

News release

Tackling ethnicity gaps in outcomes of professional legal assessments

03 June 2024

We are calling on the legal, education and training sectors to work with us to tackle issues leading to differential outcomes in professional legal assessments by ethnicity.

It follows the publication of [research \[https://publications.sra.org.uk/differences-in-outcomes-by-ethnicity-in-legal-professional-assessments-research-summary/\]](https://publications.sra.org.uk/differences-in-outcomes-by-ethnicity-in-legal-professional-assessments-research-summary/). We commissioned to understand why minority ethnic students are more likely to have poorer outcomes than White candidates in legal professional assessments.

We will now bring together education providers, law firms, and the wider legal sector to work with us to address issues identified in the report. We will also develop an action plan informed directly by the findings.

The University of Exeter carried out the interdisciplinary study with academics from law, business and psychology. It found that no single reason explains why candidates from certain ethnic groups perform better than others, yet multiple factors combined do explain the differences.

The research includes lived experiences and stakeholder views. Whilst issues such as socioeconomic background influence later outcomes, it also found that different experiences in school and university impact students' ability to find legal work placements.

The report highlights the current initiatives in place to address the issues, generally on a small scale, and that more collaboration and widespread action is needed to effect significant change.

It suggests actions and discussion points for key stakeholders, including the SRA. It suggests that the SRA should continue to play a leading role as a change agent in progressing diversity across the profession.

Paul Philip, SRA Chief Executive: 'A student's ethnicity should not impact their opportunity to study law or secure a career in the legal profession, yet the evidence shows that it does. This is a wakeup call for the legal and education sectors to address a serious imbalance in outcomes for minority ethnic students.'

'Taking the knowledge and insight from this research, we will bring together law firms, education providers and representative groups to

discuss how we can all take action to address these differential outcomes. Collectively, we need to bring about widespread change.'

We commissioned the research to better understand the complexity and breadth of the potential causes of ethnicity gaps and how they combine to impact legal professional assessment outcomes. The research team from Exeter used a wide range of methods to maximise the validity and robustness of the research. Specific findings from the report include:

- Being part of a minority group increases the likelihood of experiencing discrimination and bias in education settings and decreases access to work experience opportunities in law firms.
- Lack of ethnic diversity in academic staff and in the examples taught in legal education can impact students' feeling of belonging and/or that they 'fit' within law. It can also lead to microaggressions and bias in the classroom from academic staff, impacting minority ethnic students' learning.
- Some minority ethnic students experience increased difficulties in getting funded support from law firms for legal professional education and assessments. This is because recruitment processes often rely on A-level results, without looking at the context in which students received those grades (such as the school attended and their personal circumstances), which is more likely to lead to White students being recruited.
- Those doing better in their professional assessments tended to have fewer challenges at school, at university and within professional education. They also tended to be individuals who had had more access to positive workplace opportunities and role models from similar backgrounds to them.
- The Higher Education Statistics Agency's data shows that in 2022 60% of Black students at university and 70% of Asian students were awarded a 2.1 degree or higher, compared to 79% who are White.

Greta Bosch, Professor of Law at the University of Exeter: 'This research brought together academics from law, business and psychology to consider the multiple factors influencing outcomes in legal professional assessments.'

'We have identified clear opportunities to address differential outcomes between ethnic groups and we recommend actions for stakeholders with that in mind.'

'In response to the study, we are pleased that the SRA is committed to bringing together stakeholders from across the sector to consider how they work collectively to address what happens next.'