

# Ethnicity trumps school background as a predictor of admission to elite UK universities

By economicsofhe on May 9, 2014

by [Kurien Parel](http://journalisted.com/kurien-parel) (<http://journalisted.com/kurien-parel>) and [Vikki Boliver](https://www.dur.ac.uk/sass/staff/profile/?id=9700) (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/sass/staff/profile/?id=9700>) (University of Durham)

Last year an article in the *Guardian* newspaper described significant disparities in the success rates of white and non-white applicants to the University of Oxford, even among students who received top grades at A-level. The [article reported](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/feb/26/oxford-university-ethnic-minority-applicants) (<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/feb/26/oxford-university-ethnic-minority-applicants>) that, in 2010-11, offer rates were around 1.5 times higher for white applicants than for ethnic minority applicants with the same grades, and up to twice as high in relation to Oxford's two most oversubscribed subjects, Medicine, and Economics and Management. This pattern was found to hold even for students with 3+ A\* grades at A-level.

Of course, A-level performance is not the only criterion for admission to Oxford or other Russell Group universities. Indeed, admissions decisions are often made before A-level results are known, on the basis of predicted A-level grades, prior grades achieved at AS-level and GCSE, references, personal statements, and other criteria. Moreover, certain degree subjects have certain A-level subject prerequisites.

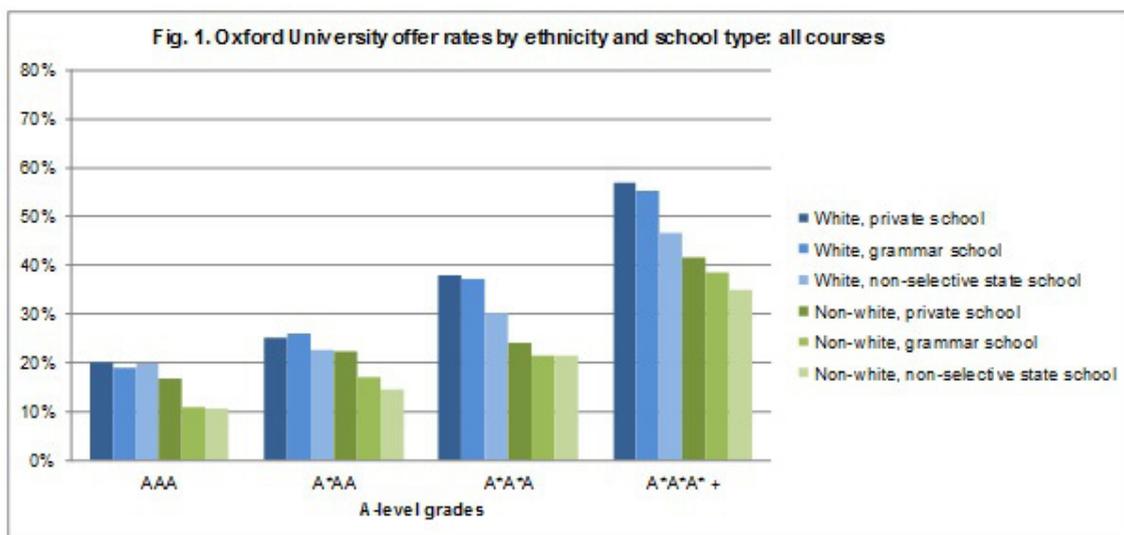
Nevertheless, the figures reported in the *Guardian* appear to contradict claims made on behalf of [Oxford University](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/09/oxford-cambridge-do-not-discriminate) (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/09/oxford-cambridge-do-not-discriminate>) that ethnic differences in offer rates are due to ethnic disparities in academic attainment at schools as reflected in A-level grades coupled with the fact ethnic minorities apply disproportionately to more competitive subjects such as Medicine.

Some have [speculated](http://liberalconspiracy.org/2013/02/28/its-unfair-to-criticise-oxbridge-for-bias-against-ethnic-minorities/) (<http://liberalconspiracy.org/2013/02/28/its-unfair-to-criticise-oxbridge-for-bias-against-ethnic-minorities/>) that ethnic minority applicants to Oxford have lower offer rates because they are more likely to have attended non-selective state schools. Such schools are thought to be less adept at helping applicants prepare for university-administered tests and admissions interviews than state grammar schools and private fee-paying schools.

Below we summarise a further analysis of Oxford's admissions data which explores how ethnicity and school background interact with respect to offer rates. The figures were obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request and relate to UK applicants to Oxford University in 2010-2012 (the 6% of applicants who didn't disclose their ethnicity are excluded from the analysis).

Our analysis of the data confirms the findings of the *Guardian* piece that offer rates are indeed lower for ethnic minority groups than for white applicants with the same grades. For instance, while 22.8% of British Chinese applicants to Oxford who sat A-levels went on to score 3+ A\* grades, only 15% of British Chinese applicants were made offers of admission. By contrast, while only 17% of white applicants who sat A-levels went on to score 3+ A\* grades, 26.2% of white applicants were made offers. The figures also confirm that [privately educated](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/aug/14/oxford-university-private-a-level) (<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/aug/14/oxford-university-private-a-level>) Oxford applicants were more likely to receive offers than non-selective state educated applicants who went on to achieve the same A-level grades, even among students with 3+ A\*s at A-level for whom offer rates were 50% and 44% respectively.

As Fig. 1 shows, offer rates are lower for ethnic minority applicants to Oxford than for white applicants even when they achieved the same A-level grades and attended the same type of school. A particularly striking finding is that *white applicants to Oxford from non-selective state schools are more likely to be offered admission than privately educated ethnic minority applicants with the same grades*. This disparity is greatest, and is statistically significant, among the highest performing applicants with A\*A\*A grades or higher at A-level.



(<http://economicsofthe.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/figure1.jpg>)

Since it has been argued that ethnic differences in offer rates are due in large part to ethnic minority applicants applying disproportionately to more competitive subjects, we also analyse admissions figures for Oxford University's three most oversubscribed subjects

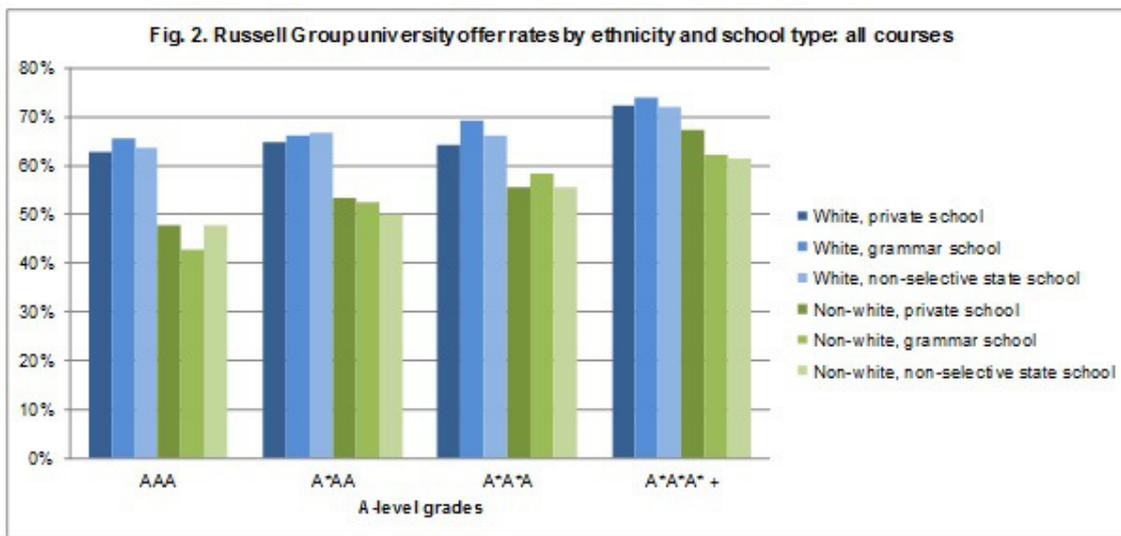
([http://www.ox.ac.uk/about\\_the\\_university/facts\\_and\\_figures/undergraduate\\_admissions\\_statistics/courses.html](http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/facts_and_figures/undergraduate_admissions_statistics/courses.html)): Medicine; Economics and Management; and Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE).

The pattern of interaction between ethnic and school type is found to be similar for Medicine and for Economics and Management as for applications to Oxford overall: ethnic minority applicants to these subjects are less likely to receive offers than their comparably qualified white peers from the same school background. These disparities are statistically significant for applicants with AAA+ at A-level.

Moreover, white applicants to these subjects from non-selective state schools are more likely to be offered admission than privately educated ethnic minority applicants with the same grades. These contrasts are statistically significant for AAA+ applicants to Medicine. However, they are not significant for Economics and Management applicants, perhaps because of the much smaller sample size.

It should be noted that not all degree subjects at Oxford display this pattern of lower offer rates for non-white applicants from private schools as compared to white applicants from state schools. Oxford's third most oversubscribed subject, PPE, is a case in point. However, focusing just on non-selective state school applicants to PPE, offer rates are significantly lower for non-white applicants than for white applicants with the same AAA+ A-level grades.

We carried out the same analysis for all Russell Group universities using UCAS data for 2010-2013 and found a similar picture: among those with 3+ A grades at A-level, offer rates are lower for non-white applicants than for White applicants, even when non-white applicants had attended private schools (see Fig. 2).



(<http://economicsofhe.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/figure2.jpg>)

More detailed data is needed (<https://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-why-arent-there-more-black-british-students-at-elite-universities-25413>) to tease out the reasons for these ethnic disparities in admissions chances, not least so that proper account can be taken of possible factors such as ethnic differences in predicted (as opposed to actual) A-level grades, in holding prerequisite subjects at A-level, and in previous achievement at AS-level and GCSE.

We urge UCAS to make more detailed datasets available to independent academic researchers, and we urge universities such as Oxford to published detailed analyses of their own admissions data.

Until this further analysis has been carried out and published openly, we must take seriously the possible implication of the findings presented here: that ethnic minority applicants are systematically disadvantaged in the competition for places at highly selective UK universities.

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## 2 responses

**Ethnicity trumps school background as a predictor of admission to elite UK universities | Monique Charles** May 12, 2014 at 9:49 am | [Reply](#)  
 [...] See on economicsofhe.org [...]

**Anon** July 9, 2014 at 7:51 am | [Reply](#)  
 I'm interested what each of you make of Dr Mountford-Zimdars' analysis which seems to suggest that independent school students with the same grades as state school students are less likely to receive an offer. Is this due to different data sets or are you controlling for grades in different ways or is something else afoot?

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