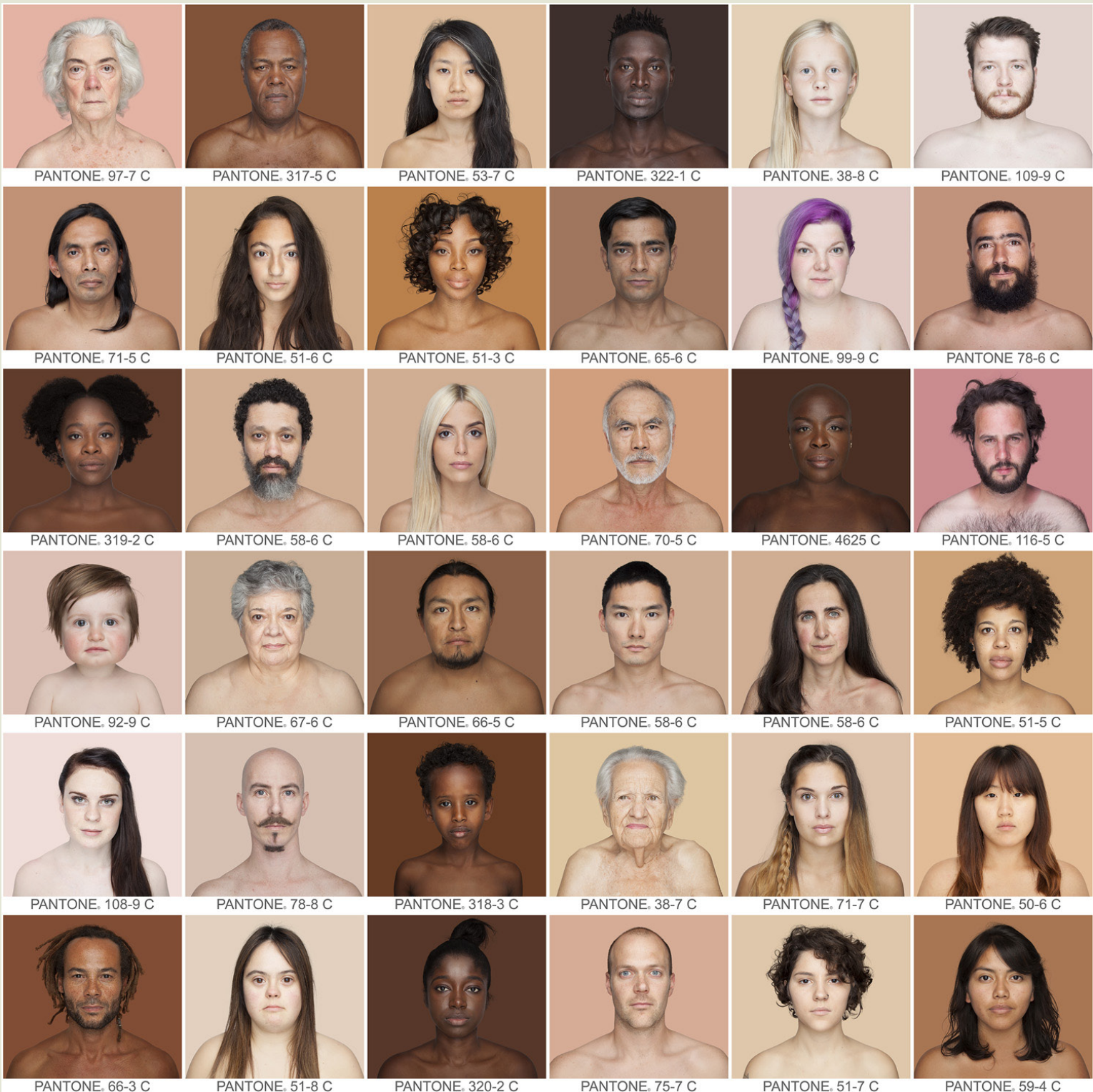


Mixed-Heritage Young People's Educational Experiences in London

An Exploratory Study

Dr Ayo Mansaray & Dr Chiamaka Nwosu

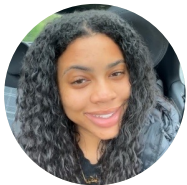




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Forward



We are pleased to present this important research, undertaken by King's College London, on the experiences of mixed-heritage students in London's education institutions. The Portal Trust commissioned this report because, while mixed-heritage young people represent one of the fastest growing groups in our city, their voices and perspectives remain too often overlooked within both educational research and institutional practice.

The findings of this report are striking. They reveal how mixed-heritage students navigate daily negotiations of identity in classrooms, corridors, and playgrounds. Teachers, peers, and institutions all play a role in shaping how these young people perceive themselves and how others perceive them. From misidentification and questions of 'authenticity' to the subtle but insistent pressures to fit into one category or another, these are not abstract issues but lived realities that affect educational outcomes, social belonging, and well-being.

Personally, these accounts resonate deeply with me. Being of mixed-heritage means carrying multiple truths at once, and school is often the first place where those truths are challenged. What emerges in this research is the extra effort that mixed students must expend – whether in forging friendships, navigating cultural expectations, or responding to identity policing from peers and adults alike. Yet there is also resilience here: young people adopt sophisticated strategies to navigate environments that are not designed with their experiences in mind. It is essential to recognise both the challenges they face and the ways they respond.

Sophie Fernandes

Chair of Trustees, The Portal Trust



The report highlights the responsibility of institutions to look more closely at the experiences of mixed-heritage students. Too often, they are grouped into broad categories or treated through assumptions that miss the reality of their lives. Schools and colleges need better data, greater awareness, and practical tools to meet the needs of these students. Addressing this is essential if every young person is to feel recognised and supported.

We are proud to have commissioned this study. It represents a significant step in broadening our understanding of diversity within education and offers a clear basis for change. We hope it will prompt practitioners, policymakers, and researchers alike to engage more closely with the realities of mixed-heritage students and to embed their experiences within the mainstream of educational thought and practice.

Richard Foley

Chief Executive, The Portal Trust

Executive summary

This report presents an exploratory study into the educational experiences of mixed-heritage young people across London schools and universities. It addresses a critical gap in research and policy concerning this rapidly growing yet under-examined population. Drawing on a range of methods, the study combines a literature review, qualitative case studies with students and staff across three sixth-forms and three universities, questionnaire data from 104 participants, and quantitative analysis of national datasets (UCAS, HESA, OfS, EVENS).

The research explores key themes, including perceptions and formations of ethnic identity amongst mixed young people, the effectiveness of institutional support mechanisms, barriers to educational success, and disparities in access, progression, and outcomes. It also examines intra-group differences within mixed-heritage categories, offering evidence-based insights to inform inclusive policy development, targeted interventions, and reform across the education sector.

Key findings

Identity and belonging

Mixed-heritage students encounter ongoing identity challenges throughout their educational journeys. They often navigate complex social dynamics marked by peer scrutiny, identity policing, and pressure to ‘choose a side’ amongst their heritages. Many adopt nuanced strategies – such as concealing, simplifying, or code-switching – to gain social acceptance. According to survey analysis, mixed individuals tend to place less emphasis on ethnic identity, and also report a lower sense of belonging to British society compared to other minority ethnic groups, challenging assumptions about their ease of integration.

School experiences

Challenges in secondary education:

- Mixed-Black students are frequently accused of being ‘whitewashed’ based on their friendships, speech, or cultural preferences – forcing painful choices between cultural authenticity and institutional approval.
- Peer-led identity policing generates anxiety around self-expression, especially regarding appearance, behaviour, and friendships.
- Harassment related to mixedness is often minimised by teachers and seen as less serious than other forms of ethnicity-based discrimination.
- Teachers hold racialised assumptions, with mixed-Asian students facing ‘model minority’ stereotypes, while mixed-Black students are subject to behavioural scrutiny and lowered expectations.

Parental and institutional influences:

- Parents often hold high academic aspirations but may lack the cultural capital to navigate the UK education system particularly in migrant families.
- Schools exhibit institutional invisibility: inconsistent data practices, categorical erasure (e.g., merging mixed students into monoracial groups), and a lack of targeted support.

- Mixed-heritage perspectives are largely absent from curricula and cultural programming.
- Students frequently manage identity-related challenges independently, with limited parental or institutional support.

Sixth-form as a turning point: Students consistently describe sixth-form as a more liberating environment, characterised by reduced peer policing, greater maturity, more diverse communities, and stronger institutional support for identity expression.

Higher education patterns

Access and outcomes: Mixed-heritage students face paradoxical trends in university access and success. Despite demonstrating smaller continuation and awarding gaps once enrolled, they receive fewer offers from high-tariff institutions and are overrepresented at lower-tariff universities, where outcome gaps widen. White/Asian students progress to higher education at nearly triple the rate of White/Black Caribbean peers, with mixed White/Black Caribbean males critically underrepresented in higher-tariff institutions and absent from the university sample.

University experiences:

- Diversity can both normalise difference and intensify exclusion, with students facing new forms of identity questioning.
- Student-led cultural societies (especially Black and African Caribbean) foster inclusive belonging, while White-European societies often demand authenticity based on appearance.
- Some mixed students are able to deploy their proximity to Whiteness as a form of cultural capital to facilitate navigation within university spaces. This is experienced ambivalently. It provides institutional advantages but also generates anxieties around legitimacy.
- Academic staff are often unaware of students' mixed-heritage backgrounds, and limited ethnic diversity among faculty restricts mentorship opportunities.
- None of our university case studies had interventions specifically tailored to mixed-heritage students; and existing frameworks lack nuance.

Financial and support barriers: Scholarship criteria based on monoracial categories create eligibility ambiguities, often requiring uncomfortable 'identity performances.' Mixed-Black students expressed uncertainty about accessing monoracial Black-focused funding, unsure of their entitlement or comparative disadvantage.

Intra-group differences

The 'mixed' category encompasses significant diversity. White/Black Caribbean students face compounded disadvantage, the lowest GCSE attainment, highest exclusion rates, and greatest socio-economic hardship. In contrast, White/Asian students outperform national averages. Mixed White/Black African students occupy a middle position. The mixed-other category has grown significantly but remains under-researched. Intersectional analysis reveals wide FSM gaps and complex socio-economic dynamics that underpin some of these inequalities.

Institutional invisibility

Mixed-heritage students are consistently invisible within school and university policies and practices:

- Poor data collection and categorisation obscure the needs of mixed-heritage students.
- Small population sizes are used to justify neglect, despite likely undercounting.
- Mixed students are absorbed into broader categories, erasing distinct identities.
- Colour-blind approaches focus on material disadvantage while ignoring cultural and identity dimensions.
- Post-1992 universities show more proactive monitoring, but targeted interventions are absent across all institutional types.

Conclusions

Mixed-heritage students navigate complex educational landscapes shaped by monoracial norms. Despite their resilience and sophisticated identity strategies, they face persistent barriers, including racialised microaggressions, limited support, underrepresentation, and institutional frameworks that render them invisible. Sixth-form emerges as a potentially transformative space, suggesting that supportive environments can shift identity from burden to strength. However, meaningful change requires moving beyond generic ‘mixed’ classifications. Institutions must adopt intersectional approaches that consider heritage combinations, socio-economic status, and the impact of institutional racism. These steps are essential to ensure that mixed-heritage students are not only recognised but meaningfully supported in their educational journeys.

Introduction

The mixed-heritage population in England and Wales has grown substantially over the past two decades, increasing 40% from 1.2 million (2.2% of the population) in 2011 to 1.7 million (2.9%) in 2021. This growth is not uniform across mixed groups. Whilst mixed White/Black Caribbean remains the largest single mixed ethnic group (513,042, a 20% increase), the White/Asian population grew faster at 43%, rising from 341,727 to 488,225. The Mixed-other and White/Black African groups have also expanded significantly, reflecting both migration patterns and intergenerational mixing.

The mixed population is also exceptionally youthful, with 43% under 18 years old and a median age of 19, compared to 40 for all groups combined. White/Asian and White/African mixed backgrounds have the highest proportions of under-18s. This demographic shift is reshaping established minority communities. For example, the Black Caribbean ethnic group, which has had historically high rates of interracial unions and marriage stretching back decades is increasingly a mixed one. Almost half of those with any Black Caribbean background are mixed (ONS, 2023). Amongst those under 18 years old, there are twice as many from mixed than from monoracial Caribbean backgrounds. Due to the older age profile and lower immigration rates within this community, individuals with Black Caribbean ancestry are likely to become more diverse in identity, with increasingly diffuse cultural ties and varied experiences of belonging.

London is the UK's most ethnically diverse region, home to 29% of the mixed-heritage population. It has the highest proportion of mixed residents (5.7%) and the lowest share of White British people (37%). All top 10 local authorities with the highest mixed populations are in London (ONS, 2023). The city has seen growth across all mixed ethnic groups since 2011, all of which have a notably youthful profile. As these young Londoners move through schools and universities, understanding their distinct identities and needs is increasingly vital.

Amidst this diversity there are also patterns of educational disadvantage, which are explored in this report. It has been over two decades since Tikly and colleagues (2004) highlighted the higher risks of underachievement and marginalisation faced by mixed White/Caribbean children, and emphasised more broadly the 'invisibility' of mixed-heritage students within school policies, curriculum and focus. Equally, within the ethnically diverse higher education sector in London – over half of students in London are minority ethnic groups – disparities in access, participation and outcomes remain. Yet, there is strikingly little evidence on the university experiences of students from different mixed backgrounds, and how they are positioned within existing equality, diversity and inclusion work undertaken by universities. Across all phases of education in London, it is critical to identify and address the specific barriers that influence the educational experiences and status of young people from mixed backgrounds. This report contributes to ongoing policy dialogue and supports the development of targeted strategies to meet their evolving needs.

1. Methodology

This report draws together findings from three strands of research: a literature review; qualitative case studies, involving interviews and a short questionnaire with a mixed young people and ten staff in school sixth-forms and universities in London; and quantitative analysis of publicly available datasets to examine the educational status and outcomes for mixed-heritage young people. This approach highlights different perspectives, and data sources, on the issue of mixed young people's educational experiences and trajectories. The project was also overseen by a steering group composed of senior staff from the Portal Trust. We explain each strand in detail below.

Quantitative dimension	Qualitative dimension
■ Analyse higher education trajectories and transitions of mixed-heritage young Londoners; ■ Map and understand the progression, outcomes and attainment of mixed-heritage students in London higher education institutions; ■ Undertake secondary analysis of existing surveys to quantitatively explore mixed-heritage ethnic identification and student experience in higher education in London.	■ 8 focus group interviews with 50 mixed young people, conducted across three sixth-forms in London. ■ 42 participants interviewed (a mix of focus group and individual interviews) across three London universities. ■ 4 Semi-structured individual interviews with senior school staff (n=4) ■ 6 semi-structured individual interviews with university staff (n=6) ■ Questionnaire survey of our student participants (n=104)

The project was guided by the following exploratory research questions:

1. What are mixed-heritage young people's experiences of their ethnic identity within schools and sixth-forms?
2. What are mixed-heritage young people's perceptions and experiences of their ethnic identity at university?
3. How do schools and universities support mixed-heritage students' well-being and academic success?
4. Identify any barriers and challenges faced by mixed-heritage young people in their educational career, and chart areas of best practice that exist;
5. How does mixed-heritage status relate to access to higher education, progression, attainment, and educational experience?
6. Are there intra-group differences among mixed-heritage students?

1.1. Strand one – literature review

This report is based on a review of over 50 academic and policy sources on mixed-heritage students' educational experiences in the UK and internationally. Led by Dr Ayo Mansaray with support from Jessi

Johnson (a research assistant), the literature review informed the research design and was expanded as fieldwork progressed. It helped identify gaps in existing knowledge and shaped the analysis of emerging themes from qualitative and quantitative data, enabling a deeper understanding of identity, inclusion, and educational outcomes for mixed-heritage young people.

1.2. Strand two – Qualitative interviews¹

In order to ensure that we captured the views and lived experience of mixed young people in relation to the context of higher education in London, we focused on students at school sixth-forms, who will be making decisions about HE in the near future, and those already studying at university.

1.2.1. Sixth-form case studies

We visited three sixth-forms in East, North, and South London boroughs with high mixed-ethnicity populations (based on school census records). Across these schools, we conducted eight focus groups with 50 students and four semi-structured staff interviews, including pastoral managers and senior teachers.

The three sixth-forms are popular, academically focused, and located in multicultural, economically deprived areas in London. They all attract students from a wide area. They offer mainly A-Levels, and strongly encourage university progression, often aiming for high-tariff institutions. North Academy is a standalone selective. We interviewed 23 students across four focus groups and one staff. East Academy sixth-form is part of a popular and over-subscribed all-through school. We interviewed five students in one focus group, and one staff. South Academy sixth-form is part of a heavily oversubscribed multicultural girls' school in South London. The sixth-form is co-educational. We interviewed 22 students and two staff members. We worked with senior school staff to disseminate our recruitment advert to students but not to select participants. Given the nature of the project, it was important that participants defined and identified themselves, rather than be identified by teachers or other school staff. All students gave informed, written consent to take part in the research.

1.2.2. Case study universities

To capture diverse experiences among mixed-heritage university students, we recruited undergraduates and postgraduates from three London institutions using HESA data. Criteria included ethnic diversity, selectivity, research intensity, and engagement with race equality initiatives. We also used academic networks to support recruitment. Our final sample included one elite, high-tariff institution and two mid-low tariff, teaching-focused universities. Most interviews, 42 in total, were conducted online or in person, either individually or in focus groups.

As with the school-based focus groups, we identified members of staff within each of the three universities with some role, responsibility or knowledge of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and/or widening participation at the university, faculty or programme level, and who was able to speak to institutional policy and practices relating to the educational experience and attainments of different ethnic groups. We also interviewed another senior member of staff at a fourth university where we did not recruit any students.

1.2.3. Focus groups with sixth-form students and institutional staff

For both groups of students, we used similarly structured topic guides, and encouraged participants to consider how they felt about their mixed identity, what exactly made them 'mixed', and how this has changed over time, how being mixed has shaped and influenced their educational experiences now and in the past, the influence of parents, peers and teachers, parents, and their future plans and destinations.

¹ We are deeply grateful to all the students and staff who generously shared their experiences and insights for the project. We also wish to thank the staff in schools and universities who, in various capacities, supported our research.

For those at university, we also discussed with them their awareness of ethnicity degree awarding gaps, and sense of belonging at university.

Sixth-form focus groups (45–70 mins) were held in person, while university student interviews (60–90 mins) required flexible formats as students were dispersed across multiple sites. Our team used a mix of in-person and online focus group and individual interviews. All sessions were recorded, professionally transcribed, and analysed using NVivo.

We conducted four staff interviews, two in person and two online, to explore institutional perspectives on mixed students. Using structured topic guides, we examined how institutions identify mixed students, the challenges they face, and the role of schools and universities in supporting their identity, well-being, and educational success. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes and offered insights into institutional policies and practices, enabling comparisons with student perspectives.

1.2.4. Short socio-demographic questionnaire

A short questionnaire was devised to collect mainly quantitative information from focus group participants. Key literature in mixed-race studies and education, highlights the importance of socio-economic background and parental level of education, specificity of an individual's particular mix of heritages, and how an individuals' appearance is perceived as important in shaping mixed identity and experience (Song, 2010). The questionnaire contained items on parents' level of education, free school meals (FSM) eligibility during school career, information about their course of study, how their appearance is perceived by others (whether an individual was generally perceived as being monoracial or more ambiguously), their household and employment status, and self-descriptions of identity. The questionnaire findings are presented in chapter 3 of the report, and are used to inform the overall qualitative analysis. All student participants completed a questionnaire (50 sixth-formers and 42 university students). A further 12 completed questionnaires but were not interviewed, thus 104 returns in total.

1.3. Strand three – Quantitative research

The quantitative analysis uses publicly available secondary data from the Evidence for Equality National Survey (EVENS) to examine ethnic identity, sense of belonging, and experiences of discrimination in education. Data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is further employed to analyse patterns and trends in access and participation across provider categories, while higher education attainment is assessed using data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). To complement these sources, data obtained from the Office for Students (OfS) Access and Participation dashboard was used to explore continuation rates and degree outcomes. Taken together, these datasets provide a comprehensive account of inequalities experienced by mixed-heritage young people across key stages of the educational journey. The results are presented in chapters 2 and 3.

The analysis applies a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test for mean differences in outcomes across ethnic groups. Specifically, the one-way ANOVA compares the means of a continuous dependent variable across categories of a single independent variable, which must comprise at least three groups or levels (Okoye & Hosseini, 2024). In this study, the analysis considers differences both between broad ethnic groups and within mixed ethnic categories, further disaggregated by geographical location and institutional tariff group. The use of one-way ANOVA is appropriate, as it enables simultaneous comparison of multiple groups to determine whether statistically significant differences exist.

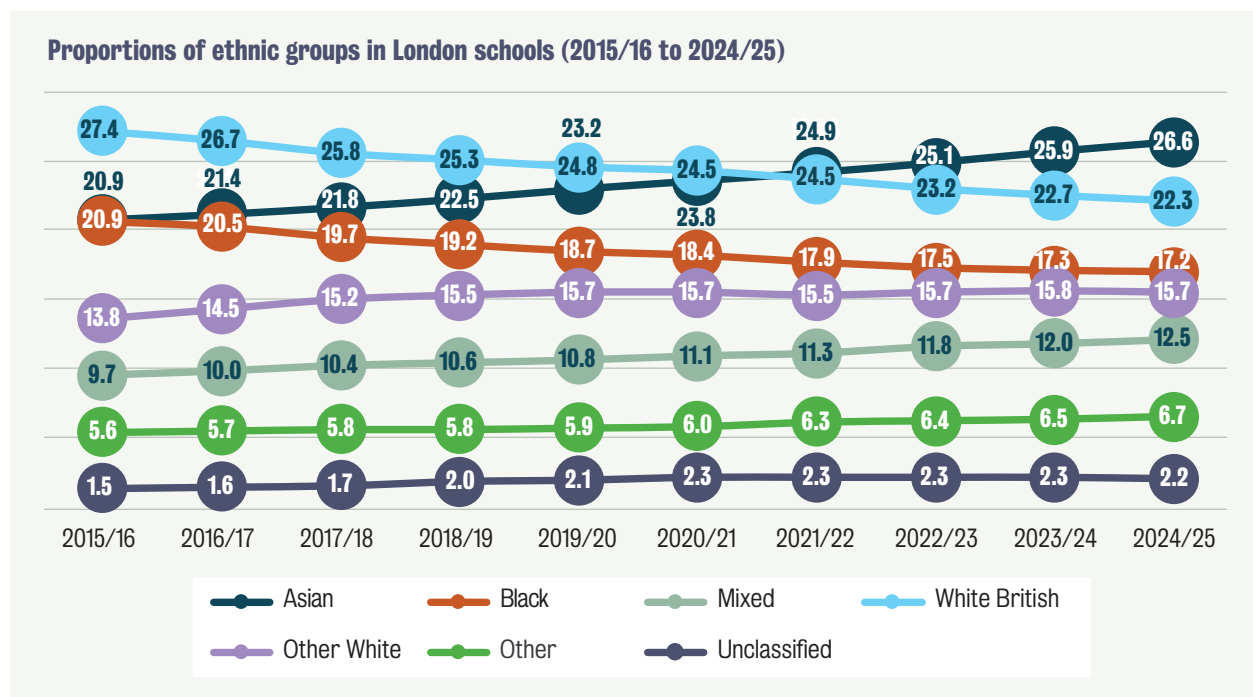
Where ANOVA identifies significant group-level variation, post-hoc tests are conducted to pinpoint the specific sources of difference. To minimise Type I error (false positives) arising from multiple pairwise comparisons, the Bonferroni correction is applied, ensuring a more conservative interpretation of results. All statistical analyses were conducted in STATA, with statistical significance set at the conventional 5% level unless adjusted by the Bonferroni procedure.

2. Contextualising the experiences of mixed young people in London

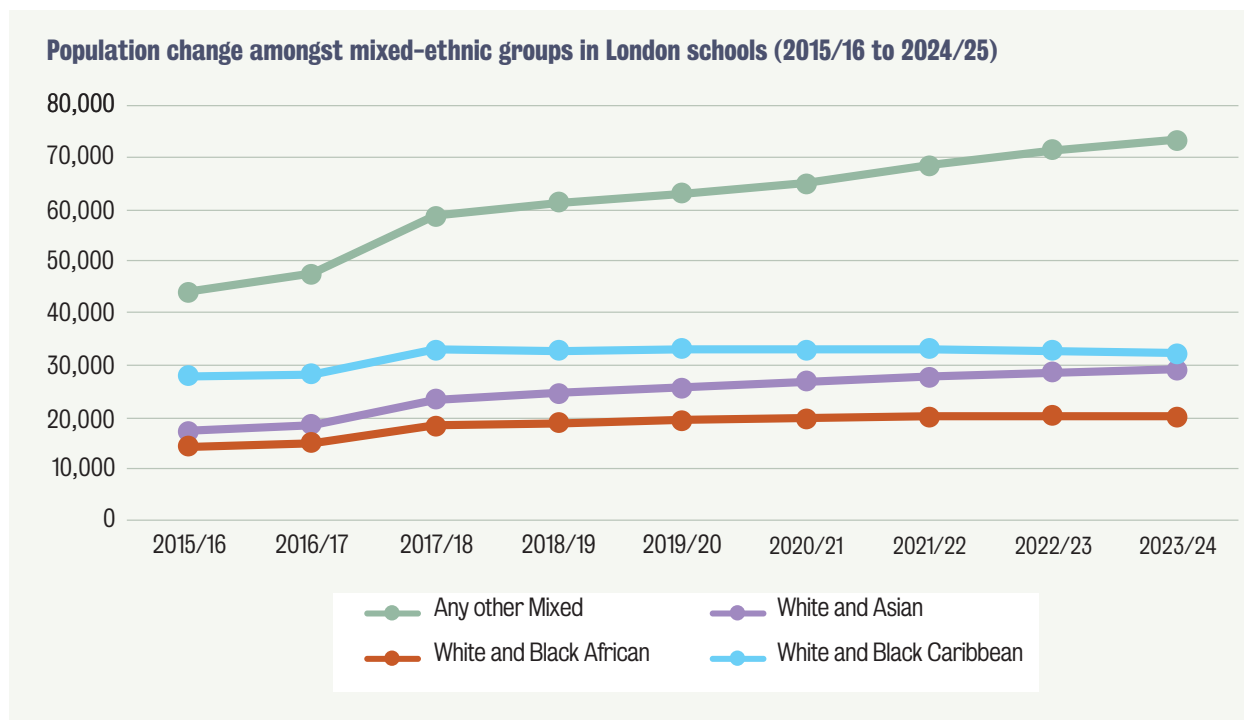
This chapter reviews the socio-demographic and educational position of mixed-heritage young people. It draws together existing data, key literature and quantitative analysis of publicly available student lifecycle datasets.

2.1. London's schools: demography

The broader changes in the mixed population within London outlined in the introduction are mirrored and accentuated in London's schools. Key trends include the relative decline in the White British school population and the growth of minority ethnic students, particularly amongst those from Asian, Black and mixed backgrounds (with the exception of mixed White and Black Caribbean which witnessed a slight decline). According to DfE data for 2024/25, students of mixed-heritage now represent 12.5% of the school population in London (DfE, 2025b).



A more detailed look at the mixed ethnic groups highlights some additional patterns. The Mixed-other and White/Asian groups have almost doubled in the past decade (percentage increase of 71% and 73% respectively) whilst the White/Black Caribbean group appears to have plateaued in 2021/22. It is important to note the dramatic rise amongst the school population classified as 'Mixed-other'. This group is likely to be highly heterogeneous. Its growth is linked to recent immigration, particularly from South America (e.g. Brazil, Colombia), as well as the greater numbers of intergenerational mixed young people, for example with some Black Caribbean heritage, for whom the 'dual' mixed categories are no longer meaningful (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2016).



2.2. London's schools: attainment and experience

Over the past two decades students in London schools have consistently outperformed their peers in England (Demie, 2023). In particular, disadvantaged and minority ethnic students, overall, tend to do much better in London than elsewhere. It is within this foundational context of school improvement in which the relative (under) performance of some mixed groups must be viewed. Key insights from data show that:

- In terms of attainment measures at Key Stage 4 (i.e. GCSEs), overall, mixed students outperform the national average. However, there is a persistent gap amongst mixed groups, with those from White/Black Caribbean backgrounds having the lowest attainment whilst those from White/Asian and Mixed-other backgrounds consistently achieve above the national average. Those of White/Black African ethnicity occupy a middle position (Education Policy Institute, 2024; Lewis & Demie, 2019).
- Students from White/Black Caribbean, particularly boys, are significantly more likely to be excluded or suspended from school than students from other minority ethnic groups (GOV.UK, 2025).

Analysis of student attainment in relation to free school meals status (FSM), a common proxy for socio-economic disadvantage and poverty, suggests that the FSM-gap within mixed ethnic groups (i.e. the difference in attainment between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students) is particularly wide. Mixed students are more likely than White students to live in low-income households, though again this masks significant differences amongst mixed groups, with high rates amongst White/Black Caribbean and White/Black African groups (35% and 38% respectively), whilst the figure for the White/Asian group is lower and closer to that of White groups. Mixed White/Black Caribbean students from disadvantaged backgrounds have amongst the lowest attainment in schools (DfE, 2025b).

2.3. Accounting for the experiences of mixed students at school

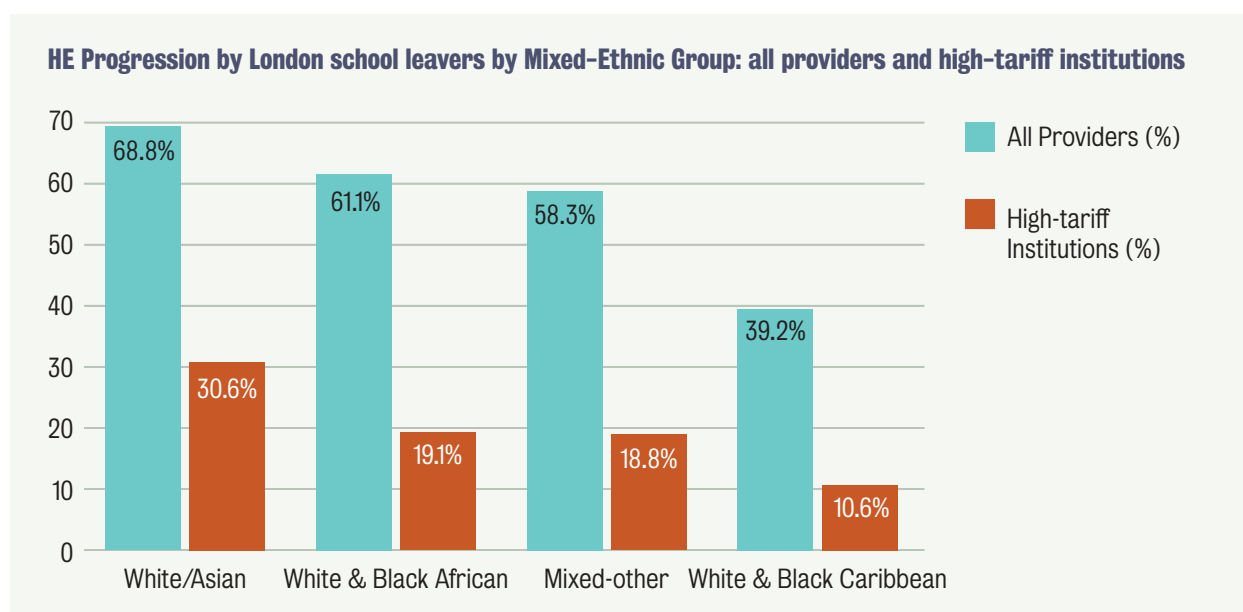
Historically, mixed White/Black Caribbean students have been the largest mixed-heritage group in London schools and among the most disadvantaged in terms of attainment and exclusion. Research highlights how gendered anti-Black institutional racism shapes their experiences, with teachers often

holding lower expectations and making assumptions about identity issues, behaviour, and family structure (Demie et al., 2022; Tikly et al., 2004). These stereotypes, such as absent Black fathers and lone White mothers, have been challenged by evidence showing diverse family forms and active paternal involvement (Caballero, 2007). These students are frequently racialised as ‘Black’, face microaggressions from peers, and experience socio-economic disadvantage. In contrast, mixed White/Asian students appear more educationally advantaged, though their identity experiences remain under-researched. A key finding is the lack of institutional recognition of mixed-heritage identities in school policies and practices. This lack of visibility and consistent terminology makes it difficult for schools to identify their needs and develop effective support strategies (Lewis & Demie, 2019; Tikly et al., 2004).

2.4. Universities: access, participation, continuation and degree awarding gaps

In London’s universities, students from ethnic minority backgrounds make up 55% of the UK-domiciled student population (excluding ‘Not Known’ categories). This represents a significant level of over-representation compared to national trends, where White British students accounted for more than two-thirds of all students with known ethnicity in the 2023/24 academic year (DfE, 2025a). Such concentration patterns reflect multiple intersecting factors, including demographic composition, institutional accessibility, migration patterns, prior attainment, and differential participation rates across ethnic groups, including those of mixed-heritage.

London school leavers have the highest HE participation rates in England, with 61% of school-leavers entering HE by age 19, compared to 50% nationally in 2023/24. Drivers include proximity to a dense network of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which creates a strong bias towards university destinations and allows London students to study while living at home, avoiding prohibitive travel and rental costs. Better than average prior attainment in London schools, particularly amongst disadvantaged students, and a strong preference for university destinations amongst minority ethnic groups contributes to high rates of participation (DfE, 2025a; Martin, 2025). Consequently, most minority ethnic groups have higher rates of progression than the White British group in London, whose rate stands at 43%. The access and participation landscape is further complicated by intra-ethnic variation within mixed-heritage groups. These differences are evident not only in overall participation rates but also in access to high-tariff institutions, where disparities within mixed categories often mirror broader patterns of inequality.



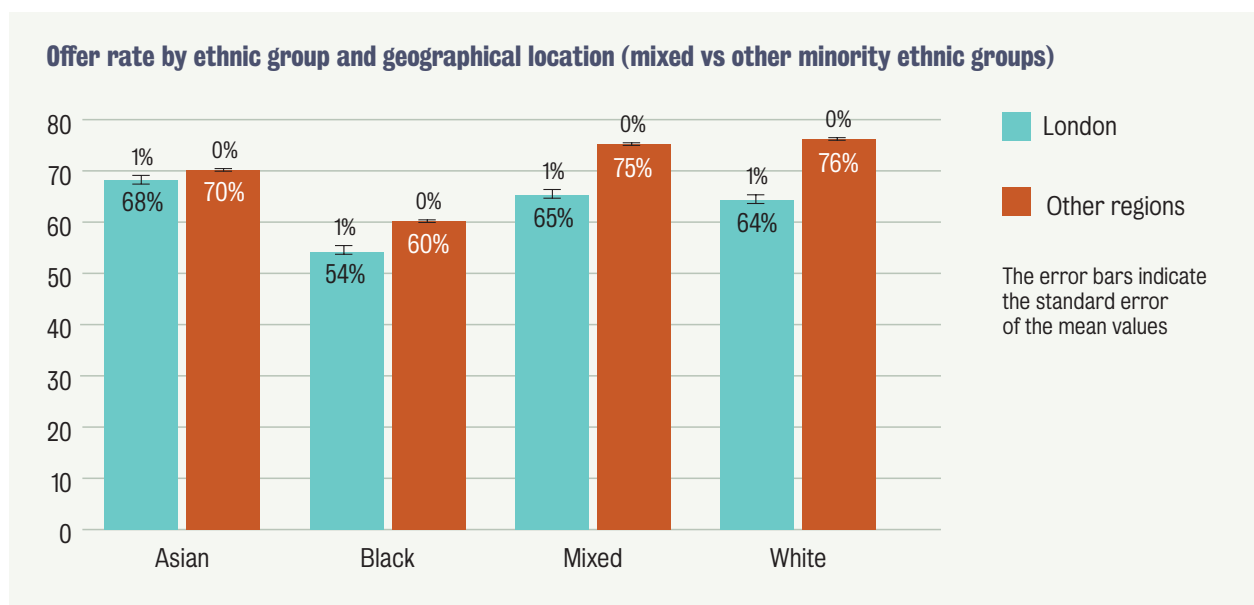
The high-tariff gap matters because it reflects unequal access to the most selective and prestigious universities. Attendance at these institutions often lead to stronger graduate outcomes, higher earnings,

and influential networks (Boliver, 2015). Persistent gaps, with White/Asian students participating at nearly triple the rate of their White/Black Caribbean counterparts signal potential structural barriers beyond attainment (DfE, 2025a). When the intersecting layer of FSM-eligibility is added, the gaps for White and mixed ethnicity students are even higher than those for students from other ethnic groups. This suggests that financial status before university also affects mixed-heritage students' access to higher education. Again, these gaps, both general progression and into high-tariff institutions are also shaped by gender, with the gap greatest for mixed White/Black Caribbean males. Overall, across all ethnic groups, female students progress into higher education at significantly higher rates.

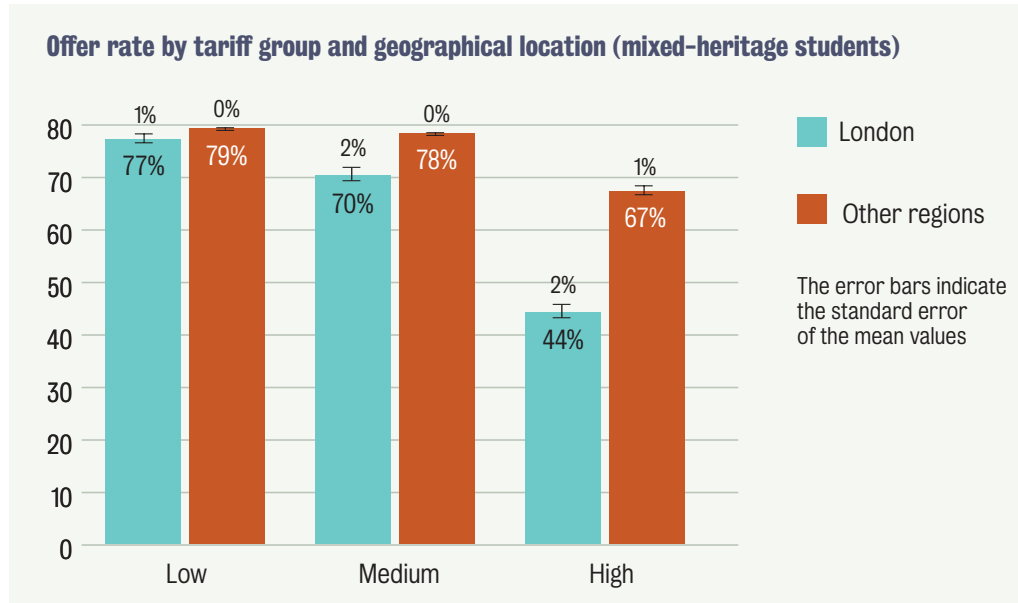
Research into degree outcomes shows persistent 'awarding gaps', with Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) students less likely to gain first-class or upper second-class degrees than their White peers (Banerjee, 2024). The gap is widest for monoracial Black students and smallest for Mixed students, although this is not usually disaggregated in published data. Internal institutional reporting suggests that White/Black Caribbean students' experience much larger gaps, which are often closer to those of monoracial Black students, whilst White/Asian students often have outcomes closer to the sector average, though still below those of White students. Even when there are smaller gaps for some mixed groups, the consequences can be significant. Being awarded an upper second-class degree can affect access to postgraduate study, graduate jobs prospects and future earnings.

Using student lifecycle data from UCAS for the 2023/24 cycle, a series of statistical analyses were conducted to explore whether offer rates (the percentage of applications which received an offer) differ for mixed-heritage applicants across different types of providers – specifically lower, medium, and higher-tariff institutions in both London and other regions. This analysis is constrained by the use of the high-level 'mixed' category, which limits insight into within-group variation. Additionally, data from the Office for Students Access and Participation dashboard was used to examine continuation rates and degree attainment by ethnicity and institutional tariff level. Together, these datasets provide a broader picture of how mixed-heritage students navigate the higher education system, from application to outcomes, and highlight the need for more detailed data to better understand and address disparities.

Results indicate that there are small to medium differences between ethnic groups in relation to the rate at which offers are made. For London-based institutions, the results revealed statistically significant differences in the offer rates between students from Black and Asian ethnic groups, students from Black and mixed ethnic groups, as well as Black and White students. For non-London based institutions, there were significant differences in the offer rates between all ethnic groups excluding the White and Mixed ethnic groups.

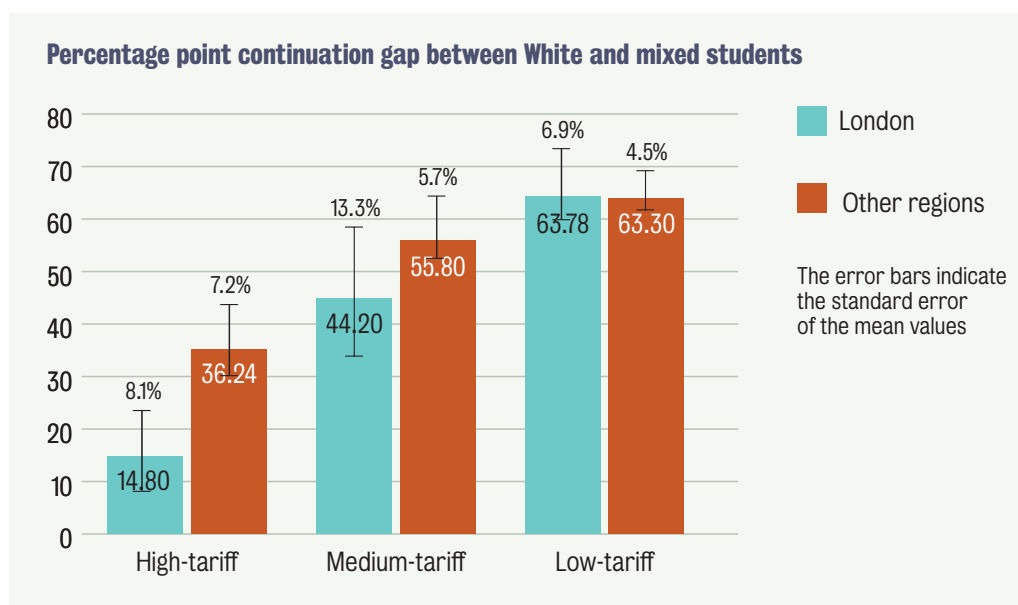


When offer rates for mixed-heritage students are investigated by tariff group (i.e. low, medium and high), the results show significant differences in offer rates by tariff group, with fewer mixed-heritage students gaining offers into high tariff universities in London, relative to lower and medium tariff institutions. The same trend is observed for non-London based universities, though the gap between higher and lower tariff is smaller.

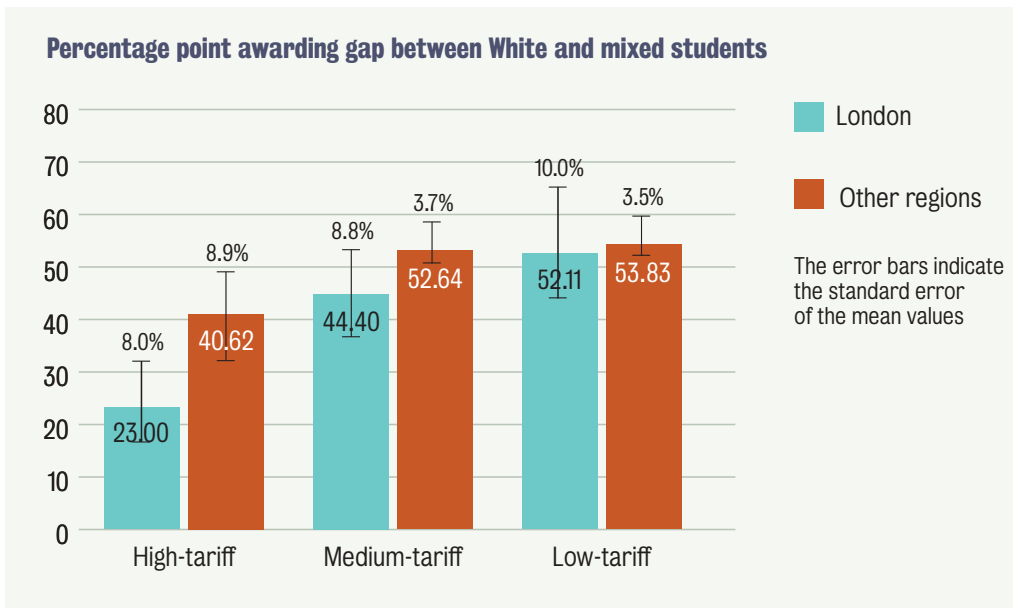


To investigate continuation and degree outcomes, data was obtained from the Office for Students Access and Participation dashboard. The access and participation data dashboard shows data for individual providers across different student characteristics. The data includes indicators and gaps as measures of performance for each stage of a student's journey through higher education, but this analysis focuses on the continuation gap (i.e. whether students continue their studies), and degree outcomes (i.e. the proportion of students from mixed ethnic groups who obtain a first class or upper second-class degree).

At London-based institutions, there are significant differences in continuation (a measure of whether or not students continue their studies) gaps between low- and high-tariff universities. The gap between White and mixed students is significantly smaller at high-tariff institutions than at low-tariff ones. This same pattern is also seen at universities outside London.



Among institutions based in London, the awarding gaps – the difference in the proportion of first and upper second-class degrees awarded to White and mixed students – differ significantly by tariff level, with high-tariff universities exhibiting much smaller gaps compared to low-tariff universities. This pattern is similarly observed in institutions outside London (Richardson et al., 2020).



In sum, mixed-heritage students face distinct and under-recognised barriers in higher education. They receive fewer offers from high-tariff universities, despite performing better once enrolled. Conversely, they are overrepresented in lower-tariff institutions, where continuation and awarding gaps are wider – limiting their chances of achieving strong degree outcomes and affecting long-term employment and earnings. Geographic disparities, particularly between London and non-London institutions, further complicate their position, underscoring the need for context-sensitive interventions. Crucially, the broad ‘mixed’ category masks significant within-group variation, which needs to be disaggregated if we are to identify and support the most disadvantaged groups effectively.

2.5. Accounting for mixed students’ experiences in higher education

Several studies have identified a range of interconnected factors contributing to the degree awarding gap, particularly among students from minoritised ethnic and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Arday et al., 2022; Banerjee, 2024; Meadhbh Murray et al., 2023; Richardson et al., 2020; Stoll et al., 2022). These include, unconscious bias and institutional racism can subtly shape student experiences, while a lack of ethnic diversity among academic staff and limited cultural responsiveness in teaching can undermine belonging and engagement. Non-inclusive curricula and assessment practices often fail to reflect diverse histories and perspectives, reducing academic connection. Students may also face limited access to academic and pastoral support, with class and racialised differences influencing help-seeking behaviours. Financial stress further impacts students’ ability to focus or participate in enrichment activities. Additionally, unequal access to networks, resources, and academic know-how can disadvantage students navigating higher education. Feelings of not belonging, imposter syndrome, and identity-related stress – particularly in racialised settings – can erode confidence and academic performance.

2.6. Conclusions

The mixed-heritage population constitutes the most rapidly expanding demographic in London, yet this growth conceals significant intra-group disparities within the education system. While aggregate data often suggest educational advantage for mixed-heritage students, disaggregated analyses reveal entrenched stratification. For example, White/Black Caribbean students frequently encounter compounded disadvantage due to anti-Black institutional racism, socio-economic marginalisation, and disproportionately high exclusion rates. In contrast, White/Asian students tend to experience educational privilege, with outcomes that meet or exceed national averages.

In higher education, mixed-heritage students encounter a paradox: they receive fewer offers from high-tariff universities where they demonstrate smaller continuation and awarding gaps, whilst being overrepresented at lower-tariff institutions where outcome gaps widen substantially. Participation data indicates that White/Asian and White/Black African students are more likely to attend high-tariff institutions than other mixed-groups. The aggregated 'mixed' category obscures critical within-group disparities, particularly for White/Black Caribbean students whose outcomes closely mirror monoracial Black peers (Martin, 2025).

A key concern emerging from our analysis is the under-researched nature of the 'mixed-other' group, particularly in schools. Although clearly not a meaningful social and cultural grouping, it nonetheless points to a growing number of young people who are not reflected in our existing classifications.

3. Contextualising our student participants

We acknowledge that terms like *'mixed-race'* and *'mixed-heritage'* are complex and contested, reflecting broader debates around identity, classification, and representation (Caballero, 2007; Song, 2010). For the purposes of this report, we use these terms inclusively to describe young people with multiple ethnic and racial backgrounds. The ways in which these heritages are experienced, expressed, and made visible in society are shaped by various factors that influence who, and what kinds of heritage, are understood to constitute mixedness. Rather than unpacking the terminology in detail here, we hope the lived experiences of the young people featured in this study speak to the nuanced and fluid meanings of mixedness in contemporary society.

In this section we present a summary analysis of the personal characteristics and backgrounds of our participants. Our analysis is based on questionnaire responses from 104 participants, and broader data from publicly available dataset.

3.1. Demographic characteristics

Most of our participants are female – (69% versus 31% male in the sixth-form) – with a more pronounced bias amongst our university sample (83% versus 17%²). In terms of age distribution, sixth-formers are split between those aged 16yrs old and 17yrs (51% versus 47%), and one 18-year-old (2%). Amongst our university students, 43% are 18-22yrs, 35% are 23-29yrs and 21% are over 30+.

3.2. Subject profile

The subject profile of our school sample reflects contemporary sixth-form trends towards Science Technology and Mathematics (STEM) whilst maintaining the academic breadth required for competitive university admissions at high-tariff institutions. Students are studying a range of subjects in STEM, humanities, social sciences, languages, and creative arts. Most are studying A-levels (90% including combinations with other qualifications), with a small number studying for vocational qualifications (3%). Subject choices and the predominance of A-levels reflect high prior attainment and university aspirations. The most popular A-level subjects reported are: mathematics (appears 25 times), biology (13 times), and chemistry (12 times). The most popular subjects are evenly distributed across different mixed groups.

The degree profile of our university students reflect a diverse, professionally-oriented cohort with strong representation in health/life sciences and applied fields rather than traditional humanities and social sciences subjects. The majority, 47%, are studying for an undergraduate degree, 26% for a master's and 15% for doctoral degrees, and 10% for professional and other qualifications. The most common subject areas are health and life sciences at 43% (e.g. medicine, dentistry, psychology, pharmacology), with approximately a quarter studying engineering, physics, and another quarter in social science, humanities and education. Almost half our university sample had a previous degree, namely a bachelor's or master's. This reflects the significant numbers of postgraduate students amongst our sample (approximately 48%). The majority (41%) are in the first year of study, 15% in the second, 23% in their third, and the rest distributed between fourth, fifth and sixth-years, reflecting the fact that some students study part-time and doctoral degrees are longer in duration. In contrast, the vast majority of our sixth-formers are in their first-year of study (96%).

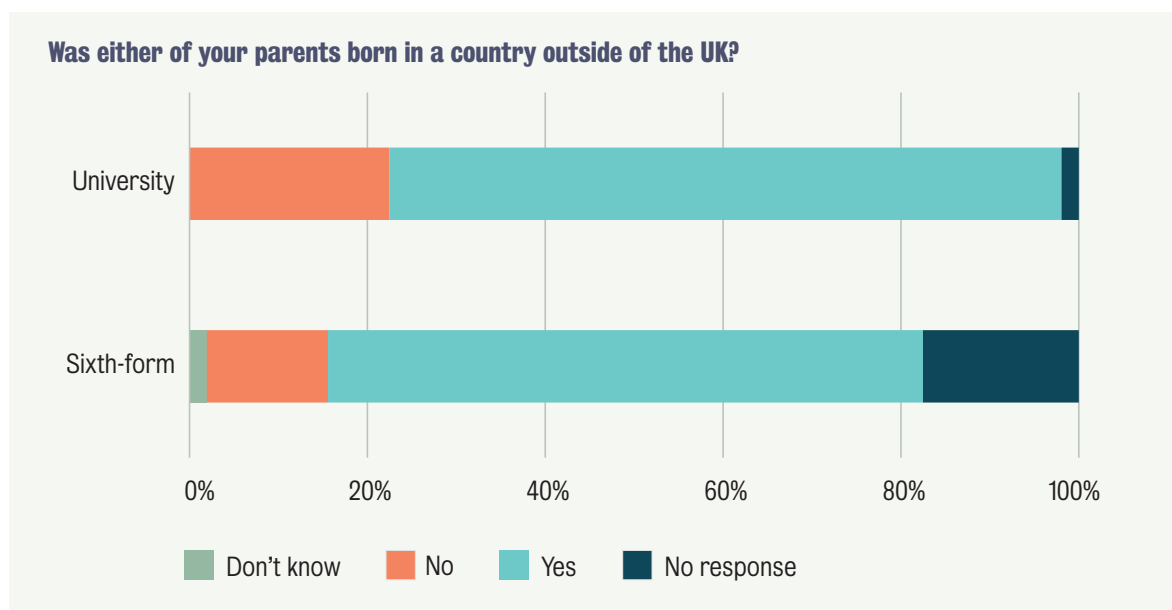
² Our sample did also include one participant who identified as a Trans man.

3.3. Mode of study and employment

All our sixth-formers study full-time, which reflects typical requirements and age-appropriate expectations. Similarly, the majority of university students report studying full-time (76%), though there is greater variety in study modes (21% part-time and other modes) accommodating different life circumstances, varied ages, and priorities, particularly for older students. Significant numbers of university students combine study with employment (15% full-time and 38% part-time). A much smaller proportion of sixth-formers work part-time (8%).

3.4. Parental origins

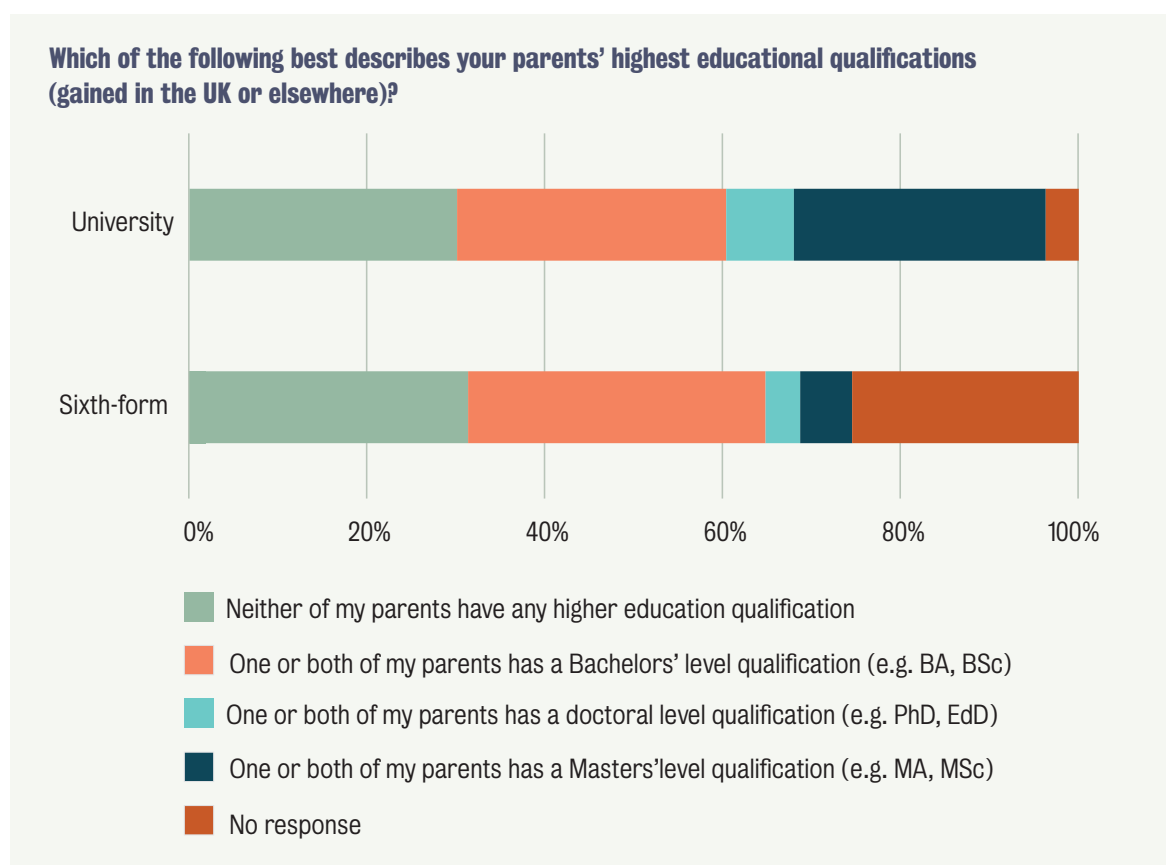
Across both student populations, the majority have at least one parent born outside the UK, with university students showing higher proportions (76% compared with 67% for sixth-form students).



This reflects London's diverse demographic composition, and high rates of immigration – according to census 2021 figures the proportion of foreign-born Londoners is 41%. Analysis of participants' descriptions of their parents' background reveal two broad patterns. First, a predominant pairing of White Europeans with those of African, Asian, Caribbean or Middle-Eastern heritage, reflecting colonial legacies (the British in the Caribbean, Asia and Africa, and the Dutch in Indonesia), and more recent globalised migration patterns (e.g. Polish-Nigerian, German-Sri Lankan, Hungarian-Black Caribbean etc).

In terms of specific geographic origins, sixth-formers' parents come from traditional 'commonwealth' countries in the Caribbean (e.g. Jamaica), Africa (e.g. Nigeria) and Asia (e.g. India, Sri-Lanka), and Eastern Europe (e.g. Hungary, Lithuania), reflecting more recent EU migration. The university sample shows broader global representation, with strong Asian representation more prominent (e.g. Japan, Indonesia), and Western European (e.g. France, Germany). The data reflects London's position as a global migration destination, with university students showing more diverse international origins, embedded within highly mobile transnational professional families, whilst the parents of sixth-form students demonstrate stronger commonwealth migration patterns typical of established or emerging diaspora communities.

3.5. Parental background



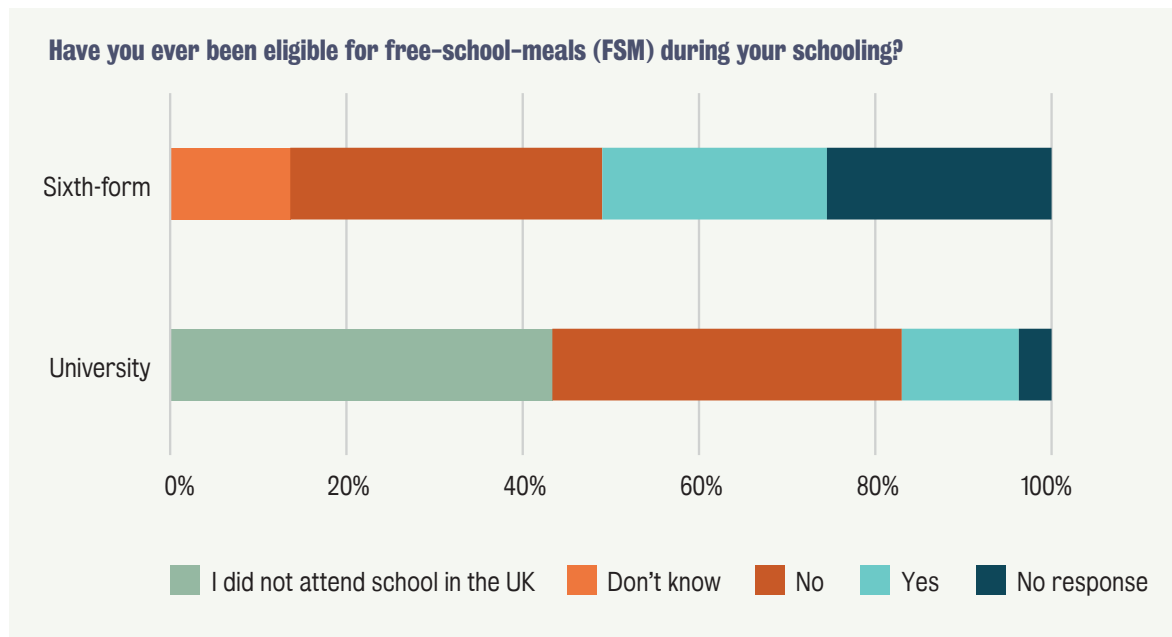
University students come from more educationally privileged backgrounds at each level of qualification, with 66% having parents with higher education qualifications compared to 43% of sixth-formers. Interestingly, almost a third of university and sixth-form students have parents with no higher education qualifications. This means therefore amongst our university sample nearly a third are first-generation students. In terms of educational background and mixed-heritage, students of White European/East or South Asian background, are most likely to report parents having high educational qualifications. This is also associated with being an international student or having attended a school abroad. Students from mixed-Black backgrounds are more likely to report having parents with no higher education qualifications.

We cross-tabulated parental education with FSM-eligibility, and there are very few university students that were eligible during their schooling for FSM, partly because so many of them grew-up outside of the UK. In addition, data from interviews suggests that several had privileged schooling trajectories attending independent schools in the UK or abroad, whereas none of the sixth-formers had such experiences. The 13% of university students that were FSM-eligible during their schooling career indicates a small but significant minority, UK educated, from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Amongst sixth-formers where this information was more meaningfully collected. Approximately 26%³ of our participants reported being FSM-eligible during their educational career which closely mirrors the London average at 27%, and lower than many other minority ethnic groups.

Further analysis indicates that FSM-eligibility and parental education are inversely related, meaning that having educated parents does not lower the chances of being in disadvantage as one might expect.

³ This figure is potentially higher since almost a quarter of our participants did not complete this question.



Almost half of FSM-eligible students have parents with bachelor’s degrees or higher. This is largely explained by the fact that so many of our sixth-formers have parents that were born and educated outside of the UK. This result strongly suggests that parents’ educational qualifications might not reflect current economic circumstances due to migration, qualification recognition issues, or other structural barriers (Erel, 2010). It might also relate to family structures, such as the presence of lone-parent households with educated but economically struggling parents. This pattern suggests more nuanced socioeconomic positioning amongst our sixth-form students.

3.6. Caring responsibilities

The data reveals that caring responsibilities affect a significant minority of students across both educational levels (19% for university versus 8% for sixth-formers). University students with caring responsibilities tend to be older (particularly 30+), whilst sixth-form students with such responsibilities are still teenagers living at home and are virtually all female, reflecting traditional gendered caring patterns. One-third of university students with caring responsibilities study part-time, compared to virtually all other students studying full-time, indicating accommodation for caring duties. The presence of caring responsibilities among sixth-form students suggests some young people are taking on significant family support roles whilst completing their education, which may impact on the time and focus required for their studies. University students’ caring responsibilities are likely to involve own children or elderly relatives, whilst sixth-form caring responsibilities may involve younger siblings, ill parents, or extended family members. The fact that students with caring responsibilities continue their education demonstrates resilience and commitment despite additional challenges.

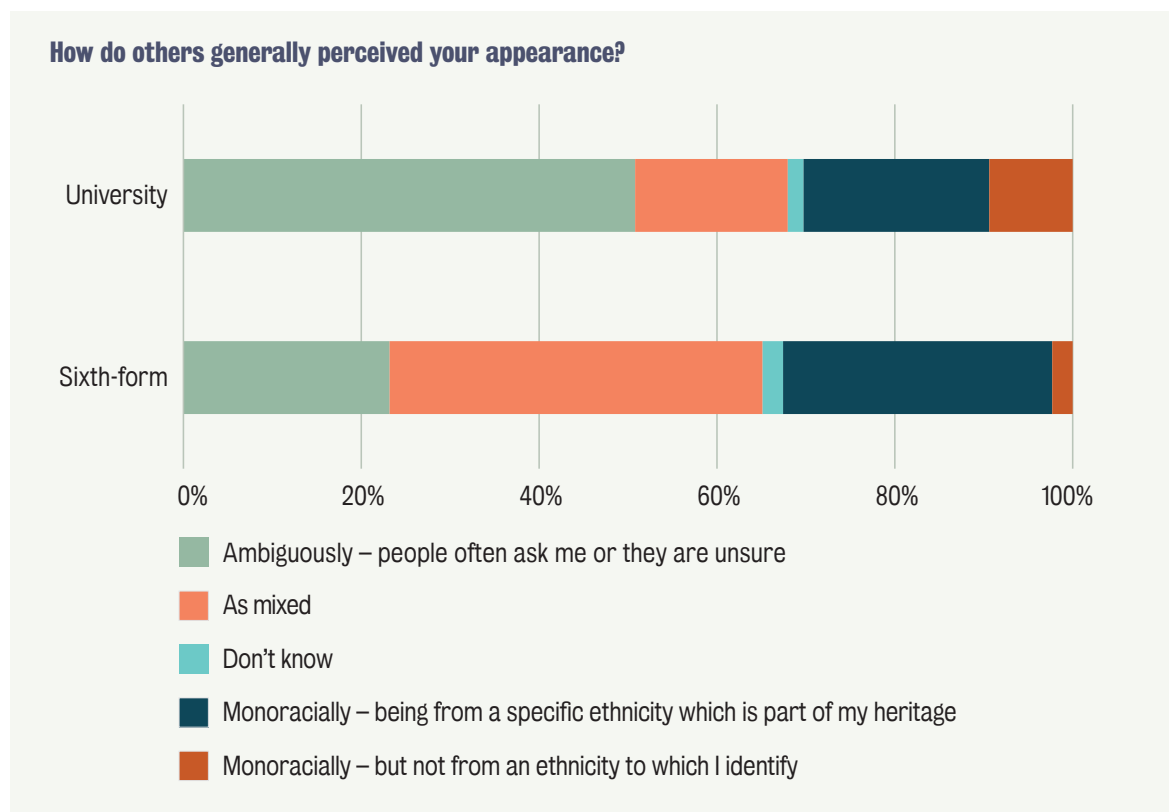
3.7. Housing situation

The housing patterns of university students reflect the intersection of age, study level, financial circumstances, and possibly cultural preferences in London’s expensive housing market. For example, despite being older, postgraduate students show more diverse living arrangements, potentially reflecting varied life circumstances, international status, or financial situations. In contrast all sixth-formers live with their parents, reflecting age-related housing transitions and status.

3.8. Identity and self-perception

Research in both Britain and North America demonstrates that when given the opportunity, a significant number of mixed people prefer to identify their mixed origins rather than identification with a single group (Aspinall, 2022). We asked several questions concerning identity, external perception of appearance and parental heritage. The descriptions exemplify the complex, fluid, and multidimensional nature of ethnic categorisation for mixed people.

In response to the question of how they are perceived by others (see chart below), university students are more likely to report being perceived ambiguously (51%) compared to sixth-formers (20%).



In contrast, our sixth-formers are more likely to report being perceived as ‘mixed’, 35% versus 17% for university students. There are several possible reasons for the difference. Amongst our university sample, being perceived ambiguously was largely attributable to those with East or South Asian/White European (e.g. Japanese-English, Filipino-British, Indian-German) and Middle Eastern/White combinations (e.g. Kurdish-English), and those with complex multi-generational mixed backgrounds. These students are more likely to use cultural rather than racial descriptors in their self-descriptions. Students of part-Black heritage in sixth-form and university settings are more likely to report being perceived as ‘mixed’, suggesting that certain forms of mixedness, particularly White/Black heritage, are more socially recognisable. The perception is likely to be shaped by dominant societal representations of mixed identity which often centre on White/Black individuals (Caballero & Aspinall, 2018).

When asked to describe their ethnic identity, a few patterns emerged among both sets of students. A high proportion used ‘fractional quantification’ terms to articulate their heritage composition (e.g. ‘half Jamaican, Quarter Algerian Quarter Scottish’ or ‘Half Indonesian, quarter Spanish and English.’ The precision implies systematic calculation of ancestral contributions, potentially reflecting the popularity of commercial DNA ancestry testing and its mathematical language of precision (DaCosta, 2022). Some described themselves in terms of geographic locations:

'I am of mixed-race, of Irish and Fijian descent. My father is of Irish heritage, and my mother was born in Fiji, the South Pacific. However, I was born here in London.'

'German and Sri Lankan British, grew up in Britain.'

These descriptions demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the interplay between heritage, birthplace, and cultural formation. Geographic anchoring serves as a legitimising strategy, providing concrete spatial references for complex identity claims and is used by several participants. Sixth-formers especially were more likely to use broader geographic descriptors (e.g. 'mixed Asian and European'). Several used the term 'mixed-race' (e.g. 'mixed-race- Black Caribbean') which points to established meanings attached to this particular vocabulary of self-definition, particularly by those with White/ Black heritage. Several expressed ambivalence about their identities and belonging, and articulated a sense of occupying a 'third space', characteristic of mixed experiences:

'I am just a citizen of the world as many other. Too other for each country but also belong to either of them at the same time.'

'I don't know that I know either of them [heritages] well enough to identify with them.'

Some used hybrid constructions, mixing external official classifications and more personal self-definitions: 'Mixed British Asian – of Indian and Singaporean heritage but born and raised in London.' A few expressed disjuncture between how they identified themselves using official categories and their own personal sense of self: 'In check boxes, 'mixed other' /To myself, Scottish/Moroccan.' Many, also expressed identities that went beyond binary constructions, revealing multi-generational and complex genealogies:

'I have identified myself as many different things over the past 5 years but currently I would say I am "blasian", if people ask me where, I would say Persian or Pakistani, west African and South American.'

'Maltese and Surinamese (with mixed Chinese and West African heritage).'

Others, particularly those from regions with historically diverse populations such as Latin America, offered rich historical and contextual details, with reference to phenotype, in their self-descriptions. One participant shared:

'I'm a Latin-American woman. My heritage is a mixture of what I would call an indigenous mother and Spanish father ethnicity, but this is looking through their features because both were born in Colombia and grandparents too.'

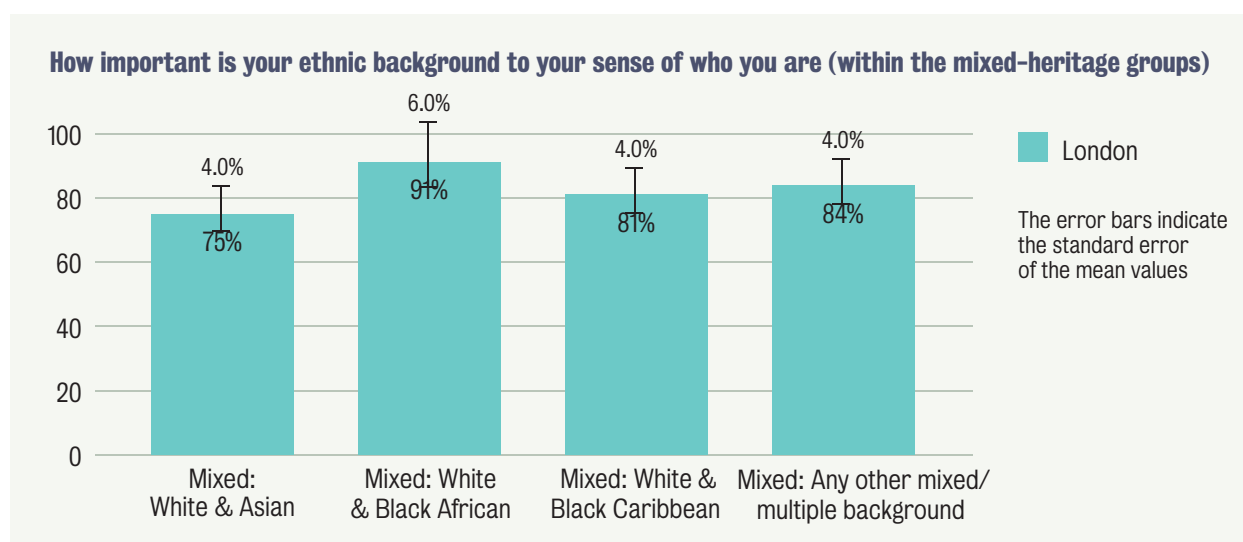
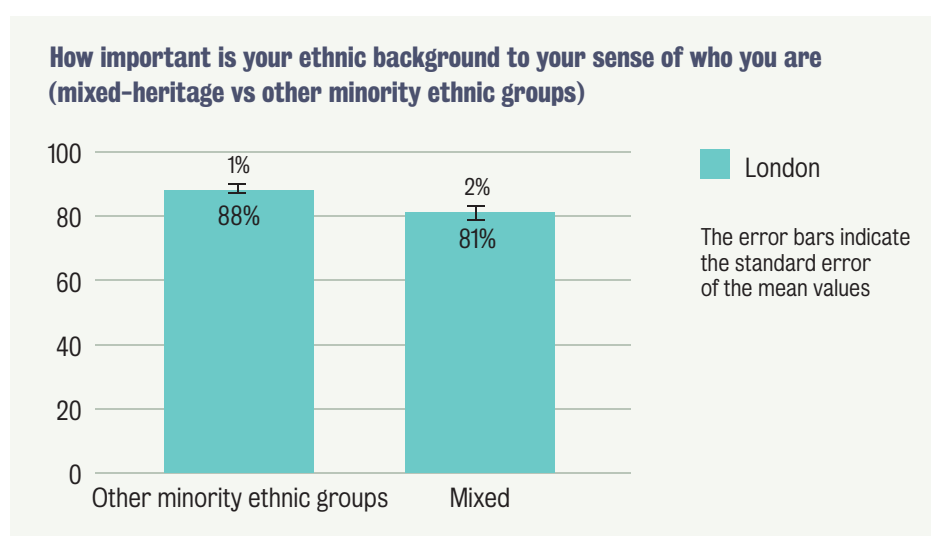
Our linguistic analysis of our participants' responses reveals self-description as complex identity work that resists essentialist frameworks. Identity formation is characterised by multiplicity and contextual negotiation. It operates through several strategies outlined: including, fractional quantification, geographic positioning, historical narratives, ambivalence, resistance and active self-definition. Both sixth-formers and university students understand their mixed ethnicity as dynamic, contextual, and personally negotiated rather than externally imposed.

3.9. Identity formations – national survey data evidence

In this final section, we examine broader links between ethnic background and sense of identity, we draw on data from the Evidence for Equality National Survey (EVENS) which is the largest and most comprehensive survey in over 25 years on the experiences of ethnic and religious minorities in Britain. The survey, conducted in 2021 includes responses from approximately 14,200 individuals, of whom 9,700 identify as belonging to an ethnic or religious minority. This analysis enables us to further contextualise our participants' responses within a broader national context.

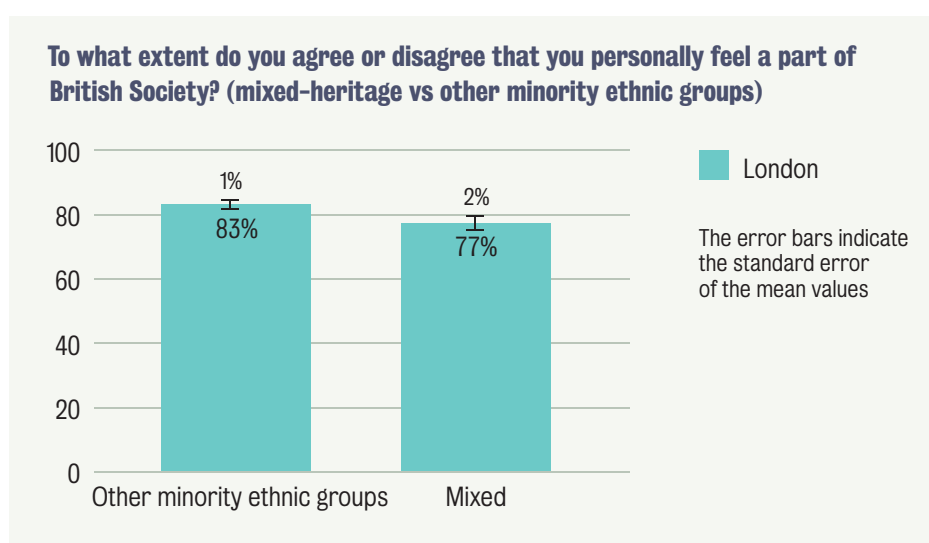
This dataset provides valuable insights into racial identity and the broader challenges faced by ethnic minorities, including within educational settings. It also enables a more detailed analysis of people from mixed-heritage backgrounds, such as White and Asian, White and Black African, White and Black Caribbean, and other mixed or multiple backgrounds. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of their ethnic background to their sense of identity on a five-point scale: 1 = Very important, 2 = Fairly important, 3 = Not very important, 4 = Not at all important, and 5 = Don't know. Responses of 'Don't know' were excluded. Individuals selecting 1 or 2 were categorised as placing high importance on their ethnic background, while those selecting 3 or 4 were categorised as placing low importance.

Focusing on respondents living in London, the data were broadly grouped by ethnicity into mixed-heritage and other minority ethnic groups. Statistical tests revealed a significant difference between these groups with people from other minority ethnic backgrounds (88%) more likely than those of mixed-heritage backgrounds (81%) to say their ethnicity was important to their identity.



Within the mixed-heritage group, while there were small differences in the proportion of respondents who felt that their ethnic background was important to their sense of who they are. Analysis revealed that none of the difference between these groups were significant. These results are shown left.

In terms of sense of belonging, survey respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed that they personally felt they were part of the British society. The responses were given on a 5-point scale: 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Tend to agree, 3 = Tend to disagree, 4 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Don't know. Responses marked as 'Don't know' were excluded. Those who answered 1 or 2 were classified as agreeing that they personally felt they were part of British society, while those who answered 3 or 4 did not agree that they felt they were part of British society. For respondents living in London, two broad ethnic groups were compared: mixed-heritage and other minority ethnic groups. Statistical analysis revealed that those from other minority backgrounds were significantly more likely than those of mixed backgrounds to feel included in British society.



When the mixed-heritage group is further broken down, the analysis shows very similar proportions of respondents from each group reporting that they agreed that they felt they were part of the British society. None of the small differences observed were significant. Overall, quantitative evidence reveals an apparent paradox: mixed-heritage individuals simultaneously attach less importance to their ethnic identity and report a lower sense of belonging to British society compared to other minority ethnic groups. This dual marginality challenges simplistic integration narratives that presume mixed-heritage positioning facilitates smoother incorporation into mainstream society.

3.10. Key limitation of our participant sample

A notable limitation in our participant data is the absence of mixed-Black males, and in particular those with a Caribbean background within our university sample. There are none. While this may partly reflect methodological factors related to the design of the study, the more substantive explanation is structural. Mixed White/Caribbean males remain significantly underrepresented in higher education, particularly within high-tariff institutions, where the majority of our participants are enrolled. Their absence in our sample is, in effect, the culmination of earlier systemic barriers that begin in schooling and disproportionately divert this group away from educational success (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Lewis & Demie, 2019).

3.11. Case study vignettes

Olumide's journey

Olumide is a sixth-form student at North Academy, who describes herself simply: 'my dad's Nigerian and my mum's Hungarian.' However, this straightforward statement creates complex identity dynamics across different cultural spaces. Her father, whom she describes as 'a very like, proud Nigerian man,' actively cultivates connections to their African heritage through music, visits to Nigeria, and community engagement. This strong cultural foundation provides Olumide with robust support within Nigerian community networks, where she finds belonging amongst friends who share similar Nigerian backgrounds.

However, Olumide's mixed identity creates unique challenges within family contexts. She observes how 'my Hungarian family they definitely see like, my Black side and then like, my Nigerian family do see my White side.' Though neither family makes her feel uncomfortable about this difference, the awareness of being perceived differently remains present.

Schooling presents particular complexities for identity navigation. During secondary school, she primarily socialised with Black peers, yet explaining 'I was kind of more friends with the Black side and then I'd kind of be like, an odd one out.' Her sense of being different amongst her Black friends was underpinned by her physical appearance (e.g. long straight hair and light-skin). She felt that teachers' perceptions and expectations shifted dramatically based on her peer associations. As she describes, 'depending on who I'm surrounded with then they sort of picked what side of me to see.' When with Black friends, educators anticipated misbehaviour, but when seated with non-Black classmates, teachers paid little attention to her, highlighting how racial assumptions shaped expectations.

International experiences, particularly visits to Hungary to her mother's family, expose Olumide to different forms of othering and racism. She has encountered 'a lot of stares to be honest' from locals who appear curious rather than hostile, reflecting limited exposure to diversity in Hungarian society.

Despite these challenges, Olumide maintains a pragmatic approach to identity-related difficulties. She acknowledges that as 'a person of colour', 'you're sort of always just like, wary of that,' constantly aware of others' perceptions. However, she refuses to fundamentally alter her behaviour based on external judgements, stating she will not 'do anything majorly differently just because like, I'm mixed-race.'

Olumide's experience illustrates the multifaceted nature of mixed-race identity, encompassing family dynamics, educational challenges, international perspectives, and personal resilience strategies whilst navigating spaces where her complex heritage is consistently noticed and interpreted by others. Her resilience appears bolstered by strong family connections and supportive peer networks.

Sebastian's transnational identity journey

Sebastian is a 19-year-old social sciences student at a Russell Group university in London. He embodies the complexity of a White European and East Asian-British mixed-heritage shaped by extreme geographical mobility. His mother, ethnically Hong Kong Chinese but UK-raised, and his French father, created a multicultural foundation that became more complicated through constant relocation: 'I lived in six different countries before the age of 10' across Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Sebastian's relationship with his heritage reflects profound ambivalence rooted in experiences of othering. Despite his mother's efforts to maintain Hong Kong cultural connections through 'traditions and the customs and the history,' language barriers created painful family disconnections. He adds that he has 'never actually had a conversation with my grandma because she doesn't speak English and I don't speak Cantonese.' This linguistic gap developed through his own resistance when settling in rural France as an adolescent, to learning Cantonese, explaining: 'I was already kind of an outsider because of how I looked. So, I just didn't want to learn the language as well and be even more of an outsider.'

His appearance consistently marked him as different across regional and national contexts. In Singapore and Malaysia, people assumed he was 'Singaporean Chinese,' rather than being mixed, whilst in Europe, 'every Asian is Chinese.' This persistent misidentification contributed to his defensive stance about racial categorisation.

Sebastian admits shamefully that during his youth, 'I didn't really like, like my Asian side of me. ... I really tried to push that as far away as I could. And always say, 'No, no, I'm French, I'm French.' The rural French context intensified his struggles. As 'one of the only non-White kids,' he faced bullying that culminated in explosive confrontations with his parents.

Educational aspirations reflected his mixed cultural background. His French father emphasised mathematics and engineering, reflecting French academic culture and gendered expectations, whilst his UK-raised mother encouraged broader exploration, including 'guitar, tennis, like, all my hobbies.' This created competing expectations around academic success and personal development.

University life in London has provided the acceptance Sebastian has long sought. Unlike his rural French experience, diversity at university means 'I don't think lecturers even really acknowledge it. ... it's just not, like, that rare.' Now studying Europe-Asia relations for his dissertation, Sebastian has since transformed his mixed-heritage from a source of shame into an academic and career focus, particularly around Hong Kong human rights issues, demonstrating how supportive environments can reshape identity from burden to strength.

3.12. Conclusions

Our questionnaire data reveals significant socio-demographic diversity among mixed-heritage students, challenging the homogenising use of the 'mixed' category in education policy. While many show educational privilege, others – especially sixth-formers with foreign-born, degree-educated parents – face socio-economic disadvantage due to structural barriers in the UK labour market. Identity is expressed through nuanced strategies that resist rigid racial classifications, with racialised perceptions varying by heritage. Students with part-Black heritage are more readily recognised as 'mixed' than Asian/White peers, reflecting racial visibility hierarchies.

Parental heritage patterns predominantly involve White European individuals partnered with African, Asian, Caribbean, or Middle Eastern backgrounds, reflecting both colonial legacies and contemporary transnational mobility. Educational experiences range from FSM-eligible sixth-formers to independently schooled undergraduates and mobile postgraduates, showing that mixed-heritage trajectories are shaped by intersectional factors. EVENS survey data shows mixed-heritage individuals report weaker ethnic identity and lower British belonging than other minorities, challenging assumptions of smoother integration. Many occupy liminal positions between ethnic minority communities and mainstream British society.

Despite differing attainment and treatment across subgroups, identity salience and belonging show little variation. These findings underscore the need to move beyond generic 'mixed' classifications and adopt intersectional approaches that consider heritage combinations, socio-economic status, institutional racism, and geography to address structural inequalities in education.

4. What are the barriers and challenges for mixed students at school?

In this chapter, we explore the perspectives of students, drawing mainly from our sixth-form focus groups and where relevant recollections of schooling experiences from our university interviewees. The section concludes with practitioner views and reflections on the themes identified in the student data.

The research literature highlights schooling as a formative and critical period in the development of mixed identities in terms of how mixed people see themselves and how they are perceived by others, with often long-lasting consequences (Aspinall & Song, 2013). Educational transitions are important triggers for identity transformations, exposing individuals to a wide range of powerful institutional and interpersonal social and cultural forces. This section documents and examines the challenges and difficulties experienced by our participants from mixed backgrounds at school. These barriers and constraints appear to be pervasive and not confined to any phase of schooling, though there is a clear developmental trajectory, which we will return to at the end.

Mixed students can face identity-related barriers and challenges in their schooling, particularly during adolescence (Tizard & Phoenix, 2002). Our data suggest that secondary schooling is a period where mixed students become acutely aware of how they were perceived, judged for their choices, and often forced to navigate contradictory expectations about authentic embodiment of cultural identity whilst managing the normal challenges of adolescence. Having multiple heritages can generate conflicts, tensions and divergent expectations within educational contexts. Educational institutions such as schools, it is argued by scholars, operate under deep 'monoracial' assumptions and norms which privilege singular, discrete ethno-racial identities, and marginalise those who possess multiple identities (Howard & Doucet, 2025). Our discussion is organised around the following key themes:

- **Negotiating identity and belonging with peers** – this set of barriers concerns students' struggle to fit into ethno-racially defined friendship groups, the pressures and expectations to align with one aspect of their heritage over others, and the dilemmas and conflicts this generates in terms of authentic self-expression and a sense of belonging. A key aspect of this is the policing of mixed identities by peers through questioning and scrutiny of mixed students' cultural authenticity. A significant issue is the use of derogatory labels such as 'whitewashed' to suggest that mixed individuals inauthentically embody their minoritised heritage. Students spoke about inadequate and dismissive responses to harassment from peers targeting their mixedness.
- **Negotiating teachers and school relationships** – according to students, teachers often made assumptions and held stereotypes about them and their family backgrounds based on their appearance, names, or perceived ethnicity, which led to differences in how they are treated; students also discussed a lack of representation in the curriculum and identity pressures resulting from insensitivities in cultural programming and events.
- **Parental support** – we explore how students navigate their parents' typically high expectations and aspirations for them, and the support that they receive in relation to their identities.
- **Institutional perspectives** – practitioners' views highlight how institutional frameworks and processes contribute to the invisibility and misrecognition of mixed students' experiences, needs and concerns.

4.1. Identity questioning and challenges

How mixed people believe they are perceived by others – what Khanna (2004) refers to as ‘reflected appraisals’ – fundamentally influences racial identity development. The literature demonstrates that categorisation by others generally does not match how mixed students categorise themselves and within their families (Tizard & Phoenix, 2002; Williams, 2009). This mismatch creates what Howard and Doucet term the ‘mixed-race identity trap’: ‘The result of this limited way of thinking is that mixed-race individuals often experience an authenticity trap where their multiracial or mixed identities are removed as an authentic identity option, and they are forced to embody a monoracial identity that is fundamentally inauthentic’ (2025, p. 6). Mixed students frequently face peers’ assumptions about their identity. They are often misidentified racially, have their stated heritage questioned, dismissed, or scrutinised. This constant external questioning and demand for identity disclosure creates internal doubt and defensive positioning within their peer interactions and friendships at school. The persistent questioning about physical characteristics and heritage origins leads to an uncomfortable form of hypervisibility. Significant numbers of students consistently report encountering disbelief regarding their racial or cultural backgrounds. This scepticism persists despite evidence of mixed-heritage (e.g. seeing an individual’s parents). Students face explicit challenges to their racial authenticity through language that positions identity as demonstrable.

‘I got into secondary obviously you know when people ask, “Where you from, where from, where you from?” You know like, and I said, “British, British, British people were like, what are you talking about?” You know but, I didn’t have curly hair at the time either then so, I honestly, I just looked like, really White anyways but, I didn’t look British either.’

P74, Male, 6th-form, 17, Black African and White European/White European

The above extract illustrates how appearance-based assumptions create systematic questioning of national belonging, with mixed students facing persistent demands to explain their identity claims. Several students mentioned peers playing ‘guessing games’ about their parentage which they found discomfiting and intrusive.

‘I think it’s funny when people try and guess like, which parent is Black and they’re like, oh you look like your mum is Black or, you look like your dad’s Black, I think that’s so weird.’

P69, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black Caribbean/White British

The constant pressure to validate others’ assumptions about their identity or have their own claims invalidated lead many of our participants to develop sophisticated strategies for managing identity disclosure, often prioritising social acceptance over complete disclosure. These strategies reflect a deep understanding of social dynamics and perceived risks of identity revelation. Students develop frameworks for rejecting peer-imposed identity boundaries whilst maintaining internal self-images. In the examples below, students use concealment, simplification and evasion to counter peers’ incredulity, avoid confrontation, and facilitate acceptance and prevent further questioning. Students with different mixes faced similar challenges:

‘I would tell people that I’m Indian they wouldn’t believe me and then they would just like, pretend like, act as if I was trying to make a joke. So then I guess in that sense that’s why I felt more disconnected from that side because I don’t look like it, I feel like I don’t need to embrace it.’

P76, Female, 6th-form, 17, Caribbean Asian/Black Caribbean

'Because I look the way that I do [White-passing], people didn't really question me about my heritage. And then when they would see my mum, they'd be like, "Why? Why this? Why that?" And then there'd be other questions.'

P35, Female, HE, 22, South Asian/White British

'I remember in Year 9 I fully convinced myself I was fully White because my friends at the time they said, "Oh, no but your dad, it's your dad who is Sri Lankan and you're really pale so you're White, you're White." So I like, for a good two months in Year 9 I just thought I was White.'

P80, Female, 6th-form, 17, White Australian and Pacific Islander/South Asian

4.2. Navigating friendships

Studies indicate that the racial composition of mixed individuals' social networks is important in establishing the parameters of what are considered legitimate identity options (Rockquemore & Arend, 2002). Friendship networks provide mixed individuals with social cues about what identifications are possible, what claims will be validated, rejected or denied. The pressure 'to pick a side' reflects monoracial frameworks which privilege singular racial identification over multiracial complexity. Students identified the transition from primary to secondary education as a critical period where friendship dynamics became increasingly racialised and organised around question of heritage. Secondary education introduces more rigid ethnic boundaries that complicate social navigation for mixed students. Students consistently report making additional efforts to establish and maintain peer relationships compared to monoracial counterparts, whom they perceived as having 'automatic' cultural affinities. Some felt that they were hindered by their partial cultural knowledge as a result of growing up in multicultural rather than monocultural households.

'You still have to force your way in there. You just sort of have to just be like, right, you need to put yourself out there, because if you're not putting yourself out there, people won't come to you really. ... you have to put that extra effort in. People that have the same sort of races, they won't have to put that effort in because they just connect immediately.'

P56, Female, 6th-form, 17, Black Caribbean and Caribbean Asian/Mixed-White and Black Caribbean

'I have like been asked before for example, ... where my dad's from, and I'm like, oh, I don't even know, I just know which language he speaks, or like people have like stuff to say about food, like their favourite food, and I don't have anything to say about it.'

P45, Female, HE, 22, Black African/White European

In turn, this additional social labour burden marks them out as different and visible and creates situations where mixed students simultaneously belong everywhere and nowhere – accepted provisionally in multiple groups but fully claimed by none. Several students recalled moving through multiple peer networks, seeking authentic belonging across different ethno-racial communities during their secondary schooling. The extract below from a participant illustrates this process, and the added complexity of her intersectional identity as a Muslim:

'I was, firstly, friends with all the White people. And it was literally just a friend group of just fully White people. It was really strange. And then I was like, okay, clearly, I don't fit in here. It's really just off-putting. And then I was friends with the Asians. And since I wore the hijab, I guess they were a bit like more accepting. And then I just went into a trio where it was just like an Asian girl and a White girl. And then the next thing I know, we stopped being friends with the Asian girl and it was just the White girl. And then we ended up just with Black people. ...when you're just friends with like a specific group, like, for example, the Asian people or whatever, like it's very apparent that you are the person who doesn't belong. And even with the White people as well, it was very clear.'

P57, Female, 6th-form, 17, North African/White European

This student's sequential movement of 'trial and error' reflects the challenging process of finding social belonging when one's identity does not align neatly with established, and rigid, group boundaries. Each transition reflects both the failure to achieve complete belonging within previous groups and the continued search for authentic cultural community. Being in predominantly White friendship groups also brought additional complexities and risks, particularly for those whose physical appearance was perceived as White and made them 'racial insiders'. Participants recounted involuntary exposure to racist comments that was difficult to navigate.

'It felt very much like, I don't know, sometimes I was undercover, that people would say these really racist things around me.'

P11, Female, HE, 22, East Asian/White European

Other participants described more pro-active and strategic maintenance of friendships, constantly 'floating' or 'going in between' different ethno-racially defined friendship groups. Institutional demographics also played a role in shaping social positioning and peer dynamics. Students from schools with high concentrations of minoritised students, in which one or two groups were culturally dominant, appeared to be more constrained. In contrast, students attending more ethnically diverse schools suggested that the social labour demands around friendship were less.

'We all live in one of the most, in my opinion, culturally diverse places in England or maybe in London. So we're kind of constantly surrounded with people like us that have various mixes, so really finding friends isn't really much of a hard...task.'

P96, Male, 6th-form, 16, Black Caribbean/White European

4.3. Identity policing and authenticity

Identity policing emerged as a substantive theme in our focus groups. It describes the ways in which monoracial peers act as cultural gatekeepers to belonging, and position mixed people and their identities as anomalous, and in need of authentication or proof. Within this framework, the burden of proof rests with mixed people, to justify their embodied cultural identities. Students, particularly girls, described facing scrutiny and surveillance over their appearance (e.g. hair styling), speech patterns, friendship choices, and cultural practices and consumption (e.g. what television shows they watched) as measures of authentic group membership. It is within this context that the deployment of the term 'whitewashed' was repeatedly mentioned. Accusations of being 'whitewashed' emerged as a potent mechanism, and weapon, for questioning mixed students' cultural allegiance, and thus a sophisticated form of interpersonal social control, that reflect broader societal anxieties about racial boundary maintenance.

Implicit, is a binary framework, in which Whiteness and mainstream status, were viewed as being in opposition, to minoritised status (Nguyen, 2016). Mixed students therefore faced a double bind: they risked exclusion for being ‘too White’ for minoritised groups while simultaneously being ‘too other’ for White peer groups. Whilst the term could be deployed against any minoritised student, it was most frequently mentioned by mixed-Black participants. In short, identity policing generated an anxiety amongst many mixed-Black students that theirs was a ‘conditional belonging’.

‘I feel like when you’re in like, secondary school and there’s a lot more like, when people are forming little friendship groups there’s a bit of emphasis on race and so you feel like you have to prove that you are mixed, that you are Black to all these people.’

P70, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black African/White European

Identity policing can also be looked at as an aspect of what Campion (2019) refers to as ‘horizontal hostility’ where students face criticism, exclusion, or authenticity challenges from peers who share similar minoritised or racialised status. The application of this label appears to be linked to specific behavioural, often middle-class cultural markers, that are viewed as racially suspect from Black working-class peers. Accusations of being ‘whitewashed’ were viewed as evidence of assimilation or rejection of minority parental heritage.

‘It makes me feel like I’m not accepted into it, like you don’t, just because I look a certain way or just because of who I talk to like I’m not accepted into that community or into that culture as if I’m the one rejecting it. But that’s just like, it’s not like I’m doing anything to purposely try to do that so, it’s just like, based on me as a person, you’re saying that I’m not a part of it, it’s just like a bit insulting.’

P78, Female, 6th-form, 17, Black Caribbean/White European

‘I know when I was at secondary school I used to be teased about, like they were my friends but they weren’t really my friends, they used to tease me about, why do you talk so White, why are you so posh...and I felt as I was growing up, and I mull it round, yeah that was not okay, like what they said, why am I friends with them.’

P9, Female, HE, 23, Pacific Islander/White British

The accusation of ‘whitewashed’ positions mixed people as active agents in cultural abandonment when they are simply being themselves, creating internalised conflict about authentic self-expression.

‘I’d get called whitewashed a lot, and I feel like, that like, it kind of like, hurts your identity because it’s like, what am I supposed to be to fit in? So, I feel like that did change me a lot like, throughout secondary school I felt like I had to do certain things.’

P69, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black Caribbean/White British

The policing of friendship choices emerged as another site of cultural authentication and policing. Mixed students reported experiencing scrutiny regarding their friendship choices, with particular attention to relationships with White peers. Multiple participants describe being labelled ‘whitewashed’ for their social associations. Friendship choices were interpreted as signifiers of cultural authenticity and allegiance, as illustrated below:

'When I hang out with like, mostly White people I got judged. I remember in like, Year 8 I was with these three girls and they were all White and then someone that I knew before they were like, oh, like [participant] come here, and I'm like, oh why? Look at you getting all whitewashed like, you're just hanging out with White people.'

P79, Female, 6th-form, 17, Black Caribbean and African/White British

Although identity policing was most acutely experienced by part-Black students, some mixed female Muslim students also described encountering similar pressures, especially in schools with significant South Asian Muslim populations. One participant spoke about conforming to specific norms around visible religious identity and practice (e.g. wearing the hijab, fasting, etc.), which overshadowed her other heritage.

'Because I was friends with like, mostly Muslim girls and ... I feel like most of the girls, because nearly all of them wore hijabs ... I felt like, there was always a kind of pressure to fit in with the girls who wore [the] hijab...[consequently] at secondary school ... I felt like I was more Bengali [than Caribbean].'

P72, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black Caribbean/South Asian

In contrast, another student was not perceived as Muslim because of her physical appearance and the absence of a headscarf. Instead, she was positioned in relation to her Whiteness, rather than her minoritised identity.

'And then when I went to secondary school, I went to an all-girls' school in Stratford. So, there were a lot of Muslims there So, then it became like because I don't wear a headscarf and I look mixed and you can tell I'm half White, it became more like I'm the White person in the class.'

P55, Female, 6th-form, 18, North African/White British

The extracts discussed above demonstrate how mixed students navigate a minefield where everyday choices become markers of cultural loyalty or betrayal, that reflect assumptions about appropriate racial and classed performance of identity that extend beyond voluntary cultural choices to include acquired dispositions such as ways of speaking. Ultimately, these binaries present false dichotomies and identity traps, which view non-conformity to monocultural norms and ideals as necessarily indicative of cultural abandonment, and put enormous pressure on students to align their social lives and cultural practices according to ethnic expectations rather than compatibility and shared interests. As evidenced in our transcripts, the pressure for authentic identity performances leads many students to change their behaviour, speech patterns and cultural practices to align with peer expectations, or at the very least engage in effortful 'code-switching'.

4.4. Racialised microaggressions and harassment

In tandem with the use of terms such as 'whitewashed', students also spoke about general forms of 'multiracial microaggressions' – which are subtle statements and behaviours that exclude or isolate, stereotype or deny the experiences of mixed and multiracial people. These microaggressions communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages specifically toward mixed or multiracial individuals regarding their racial identity and have significant psychological and social impact (Nadal et al., 2011). Whilst the use of the label 'whitewash' largely concerned mixed Black/White students, those

with different mixes also spoke about experiencing or witnessing other incidents that could be viewed as mixed microaggressions – terms, comments and behaviours by peers that targeted their mixedness, that made them deeply uncomfortable, hurt, harassed and embarrassed. These coalesced around student names, physical appearance, objectification and exoticisation, often reflecting broader race-gender, skin shade, and religion hierarchies. The following extracts illustrate this range:

‘And the first nickname I was given by fellow six- and seven-year-olds was “The Terrorist” because 9/11 had just happened and I have an Arabic name.’

P25, Male, HE, 30, North African/White British

‘Like, with me, one of my big things is people touch my hair all the time without asking and stuff. And because I’m not Black, they don’t think it’s a problem.’

P55, Female, 6th-form, 18, North African/White British

‘From what I’ve seen from other people like, I don’t know if this is the right word for it but, some people sort of fetishise light skins and like, mixed-race individuals. ... and I feel like, yeah sometimes it is a bit weird.’

P70, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black African/White European

‘Like, every single, the majority of comments I’ve got made about my appearance have largely been ethnicity related in fact like, 99% have been ethnicity related, and I think that is really, really weird.’

P80, Female, 6th-form, 17, White Australian and Pacific Islander/South Asian

Microaggressions that specifically target mixed-heritage identity are not typically recognised by teachers or addressed through school policies.

‘I’ve been called like, a zebra, that kind of stuff...which I feel like, if I go tell a teacher that it’s just going to feel like as a joke but, then if someone calls a Black person like, I don’t know, a monkey let’s say it would be taken a lot more seriously.’

P68, Male, 6th-form, 16, Black Caribbean/White British

In Lewis and Demie’s study (2019, p. 2074), mixed-Black students reported being called ‘Oreo, coconut, mongrel, muffins, yellow. And grey, or elephant’. This implies a troubling institutional hierarchy, which students perceive, where some forms of racism are immediately recognised while others are dismissed.

‘[Terms] like whitewashed and stuff like that. Like, I’ve heard that term a lot. Trust me. I’ve heard it a lot. And teachers will definitely brush over it. Because they’re just like, it’s not the same, you know. ... So, it doesn’t matter whatever you say to them because they’re a bit of White, bit of Black, bit Asian. It doesn’t matter, right? But it does definitely affect you. Because you’re just like, well, why does it not matter when people say it to me? No, it’s the same thing.’

P54, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black Caribbean and Caribbean Asian/Mixed-White and Black Caribbean

Institutional silence sends a message that harassment of mixed people is not a legitimate concern worthy of protection. The institutional hierarchy that takes anti-Black and generally monocultural forms of racism seriously while dismissing mixed-race discrimination creates an unequal level of protection, where some students receive institutional support while others are left vulnerable. Moreover, when schools fail to act or dismiss name-calling and similar harassment, this impact on student well-being and educational outcomes. For example, research suggests that the high rates of exclusions of mixed-Black boys is partly connected to their responses to peer harassment which goes largely unnoticed (Lewis & Demie, 2019). The institutional invisibility of mixed students' concerns directly creates a vacuum which enables peer-led identity policing to establish the boundaries around acceptable behaviour and fill the void of official guidance.

4.5. How do mixed students perceive their interactions with teachers?

Research indicates stereotypical teacher perceptions of minority ethnic students can contribute to unequal outcomes for those students (Strand, 2012). In relation to mixed students and their families, teachers' expectations can vary depending on the specific mix. Lewis (2013) found that teachers view White/Black African children as coming from middle-class, stable, aspirational families prioritising educational success, whilst White/Black Caribbean descent children and families were more likely to be negatively stereotyped.

Students frequently experienced teachers making assumptions about their backgrounds, abilities, or behaviours based on their perceived ethnicity or appearance and automatically categorising them into racial groups without asking. One participant recounted a teacher wrongly assuming she was Somali, when in fact she was of mixed Black Caribbean/North African heritage. Teachers also made assumptions about family dynamics, particularly assuming strict religious control in Muslim families, rather than behaviour being the outcome of individual personal traits or preference. Another recalled a teacher questioning why she wore a hijab and suggesting she remove it when parents were not present. These assumptions often reflected teachers' limited cultural knowledge and tendency to generalise based on appearance or names.

'My little sister, she had a PE lesson one time, and ...they were learning dance. And she was like, "I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to." And the teacher went crazy. And he was like calling my dad being like, oh, why aren't you letting your daughter do dance and stuff? And just assumed it was because of my dad's religion ... And then my sister, she was like, "I just didn't want to do it." Like, this girl was shy.'

P55, Female, 6th-form, 18, North African/White British

Students reported facing various forms of cultural insensitivity, from mispronounced names to inappropriate comments about religious practices. There were few instances where teachers had connected students' academic performance to beliefs about their ethnicity. In one example, a student felt that his academic struggles were viewed through the prism of having a migrant father, disregarding the fact that his mother was White English.

'It wasn't until I got to university that I found out that I'm severely dyslexic because all of my teachers up until then just thought that English wasn't my second language and it made sense that I didn't know how to write it very well or struggled reading. English is my birth language.'

P25, Male, HE, 30, North African/White British

Existing research highlights low teacher expectations for some mixed-groups, in particular those from White/Black Caribbean heritage (Lewis & Demie, 2019). Less documented are the elevated academic expectations for mixed young people racialised in relation to their perceived 'Asian' heritage. The connection between ethnicity and high academic ability was mentioned by White/Asian students. These students felt that their academic performance was viewed as confirmation of Asian model minority stereotypes of 'Asian' students as studious, intelligent and hardworking (Archer & Francis, 2007; Wong, 2015). One student recounted how teacher expectations about her ability shifted when her family relocated from an Asian majority country to a White European one when she was a teenager.

'Growing up in Singapore, I didn't have this Asian dream because I was actually seen as a White person so they [teachers] didn't expect me to have good grades. But then I think it was afterwards when I moved to France, then people were like oh yeah, she's Asian, she has to do well. It was then that I started feeling it.'

P15, HE, 26, South East Asian/White European

The extract above points to the highly contextualised construction of 'race/ethnicity' and the ways in which being racialised in different ways can have different educational consequences.

'Definitely feel teachers cared about me more as a high achieving student. ... So, I wondered sometimes, I think people knew, they'd seen my mum, she was one of maybe three non-White parents to collect their child at that school. So I felt like everyone really knew. It was a small school, and teachers connected maybe my heritage with my performance.'

P11, Female, HE, 22, East Asian/White European

In contrast, mixed-Black students spoke more about racialised differences in treatment within disciplinary contexts. A range of participant students spoke about witnessing harsher treatment towards students racialised as Black within their secondary schools.

'But I feel like they would be less lenient with Black kids when it comes to doing something bad. But then, when it comes to White kids, they didn't really care as much.'

P58, Male, 6th-form, 16, Middle-Eastern/White European

In line with the established literature most mixed-Black students report being classified and perceived as Black by school staff. In doing so they drew upon social conventions regarding how mixed Black people have historically been racialised using hypodescent (e.g. any perceivable Black ancestry is sufficient for categorisation) (Caballero et al., 2007).

'Because when you're mixed, normally you get perceived as Black. ... for me, I know I was perceived as Black by many of my teachers. I just know. You're sort of just know. I'm not White. You can tell I'm not White. So, if you're not White, it's normally you're just Black. Because like when people see mixed people, it's normally like if you're not White, you're Black. Because you see light-skinned Black people, but you don't see dark-skinned White people.'

P54, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black Caribbean and Caribbean Asian/Mixed-White and Black Caribbean

According to these students, this tendency to racialise them as Black, sat somewhat at odds with at least some teachers' knowledge of their actual mixed-heritage. Several mixed-Black students spoke about how the composition of their peer groups also influenced how teachers perceived and treated them. These students felt that they were treated differently when associating with Black friends versus White peers, and more likely to be misrecognised as Black. That is to say, proximity to Blackness appeared to activate and subject mixed students to the same negative gender-race behavioural assumptions and stereotypes as their monoracial peers (Lewis & Demie, 2019). These negative stereotypes are generally regarded as an important barrier to Black children's achievement at school (YMCA, 2020). In the case of female students, their awareness of, and exposure to, teacher stereotyping of Black girls, as 'loud' and problematic learners created pressures to avoid confirming stereotypical expectations (Archer, 2008). Typically, this required vigilance and constrained ways of behaving.

'I think for me in secondary because most of my friends were Black, I think it was more like, depending on who I'm surrounded with then they [teachers] sort of picked what side of me to see. Because if I'm like, with my Black friends, I feel like they automatically are like, okay, this group is like, they're going to misbehave or, they're going to talk whatever. But, then if I'm like, with like, sitting next to people who aren't Black then the teacher kind of just doesn't like, take any note or they won't perceive me as someone that's like, going to misbehave.'

P73, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black African/White European

The above accounts suggest that in relation to school disciplinary contexts, female mixed-Black students occupied an intermediate position within racialised hierarchies of perceived threat and respectability, which at times shielded them from some anti-Black stereotyping and discrimination. Students were highly aware of this differential treatment and form of privilege often based on the perception of their appearance (e.g. having lighter-skin, looser texture hair, etc.).

'I feel like in school especially I haven't really faced any racism ... and I know friends that have and they're always like, dark skinned. So I feel like ... because I am lighter like, I'm still Black but I'm not going to face as much prejudice [from teachers].'

P69, Female, 16, Black Caribbean/White British

This dynamic and intermediate positioning could at times create identity traps, framing Black friendship as an educational liability, forcing students to choose between social and cultural belonging and institutional approval. This is poignantly explored in this extract:

'My [Black] friends were treated differently at the time and yeah, I think they were singled out a lot of the time. I think they would just be in trouble a lot more. ...Because of my friendship circle ... I remember the teachers used to pinpoint like, You keep hanging around with these girls and you shouldn't because- You know. They're just going to bring you down... Because I was the mixed one out of my friendship circle, it was always, "Oh, well you can do better. You can be better. You don't have to be friends with these people."'

P6, Female HE, 26, Black African/White European

As the extract highlights, while perhaps well-intentioned, teachers' attempt to separate this student from her Black peer friendships under the guise of academic intervention, reflects investment in particular forms of classed and raced social mobility that require cultural assimilation and peer group abandonment, that is experienced by some mixed students as a particular form of institutional pressure

to distance themselves from Blackness. This is particularly problematic since mixed-Black young people tend to be in friendship groups with monoracial Black peers (Campion, 2019; Joseph-Salisbury, 2018).

'It kind of always felt like I was being pulled to like, I really want to be with this social group because this is what I identify but then it's like my teachers wanted me to be with a different social group because they believed that's where I would thrive more. ... At the time it felt like that. I mean maybe that wasn't what they were trying to do, but I think just the way they used to go about it, it felt like that. It felt that...Yeah, you want to take me away and you just want to push me to this other side.'

P6, Female, HE, 26, Black African/White European

These accounts from our participants suggests that teachers may view mixed students as potentially more 'salvageable', than their monoracial Black peers, through peer separation, which leaves unexamined teachers' own racialised assumptions. The institutional framing of Black peer groups as inherently problematic creates pressure for mixed-race students to abandon cultural community in exchange for institutional acceptance. However, this can position them in a bind, and as the example above, push students to adopt rebellious anti-school forms of resistance.

4.6. Mixed students' experiences of teaching and learning

Students were generally positive about the respect for diversity and range of multicultural programming and learning available – heritage months, cultural assemblies, student societies, and celebratory events – in their sixth-forms and compared this favourably to their earlier schooling experiences. However, one event emerged as somewhat problematic for several mixed students in their current and previous schools: 'culture days'. Intended as public celebrations of students' diverse ethnic, national traditions by schools, many of our participants found it challenging in several ways. Firstly, the focus on visual or easily displayed cultural markers (e.g. national dresses, dances, etc.) made it practically difficult for some to fully represent all their diverse heritages. This presented an internal conflict about which heritage to prioritise, leading to feelings of cultural disloyalty or incompleteness, and resurfaced familiar dilemmas of being pressured to 'choose one side'.

'When we had Culture Day, I didn't have much, but I had a Nigerian flag and he [her White English father] was like, "oh, so you don't want to accept anything from my side of the culture?" Because there wasn't much, I could do and I was just like, I don't know what to say here.'

P79, Female, 6th-form, 17, Black Caribbean and African/White British

Secondly, in relation to the peer dynamics outlined earlier, 'culture days' presented students with heightened anxieties about peer authentication of their identity claims, and even their entitlement to represent their heritage. Several students said they felt unconfident about their knowledge of their multiple heritages, or that their family diverged from institutional or peer assumptions about authentic cultural expression. One student said, in relation to her South Asian heritage:

'I know my really niche family traditions which stem from the culture but, I don't have the culture.'

P80, Female, 6th-form, 17, White Australian and Pacific Islander/South Asian

4.7. Gender and authenticity

The data reveals distinct patterns of identity policing in relation to male and female participants. Mixed female students experienced intensified dual pressures around racial authenticity and gendered cultural expectations. For female participants, embodied physical appearance and dispositions were a primary site of identity contestation. Hair styling, clothing choices, and aesthetic presentation were constantly evaluated by peers as markers of racial authenticity. This created ongoing pressure to perform racial identity through specific aesthetic choices, with deviation interpreted as cultural betrayal or inauthentic. However, male participants described more rigid racial segregation in friendship groups. Female students reported more fluid friendships across racial lines but face intensified aesthetic and behavioural scrutiny. In addition, boys engaged in sexualised commentary about mixed girls' appearance, particularly around hairstyles and perceived racial authenticity, creating additional layers of objectification. In relation to teachers, mixed-Black female students faced particular scrutiny around behaviour and had to navigate anti-Black stereotypes as 'loud' and 'ghetto' whilst also not appearing too assimilated (Pennant, 2024). There are likely to be specific gender-race stereotypes which impact male students, but which were not discussed by our participants. The comparatively poor educational outcomes observed among mixed-Black males underscore salient intersectional differences in how gender mediates the experience and management of academic pressures and tensions (Joseph-Salisbury, 2016).

4.8. Mixed-heritage in the curriculum

As Tikly and colleagues (2004, p. 6) have argued the educational barriers for some mixed-Black groups 'operate in a context where mixed-heritage identities ... are not recognised in the curriculum'. Beyond explicit multicultural programmes, most of our sixth-formers did not encounter teaching or learning that acknowledged mixed-heritage experiences and contributions. Whilst students were very appreciative of the multicultural programme that their sixth-forms, and previous schools organised, most students reported existing provision as typically framed in a monocultural manner.

'If there's assembly about culture they will talk about your Black side or your White side, or whatever side you have. They don't really talk about anybody being from multiple, different places and the hardships or whatever that comes with that, I guess.'

P69, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black Caribbean/White British

Students suggested that information about mixed-heritage historical or cultural figures should be incorporated into existing school teaching and learning. As indicated above, students wanted a more embedded approach in which teaching about culture explicitly addresses mixedness. Most students said that they had never had an opportunity to speak about their mixed identity at school and appreciated the opportunity to do so as part of the research. Several identified the potential educational benefits of having such discussions in school with peers and teachers. In one focus group, a participant discussed an example of a pedagogical approach which she, and the group, felt was successful in opening up conversations around mixedness and peer dynamics. It was an assembly and workshop on hair. Hair is highly resonant focus given the scrutiny female students in general, and mixed students in particular, faced around hair.

'Because it was a way to talk about something that a lot of mixed people and a lot of non-mixed people have different cultural and societal problems with.'

P55, Female, 6th-form, 18, North African/White British

As the student explained, it was successful as an intervention because it explicitly addresses mixedness (variations in hair type that do not fit monoracial norms) and avoided essentialising students' identities; it focused on embodied and material experiences which made it tangible and easy for students to share their experiences; and lastly, it created space for complexity, through an open discussion that cut across mixed and non-mixed students.

4.9. How do students negotiate parental aspirations?

Research indicates that parents of mixed-heritage students have high academic expectations and aspirations, although this is not always acknowledged by schools (Tikly et al., 2004). The transcripts reveal sophisticated negotiations of cultural expectations around educational and career choices, with students balancing intergenerational sacrifice narratives against personal aspirations. The majority spoke about parents expressing strong preferences for university and specific 'prestigious' careers, particularly medicine, dentistry, engineering, computing and law. While the pressures manifest differently depending on familial and socio-cultural contexts, the underlying dynamics remain strikingly uniform. This strong emphasis on educational success and high career aspirations is perhaps not surprising given the nature of the schools themselves, and the impact of what might be termed institutional selection effects on those that attend. Our case study institutions are all highly-rated academically focused schools that attract and select university-aspiring students who undertake academic pathways. Students' aspirations frequently reflect parents' own unfulfilled educational ambitions or their perception of what constitutes success in their 'new' country, and framed by cultural values that prioritise financial security and social status.

'They expect us to do like, really good, like, go to university and do all this stuff and like, achieve amazing things you know, be one of the best people and they can be quite a lot like pressure, you just hear all the people in your family, "Oh they just did this, they finished this, they did a first in whatever:" and just like, okay, great, so now I have to be like that as well.'

P79, Female, 6th-form, 17, Black Caribbean and African/White British

'My dad told me for years, go into computer science. That's where the money is. And now he's trying to do that with my sister now that I've decided not to do that.'

P55, Female, 6th-form, 18, North African/White British

A significant proportion of participants had parents with higher education degrees. However, we must be cautious in reading direct social class implications from this fact as outlined earlier in chapter 3. Migrants' cultural capital, in the form of high-level qualifications, cannot always be mobilised or validated, as they would have been in their home contexts (Erel, 2010). Moreover, the majority of our sixth-form participants' parents lack direct experience with the UK education system, creating a gap between their strong and specific aspirations for their children and their ability to provide practical support. This creates a distinctive pattern of what might be called 'aspirational' without 'navigational' capital (Gale & Parker, 2015). This unfamiliarity often results in students navigating applications, university choices, and academic decisions largely independently, while still managing parental expectations.

'My dad also grew up in a very poor area of Albania, so he didn't get a lot of education, and my mum didn't really get much, like higher education as well. So, I think getting support about going to university and stuff will be very little ... because they don't really understand...they wouldn't know how it works.'

P86, Female, 6th-form, 16, White European/Mixed South and East Asian

Parents' deep investment in the importance of education without corresponding practical knowledge could sometimes be a source of tension, and students spoke about 'correcting' parental misconceptions around university, career and subject choices. Students' talk about aspirations was frequently suffused with a strong sense of 'parental sacrifice'. They described parents who fled civil wars, struggled against racial discrimination, grew up in poverty, or immigrated to the UK to improve their lives, viewing British higher education as superior and essential for their children's success. This sense of intergenerational sacrifice weighed heavily on students' educational decision-making and motivations.

'I think, more of my mum's side, I have more kind of expectations since I'm also, like, the first person to go to university. They kind of want me to do something that's, like, longer lasting and something that will get me money. And the main one is just, like, being a doctor in Slovakia is, like, a big thing. ... But it's not my aspiration. ... But it's also kind of hard and it's kind of, there's a lot of pressure because you want them to be happy because they kind of moved here for you.'

P90, Female 6th-form, 17, Black Caribbean/White European

'I want to you know, make them...proud like, maybe like, break the cycle, do really well you know – Well, considering my mum being mixed as well like, when she grew up it was the Angolan civil war ... she fled and everything you know, started a new life here. You know like, obviously I want to build on that.'

P74, Male, 6th form, 17, Black African and White European/White European

For some of our mixed-Asian participants, parental aspirations throughout schooling were explicitly framed by internalised stereotyped notions of the 'Asian dream' which connects defining notions of academic excellence and persistence, and the pursuit of 'prestigious' careers with 'Asian' ethnicity and identity. For these students therefore autonomy in their educational choices was framed as a question of cultural identity and belonging, and thus a struggle at times, operating as what Wong (2015) terms a 'blessing with a curse', simultaneously elevating expectations whilst constraining educational choice.

'A lot of people on my Indian side have and they've kind of all gone to Warwick university and have become like, doctors and lawyers ... my mum will make comments and be like, "Oh, you've got to go Warwick and follow the family path."'

P76, Female, 6th-form, 17, Caribbean Asian/Black Caribbean

One participant felt that her multicultural household moderated stereotypical 'Asian' expectations and pressures around education.

'There were no sort of like stereotypical pressures. I think my mum and dad, they make a really good team regardless of background. So, I think they share their approach based on values. So, like I don't necessarily inherit cultural values. I more inherit the values that are important to my parents that they have sort of met in the middle between their two cultures.'

P34, HE, 22, South Asian/White British

Others spoke of lenient parents that support their aspirations, with little or no pressure.

'I think I'm quite lucky in that aspect I don't really have these [high] expectations because like, I'm the first person from my whole family like, on my mum's side at least to like, be in the UK. So, like, it's a lot different from here than in Romania and so like, my mum has always been like, just do what you want like, whatever aspirations you have just try and strive for them.'

P78, Female, 6th-form, 17, Black Caribbean/White European

Having parents from different cultural backgrounds could sometimes lead to contrasting approaches to education and career choices, with one parent tending to emphasise happiness and personal growth, while the other focused more intensely on academic achievement, career channelling and conventional markers of success. This could create complex dynamics where students navigate between different sets of gendered, classed, racialised cultural expectations from each parent.

'My mum is like just very relaxed, like if you don't want to go to school, don't go to school because that's how she was brought up and doesn't value education. My [Black Caribbean] dad was like – He was giving his phone number out to teachers.'

P4, Female, HE, 29, Black Caribbean/White British

'On the education side, in France, there's, like, a very big culture of, like, maths is the only thing that's important, and then becoming an engineer is, like, super important. So, my dad always pushed really hard for me to, like, do maths and, like, be super good at engineering, whereas my mum, I guess, being brought up in the UK, she was a bit more, like, liberal about these sort of things.'

P36, Male, HE, 19, East Asian/White European

'My dad, he's Caribbean he also focuses a lot on like, academics. ... he's the one every, single day like, telling me, "Do your homework, do this, do that."'

P52, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black Caribbean/South Asian

A student with a Muslim father, spoke about restrictions on mobility and university choices, shaped by gendered cultural norms around independence. She explained how being mixed creates fears within the family that White cultural influences might lead to inappropriate behaviour that compromise traditional gender roles.

'Being Algerian and a woman, it's like, I'm not supposed to move out until I get married and stuff ... my older sister, she could only go to school outside of London ... She had to get my dad's whole side of the family to try and convince him. ... there's more fear, I guess, on my dad's side that we're going to end up doing something that we shouldn't be doing because we've got that White culture in our family as well.'

P55, Female, 6th-form, 18, North African/White British

In sum, students' educational aspirations are shaped by intersecting factors including their parents' migration history, which fosters a sense of intergenerational sacrifice and unfilled ambition. They also differ in their stocks of social and cultural capital, in the form of familial networks and cultural knowledge, that support achievement and motivation. Our analysis highlights that subtle differences in parental aspiration

occur within and between families, challenging simplistic cultural explanations. While some families exhibit stereotypical professional pathway channelling, others demonstrate exceptional flexibility. Gendered patterns reveal variable maternal/paternal emphasis rather than consistent gendered educational pressure.

4.10. Parental support for identity challenges

In the main, students faced many of their identity challenges alone, often protecting their parents from these realities. Many students describe managing racial incidents at school independently, either because they do not want to burden parents, and tried to ‘ignore it’, or because parents lack the cultural context to understand these experiences or the racial literacy themselves. Some cited their parents’ own experiences of growing up in monocultural households, or a lack of understanding of life as a racialised minority, as factors limiting their ability to provide guidance and understanding. There was also a distinctive pattern, with students from mixed-Black backgrounds more likely to report having had conversations about racial incidents or experiences with their parents, compared to those with different mixes. This echoes research which shows that parents of mixed-Black young people often engage in explicit attempts to develop their children’s ‘racial literacy’ and ‘resilience’ against potential racism (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018).

As indicated earlier, some of the most painful experiences that students recounted occurred within friendship groups, and many students found it difficult at the time to articulate and recognise what they were experiencing as serious enough to burden their parents.

‘I never really to a point ever thought it was like bullying, because often it would come from people who I’ve called friends. And it’s just how they would consider it jokes, which I’d understand but I just really disliked, just disliked hearing them, they just made me feel quite uncomfortable and like quite singled out. ... I don’t know I always kept this to myself, I never actually told my parents about this. Because one I didn’t think it was first extreme enough to like class as bullying It’s just one of those things that I just felt like I had to, unfortunately I just had to endure.’

P14, Male, HE, 24, East Asian/White European

In line with existing research, when students did seek parental support, it was overwhelming from mothers, particularly those who shared racialised and minoritised experiences. Overall, there is a silence around discrimination, whether from students protecting parents, or parents lacking frameworks to address them, with fathers often absent from these discussions, which leaves students vulnerable and isolated during key periods of growth as young people. A few students reported turning to their mixed siblings for support, particularly in cases where parental support was lacking or not forthcoming. Several students mentioned having meaningful conversations with brothers or sisters about racialised encounters at school and their identities.

4.11. Institutional invisibility – practitioner perspectives

Our interviews with senior school staff reveal a persistent pattern of institutional invisibility affecting mixed students in educational settings. Despite their presence in schools, mixed students remain unrecognised as a distinct group with specific needs and experiences. Invisibility manifests most fundamentally through deficits in data collection, categorisation and deployment. This is unfortunately a long established finding within the literature (Tikly et al., 2004). As Caballero et al., (2007, p. 355) documented, the lack of visibility means ‘no meaningful dialogue is currently able to take place about what the needs of this pupil group might be.’ Data on mixed students across the three case study schools mixed students was inconsistently categorised or deployed in relation to key institutional measures and interventions, which effectively hindered meaningful engagement with group-specific experiences.

Mixed students are often absorbed into broader categories, losing their unique identity in data analysis and intervention planning. It is even rarer for schools to disaggregate data on mixed groups. At East Academy, staff explicitly noted that mixed students from White/Asian backgrounds are collapsed into monoracial categories and ‘get taken into one ethnic group as opposed to them, or being recognised that, you know, they are from both backgrounds.’ This categorical erasure means their specific challenges remain unaddressed, as they are statistically merged with other ethnic groups rather than being analysed as a distinct population with unique experiences.

When interventions are planned, there is caution about ‘basing intervention groups solely off of ethnicity as such,’ in East and South Academies, yet this same caution appears to result in mixed-heritage students being excluded from targeted support altogether. School focus tends to gravitate towards numerically visible groups – whether Black boys or White working-class students.

‘I guess sometimes it’s that ethnic group that is kind of seen as almost the forgotten group so to speak, which obviously shouldn’t be the case. But I know, you know, sometimes we’ve got this big push on you know, supporting our Black boys or this big push in supporting like our White working-class boys. And often because that mixed group is quite small it kind of does get like forgotten about.’

East Academy

In East and South Academies, staff mentioned the small numbers of mixed students in their cohorts as presenting a challenge whilst simultaneously using this to justify institutional neglect. Given the relatively poor quality of the data on mixed students, it is surprising that staff appeared so confident about the small numbers. Moreover, given the frequent mismatch in how students and teachers classify mixed individuals, it is likely that the mixed population is larger than presumed.

At South Academy, staff argued that socio-economic disadvantage was the main barrier to student achievement. Access to material and financial resources appeared to be prioritised and disconnected from broader questions of culture and identity.

‘I think the challenges the pupils face are probably more disadvantage than anything else, so it’s a matter of us just trying to find some kind of resources and see what’s available to be able to help them to access what they need to access.’

South Academy

South Academy offered a comprehensive financial support system for eligible students, and interventions for low-attainers. However, it maintained a notably colour-blind approach that did not target or track usage by ethnicity.

‘We’ve never actually looked at, at least I haven’t, looked at in terms of group and who’s accessing it [financial support] more. It’s just pupils who need access to something and we provide it as best as we can.’

South Academy

At South Academy invisibility within data monitoring combined with a framework that prioritised material disadvantage.

In sum, there appears to be a vicious cycle at play: insofar as mixed-heritage students remain invisible within monitoring systems, their specific needs go unidentified and targeted support is not developed (Lewis, 2013). In turn, continued invisibility in the data reinforces the assumption that no specific attention is needed.

4.12. Issues of identity and belonging – practitioner perspectives

Of the three schools, North Academy appears to be most reflective and nuanced in its approach to supporting its minoritised students. It has implemented a three-year racial literacy programme run by an external company, which emerged from internal research conducted by the head of inclusion that we interviewed. The research revealed persistent issues of microaggressions, curriculum bias, and identity conflicts that she had assumed would not exist in such a diverse school. The training focuses on one racial group at a time, with the first-year centring on the experiences of Black and mixed-Black heritage students. The training deliberately challenges the notion of Black identity as a monolith, breaking down assumptions that all Black students share identical experiences. According to staff, the programme faces significant barriers in an environment that prioritises narrowly defined academic outcomes, and where teachers experience ‘pressure on getting our students to the aspirational universities’ making comprehensive curriculum redesign difficult. Our staff interviewee recognised the racial literacy programme itself may have a ‘blind spot’ regarding mixed-heritage students, as it is underpinned by a monoracial framework.

The sense that identity issues are largely resolved or insignificant for students at sixth-form was mentioned by a practitioner at North Academy as a barrier.

‘It’s quite easy to assume that actually, they’re now free from all the issues that affect them from the day-to-day kind of microaggressions and other stuff that impacts them. They’re here, they’ve made it, they can continue. But actually, given the mix of students we have now, it can mask and hide some of the issues that impact some of our local kids.’

North Academy

The assumption that students no longer face identity-related challenges, or that prior academic success generates resilience to discrimination, can lead to a false sense of security and institutional inaction. In fact, as research indicates, academic success does not eliminate racialised positioning but transforms its manifestations. Educational success for students from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds, may intensify rather than resolve identity conflicts and lead to feelings of ‘imposterism’ (Archer, 2008; Meadhbh Murray et al., 2023). Staff at North and East Academies were highly sensitised to issues of identity and belonging for minoritised students, and in particular how these might impact and shape educational outcomes and experiences. Staff interviewees had personally witnessed or intervened to support students who were experiencing issues relating to their identity and peer dynamics, including events such as Culture Day.

‘So, that is what we’re trying to do but I’m very aware of how identity can be like a box that you put yourself in. And sometimes, as a school, by celebrating it, and trying to get people to celebrate their identity, perhaps we may be missing out on the nuances of students who either have mixed-heritage.’

North Academy

At East and North Academies, both with significant Muslim student populations, there was a particular concern about how this specific group of mixed students navigate their ethnic and religious identities. Staff gave examples of mixed students with a Muslim background that faced scrutiny and peer judgement and exclusion around religious practice and cultural visibility (e.g. fasting, celebrations and clothing choices):

'I know there have been issues when it's come to Islam in particular, and pressures to pray, or to cover your hair, and stuff that can present itself.... I think, yes, generally, I think as a school, perhaps we do have a blind spot to those of mixed-heritage.'

North Academy

At East Academy, staff also described mixed White/Asian students who struggled with internalised stereotypical associations between their partial 'Asian' ethnicity and academic ability in mathematics and science. She gave examples of students who said: 'I'm only half [Asian] so obviously I'm not going to be as good' or another who 'kind of attributed her own success because of the Asian side'. These examples highlight the way in which Asian model minority stereotypes can create a deficit narrative for mixed-heritage students who feel they possess only partial claim to this supposed advantage, and even when successful, attributing their achievement to one part of their heritage rather than their own efforts. Although our interviewee at East Academy expressed critical awareness of peer group dynamics that perpetuate stereotypical associations, there was comparatively limited reflection on the role of educators and institutional practices in reproducing these stereotypes (Wong, 2015).

The issue of harassment was discussed with our interviewee at East Academy. She acknowledged that while there is a robust anti-racist school policy with clear consequences for specific racial slurs, it did not include discrimination or harassment targeting mixed groups.

'There is like zero tolerance to racism. It's, again a list of words, you use those words it's an automatic day exclusion. But actually, one the list isn't exhaustive and two it's there are just so many things that of course a student might say to another student which is really hurtful or totally unacceptable and I wonder how as a staff body we would navigate or deal with that.'

East Academy

In light of the consistent finding over decades that mixed students are frequently the target of harassment and bullying from their peers, often doubly, in relation to their mixedness and their minority heritage, it is disappointing to find that so little has changed in this regard (Lewis & Demie, 2019; Tikly, 2007).

4.13. The sixth-form as a space of transformation and liberation

While we have focused on the challenges and barriers faced by students in their educational trajectories, it is worth noting that most of our participants viewed current sixth-form experiences favourably compared to experiences of primary and secondary schooling. Most our interviewees did not attend the lower-schools attached to the case study sixth-forms where there is one, therefore the sixth-form was for many a substantively different and new environment, often in a different locality to the one in which they lived. For most, the transition was characterised as a move from constrained to more expansive identity expression. Participants consistently report experiencing pressure and constrained identity possibilities during secondary education, which starts to dissipate in sixth-form. Several spoke about how they had begun to identify themselves differently, often embracing a 'mixed' identity. Students cited a shift in peer culture, attributable to increased maturity and reduced policing of identities.

Many pointed to increased knowledge about cultural differences, more awareness and greater cultural competence amongst their peers. Participants felt under less racialised surveillance in their friendship choices and freer to choose friends based on interests.

‘As you move into like, sixth-form that starts to breakdown and so it’s kind of just like that’s just who you are, and how other people perceive you isn’t like, you don’t have to force yourself to make them perceive you a certain way.’

P70, Female, 6th-form, 16, Black African/White European

There also factors that students did not articulate but which nonetheless are important in shaping the distinctive contours of their sixth-form experience. Foremost is the selective nature of their institutions, which have brought together students like themselves from a wide field within London. Unlike their earlier schooling, most students were now in a more academically homogenous environment with motivated peers, who shared similar pro-school, academic, university-aspiring, dispositions and orientations, studying A-levels. Moreover, all of the case study schools have an explicit culture of high-expectations and high standards. The ethnic composition is also likely to have played a role. For many students, their sixth-forms are likely to be more diverse, in terms of ethnicity and sex, than their secondary schools. London has the highest number of single-sex schools in England (approximately 1 in four students attend a single-sex secondary school) and high levels of ethnic segregation across its primary and secondary schools which can be especially constraining for those who belong to more than one heritage (Mitchell, 2023).

4.14. Conclusions

Mixed-heritage students face complex identity challenges, especially in secondary education, including peer pressure to ‘pick a side’ and scrutiny over appearance, speech, and friendships. Mixed-Black students, in particular, face accusations of being ‘whitewashed,’ which create difficult choices between cultural community and institutional approval. Mixed-Muslim students face parallel pressures around visible religious practice – scrutiny over hijab-wearing – with some excluded for appearing insufficiently observant, whilst others are racialised as White rather than recognised as Muslim. Forming friendships requires significant social labour, as students navigate ethnically defined groups without full acceptance.

Teachers hold racialised assumptions, interpreting students’ behaviour and ability through stereotypes. Mixed-Asian students are often viewed as ‘model minorities’, while mixed-Black students are racialised as Black and subject to surveillance and harsher discipline. Teachers also make assumptions about Muslim families, attributing students’ choices to strict religious control rather than individual preference. Harassment from peers targeting mixedness is frequently dismissed as less serious than monoracial discrimination. Despite strong parental aspirations, many students lack support for identity development at home, especially from fathers or non-minoritised parents with limited racial literacy.

Practitioner interviews confirm the institutional invisibility of mixed-heritage students, driven by broad ethnic categories, poor data collection, and colour-blind policies. However, the sixth-form case study schools appeared to offer greater freedom: reduced peer policing, increased maturity, and more diverse, academically focused communities which allow students to explore and embrace their mixed identities more authentically.

5. Mixed identities and experiences at university

This chapter reports on the university interviews with students and staff. It considers how our mixed-heritage participants navigate the distinctive social and institutional dynamics of university settings. It details how mixed identities are enacted at university, and how they shape educational and peer dynamics. There is an established literature which highlights the ways in which universities, particularly the more selective ones, can be inhospitable or even culturally hostile towards students from minority ethnic and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Bhambra et al., 2018). Yet, the positioning of mixed-heritage students is rarely explored in detailed.

5.1. Navigating university: key dispositions and orientations

As documented in the previous chapters, our participants experienced distinctive racialised, gendered, and classed trajectories through schooling. These trajectories are shaped by having to navigate multiple, and at times contradictory, racial positions and institutional expectations and pressures. For many, transnational mobility and mixed-heritage further complicate their educational journeys, particularly within international schooling contexts. These experiences have shaped distinct dispositions and orientations that underpin how participants make sense of and navigate university life. First, students have an embodied dispositional flexibility and heightened sensitivity or hypervigilance to how their identities are perceived and racialised by different audiences. This is frequently coupled with an underlying anxiety about meeting the threshold of belonging.

‘Even now doing this [research interview] I don’t even know if my mixedness was enough to get into this space ... I was like oh yeah, I’ll think about it and in my head, I’m thinking I’m not gonna do this ... I don’t have anything to contribute to this’

P1, Male, HE, 20, South Asian and White British/White European

In addition, most participants demonstrate sophisticated and reflective understandings of racial categories and hierarchies, and their own positioning within them. Arguably, most of our interviewees can be said to demonstrate an adaptive resilience – the ability to strategically manage and deploy their identity to facilitate social navigation, grounded in earlier experiences within educational settings. These characteristics can be seen below:

‘I feel like the big difference is that you are always aware how people perceive both sides of who you are ... It’s always a double consciousness right, it’s like one thing is like how I perceive myself but you’re always aware how others perceive yourself on both sides.’

P3, Female, HE, 33, East Asian/White European

‘I think I passed as Malay. If you’re Malay and you look at me, you’ll think I’m Malay. But to people who don’t know what being Malay is or who don’t know, like, Southeast Asia, they wouldn’t be able to identify me.’

P40, Female, HE, 22, South Asian and East Asian/South Asian and East Asian

Participants conveyed growth in personal awareness and development, in terms of confidence and knowledge about their heritage which continued as they entered university. This was underpinned in some cases, by new intellectual frameworks that were unavailable to them during their schooling:

'I think even before I started university because I worked for about four years before I started university... and I do think in terms of my own knowledge and even just being confident. ... I think I used to just dismiss it [conversations about identity], like I'm mixed-race but I don't think when I was in school I really knew the purpose of the deeper conversations of what it's like being mixed race. I used to just say it in a sentence and want the conversation to be done, because I was so bored of those assumptions and those second questions and I just didn't want to put up with it.'

P9, Female, HE, 23, Pacific Islander/White British

Within these general dispositions, particular racialised patterns can be discerned, shaped by the different educational trajectories of White/Asian and mixed-Black students, and their different social and cultural positions, as well as self-understandings. First, in general mixed-Asian students experienced more ambiguous racialisation in educational settings. When their appearance is read as 'Asian' they benefit from, as well as being constrained by, 'model minority' stereotypes, which carry with them presumptions of effortless academic success, compliance, and technical aptitude (Okura, 2022; Walton & Truong, 2023; Wong, 2015). Positive teacher expectations during their schooling careers sustain internalised high-achieving academic self-images. Several of our participants spoke about struggles with elevated expectations, from others and themselves, through the internalisation of the model minority stereotype:

'Like when I am doing my PhD, like- I've been socialised to think that's the Asian part, but I do feel like the idea of excelling at it is the Korean values in me. And people do kind of contribute to that narrative. And it's sometimes hard, I think as a mixed person- My struggles have also been like how much of this I'm doing because it's what I feel and what I am and how much of this is am I doing because I know that's what they perceive as Korean-ness and because I want to highlight that Korean-ness.'

P3, HE, Female, 33, East Asian/White European

In contrast, mixed-Black students' orientations are underpinned by the experience of navigating schools structured by anti-Black racism, in the form of low teacher expectations, heightened surveillance and exclusion. Consequently, they demonstrate an acute, and critical awareness that performing certain classed expressions of Blackness may be perceived as institutionally problematic or risky. This awareness necessitates an ongoing vigilance in how mixed-Black students manage and negotiate their identities in educational spaces. One mixed-Black participant, who at the time of the interview was applying for a PhD, explained in detail how over time she had adapted to life within selective elite universities, and learned to 'play the game' and utilise opportunities for self-formation. She described how adopting a 'mixed' identity became a strategic means of navigating the institutional culture of an elite predominantly White university space.

'I don't know if I thought it would be easier in the back of my head to identify as being mixed- race in these spaces ... I think I realised like this is just how these spaces are. And I just kind of became more comfortable. ... It's complicated because it's like I'm visibly not White ...but at the same time in terms of Blackness I'm at the light scale of that. So, yeah, a hundred percent it's easier to just say oh yeah, I'm mixed race.'

P4, HE, Female, 29, Black Caribbean/White British

For another mixed-Black participant, this strategic engagement of mixed identity could co-exist with a shift to embracing a redefined ‘Black’ identity rooted in notions of racial struggle, pride and solidarity.

‘I do have privileges that necessarily my fully Black friends don’t have and I’m very aware of that. I’m not going to pretend like I’m not half White. I’m definitely half White. But they can understand the struggles of being- At the end of the day, a lot of the times it’s White and just not White and then within that not White group you can just kind of all flow together.’

P49, HE, Female, Black African/White European

5.2. Negotiating peer relationships

For many participants, university marked a significant departure from their previous educational experiences, where their mixedness was either invisible or marginalised. In contrast, many reported that diversity at university was normalised, creating expansive opportunities for self-redefinition. Several said that they felt more confident responding to questions about their backgrounds and identities, which had previously been sources of discomfort or marginalisation in school settings. A few participants spoke of the profound impact of meeting others who shared their mixed-heritage, often for the first time. These encounters disrupted long-standing feelings of isolation and fostered a sense of recognition. Additionally, the presence of international students challenged narrow, parochial understandings of race and ethnicity, offering alternative frameworks for thinking about identity. In this context, university became not only a site of academic development but also a transformative space for personal and cultural affirmation for many of our participants:

‘At university level nobody really minds where you come from, everybody is like an adult now and it’s just easier. ... Also London is a melting pot, I mean I rarely meet British people so that’s kind of nice.’

25, Male, HE, 30, North African/White British

‘For the first time in my life, other than my sister, I met people who were half Punjabi and half British, so three people, and that was like earth shattering to me because we all look very different, but we all have the same background and we actually still had the same sort of misplaced identity experience.’

P35, Female, HE, 22, South Asian/White British

University life particularly in London, presents a contradictory experience for some of our mixed-heritage students. The high level of diversity normalises difference, making students feel less remarkable or scrutinised. However, this same diverse environment can sometimes intensify interrogation and create new forms of exclusion. A few students reported experiencing more invasive questioning at university than at school, often related to the classed aspects of self-presentation. One privately educated student recalled:

‘They’re like where are you from? What are you? Sometimes the first question they’ll ask you, which I find crazy, because it’s like, at least what’s my name, how are you? And I’ve also had comments that I’m like too English as well, and that I’m not like ethnic enough, I guess in my behaviour. Or I’ve had comments from one girl, who was like, I honestly thought you were White this whole time.’

P32, Female, HE, 24, South Asian and White British/East Asian

The visibility of difference in multicultural spaces can make mixed students more, not less, subject to categorisation, confusion, and surprise when their heritage does not align with others' visual assumptions. This suggests that diversity alone does not eliminate racialised scrutiny, it may simply redistribute it or create new expectations.

A consistent imbalance emerged in how mixed students are received across cultural societies and spaces at university, revealing deeper patterns about how different communities construct belonging. Black and African Caribbean societies were described as unconditionally welcoming, embracing students across the spectrum of Blackness without questioning their legitimacy or requesting explanation for their presence. This inclusivity appears rooted in shared experiences of racialisation and marginalisation that create solidarity across variation in appearance and facial features. In stark contrast, White and European heritage societies appeared to demand justification and proof of authenticity. As one student explained:

'It's like no-one's ever questions me for being there. No-one's every like looked at me differently. It's like very much you are Black, we are all Black, we are all different shades of Black. Whereas like for the Spanish- They have a Spanish and Latin American society. I can remember showing up and like it's very much they're like, "Oh-" Like they wouldn't expect me- They were not expecting me to be there. They were like, "Oh, like, are you South American then?" I was like, "No, no, no, I'm Spanish." They were like, "You are like you're Spanish, like fully?" And I was like, "No, well, my mum's Nigerian." And I had to then specify why my skin isn't like completely White. Which I'm fine with. I didn't find it offensive. Obviously, you find darker skinned people in Latin America, but it was very much a question of like, "Oh, like how come you're Spanish."'

P49, HE, Female, Black African/White European

Another student spoke of a similar experience of rejection:

'I tried to go to the German Society when I first joined and I spoke to them. I didn't feel very welcomed, I guess. They're not being malicious, but you could just tell that their initial thoughts are like, 'Why are you here? Are you German?' You know, everyone else looks just like photocopies of each other, especially in Germany, it's very the same. So you don't really get people that look like me. So I didn't really go back.'

P53, Female, HE, 20, South Asian/White European

A few also mentioned feeling excluded from heritage communities due to language barriers:

'I mean if I'm going to be honest, a lot of my friends are British because I do classics and English a lot of the people on the course are English and so just get on with everyone because I grew up with those as my peers normally. But then the Turkish societies and stuff, because I don't really speak Turkish that well so I don't feel that included within that group now either. I'm trying to become I guess more Turkish, if that's even really a thing.'

P19, Female, HE, 19, Middle-Eastern/White British

This differential reception reveals how minoritised communities, having experienced marginalisation themselves, often create more expansive and flexible definitions of belonging based on shared struggle rather than rigid criteria. Meanwhile, some white-dominant spaces maintain stricter policing of authenticity and membership boundaries, often defaulting to visual appearance as the primary marker of legitimate belonging. As Museum and colleagues (2015) observe in the US context, such experiences

can manifest as exclusion from monoracial spaces, the invalidation of racial identity, and persistent questioning about ‘what’ they are. These encounters can undermine self-esteem, hinder academic engagement, and contribute to a sense of alienation. The resulting cultural dissonance may lead some mixed-heritage students to disengage from campus life, highlighting the subtle yet significant tensions that can arise when navigating identity within student-led spaces.

For many mixed students, identities beyond race were important organisers of university social life, revealing the complex, intersecting nature of belonging. Religion, particularly Islam, served as a more salient connection point than ethnic heritage, with students gravitating towards Muslim peers across ethno-racial lines. This religious affiliation can provide community and shared values.

‘My friendship group, I think is quite representative of the people that you see at [named university]. We make friends based on like common interests so I think most of my friends are from medicine... But some other girls that I’ve made friends with are Muslim. So it’s either like interests...probably just like the course and religion, I guess is a big part of it.’

P40, HE, 22, South Asian and East Asian/South Asian and East Asian

Class background similarly intersects race in unexpected ways. One student, who was studying medicine on a widening participation pathway, explained that she found common ground across ethnic lines amongst her pathway peers, in contrast to the wider medical school cohort.

‘So like people felt similar and more easy to speak to ... like I find it slightly easier to get along with people who are doing my course because... when speaking to medicine students in general, it feels like they’re ... a lot of like private school kind of people.’

45, HE, Female, 22, Black African/White European

Another spoke about subject-specific divisions between ‘posh’ and ‘more ethnic’ students, particularly in traditionally elite disciplines like Classics, suggesting that access to certain academic spaces remains structured by class as much as race. International mobility plays a significant role in shaping belonging for some mixed-race students. Those with transnational experiences often felt a stronger connection with internationally mobile peers than with UK-based students of similar heritage. This suggests that shared experiences of cultural displacement, adaptation, and navigating multiple identity frameworks foster a sense of solidarity that transcends specific ethnic backgrounds.

‘A lot of the friends that I make that are meaningful, and I have a big connection to are those who are also international, just because we had the same experiences growing up, and we understand each other a little bit better ... I don’t think I have a single friend who’s like, English, fully English, lived their whole life in the UK. And I was like, I wonder why that is?’

P21, Female, HE, 22, East Asian/White European

‘[Since being at named university] I’ve been able to find people who are part of, like, a diasporan community, which I wouldn’t have realized that, oh, there are Malaysians who have lived abroad, who have had similar experiences. So I’m not, like, the only one who’s gone through this.’

P39, Male, HE, Middle-Eastern/South East Asian

Mixed students' social worlds are organised not by singular identities but by constellations of shared experience – migration, class position, religious practice, linguistic competence – that can cut across conventional demographic categories in unpredictable ways.

5.3. Proximity to Whiteness – mixedness as cultural capital

Several of our participants spoke about how being mixed facilitated their navigation of university life. This theme highlights how students navigate university by strategically managing their proximity to Whiteness. That is to say, the extent to which they are perceived as aligned with White European phenotypical, cultural, linguistic, and behavioural norms. This involves deploying ambiguity or adopting certain enactments of identity to gain acceptance or advantage, while simultaneously acknowledging the inequities embedded in these dynamics.

Proximity to Whiteness extends beyond physical appearance; it includes accent, class symbols, cultural fluency, and the ability to embody White middle-class academic norms. It is clear from our analysis that proximity to Whiteness could function as a form of capital in university contexts for some of our participants, conferring advantages, based on their appearance and other embodied resources, whilst simultaneously generating anxieties about legitimacy and belonging. Proximity exists on a spectrum, with some mixed individuals being indistinguishable from White people, whilst others are clearly racialised but possess features that mark them as closer to Whiteness than their darker-skinned counterparts. Mixed students who could approximate white norms found it easier to university spaces. The institutional valuing of particularly embodiments of mixedness, was acknowledged by a few participants. These participants described being treated as exceptional and palatable versions of their minoritised heritage.

'Yes, I'm also hyperaware that, you know, I'm, you know, I have to say this politely but I'm like a very, I'm probably like a vice-chancellor's perfect idea of a Black student, you know. I've got like a posh accent and I don't, you know, like I have a very kind of like middle-class little look to me.'

P50, HE, Female, 29, Black African/White European

'I think that's something that's specifically interesting about mixed experiences is that I think you can sometimes be like positioned as like one of the good ones or like one of the like- The person that's like closer to this thing that we know, and that feels safe.'

P2, Female, HE, 28, South East Asian/White European

Another spoke about the labour involved in performing proximity to Whiteness (e.g. modifying her working-class speech, straightening her hair) to accentuate her racial ambiguity, and the way that it facilitated acceptance within white academic spaces.

'Yeah, a hundred percent it's easier to just say oh yeah, I'm mixed race. But like I do still feel like there are things that I have to change about myself. So, my entire time in my master's and at [named research intensive university] like I would straighten my hair and I feel like I kind of played into that whole [thing]... I didn't actually notice that I was doing it. I think it was very subconscious and it was just a way to fit in ... Like my [Black] cousin was like I don't know why you keep doing this but like what's happening with this straightening the hair thing. Because at first it was like I'd straighten my hair like once in a blue moon and then every single time they would see me my hair was straight. And then he was like, you know, like we can still see that you're not white and I was like fair enough.'

P4, HE, Female, 29, Black Caribbean/White British

As indicated above, proximity to Whiteness is as much a classed process as it is a racial one. Mixedness can be positioned as valuable in educational contexts such as universities which emphasise globalisation and multiculturalism. Student difference is framed as enriching rather than requiring remediation or support. For those students who could perform the ‘correct’ forms of racial ambiguity and signal their proximity to Whiteness, utilisation of this capital creates a double bind of contradictory pressures: they benefit from advantages (easier institutional acceptance, less severe racism, valued cultural capital) but cannot acknowledge these without undermining claims to marginalised or minoritised identity. They must perform proximity for institutional success through code-switching and other forms of identity-work yet potentially hide that performance to avoid accusations of cultural inauthenticity or disconnection from minority communities.

5.4. Experiences of teaching and learning

Most of our participants reported that academic and university staff were generally unaware of their mixed-heritage, or that it was not acknowledged, with staff often making assumptions based solely on visible appearance. Students who appear White were presumed to be White, while others were categorised into singular ethnic identities. This invisibility spanned most university contexts – from lectures to personal tutor meetings. Students also spoke about varying levels of contact and interaction with staff, with some large courses being lecture based and offering very limited opportunities for interaction. This was particularly the case for those studying health and life sciences courses.

One medical student described how having a less diverse staff workforce combined with a lack of consistency in lecturers throughout the academic year meant it was more difficult for her to build a rapport with her lecturers and seek support.

‘Okay, well, for me, because I’ve had some attainment issues, I guess it’s harder to feel connected to the staff... I think lecturers are mostly White . Like I’m trying to think of someone who isn’t. ... I don’t know, I think probably staff connections, maybe if there was more diversity, or ... because we don’t have consistency either.’

P45, HE, Female, 22, Black African/White European

Interestingly, many students express ambivalence about whether staff awareness of their heritage matters, suggesting that invisibility may not directly affect their academic engagement. The lack of recognition appears rooted in both staff discomfort with discussing race and the inability to visually recognise mixed identity within dominant racial frameworks. One student recalled the reaction of a personal tutor in discovering that she was mixed and her minoritised heritage in Fiji:

‘When I told my tutor about it the first thing he said, ... he was really taken aback, gosh that’s quite far away, and then obviously when I explained and I think the shock on his face kind of then confirmed my answers, like okay I don’t think he realised I was mixed... I don’t think they do know that I’m mixed race and I don’t know whether that’s down to environmental factors as well with me. Because I straighten my hair.’

P9, Female, HE, 23, Pacific Islander/White British

Among those who experienced some level of recognition, minority ethnic staff were notably more likely to acknowledge and engage with students’ heritage, often offering mentorship, cultural and social opportunities as well as validation. However, such interactions were relatively rare, as most students reported encountering limited ethnic diversity among their teaching staff.

5.5. Other factors that impact well-being

Students discussed a number of topics when asked what could support their educational success.

Well-being support – students told us that their universities provide general mental health services, neurodiversity support, and wellbeing advisors that they found helpful. However, no mixed-heritage specific interventions exist.

Financial support – Mixed students accessed diverse financial mechanisms: university hardship funds, accommodation schemes, heritage-specific scholarships, widening participation funding, Disabled Students' Allowance, and government grants. Substantial proportions combine study with employment. Critical barriers emerge around monoracial funding categories that create eligibility ambiguity and require uncomfortable 'identity performance' for mixed students. For example, current provision sometimes extends Black-focused funding to mixed-Black students as an add-on. Some mixed-Black students expressed ambivalence about applying for such scholarships, unsure whether they were entitled to claim 'Blackness' and questioned if they were as disadvantaged as their monoracial peers. Mixed-race students may find it more difficult to secure scholarships that align with their unique identity experiences, leading to additional financial stress and potential barriers to entry (Bolton and Lewis, 2024). Multiple participants emphasised that socioeconomic status intersects with ethnicity in determining support accessibility and effectiveness. Some felt that ethnicity-based targeted funding often did not consider socio-economic background, and other factors. Students recommended dedicated mixed-heritage scholarships with unambiguous eligibility criteria, arguing current broad 'ethnic minority' categories obscure specific needs. Proposed interventions emphasise identifying precise student demographics, and intersectional assessment which prioritise socio-economic status alongside heritage.

5.6. Monitoring of mixed-heritage students at university

Many institutions do not collect specific data on mixed students, opting instead for broad 'global majority' categories. Staff noted that students often feel fatigued by repeated ethnicity inquiries and may choose not to disclose, leading to hesitancy around identity-related conversations. While staff acknowledged that this avoidance erases the distinct experiences of mixed-heritage students – especially compared to monoracial peers – current data frameworks lack the nuance needed to inform targeted interventions (Williams & Chilungu, 2024).

Post-1992 universities, which typically serve more diverse and non-traditional student populations, showed greater engagement with data to support EDI work. Staff at these institutions expressed a desire to better understand mixed-heritage experiences and recognised the limitations of current ethnicity categories. One university, for example, triangulates entry survey data with attendance and engagement metrics to identify students at risk. While comprehensive, staff admitted that mixed-heritage monitoring remains underdeveloped.

The contrast between post-1992 and high-tariff institutions reflects broader disparities in student outcomes. With fewer pressures to innovate, selective universities may overlook the specific challenges faced by mixed-heritage students. As one staff member explained:

'Mixed students have different struggles... they can be part of either [group], so it's difficult to categorise them. We break down categories; mixed White and Asian, mixed White and Black Caribbean, etc., and track engagement and attendance to identify students at risk.'

Staff, Post-1992 University

There are clear barriers to the wellbeing and academic success of mixed-heritage students that require more accurate monitoring and tailored interventions. Universities could learn from the practices of post-1992 institutions, which demonstrate a more proactive and inclusive approach to understanding student needs.

5.7. EDI work and mixed-heritage students

Programmes specifically designed for mixed-heritage students – although limited – have shown promise in fostering belonging and validation. Wong and Buckner (2008) in the US context document initiatives such as multiracial student organisations and tailored mentoring schemes, which offer critical support for mixed-race identities. However, such programmes remain rare and are frequently overlooked within broader diversity and inclusion agendas.

Interviews with EDI staff revealed a consistent theme: a lack of targeted interventions for mixed-heritage students. While many institutions are actively working to address awarding gaps, these efforts are typically directed at global majority or other broad categories, rather than recognising the distinct needs of mixed-heritage subgroups. As a result, the specific nuances of mixed-heritage educational experience, such as, identity negotiation, cultural ambiguity, and racialised assumptions, are often excluded from intervention design. Consequently, mixed-heritage students may not fully benefit from these initiatives. As one staff member from a Russell Group university noted:

‘They use BAME. It’s not a term I like to use myself, but even if you kind of recognise the Black and ethnic minorities that is so broad in itself... that grounding level isn’t explored at all. I think there’s poor recognition... I certainly haven’t seen enough focus on the institute solely focusing on intersectionality and what that actually means for our students.’

Staff, Russell Group University

Although no institution visited had implemented interventions specifically for mixed-heritage students, several staff members discussed efforts to advance the awarding gap agenda. These efforts include designing interventions with clearer intentions and outcomes, as one post-1992 university staff member explained:

‘When we’re designing interventions or events, we’re thinking about the outputs and impact... so we have a better understanding of why we’re doing things and who we’re intending to engage with.’

Staff, Post-1992 University

Another post-1992 university described a proactive enrolment process where students complete a wellbeing and support survey. Based on their responses, covering financial concerns, mental health, care responsibilities, and academic skills, students are signposted to relevant support services, and personal tutors are informed to provide tailored assistance. While not specific to mixed-heritage students, this approach enables early identification of student issues and offers a model for inclusive support:

‘At the end of the survey, depending on the answers... our teams get a flag so that we can proactively react.’

Staff, Post-1992 University

In practice, Black mixed-heritage students are often subsumed within broader Black student interventions, such as scholarships and studentships. While these funding opportunities may include

eligibility clauses for Black mixed-heritage students, this approach encourages students to ‘perform their Blackness’ to access support, as some respondents described earlier. This conflation treats Black and Black mixed-heritage students as a monolith, overlooking the distinct challenges faced by each group. Notably, this phenomenon is not observed for Asian mixed-heritage students, whose needs remain largely unaddressed.

Despite the growing presence of mixed-heritage students in UK universities, institutions remain ill-equipped to monitor their experiences or understand their specific needs. Where efforts have been made to address disparities, mixed-heritage students are often included as an afterthought rather than as a distinct group requiring tailored support. This lack of recognition risks perpetuating invisibility and undermines the effectiveness of diversity initiatives.

There is a clear opportunity for universities to explore the experiences of their mixed-heritage populations more deeply and to develop interventions that reflect the complexity of these identities.

5.8. Conclusions

Our analysis indicates that university students develop sophisticated navigational strategies shaped by earlier educational trajectories, demonstrating heightened awareness of contextual racialisation and self-presentation. University spaces offer contradictory experiences: on the one hand, diversity and difference is normalised, which enables identity exploration. On the other, they can create new exclusionary dynamics.

Peer relationships reveal uneven patterns of acceptance, with some minoritised student-led cultural societies demonstrating inclusive belonging frameworks whilst White-European spaces demand authenticity performance. Friendship formation appears significantly less rigid compared to schooling and often transcends racial categorisation. Instead, it is organised through intersecting axes of religion, class position, international mobility, and for some, shared educational disadvantage.

We also observed how proximity to Whiteness, for some mixed students, functions as ambiguous cultural capital, conferring institutional advantages whilst generating anxieties around legitimacy and minoritised community belonging.

Academic staff remain largely unaware of students’ mixed-heritage, with limited ethnic diversity amongst teaching staff constraining mentorship and relational opportunities.

Critical institutional deficits persist, akin to those found at school: monoracial data frameworks obscure distinct experiences; financial support structures require uncomfortable identity performance; and EDI interventions subsume mixed-heritage students within broader categories. Post-1992 institutions demonstrate more proactive monitoring approaches, though targeted mixed-heritage interventions remain absent across all institutional types, perpetuating systemic invisibility.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This exploratory study highlights the ongoing educational marginalisation of some mixed-heritage young people in London, despite increasing diversity in schools and universities. Building on existing literature, it deepens our understanding by examining the distinct needs of different mixed groups across diverse educational contexts. Overall, our analysis reveals significant intra-group disparities shaped by specific heritage mix, socio-economic status, and institutional norms rooted in monoracial assumptions that disadvantage students navigating multiple identities. To tackle some of the barriers and challenges faced by mixed-heritage individuals, we make the following recommendations.

Recommendations for schools

Inclusive data and monitoring systems

- Develop disaggregated data frameworks that accurately capture the diversity of mixed-heritage identities.
- Regularly monitor academic, behavioural, and pastoral outcomes for mixed-heritage students.
- Recognise small population sizes as requiring focused attention, not justification for exclusion.

Racial literacy and staff development

- Provide training to address assumptions and build understanding of identity complexity.
- Equip staff to identify and respond to mixed-specific microaggressions and stereotyping.
- Promote culturally sensitive communication and inclusive practices.
- Integrate mixed-heritage experiences into curriculum content and cultural programming.
- Create spaces for identity exploration and peer dialogue.
- Challenge rigid ethno-racial boundaries in friendship groups, especially during school transitions.

Targeted pastoral and mental health support

- Address the distinct needs of different mixed-heritage groups (e.g., Mixed-Black, Mixed-Asian, Mixed-Muslim).
- Provide mental health support for students navigating identity-related challenges.
- Develop reporting mechanisms for mixed-specific harassment and discrimination.

Family engagement and educational guidance

- Build communication frameworks to support families in addressing identity-related issues.
- Offer guidance to families with limited familiarity with the UK education system.
- Identify and share best practices from sixth-form environments that support mixed-heritage identity development.

Recommendations for higher education

Inclusive data and representation

- **Inclusive data collection:** Expand monitoring frameworks to capture the full spectrum of mixed-heritage identities – not just Black/White or White/Asian – to ensure accurate representation.
- **Intersectional monitoring:** Collect data on employment status, disability, widening participation, and mixed-heritage to enable tailored, evidence-based interventions.
- **Staff representation:** Increase the presence of mixed-heritage staff to enhance visibility and foster stronger connections with students.

Culturally responsive support and training

- **Staff training:** Provide professional development on mixed-heritage identities and culturally sensitive communication to foster inclusive spaces.
- **Mental health support:** Ensure accessible, culturally competent mental health services for students navigating complex identity-related challenges.

Equity in research and career development

- **Focused research:** Prioritise studies on underrepresented groups, particularly Black mixed-heritage men, to address gaps in higher education data and understanding.
- **Inclusive funding:** Design research funding schemes that explicitly include mixed-heritage students, moving beyond monoracial eligibility criteria.
- **Paid research opportunities:** Promote short-term, part-time research roles led by academic staff to support mixed-heritage students' career development and networking.

Strengthen outreach to high-tariff institutions

- Mixed-heritage students face disproportionately low offer rates at high-tariff universities in London, highlighting persistent access barriers. Institutions should build a stronger evidence base to identify which outreach strategies are most effective, for whom, and under what circumstances (Evans et al., 2017), ensuring resources are directed toward approaches that improve access for mixed-heritage applicants.

Enhance support at lower-tariff institutions

- Continuation and awarding gap data reveal wider disparities between White and mixed-heritage students at lower-tariff universities. These institutions should implement targeted mentoring and academic support programmes, with regular evaluation and student feedback to ensure responsiveness across the student lifecycle.

Include international mixed-heritage students in data collection

- Current datasets, such as the OfS access and participation dashboard, exclude international students, potentially underrepresenting a growing segment of the mixed-heritage population. Expanding data coverage to include international students will enable more inclusive and effective policy and intervention design.

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About the cover

Humanæ is a photographic art project by Angélica Dass that challenges the simple labels we often use to describe skin colour. In the project, Dass photographs people from all backgrounds, without making any selections based on race, age, or nationality. For each portrait, she takes a small sample of skin from the image and matches it to the nearest shade in the Pantone® colour system – a universal standard used in design to categorise colours. That exact tone then becomes the background for the portrait, so each person is surrounded by their own unique colour. Through this process, Humanæ reveals the extraordinary range and subtlety of human skin tones, showing that humanity cannot be contained within narrow categories like ‘black’, ‘white’, or ‘brown’. Inviting us to see difference as something beautiful and to rethink how we talk about identity, race, and belonging.

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Why we chose Humanæ

We, the team, first saw Humanæ at the Migration Museum during its former home in Lewisham, and we were immediately struck by its warmth, honesty, and visual power. We chose Humanæ for the cover of this report as we felt it perfectly captures the report’s spirit – a celebration of diversity, individuality, and connection. The image reflects The Portal Trust’s belief that every identity deserves recognition and respect. It also echoes the central theme of the report: that mixed heritage is not an outlier, but an expression of the spectrum that makes up modern Britain.

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