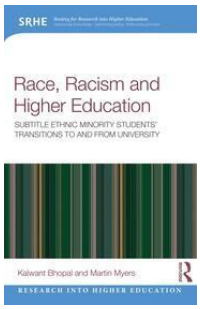
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Book Review

Race, Racism and Higher Education: Ethnic Minority Students' Transitions to and From University

Kalwant Bhopal and Martin Myers
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In Race, Racism, and Higher Education: Ethnic Minority Students' Transitions to and From University, Bhopal and Myers (2025) examine the persistence of racial and class inequalities in UK higher education against the backdrop of widening participation and the massification of higher education. Despite substantial growth in student participation, the authors argue that "structural inequalities determined by social class and ethnicity affecting university entrance continue to exist" (p. 2). More importantly, they challenge the assumption that widening access itself can overcome such disadvantages, showing that inequalities persist within higher education and extend into graduate outcomes. Drawing on empirical research with 58 final-year Black and minority ethnic (BME) undergraduate students, the book therefore shifts attention beyond access to examine students' transitions not only into higher education but also through university and into employment or further study. In doing so, Bhopal and Myers show how students' experiences within different universities, including the uneven forms of institutional support available to them, can reinforce systemic disadvantage and shape their subsequent transitions.

The methodology is well suited to the book's focus on inequality and student transitions, drawing on 58 interviews conducted between 2016 and 2018 with final-year BME undergraduates studying social science and humanities subjects across three different types of universities: a post-1992 university, a Plate Glass university, and a Russell Group university. Post-1992 universities are former polytechnics with a stronger teaching focus and generally rank lower in university league tables; Plate Glass universities were established during the post-war expansion of higher education; and Russell Group universities are research-intensive institutions generally associated with greater prestige. Bhopal and Myers used this comparative design to situate students' accounts

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within contrasting institutional contexts and illuminate how university type and institutional support shape their experiences and opportunities. The focus on final-year students further enabled the authors to connect participants' experiences of exclusion and discrimination within university with their expectations and decisions about employment or further study. By incorporating questions about finance, family support, job availability, location, and university support, the interviews captured the interconnected factors that shape students' transitions beyond higher education. This design enabled the authors to examine inequality not as a series of isolated experiences, but as a relational process shaped by students' social backgrounds, institutional contexts, and anticipated transitions beyond university.

Chapter 1 establishes the book's research context and explains the theoretical frameworks. The book draws on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field alongside critical scholarship on race and racism to examine how inequalities are reproduced in higher education. Chapter 2 presents the book's central challenge to the equation of higher education expansion with greater equality. Bhopal and Myers argue that the dramatic growth in student participation has been accompanied by a discourse celebrating expansion as evidence that educational inequalities are being addressed, even though access to university and degree outcomes remain uneven. This tension is particularly evident in patterns of ethnic minority participation. Although the number of students identifying as BME increased by 73.4% between 2003/2004 and 2018/2019, increased participation did not translate into equal access to institutions of comparable status. Ethnic minority students remained more concentrated in less prestigious universities: 34.9% of White students were offered places at high-tariff institutions compared with 18.5% of Black students, while 49.6% of Black students attended low-tariff universities compared with 27.7% of White students. Inequalities also persisted after entry. In 2017/2018, there was a 13% gap between ethnic minority and White students in the likelihood of obtaining a first or upper-second-class degree, although the size of this gap varied considerably across ethnic groups, with Black students experiencing the largest disparities and substantially narrower gaps among Chinese, Indian, and mixed-background students. These differences extend beyond graduation: White students were more likely to enter sustained employment or further study, although the authors again emphasise important variation within the broad BME category. The strength of this chapter lies in showing that widening participation cannot be evaluated simply by counting how many minority students enter higher education; attention must also be paid to where they study, what outcomes they achieve, and what opportunities follow after graduation. Chapter 3 develops this argument further, showing how racial inequalities within higher education can accumulate: BME students may enter the labour market with lower degree classifications from less prestigious universities, contributing to less rewarding employment outcomes. In this sense, the book reframes expansion not as evidence of equalisation in itself, but as the starting point for examining how inequality is reproduced across students' trajectories through higher education.

Across Chapters 4–7, Bhopal and Myers develop what they describe as "whole ecologies of disadvantage," in which students' past, present, and future experiences are entwined within interconnected forms of disadvantage and marginalisation (p. 3). Rather than treating racism, economic hardship, family resources, and institutional support as separate barriers, these chapters show how they interact to reproduce unequal experiences within higher education. Chapter 4 foregrounds both overt and covert forms of racism, including students' awareness of the disjunction between universities' public commitments to diversity and their everyday experiences of exclusion. Josh, a Black British student at a Russell Group university, captures this contradiction particularly sharply: "Maybe the university wants me the student paying my fees and my accommodation but does not want Josh, the Black man" (p. 62). His account illustrates how institutional inclusion as a fee-paying student could coexist with a sense of racial exclusion. Chapters 5 and 6 extend this analysis by showing how racialised experiences intersect with unequal access to economic and social resources. Students with limited financial support were more likely to undertake paid work alongside their studies, sometimes at the expense of time available for academic work, while family advantage operated through financial, emotional, and professional support as well as access to networks. Chapter 6 consequently shows that middle-class BME students, although sharing some racial disadvantages with their working-class peers, could occupy more advantageous positions because of their educational experiences, family connections, and social networks. Importantly, Chapter 7 expands this account beyond locating disadvantage solely in students or their families by showing that universities themselves distribute valuable opportunities unevenly. Support at the post-1992 and Plate Glass universities was generally less well organised and less valuable than that available at the Russell Group university, where students were more likely to encounter prestigious internships, bursaries, and structured guidance about future opportunities.

The authors argue that this institutional differentiation can reinforce inequalities that students already bring with them: first-generation students whose families cannot provide knowledge of higher education may be further disadvantaged when the universities they attend also provide limited information, connections, and opportunities. One of the book's strengths is therefore its refusal to reduce disadvantage to either race or class alone. Instead, Chapters 4–7 demonstrate how racism, economic resources, family and social capital, and institutional position

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accumulate relationally, so that inequalities preceding university can be reproduced and, in some cases, intensified through students' experiences within it.

Chapter 8 extends the book's analysis of disadvantage beyond university by examining how students' accumulated experiences shape their expectations and choices as they prepare to enter the labour market. Bhopal and Myers show that concerns about unemployment, competition for jobs, and the undervaluing of qualifications were shaped not only by ethnicity and class but also by university type and parental background. These concerns were grounded in students' previous experiences of inequality. Even Sam, a Black Russell Group student from an affluent professional family who had secured a prestigious internship through his parents' social capital, anticipated that employers might see him as "a Black man first" rather than as a graduate with a first-class degree (p. 141). His account illustrates an important strand of the book's argument: although economic and social resources can improve students' positions, they do not necessarily insulate BME students from anticipated racial disadvantage in the labour market. The wider evidence presented in Chapter 8 reinforces these concerns. National longitudinal data show persistent ethnic differences in graduate employment and earnings, although these patterns vary substantially between ethnic groups; ten years after graduation, for example, median earnings ranged from £36,500 for Chinese graduates and £35,300 for Indian graduates to £25,600 for Pakistani graduates and £23,900 for Black Caribbean graduates. A particular strength of Chapter 8 is therefore its connection between inequalities experienced before and during university and the possibilities students perceive as available to them afterwards. Poorer BME students, in particular, experienced repeated and multiple disadvantages that shaped their expectations of entering the labour market, leading the authors to conclude that universities could reproduce, rather than redress, earlier patterns of disadvantage. There is, however, an important distinction between anticipated and realised transitions. As Bhopal and Myers acknowledge, "the actual paths their lives would take in the future" remained unknown (p. 148). The interviews therefore provide particularly strong evidence of students' aspirations, fears, perceived barriers, and anticipated choices, rather than direct longitudinal evidence of their subsequent employment outcomes. The national longitudinal statistics help to establish the broader pattern of labour-market inequality, but this distinction is important when assessing how far the book's qualitative evidence can demonstrate the outcomes of students' transitions beyond university.

The book brings these interconnected inequalities together through its most distinctive conceptual contribution, what Bhopal and Myers term a "specialisation of consciousness." Rather than suggesting that BME students simply fail to recognise the inequalities surrounding them, the authors show that students can be acutely aware of racism and institutional disadvantage while coming to regard their effects as difficult to challenge. This leads to an important "break with Bourdieu": processes of racial domination that might be expected to operate through "covert" or "hidden persuasion" are often visible and overt (p. 53). Students were, as Bhopal and Myers put it, "fully cognisant of the unjust nature of inequalities shaping their lives" yet perceived these inequalities as an "inevitable state of affairs" (p. 54). Chapter 9 develops this argument by defining a "specialisation of consciousness" as the conjunction of an "awareness of" and "acceptance of" personal and institutional inequality (pp. 156–157). Racism experienced before and during university becomes sedimented into everyday life, while students recognise that the competition for educational and occupational opportunities is itself unevenly structured. This is a particularly valuable aspect of the book because it moves beyond demonstrating that racial inequality exists to ask why inequalities that are recognised as unjust can nevertheless remain largely unchallenged.

At the same time, the book's own evidence raises an important question about what should count as "acceptance." Bhopal and Myers observe that participation in higher education remains, for many BME students, "the only game in town" (p. 157): withdrawing from university would further restrict already limited opportunities. They also acknowledge that students' indebtedness erodes their agency to challenge systemic racism, since active resistance or disengagement may itself carry material costs. This complicates the situation that students may legitimise inequalities when they do not openly challenge them. Indeed, the students described in the book recognise discriminatory practices, question universities' equality rhetoric, and sometimes propose practical remedies such as greater financial support or better access to professional networks. Their apparent acceptance may therefore indicate not an inability to imagine inequality as unjust, but an awareness that the resources and opportunities available for challenging it are themselves unequal. The concept of "specialisation of consciousness" is consequently most compelling when read as capturing this tension between critical awareness and constrained agency. However, the authors could have clarified whether "acceptance" refers to students' perception of inequality as inevitable, their pragmatic accommodation to limited opportunities, or their endorsement of existing inequalities as legitimate. Distinguishing these responses would help establish whether students' apparent acceptance reflects the internalisation of inequality or a strategic response to the constraints they face.

Overall, Race, Racism, and Higher Education: Ethnic Minority Students' Transitions to and From University offers a compelling account of how racial and class inequalities persist across students' experiences of UK higher education. By tracing disadvantage from access to university, through students' experiences and institutional support, to their transitions beyond graduation, Bhopal and Myers demonstrate why widening participation should

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not be equated with greater equality. The book has important implications beyond academic debates. For policymakers, it highlights the need to assess educational equality not only through participation rates but also through students' experiences, academic outcomes, and post-graduation opportunities. For university leaders, educators, and support staff, it draws attention to the importance of addressing racism and inequalities in access to financial assistance, professional networks, internships, and career guidance. The book also offers students a valuable perspective on how individual experiences of disadvantage are shaped by wider institutional and social structures. Although grounded in the UK context, its analysis provides a useful perspective for other higher education systems confronting widening participation, institutional stratification, and persistent inequalities.

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Ethical Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this book review, which examines a published work and does not involve original research with human participants or personal data.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author Contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conceptualisation, critical analysis, drafting, and revision of this book review.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed for this book review.

AI Disclosure

AI was used solely to assist with formatting this manuscript according to the journal's template. It was not used to generate or revise the scholarly content. The author reviewed the formatted manuscript and takes responsibility for the final version.

Biographical Sketch

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