

ETHNICITY, MOTIVATION AND CULTURAL CAPITAL: PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION IN LIFELONG LEARNING

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<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2025.1117>

Received: 18 September 2025/Published: 05 November 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how adult learners in the UK participate in lifelong learning through their ethnic background, their motivation, and their cultural capital. It investigates how cultural identity affects professional education participation to advance understanding of participation expansion and inclusion initiatives. The study is based on an analysis of 234 adult learner enquiries received over a 10-week period, using surname-based probability methods to estimate likely heritage. National participation data from Department for Education and Office for National Statistics were then compared to contextualise the findings.

The results demonstrate that learners from Asian and Black and Mixed and Other ethnic minority groups exceed their population numbers while White British and Irish learners make up fewer participants. Studies show that ethnic minority groups maintain high educational ambitions, according to existing literature. This analysis applies Self-Determination Theory, Cultural Identity Theory and Bourdieu's cultural capital framework to explain how motivation, belonging and cultural resources affect lifelong learning participation.

Although research shows that ethnic minority groups have better outcomes than the White British population at school and college level, there is little information on whether this is continued into adult education. Both access opportunities and existing inequalities are explored, and this paper investigates the inclusion of all ethnic groups in a lifelong learning context. The problem lies not with participation of ethnic minority communities, who seem to have the right approach to self-development, but with the White population being left behind, without the aspirations and motivations of those with an ethnic minority heritage.

Keywords: Ethnic Minority; Education Participation; Lifelong Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is interesting empirical evidence that in the UK some ethnic minority groups place more value in education than the White British majority. Even when adjusting for socio-economic backgrounds, this appears to be a strong indicator of deeply embedded aspirations. Much of the existing literature focuses on school pupils from migrant backgrounds; Strand (2014) noted that certain minority groups, such as Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black Africans, regarded education as a means of gaining status and economic stability in their new homeland. The Department for Education (2023) confirmed that such groups were consistently above average in their achievements compared to the White British population.

Parental expectations are given as one reason for these young people doing well, as parents from ethnic backgrounds are more likely to monitor their children doing homework and encourage their

children to go to university (Sutton Trust, 2018). Education is a way of becoming successful in the new country (Archer & Francis, 2007; Modood, 2004). It is also suggested that the migration experience plays a role as education is seen as an opportunity (Gillborn, 2008; Strand, 2014), in contrast to the White British communities (Demie, 2019; Strand, 2021). However, Strand and Lindorff (2018) and Archer et al (2010) proposed that some ethnic minority groups just work harder at education, despite facing barriers and challenges due to their background. These barriers are reported as being costs, childcare provision and inflexible course times (Learning & Work Institute, 2022).

There is also strong evidence from UK government reports and other research that this trend may continue as children from ethnic backgrounds become adults. The Department for Education (2022) adult education survey noted consistently higher participation rates in vocational courses and skills-based training among some ethnic minority adults. The survey reported that 39% of Asian adults and 35% of Black adults were involved in formal or informal learning, compared to 29% of White adults. Further details show the most popular courses for adults from ethnic minority groups were in health and social care, construction, IT, business, and the beauty industry, which may reflect labour demands or cultural networks in these sectors (Learning & Work Institute, 2022).

Research by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Open University (2015) indicates that reasons for ethnic minority adults continuing their education are given as career advancement, improving job prospects and starting a business. They also find ways of overcoming barriers to education by accessing part-time courses and online learning (Aldridge & Tucker, 2019). Yet, these barriers and challenges ethnic minority adults face may not be the same as those faced by the White population. It is a matter of concern that more White British learners are not participating in education opportunities, and this is an under-researched area which needs more attention. We have seen under-representation of the White population in successful outcomes in schools and colleges, and this may continue after formal education. There are limited studies that focus on adult professional qualifications and scant information on whether White British learners are taking advantage of developing their skills and knowledge at a later stage in their lives than other ethnic minority groups.

To give some context to interest in lifelong learning, this paper reviews the applications of 234 adult learners enquiring about professional development qualifications over a 10-week period between August and October 2025.

2. REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Research studies about ethnic minority group educational attitudes use multiple frameworks to understand their learning motivations. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) describes how people develop intrinsic motivation through their need for autonomy, competence and relatedness. People become more engaged and motivated when they experience control over their decisions and demonstrate confidence in their actions and maintain social connections with others. The theory of cultural identity (Hall, 1990) helps explain how people define their cultural identity through shared experiences which transform over time. However, society is complex, and cultural identity is also a combination of ethnic background with individual differences (Yang, Zhao & Liu, 2021). Our personal identities develop through our origins and our life experiences which create feelings of belonging to specific groups. People develop intrinsic motivation when they experience a sense of belonging which creates feelings of inclusion and acceptance from society.

From these two theories, we can surmise that integration into a new society provides those from ethnic minority groups with the motivation to do well. Yet, at the same time, it could be anticipated that the White British population in the UK would have the same intrinsic motivation that comes from a sense of belonging.

Motivation

Nor does this fully explain the motivation for success in education that has been seen in the Department for Education (2022, 2023a) and other statistics. It is even more puzzling when taking on board Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory which provides understanding of how social background influences the values rewarded through our education system. Bourdieu suggests that those without middle-class values in language, behaviour and knowledge do not have the same educational privileges and confidence to succeed. In addition, Bourdieu proposes that networks and connections of friends and family provide social capital that opens doors to opportunities and having the financial means to continue with education means that those from ethnic minority or migrant groups are often disadvantaged. Somehow, ethnic minority adults seem to be able to overcome such barriers, which leads us to acknowledge that they may have stronger networks than universally recognised. These may be stronger than those available to British White learners.

Social Mobility

A study carried out in the US suggests that ethnic minority groups may see adult training as a means of social mobility (Punksungka et al, 2021), indicating that the motivation for education may come from personal aspirations to take advantage of opportunities for improving social as well as economic status. Research states that those with a low socio-economic status have a higher risk of not having sufficient skills to participate effectively in today's society and this is often attributed to the level of educational attainment of the parents (Desjardins et al, 2006). There is consequently an incentive to gain qualifications that will provide a better way of life than that afforded by their family and indeed there may also be cultural expectations that young people will take up opportunities not available to their parents. However, this does not seem to be reflected in White working-class communities.

Inequality

The Department for Education (2020) and Office for Students (2021) show that White British students from working-class families face a major challenge when trying to move into college or university education. The Education Policy Institute (2020) identifies this as an equality problem which has led to multiple theories about why students from this group struggle to advance, given that it is then likely to be extended into employment opportunities. The Sutton Trust (2018) suggests there are lower aspirations within some White British communities due to parents not being engaged in education and a lack of educational role models, whereas ethnic communities view education as a means of upward mobility (Archer & Francis, 2007; Modood, 2004; Strand, 2014). This is supported by McCabe et al (2022) who suggest more needs to be done to raise the aspirations of White British working class groups and engage more with parents in these communities. However, Ehren et al (2023) note that many White communities are based in geographic areas where there are more limited employment and educational opportunities; this has been shown across Europe, not just in the UK (Lindblad et al, 2025). There remains the issue,

however, that many White British learners are not accessing lifelong learning in the same way as their ethnic minority peers.

Employment

There is some evidence that efforts are being made to try and address the problem. A briefing paper presented to the UK Parliament (Bolton & Hughes, 2024) acknowledges that White students are less likely than any other ethnic group to go to higher education and that those from higher deprivation areas have poorer outcomes; White males, whatever their background, are also less likely to progress to higher education. This looks at enrolments rather than achievements, as the disparity is that White male graduates have the highest employment rates. There may be some correlation here between the White males who do progress to university coming from more privileged backgrounds, although there is limited evidence to support this; however, Dilnot et al (2025) have found that privately educated, privileged and White graduates are more likely to secure employment than their ethnic minority peers. In addition, Austin (2023) reported that in the United States, White people had better employment outcomes possibly due to discrimination. It appears that, although they do not participate in the same numbers as ethnic minority students, White graduates have more chance of getting a good job.

Professional Development

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes are seen as a way of improving career opportunities but a study by Arikawe et al (2024) revealed that such programmes were not enabling ethnic minority employees to access promotion or higher pay, in comparison with their White counterparts. It was suggested this was due to discrimination in UK workplaces where senior staff were predominantly White (Arikawe et al, 2024). The study did not offer any analysis on the types of CPD programmes taken by employees, beyond stating that the programmes may not be reflecting the reality of ethnic minority workers' lives. The value of CPD programmes is in how they help people improve their knowledge and skills and to a certain extent individuals need to make these decisions for themselves. From a CIPD (2017) report, 48% of ethnic minority and 44% of White British employees said they were satisfied with the training they received at work, which indicates more than half were not satisfied. However, this affects all ethnic groups. There is limited information on CPD programmes as opposed to accredited professional qualifications but those who are well-qualified, whatever their ethnicity, are more likely to succeed.

Age

The annual survey by the Learning and Work Institute (2024) found that overall participation in learning had increased, which they attributed to online courses. In accordance with previous surveys, however, they also reported that 77% of ethnic minority group respondents were current or recent learners, while just 47% from White backgrounds had participated in learning over the past three years. The Institute suggested this could be because ethnic minority populations were younger than the ageing populations of White communities. Age is another factor in the uptake of learning opportunities as people have less interest in learning as they grow older and they also have less confidence in using technology. It adds to the complexity of trying to understand why ethnic minority groups participate more in learning opportunities than their White neighbours.

3. METHODOLOGY

From August to mid-October a total of 234 potential adult learners made enquiries about professional development courses leading to qualifications. We have taken the full list of enquiries, some of whom consequently enrolled on courses, and others did not wish to proceed. Some are still considering whether the course is the right one for them. This database tracks the initial interest.

The names of all the enquirers were run through software to indicate likely heritage based on surname patterns. This makes a reasoned estimate of likely ethnicity, but it is a probability inference rather than a formal classification. All enquiries emanated from the UK and came from across the whole country, including Scotland and Wales. We acknowledge that surnames may reflect both a longstanding settlement in the UK and a more recent migration. However, we also recognise that there may be mixed heritages as ethnic backgrounds are complex and diverse.

Our Freedom of Information request to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) regarding common British surnames resulted in a response that stated names were not retained for statistical purposes and would not be released for 100 years. The collection of names is simply to prevent people being counted twice. However, from the 2021 census the ONS (2022) has released information on ethnicity and national identity: at that time 81.7% of the population of England and Wales identified as White, with 74.4% stating they were English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British. National identity was not related to ethnicity and that showed 90.3% of the population considered themselves British.

4. FINDINGS

Professional qualifications could improve the prospects of individuals across a range of areas and enable them to provide evidence of their competence. From the 234 names, it was possible to categorise 6.8% as White British or Irish from their common surnames (Table 1), such as Smith, Jones or MacDonald. While it was possible to identify these surnames, this is not proof of a person's ethnicity.

Table 1 - Likely heritage based on common surnames

Category	Count	Percent
White British/Irish	16	6.8%
South Asian	15	6.4%
West African	13	5.6%
Middle Eastern/North African	6	2.6%
Eastern European	5	2.1%

This left 179 whose names were unclear and who were likely to come from a wide range of backgrounds, including mixed heritage. When the names were matched to the top 500 UK surnames collated from surname frequency data (Guild of One-Name Studies, nd), it was found that this could be extended to a further 17 (7.3%) who were likely to be from a White British or Irish background.

Table 2 – Refined count by surname match

Category	Count	Percent
Initial White British/Irish	16	6.8%
Additional identified after refinement	17	7.3%
Total	33	14.1%

While this is not an exact science, in the absence of details other than names, it does give a clear picture of the small number of adult learners from possible White British descent compared to those with names that denote an alternative heritage. Similar patterns are seen in national data: the Office for National Statistics (2021) reports that White people make up 83% of England's population yet the Department for Education (2023b) shows White British students represent only 72.1% of FE students. English and Welsh statistics are collected separately but the Welsh population shows higher ethnic homogeneity than England because 93% of residents identify as White. What it does demonstrate is that fewer adults identifying as White take up opportunities for continuing their education than any other ethnic group.

5. DISCUSSION

The research examined ethnic background differences in participation in professional training for adults. A surname-based analysis of 234 adult learner inquiries revealed White British or Irish heritage in 14.1% of cases, but most participants appeared to belong to diverse ethnic backgrounds. This research data shows that ethnic minority groups actively participate in educational activities at higher rates than the general population and aligns with other studies. Further Education (FE) enrolment data show ethnic minority groups make up more than 50% of students which matches the results from this study and national statistics. The Department for Education (2023) reports that Asian students make up 11.4% of FE students yet they represent 9.0% of the total population while Black students make up 7.9% of FE students although they only comprise 3.9% of the population. The statistics confirm Strand (2014) and Archer and Francis (2007) who explain that particular ethnic minority groups view education as their main path to achieve economic success and social advancement. This study has not categorised ethnic groups, but the overall findings indicate the research data follows the same trend with White British students not having the same rate of participation in professional training as their ethnic-heritage counterparts.

Theories of motivation help explain why these specific patterns occur in the data. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), people develop stronger intrinsic motivation when they experience feelings of connection and competence and autonomy. Education serves as a path for ethnic minority communities to achieve self-determination and social acceptance in their host country (Hall, 1990). It does not explain why the White British population do not have the same intrinsic motivations as they already have social acceptance and a sense of belonging, but the research of Strand (2014) demonstrates that educational success depends on both structural opportunities and cultural ambitions. It may be that White cultural ambitions have been diluted by having an abundance of resources available to them. In the case of ethnic minority groups, Bourdieu (1986) explains that communities with strong educational values can use their cultural

capital to fight against systemic obstacles even when they begin with limited economic resources. Whether White communities have the same educational values is a matter for debate.

The increased enrolment numbers from these minority groups do not eliminate all obstacles that students face. The Learning & Work Institute (2022) reports that ethnic minority students encounter multiple barriers because of fixed class times, their limited financial resources and responsibilities to care for their family. The high numbers of minority students in health and social care fields might stem from established workforce patterns in the labour market instead of equal educational access for all students. Low White British student enrolments raises questions about disengagement and their cultural views on vocational training and their access to work-based learning programs. The research indicates that more understanding of White British learners is needed, and strategies put in place for specific re-engagement programmes, community partnerships and perhaps different motivational approaches to boost their participation rates.

The research results match national statistics which indicate that cultural background, educational goals and available learning prospects strongly influence adult learning participation rates among minority ethnic groups. The participation of these groups exists within multiple social and structural elements which create complex conditions. A combination of inclusive teaching approaches with targeted policy measures enables equal learning access for all communities. Yet, with the current emphasis on ethnic minority groups, there needs to be more focus on White British communities, who are falling behind in accessing professional development and other learning opportunities. The UK government recognises this and states that lack of opportunity should not be seen as an ethnic minority issue as it applies to the White population as well (Badenoch, 2022). Although it has been noted in schools and colleges previously that ethnic minority groups achieve better outcomes than the White population, it is clear that this trend continues into adult education and lifelong learning.

6. CONCLUSION

This research proves that ethnic minority groups significantly outnumber White British students in adult learning, both in the sample and in national statistics. The research supports previous studies which demonstrate that numerous ethnic minority groups maintain high educational ambitions because they view learning as their path to social advancement and cultural advancement. By combining statistical evidence with motivational and cultural identity theories, this paper demonstrates how cultural capital and aspiration function as essential factors for student involvement. Yet, there is clearly a need to address the lower participation rates of White British learners as the educational system of lifelong learning needs to match the intricate nature of all the communities it exists to serve. The future of social mobility, economic participation and cultural cohesion in diverse societies depends on making education accessible to all people in an equitable manner.

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