, with London pulling far out in front, with around 60% of young people from the region applying for HE (an increase of 26pp). Northern Ireland followed behind at about 53%, with the next closest region in England, again the South East, having an application rate of only 46%, and the East of England at around 45%. In comparison, the region with the lowest rate in England remained the North East, where application rates had risen much less, to around 37% (a rise of only 11pp).

Success rates for applicants also differ somewhat, although much less than application rates. Interestingly, while Northern Ireland has had very high application rates, success rates for applicants are much lower, standing at just over 76% in 2022, 9% below the average of other regions. Out of English regions, the South West has the lowest success rate for applicants, at about 81%, with the highest rate in the East Midlands, at around 86%.

On entry rates to HE, London again stands well out in front, with 51% of young people from the region going on to university. This compares to 40% in Northern Ireland, the next closest, and 39% in the South East, the closest region in England. Areas with the lowest entry rates include Scotland (30%), the North East (30%), the South West (31%), and Wales (32%).

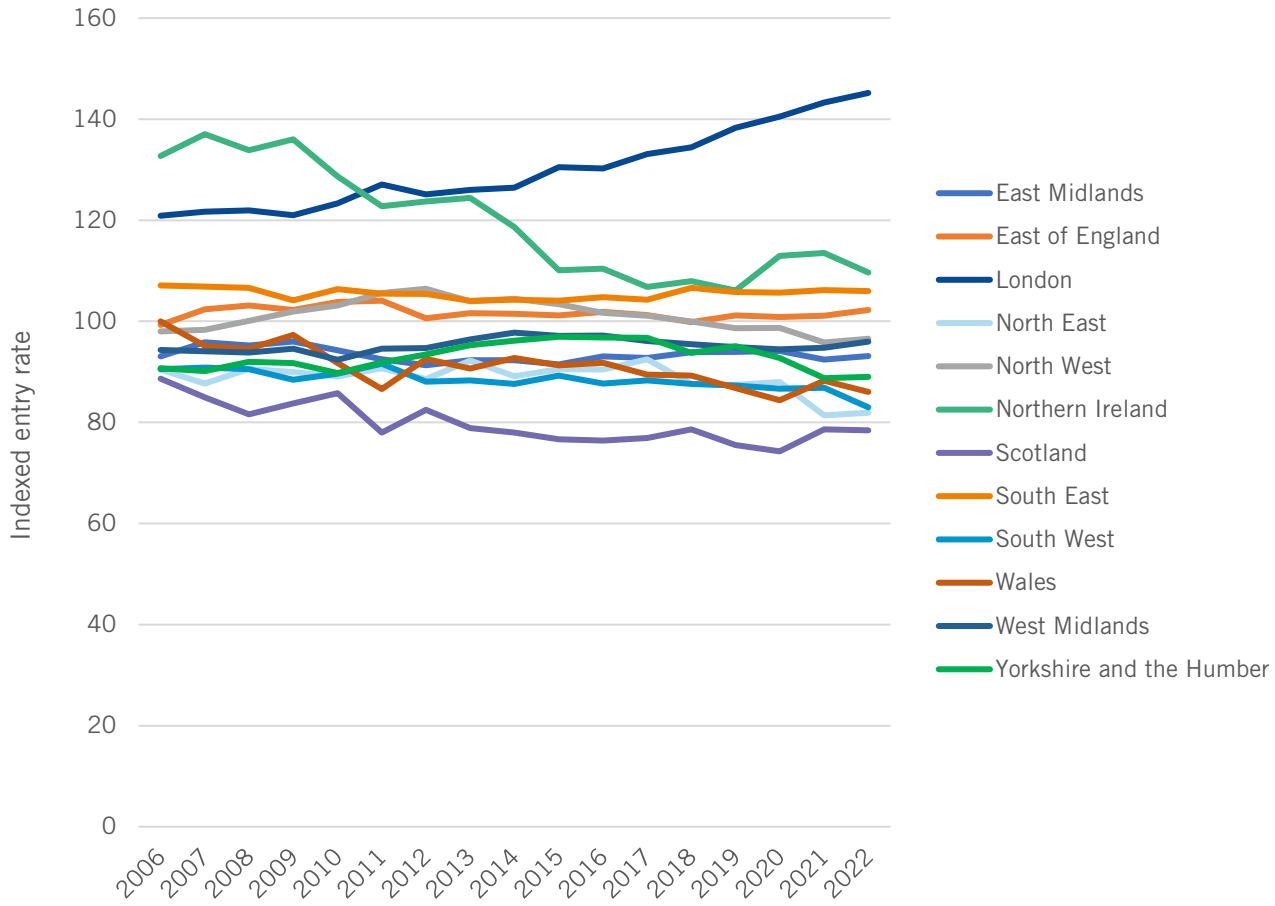
**Figure 7: Entry rates by UK nation or English region (2006 – 2022)**




Source: dataHE analysis of published UCAS data

Looking at the indexed outcomes, whereby each region's entry rate is indexed against that for all other regions, gives a clearer picture of trends over time. Figure 8 shows more clearly the strong growth for young people from London compared to the rest of the UK.

**Figure 8: Entry rates indexed, UK nation or English region (2006 – 2022): 100=average of all other groups**




Source: dataHE analysis of published UCAS data

### *5. Gender*

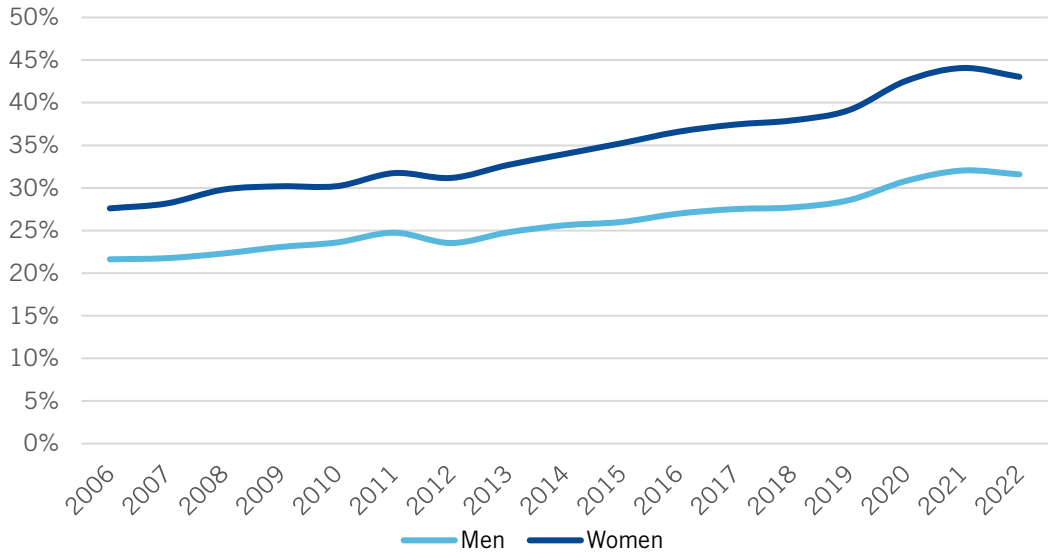
Looking first at UCAS data, as with the other groups examined here, application rates rose substantially for both men and women between 2006 and 2022. However, while rates for both groups have gone up, the gap between the two has widened, from about 7pp to around 13pp. In 2022, just over half of women applied to HE, compared to only 38% of men.

Although women were more likely to apply to HE across this time period, across much of the early 2000s, men who did apply had higher success rates until 2017. More recently this has levelled out, with women currently having a slightly higher success rate than men.

Together, this has meant the gap in entry rates has widened considerably. In 2006, the gap in entry rates was 6pp, but by 2022 had grown to 11pp.

Looking further back using published data, in 1994 there were more men than women accepted to UK universities.[8] By 2000, this had switched, and the data here shows that gap has only continued to grow.

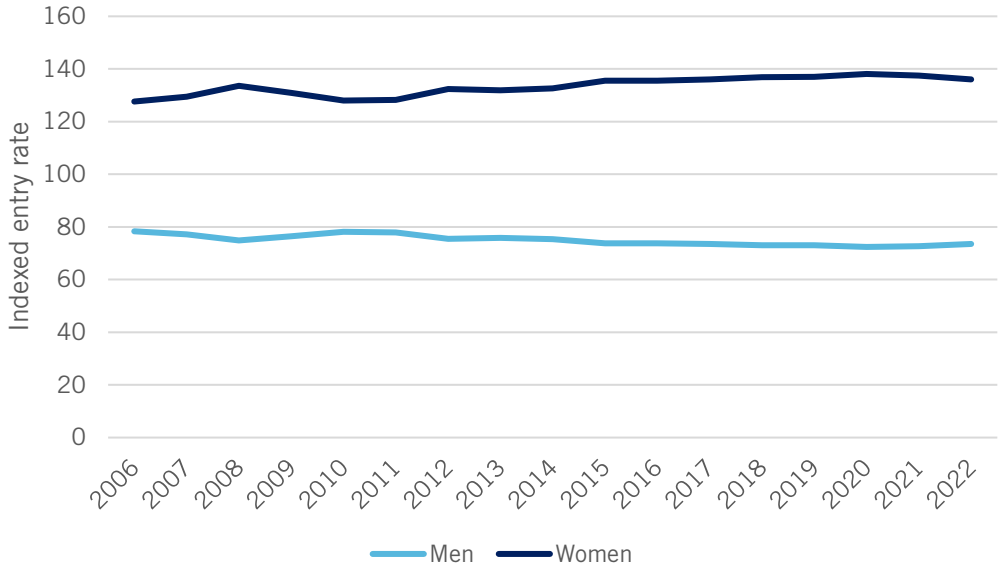
**Figure 9: Entry rates for women and men (2006 – 2022)**




Source: dataHE analysis of published UCAS data

Coming to indexed entry rates (whereby entry rates of both men and women are indexed to the weighted average of one another), those for men are more than 25% below that of women. This is slightly worse than 2006, when the figure was just over 20%. Similarly, looking at indexed application rates, men are also about 25% less likely to apply to university than women.

**Figure 10: Entry rates indexed, women and men (2006 – 2022): 100=average of all other groups**




Source: dataHE analysis of published UCAS data

[8] Bolton, B. (2023). *Higher education student numbers.* House of Commons Library. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf

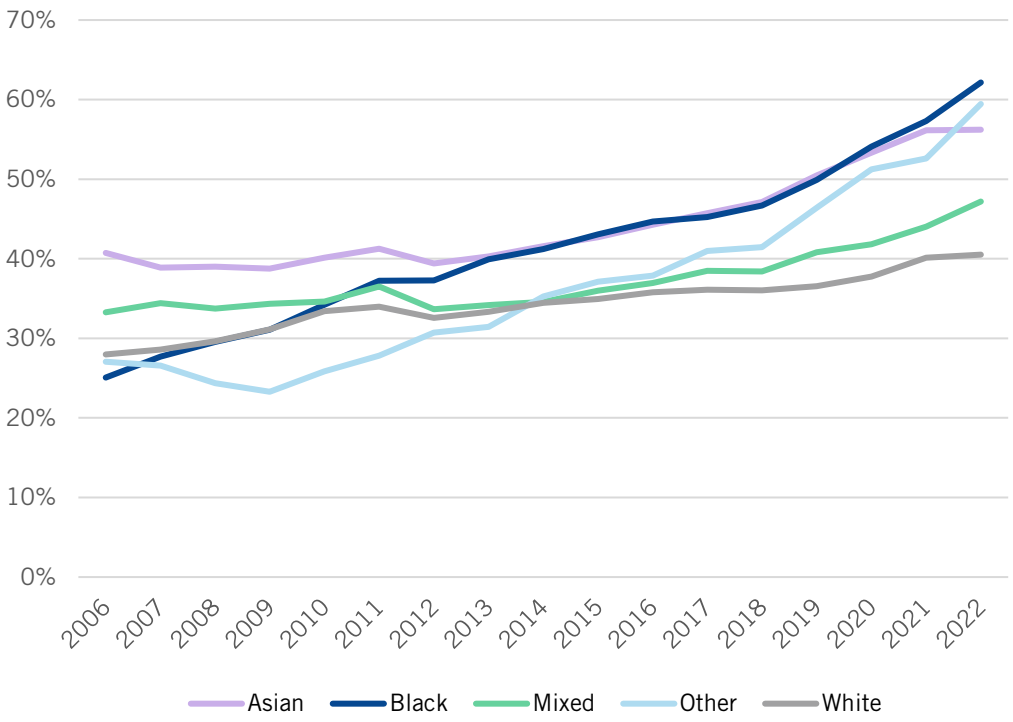
And while men are under-represented in HE generally, this is less pronounced at Russell Group universities compared to the rest of the sector, though the gap with the sector average has decreased from 1.5 percentage points to less than half a percentage point.

### 6. *Ethnicity*

In this time period, there have been major changes in the likelihood of young people of different ethnicities going on to HE.

In 2006, Black young people were the least likely to attend university, mainly driven by lower application rates. Back then, only 25% of Black young people applied to HE, but this proportion has risen substantially, now standing at 62%. Similarly, application rates for young people who described their ethnicity as "other" were just 27% in 2006, but are now just under 60%. Application rates for White young people have also increased during this time, but at a much slower rate. About 28% of White young people applied to university in 2006, a figure which only increased to 41% in 2022.

**Figure 11: Application rates by ethnicity (2006 – 2022)**

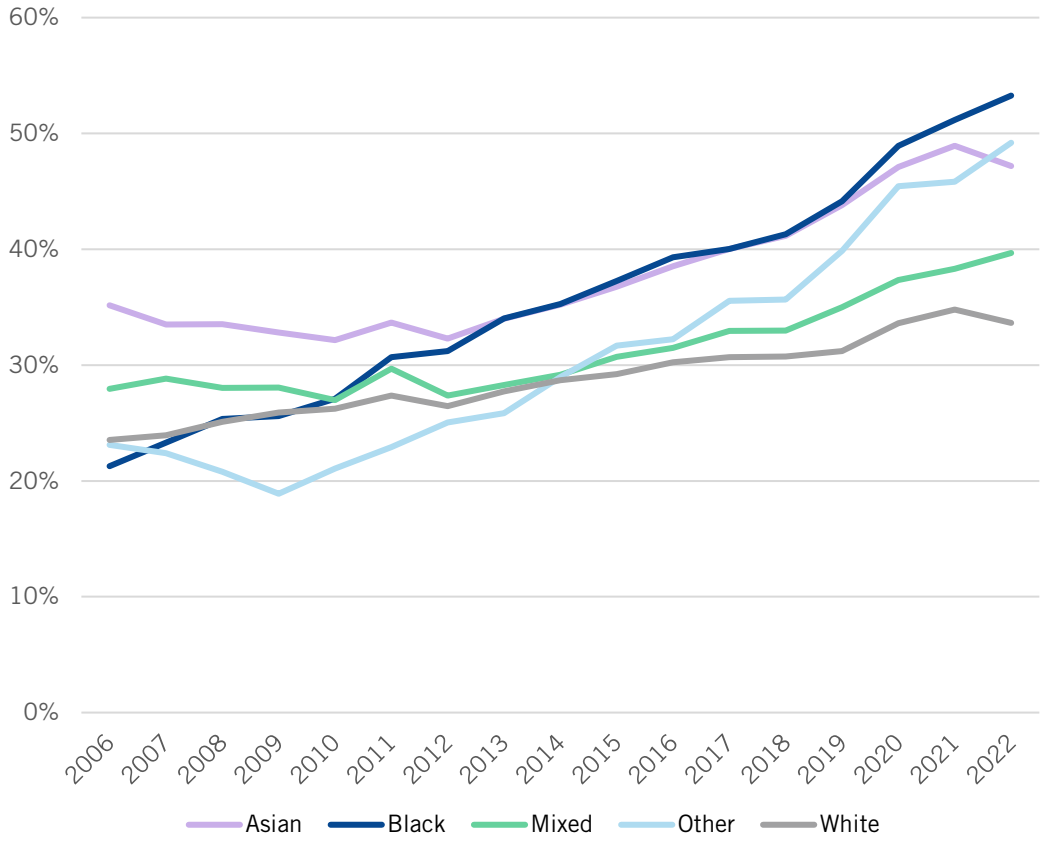



Source: dataHE analysis of published UCAS data

There are only small differences in success rates between ethnicities. For example in 2022, about 85% of Black applicants were successful, compared to 83% of White applicants.

Given only small differences in applicants' chances of success, entry rates by ethnicity show a very similar pattern to application rates, with Black young people starting as the least likely to enter HE, but by 2022 were the most likely, at 53%, ahead of those describing their ethnicity as "other" (49%). In contrast, only 34% of White young people go on to HE.

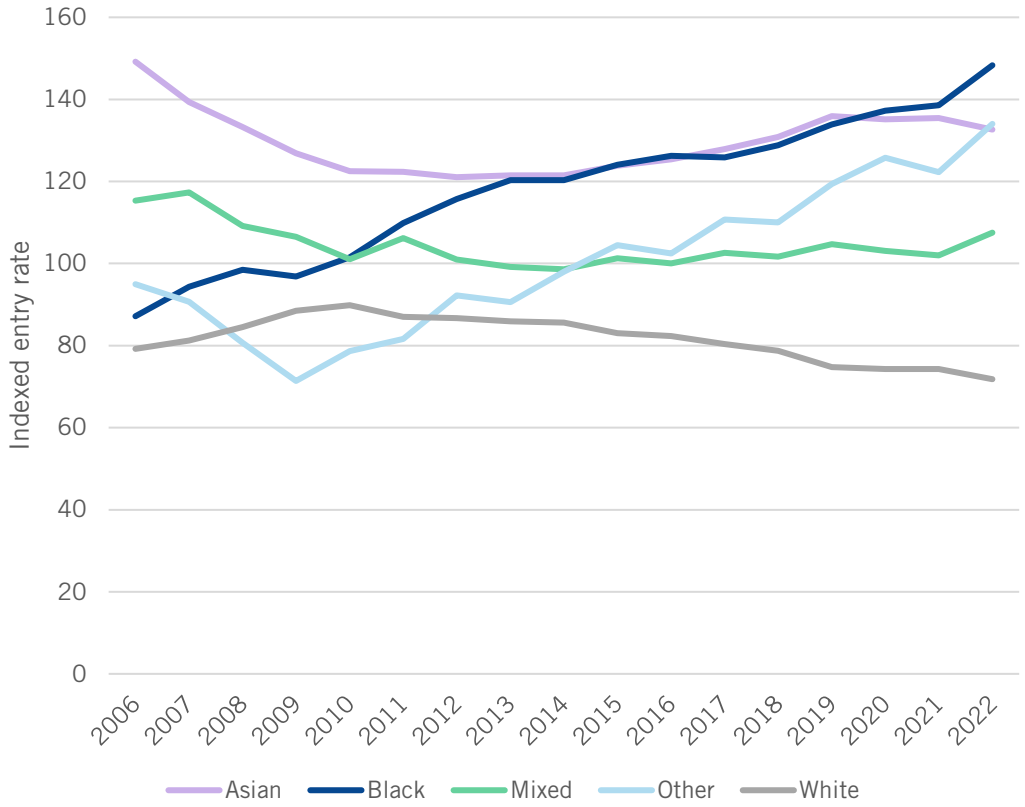
**Figure 12: Entry rates by ethnicity (2006 – 2022)**




Source: dataHE analysis of published UCAS data

Indexed entry rates, whereby the entry rate for each ethnicity is indexed to those for all other ethnicities, show clearly the strong growth in access for Black and Asian young people, as well as the comparative fall in entry rate for White young people.

Figure 13: Entry rates indexed, ethnicity (2006 – 2022): 100=average of all other groups




Source: dataHE analysis of published UCAS data

Looking at access to Russell Group institutions, despite having the lowest levels of university attendance overall, White students have the second highest rate of attendance at this group of institutions, behind only young people classifying their ethnicity as "mixed", and are actually overrepresented at this group of institutions compared to the rest of the sector, and this gap has not seen much change since 2010.

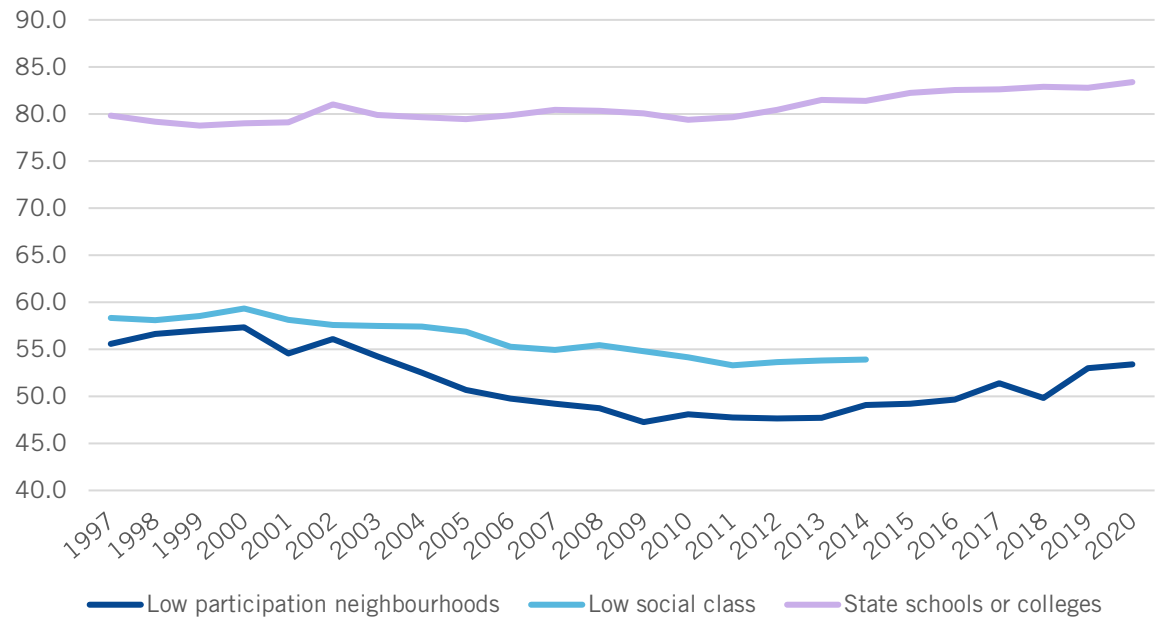
The entry rate of Black young people to Russell Group institutions has increased from 3.5% in 2010 to 10% in 2022, compared to the entry rate for White young people increasing from 7.5% to 10%, and for Asian students from 9% to just under 14%.

## Discussion

Overall numbers and population entry rates to university have increased substantially over the last 25 years, including those from underrepresented groups. However, these increased entry rates have resulted in an educational 'arms race', as those from advantaged groups seek ways of differentiating themselves further in the labour market. Which university someone goes to, rather than whether they have been to university at all, is increasingly important, and large gaps in access between groups still remain. At the most sought-after universities, there has been much less progress on fair access than in the sector as a whole; increased participation among under-represented groups has been matched by increased rates among advantaged groups.

Figures 14 and 15 show these trends at the 30 most selective universities. Compared to the rest of the sector, the most selective universities actually fell further behind on POLAR between the late nineties and 2011. The last decade has seen significant progress, however levels of those from low participation neighbourhoods are still further from the sector average than they were in 1997. The state school proportion has also converged towards the rest of the sector particularly since 2011.

**Figure 14: Percentage from group at Sutton Trust 30 universities compared to the rest of sector (non-ST 30=100), 1997-2020**




Source: dataHE analysis of HEFCE/HESA

Figure 15 shows the proportion of students 'missing' compared to the benchmark across the three dimensions in the performance indicators, taking into account entry grades and subjects. It shows a similar picture. Gradual improvement in state school representation. A decline in representation of those from low participation POLAR neighbourhoods in the 2000s followed by a recovery. Though taking grades into account, the last decade has not seen a concerted decrease in the number of 'missing' students.

Figure 15: Proportion missing from benchmark at Sutton Trust 30 universities, 1997-2020


Source: dataHE analysis of HEFCE/HESA

It would be easy to be disheartened by these figures, especially given the significant efforts put into widening participation across the last two decades from those across government, universities and the third sector. However, at top universities, the situation did actually disimprove in the 2000s in comparison to the rest of the sector, before improving again in the 2010s and early 2020s during the time of most concerted efforts.

Furthermore, it is notable that many of the measures examined here which have worsened over this period, have had much less focus in widening participation efforts. For example, London moving further ahead of the rest of the country, men falling further behind women, and entry rates for White young people lagging behind other ethnic groups. It is likely not that widening participation efforts have been ineffective, but that it has been a case of 'running to stand still' – that without the focus from widening participation efforts on measures like POLAR, access gaps for these groups likely would have widened, rather than staying static.

These findings show the need for access efforts going forward to also look to tackle the considerable gaps, such as by region and ethnicity, which have had less attention from the sector. They also highlight the importance of looking at how several different aspects of someone's background and identity, as well as overall trends for each group, in university access efforts.

While differences in access are in large part down to differences in attainment between groups, as the "missing" student figures here show, there are also differences in access even after taking into account differences in prior attainment. There is clearly more that universities, especially the most selective, could do to attract and admit students from disadvantaged backgrounds who already have the grades needed for entry. However, if we want transformative change, addressing the attainment gap in school grades is essential.

Overall, improved access in the sector has come from an expansion in places opening up new opportunities, which have then been available to less advantaged young people. A key question that remains is if real change on access will be possible without continued expansion, especially at the

most competitive institutions, where without growth in student numbers, any improvements in access will need to come from a displacement of better-off students. After decades of rises, entry rates reduced in 2022, and are projected to do so again in 2023, posing a new challenge for access.

And going forward, tackling the access gap is likely to become more, rather than less challenging. In the medium term, a population bulge is about to go through the higher education system. There are also the long-term impacts of the pandemic and their impact on attainment. Students who faced severe disruption from the pandemic will be coming through the education system for many years to come, and we already know it is having a considerable impact on the attainment of lower income students, with 10 years of progress in closing the attainment gap having been lost for the first cohort of students to sit GCSE exams post pandemic.[9] The cost of living crisis has also affected students and their families. Student finances have also been squeezed, with maintenance levels in England failing to keep up with skyrocketing inflation. Changes to repayment terms introduced this year also mean that lower earning graduates will have to pay back much more of their loans.

This generation of young people must not be locked out of opportunities because of the impact of the pandemic, and universities have a vital role to play in looking at the achievements of this group of young people contextually, taking into account the unequal impacts of the pandemic when making decisions on admissions. More generally, grades can only ever give us limited insight into a young person's potential, given unequal access to support within the education system. 3A*s achieved at a top independent school are not the same as 3A*s achieved from a state school in an area with high levels of deprivation.  we should not pretend those grades are telling us the same thing about each of these young person's potential. Universities should make much greater use of contextual admissions when assessing candidates, taking this wider information into account.

In the longer term, we cannot tackle access issues at university level without also tackling the education attainment gap earlier on in a young person's journey. This should start from the early years onwards, with efforts made at every part of the education system to ensure all young people can fulfil their potential. It is also vital that universities are properly monitored and held to account on their progress in widening participation. Recent changes by the Office for Students have introduced a "risk register" for universities to choose from when focusing their access efforts, however, this approach potentially risks allowing universities to cherry pick access gaps which are the easiest to tackle, and risks that the sector as a whole may fail to tackle these persistent gaps.[10] It is vital that the OfS monitors the sector's response to these changes closely, and takes firm action if university plans do not collectively go far enough to close access gaps between the most and least advantaged young people.

Broadening access to higher education, particularly the most selective institutions, is challenging in an environment with wide socio-economic and regional inequalities. But this work is vital to efforts to improve social mobility. While recent rhetoric has focused on the declining value of a university degree, the vast majority of those who attend university see a benefit in their earnings,[11] and this is particularly the case among lower socio-economic groups.[12]And as shown in a landmark recent study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Sutton Trust, universities are real engines of social mobility, with

[9] Booth, S. (2022, Oct 20). Secondary school disadvantage gap widens to largest in 10 years. *Schools week*. Available at: https://schoolsweek.co.uk/secondary-school-disadvantage-gap-widens-to-largest-in-10-years/
Sutton Trust. (2022). *Sutton Trust Response: Office for Students - Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education – November 2022*. Sutton Trust. Available at: Add in a link to our consultation response. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/221110-Sutton-Trust-response-to-OfS-consultation-on-new-approach-to-regulating-equality-of-opportunity.pdf
[11] Britton, J., Dearden, L., van der Erve, L., and Waltmann, B. (2020). *The impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/impact-undergraduate-degrees-lifetime-earnings
[12] Britton, J., Dearden, L., and Waltmann, B. (2021) *The returns to undergraduate degrees by socio-economic group and ethnicity*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/output_url_files/R186-The-returns-to-undergraduate-degrees.pdf

disadvantaged young people four times more likely to become socially mobile if they attend university.[13]

However, university isn't the right option for everyone, and it is equally pressing that we improve the education and training options for the 50% who do not go to higher education. It is vital that we provide genuine choice between academic and vocational options, so that young people can make an informed choice on what works for them and their aspirations.

Despite these challenges, government, universities and widen civil society must continue the work towards a future where every young person, regardless of their background, has a fair chance to access and succeed in higher education if they so choose.

[13] Britton, J., Drayton, E., and van der Erve, L. (2021). *Which university degrees are best for intergenerational mobility?.* Institute for Fiscal Studies and Sutton Trust. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/universities-and-social-mobility/

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