

Britton, Jack; Dearden, Lorraine; Waltmann, Ben

**Research Report**

## The returns to undergraduate degrees by socio-economic group and ethnicity

IFS Report, No. R186

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), London

*Suggested Citation:* Britton, Jack; Dearden, Lorraine; Waltmann, Ben (2021) : The returns to undergraduate degrees by socio-economic group and ethnicity, IFS Report, No. R186, ISBN 978-1-83870-244-1, Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), London, <https://doi.org/10.1920/re.ifs.2021.0186>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/235072>

**Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

**Terms of use:**

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*



Department  
for Education



# **The returns to undergraduate degrees by socio-economic group and ethnicity**

**Research report**

**March 2021**

**Jack Britton, Lorraine Dearden and Ben  
Waltmann**

**Institute for Fiscal Studies**

## Executive summary

We investigate differences in the returns to undergraduate degrees by socio-economic background and ethnicity using the Department for Education's Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data set. The LEO data set links school records, university records and tax records for everyone who took GCSEs in England since 2002. Using these data, we can estimate returns up to age 30. Our main findings are:

- **Average returns to undergraduate degrees at age 30 are positive for people from all socio-economic and ethnic groups we study, but there is substantial heterogeneity across groups.** Returns are especially high for privately-educated graduates, whose median earnings at age 30 are the highest of all groups. However, we find that the groups with the lowest graduate earnings, such as Pakistani students or state-educated students from the poorest families, also have relatively high returns from going to university. The reason is that the earnings prospects of these groups are very low on average if they do not attend university.
- **Besides high returns for privately educated students, returns vary relatively little by socio-economic status.** At age 30, we find gross earnings returns of around 6% for state-educated men and around 27% for state-educated women. If anything, returns are somewhat higher for state-educated students from the poorest 20% of families, with returns at around 7% for men and 31% for women. Returns for privately educated students are much higher at around 29% for men and 36% for women.
- **By ethnicity, we see especially high returns for South Asian students.** In particular, we find returns of 27% for Indian women, 40% for Pakistani women and 30% for Bangladeshi women, as well as 16% for Indian men, 36% for Pakistani men and 14% for Bangladeshi men. Strikingly, Pakistani graduates have the highest returns of all ethnic groups, even though they have the lowest median age-30 earnings at £23,000 for men and £19,000 for women.
- **Returns for Black women are somewhat lower than for White British women.** Estimated returns are 9% for Black Caribbean women, 20% for Black African women and 23% for Other Black women, compared with 28% for White British women. For Black men, estimated returns differ widely between different subgroups: returns for Black African men are large at 15%, but returns for Black Caribbean men are similar to returns for White British men at 7%, and returns for Other Black men are low at 4%.

- **Some but not all of the differences in returns can be explained by variation in subjects chosen and institutions attended.** Subject choice explains little of the variation in returns by socio-economic status, but a substantial amount of the variation in returns by ethnicity: Asian students systematically choose more lucrative subjects than White British students. Conversely, institution choices can partly explain why private school students get higher returns from university than those who attended state schools; however, institution choices do not explain much of the variation in returns by ethnicity.
- **Unexplained differences in earnings between groups are mostly smaller among graduates than among non-graduates.** This implies that differences in the returns to higher education ‘even out’ some of the earnings differences between non-graduates that cannot be explained by other factors. However, large unexplained earnings gaps between socio-economic and ethnic groups remain. In particular, controlling for background conditions, prior attainment, and university and subject choice, graduate men from all non-White ethnic groups earn significantly less than White British graduates.

We supplement these age-30 results with estimated discounted net lifetime returns in pounds for the different groups based on a simulation of lifetime earnings. This simulation is subject to a large amount of uncertainty, so the results should be treated with caution. We account for the effect of the tax and student loans system and we discount using Treasury Green Book discounting. The main results are:

- **Lifetime returns by socio-economic status follow a U shape.** For women, the average return varies between £140,000 for the bottom quintile and £70,000 for the top state quintile. For men, the returns are similar to the estimates for women for the bottom four SES quintiles, but higher at around £110,000 for the top state SES quintile, while for the privately educated the returns are much higher at around £250,000.
- **Lifetime returns by ethnicity follow a similar pattern to gross returns at age 30.** Returns for South Asian students are relatively high at around £200,000 for men and around £170,000 for women. Estimated returns for Black students are relatively low at around £50,000; an exception is Black African women, for whom we estimate a lifetime return of £175,000 on average. White British, White Other, and Other students have middling returns of roughly £100,000 for both men and women.

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1	Overview . . . . .	11
2.2	Measures of SES and ethnicity . . . . .	12
2.3	Undergraduate participation . . . . .	14
<b>3</b>	<b>Differences between socio-economic and ethnic groups</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1	Earnings at age 30 . . . . .	17
3.2	Prior attainment . . . . .	22
3.3	Location . . . . .	24
3.4	Universities attended . . . . .	26
3.5	Subjects studied . . . . .	29
<b>4</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>31</b>
4.1	Estimating earnings returns at age 30 . . . . .	32
4.2	Simulating lifetime earnings . . . . .	33
4.3	Estimating lifetime returns . . . . .	33
<b>5</b>	<b>Early-career returns</b>	<b>34</b>
5.1	Gross returns at age 30 . . . . .	34
5.2	Importance of institution and subject choices in age-30 returns . . . . .	38
5.3	Unexplained differences in earnings . . . . .	41
<b>6</b>	<b>Lifetime earnings</b>	<b>44</b>
6.1	Lifetime earnings simulations . . . . .	45
6.2	Gross returns at older ages . . . . .	47
6.3	Lifetime returns . . . . .	49
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>54</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>56</b>

<b>A1 Robustness: using IDACI instead of our SES measure</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>A2 Gender earnings gaps</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>A3 University subject choice by gender</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>A4 Age 30: unexplained gaps in earnings by SES and ethnicity</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>A5 Age 30 returns: graphs</b>	<b>68</b>

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the Department for Education for providing access to data and helping to develop this report and Judith Payne for outstanding copy-editing. They are grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council (grant ES/S010718/1) and the ESRC Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy (grant ES/T014334/1) for funding.

## List of Figures

1	HE participation by SES . . . . .	15
2	HE participation by ethnicity . . . . .	16
3	Median age-30 earnings of women by socio-economic group . . . . .	17
4	Median age-30 earnings of men by socio-economic group . . . . .	18
5	Median age-30 earnings of women by ethnicity . . . . .	19
6	Median age-30 earnings of men by ethnicity . . . . .	20
7	Median GCSE percentile by SES and HE attendance . . . . .	23
8	Median GCSE percentile by ethnicity and HE attendance . . . . .	24
9	Socio-economic status: distribution across regions . . . . .	25
10	Ethnicity: distribution across regions . . . . .	26
11	Distribution across institutions by SES . . . . .	27
12	Distribution across institutions by ethnicity . . . . .	28
13	Subject choices by SES relative to average . . . . .	29
14	Subject choices by ethnicity relative to White British . . . . .	31
15	Unexplained earnings gaps between SES groups: HE and non-HE . . . . .	42
16	Unexplained earnings gaps between ethnic groups: HE and non-HE . . . . .	43
17	Predicted net lifetime earnings by SES . . . . .	45
18	Predicted net lifetime earnings by ethnicity . . . . .	47
19	Gross returns at older ages by SES . . . . .	48
20	Gross returns at older ages by ethnicity . . . . .	49
21	Predicted net lifetime returns by SES . . . . .	50
22	Share with positive lifetime returns by SES . . . . .	51
23	Predicted net lifetime returns by ethnicity . . . . .	52
24	Share with positive lifetime returns by ethnicity . . . . .	54
A1	Median age-30 gender earnings gap by socio-economic status . . . . .	59
A2	Median age-30 gender earnings gap by ethnicity . . . . .	60
A3	Decomposition of the overall graduate gender earnings gap (in %) . . . . .	61
A4	Subject choices by SES relative to average, women . . . . .	62

A5	Subject choices by SES relative to average, men . . . . .	63
A6	Subject choices by ethnicity relative to White British, women . . . . .	64
A7	Subject choices by ethnicity relative to White British, men . . . . .	65
A8	Returns by SES: successive controls . . . . .	68
A9	Returns by ethnicity: successive controls . . . . .	69
A10	Returns by SES: impact of subject and institution choice, relative to highest SES quintile . . . . .	70
A11	Returns by ethnicity: impact of subject and institution choice, relative to White British	71

## List of Tables

1	Sample size by SES and GCSE year . . . . .	12
2	Sample size by ethnicity and GCSE year . . . . .	13
3	Sample size by ethnicity and SES group . . . . .	14
4	Median age-30 earnings by SES and ethnicity . . . . .	21
5	Age-30 returns by SES . . . . .	35
6	Age-30 returns by ethnicity . . . . .	37
7	Impact of subject and institution on relative returns by SES . . . . .	39
8	Impact of subject and institution on relative returns by ethnicity . . . . .	40
A1	Sample size by SES and IDACI . . . . .	58
A2	Age-30 returns by IDACI . . . . .	58
A3	Unexplained gaps in earnings by socio-economic status: age 30 . . . . .	66
A4	Unexplained gaps in earnings by ethnicity: age 30 . . . . .	67



# 1 Introduction

For several decades, a major aim of educational policy in the UK has been to improve outcomes for children born into more disadvantaged circumstances. Improving access to higher education for disadvantaged students has been a key element in achieving this. Despite some progress – the proportion of students from low-participation neighbourhoods has almost doubled since 2006 – participation gaps between rich and poor students remain large: nearly half of young people from the most advantaged quintile of neighbourhoods secured a place in undergraduate university courses in 2018 compared with only one-fifth of students from the most deprived quintile.<sup>1</sup> There are also large differences in university attendance by ethnicity: White British students have the lowest participation rates, while Indian and Chinese students have the highest (Crawford and Greaves, 2015).

While there is a large literature that documents gaps in access to higher education between different groups and investigates ways to reduce them<sup>2</sup> and an equally large literature investigating overall returns to higher education,<sup>3</sup> there is much less evidence investigating how returns to higher education vary by socio-economic background and ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> This is a shortfall of the literature, as evidence on this question is important for policy. Work on this question could help explain participation gaps while also highlighting the role higher education could play in reducing inequality.

Recent data developments in the UK have enabled some studies to revisit the question of the returns to higher education, drawing on linked administrative records that contain detailed information on the prior attainment and background of each individual student and their earnings records. Belfield et al. (2018) use these data to investigate gross earnings returns at an early stage of graduates' careers (roughly, age 29), while Britton et al. (2020) estimate the lifetime returns to higher education. Both of these reports primarily focus on how returns vary by institution

---

<sup>1</sup>This is based on 'POLAR', which is a less refined measure of deprivation than we have available. See UCAS (2018).

<sup>2</sup>For example, see Chowdry et al. (2013), Crawford, Dearden and Greaves (2014) and Crawford and Greaves (2015) in the UK and Hoxby and Avery (2013) and Dynarski et al. (2018) in the US.

<sup>3</sup>See Altonji, Blom and Meghir (2012) for a review and Walker and Zhu (2011), Walker and Zhu (2018), Belfield et al. (2018) and Britton et al. (2020) for evidence from the UK.

<sup>4</sup>Arcidiacono and Lovenheim (2016) provide a review of the returns to higher education for ethnic minorities, drawing on evidence from affirmative action policies; Zimmerman (2019) compares returns to elite college access for rich and poor students; Chetty et al. (2017) compare earnings outcomes for rich and poor students the US; Britton et al. (2019) compare outcomes conditional on subject and institution for richer and poorer students in the UK.

attended and subject studied, rather than on how they vary by background characteristics of the students. In this report, we make use of the same linked administrative records – referred to as the ‘Longitudinal Education Outcomes’ (LEO) data set – and expand upon these previous studies by focusing on returns to higher education by age-16 socio-economic status (SES) and ethnicity.

For our measure of SES, we follow several recent studies (e.g. Chowdry et al., 2013) and create a continuous index of deprivation based on a combination of individual characteristics and various measures of deprivation of the local area people live in when they are aged 16. We divide people into five quintiles based on this index, and also create a sixth group who were educated outside of the state system – we typically think of this group as being the most advantaged, as the majority attended fee-paying independent schools. For ethnicity, we use fairly coarse categories that are available from the National Pupil Database.<sup>5</sup>

We start by documenting differences in participation between our different groups. Our focus is on people who took their GCSE examinations between 2002 and 2007, as these are the individuals for whom we have information on their earnings outcomes. Individuals in these cohorts who went to university will typically have entered university between 2004 and 2010, and graduated between 2007 and 2013. Like the previous literature, we find large gaps in higher education (HE) participation between richer and poorer students and between White and Asian students.

We then move on to investigate earnings outcomes. For both women and men, median earnings at age 30 rise with socio-economic background. This is true both among those who attended university and those who did not (one exception is privately educated men who did not attend university, whose median earnings are lower than those of people from the top two quintiles of state-educated students who did not attend university.) For ethnicity, the picture is more nuanced but, broadly speaking, Chinese, Indian and White people have the highest median earnings and Pakistani, Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi people the lowest. Apart from differences in HE participation, possible explanations for these patterns include differences in prior attainment, location, university choices and subject choices. We show that all of these factors vary considerably across our subgroups.

In order to isolate differences in returns from differences in prior attainment, location and other

---

<sup>5</sup>Specifically, these are White British, White Other, Black African, Black Caribbean, Black Other, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani and Other.

confounding factors, we estimate similar models to those in Belfield et al. (2018). We find gross earnings returns at age 30 of around 6% for state-educated men and around 27% for state-educated women; only the bottom quintile of women achieve somewhat higher returns, at around 31%. For both women and men, returns for the privately educated are higher – at around 36% for women and around 29% for men. By ethnicity, we find very large returns for South Asian students and somewhat lower returns for Black women.

We then investigate the extent to which differences in returns estimates are affected by subject and institution choices between those coming from different SES backgrounds and those in different ethnicity groups. Our findings suggest that among state-educated students, those from higher SES backgrounds typically make worse subject choices in terms of earnings potential. Those from lower SES groups are much more likely to choose law, computing or business, all of which yield relatively good returns on average. The opposite is true for university choices, however, with the lowest SES groups making the worst choices in terms of earnings returns, even taking into account differences in prior attainment.

By ethnicity, it appears that Asian and Black African students make by far the best subject choices in terms of maximising earnings potential, with a very high propensity to choose vocational subjects such as business, computing, law and pharmacology. Students from other ethnicities have higher propensities to choose lower-returning subjects such as sociology, creative arts and social care. Institution choices play a fairly minor role in driving differences in returns between ethnicities, although there is some evidence suggesting that Asian students also make institution choices that improve earnings prospects.

We show that remaining differences in returns to a large extent mirror unexplained differences in earnings between groups for non-graduates. As a result, unexplained differences between groups are smaller among graduates. However, remaining unexplained differences among graduates are still statistically and economically significant.

Finally, we simulate the lifetime earnings of young people to estimate what returns to higher education are likely to look like at later ages than we can observe in the LEO data set. We show that returns are likely to grow with age for all groups, and especially for men. We then use our simulated earnings model to estimate the discounted net present value of lifetime returns to at-

tending higher education, taking into account both taxes and student loan repayments.<sup>6</sup> We find a U shape in returns by socio-economic background, with the lowest SES groups and independent school students benefiting most from higher education over their lifetimes. By ethnicity, South Asian students (in particular, Pakistani students) benefit the most from higher education over the course of their lifetimes, while Black students tend to benefit the least.

The report is laid out as follows. Section 2 describes the data set we use and Section 3 documents relevant differences between socio-economic and ethnic groups. Section 4 discusses the methodology for estimating returns and simulating lifetime earnings. Section 5 then estimates gross returns at age 30 and investigates the importance of subject and institution choices, and Section 6 shows our lifetime estimates. Section 7 concludes.

## 2 Data

### 2.1 Overview

We briefly summarise the data that we use, referring the reader to Britton et al. (2020) for more extensive detail. We use the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data set, an administrative data set that links together school records from the National Pupil Database (NPD), university records from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and tax records from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). We focus on students who took their GCSE examinations in England between 2002 and 2007. The 2002 GCSE cohort is the oldest cohort for which we have linked NPD–HESA–HMRC data, and we observe those individuals in the tax data up to age 30. In our returns estimates, we focus on those who attained at least five GCSEs graded A\*–C, for whom higher education was a plausible option.

For our lifetime returns estimates, we concentrate on the 2002 cohort only. As laid out in more detail in the methodology section, after age 30 we simulate earnings for everyone in the 2002 cohort with five A\*–C GCSEs and a Key Stage 5 record for the rest of their working lives. For this exercise, we use two different data sources. The first is the linked HESA–HMRC record for cohorts of students born between the mid 1970s and the mid 1980s. This gives us linked individual earnings records over time for university students back to the 1975/76 birth cohort (for this oldest

---

<sup>6</sup>Our methodology for this exercise closely follows Britton et al. (2020).

cohort, we observe earnings up to age 40). The second is the Labour Force Survey (LFS), which we use to simulate earnings from ages 41 to 67 for university students and from ages 31 to 67 for the non-university group (as we do not have the HMRC data up to age 40 for the latter).

## 2.2 Measures of SES and ethnicity

Unfortunately, we do not observe parental income. However, following previous research in this area (e.g. Chowdry et al., 2013) and our own previous work with the LEO data (e.g. Belfield et al., 2018), we generate a continuous measure of SES based on a combination of the free school meals (FSM) indicator and a set of local area deprivation measures. We combine these variables into one continuous measure using principal components analysis and then divide it up into quintiles that range from most deprived to least deprived.<sup>7</sup> We do not observe the local-area-level deprivation index for the roughly 8% of students who attended private schools – we therefore include them as a sixth and separate group.

Table 1: Sample size by SES and GCSE year

SES group	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
Bottom quintile	90,162	98,354	108,284	107,992	100,269	102,677	607,738
2nd quintile	93,902	102,645	109,960	109,576	105,618	107,522	629,223
3rd quintile	97,001	105,851	111,692	111,231	109,940	111,298	647,013
4th quintile	98,483	108,148	112,859	112,416	112,379	114,049	658,334
Top quintile	99,287	109,206	113,340	113,053	113,859	115,407	664,152
Independent school	40,888	40,773	43,745	46,095	46,651	47,199	265,351
Total	519,723	564,977	599,880	600,363	588,716	598,152	3,471,811

Note: Differences in quintile size arise because lower-SES students are more likely to have incomplete Key Stage 4 records.

Table 1 shows the number of individuals in our sample by SES group and GCSE year. We observe around half a million individuals per GCSE cohort and 3.5 million individuals overall. Small differences in quintile size arise because lower-SES students are more likely to have incomplete Key Stage 4 records and we have excluded those with incomplete records from the sample.

We use ethnicity information from the NPD. The categories we use are: White British, White Other, Black African, Black Caribbean, Black Other, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani and Other. Ethnicity is not available for those who were not state educated; hence, our returns esti-

<sup>7</sup>As shown in Appendix A1, our composite SES index is highly correlated with the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), and we obtain very similar results when we use the IDACI quintile instead.

mates by ethnicity should be interpreted as applying only to students educated in the state school system.

Table 2: Sample size by ethnicity and GCSE year

Ethnicity	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
White British	397,124	419,684	452,513	451,025	443,074	451,216	2,614,636
White Other	11,544	9,062	10,292	10,304	10,620	11,251	63,073
Black Caribbean	6,653	7,545	8,068	8,167	7,750	7,603	45,786
Black African	5,915	6,828	7,674	8,914	9,412	10,214	48,957
Black Other	3,635	2,107	2,296	2,320	2,373	2,383	15,114
Indian	12,824	13,257	13,458	12,728	12,889	12,694	77,850
Pakistani	12,113	12,048	12,799	12,615	12,722	13,305	75,602
Bangladeshi	4,489	4,836	4,981	5,043	5,356	5,279	29,984
Chinese	1,770	1,815	1,897	2,141	1,992	1,931	11,546
Other	22,768	47,022	42,157	41,011	35,877	35,077	223,912
Total	478,835	524,204	556,135	554,268	542,065	550,953	3,206,460

Note: Excludes privately educated students.

Table 2 shows the number of individuals in our sample by ethnic group and GCSE year. As privately educated students are excluded, the overall sample size is somewhat smaller, at 3.2 million. Notably, the vast majority of students are classified as White British, while Chinese and Black Other each describe fewer than 20,000 students. It should also be noted that the ethnicity classifications in the NPD became more refined over time, with smaller and mixed ethnicities explicitly included in later years; as a result, ethnicity categories are not precisely identical in different cohorts.<sup>8</sup>

Table 3 cross-tabulates sample sizes between ethnic groups and socio-economic status quintiles. Ethnic diversity decreases in higher SES quintiles. Some ethnic minorities, such as Black African and Bangladeshi, are vastly over-represented in the lowest socio-economic group. Others, such as White Other and Chinese, are more evenly split.

<sup>8</sup>Most significantly, changes in ethnicity coding appear to have led to a large rise between the 2002 and 2003 cohorts in students classified as 'Other' in our classification scheme, as students who would otherwise have been classed under a single ethnicity were now classified as mixed and therefore fell under 'Other'.

Table 3: Sample size by ethnicity and SES group

	<b>Bottom Q</b>	<b>2nd Q</b>	<b>3rd Q</b>	<b>4th Q</b>	<b>Top Q</b>	<b>Total</b>
White British	419,286	482,446	531,614	583,491	597,799	2,614,636
White Other	14,227	12,889	13,355	11,064	11,538	63,073
Black Caribbean	21,461	12,449	8,141	2,642	1,093	45,786
Black African	27,310	12,221	6,278	2,062	1,086	48,957
Black Other	6,817	3,992	2,596	1,110	599	15,114
Indian	11,885	22,559	22,568	11,824	9,014	77,850
Pakistani	32,681	25,397	11,004	3,941	2,579	75,602
Bangladeshi	20,476	5,744	2,266	962	536	29,984
Chinese	2,438	2,209	2,551	2,066	2,282	11,546
Other	51,157	49,317	46,640	39,172	37,626	223,912
Total	607,738	629,223	647,013	658,334	664,152	3,206,460

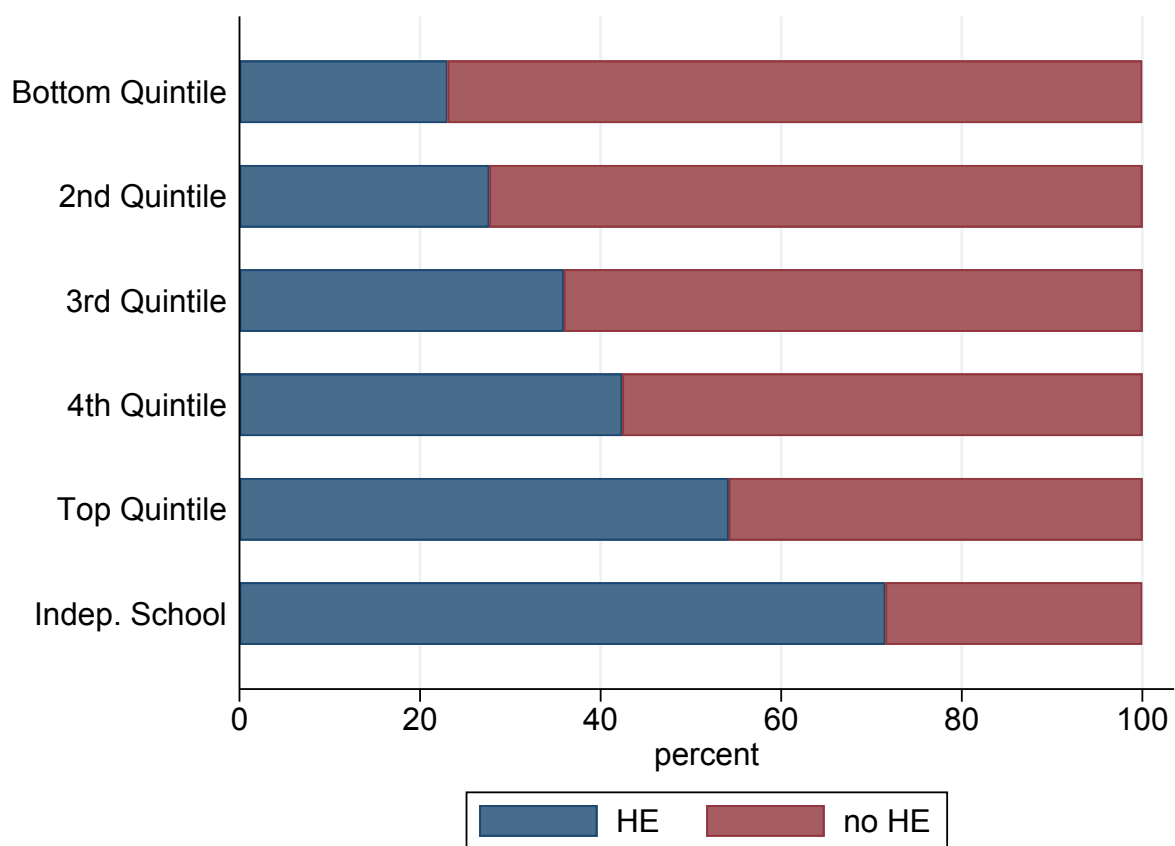
Note: Excludes privately educated students.

### 2.3 Undergraduate participation

Figure 1 shows undergraduate participation rates within each of our SES groups. In line with previous literature from the UK (Crawford and Greaves, 2015) and the US (Hoxby and Avery, 2013), we observe a significant gradient in participation by SES. Roughly three-quarters of those from independent schools attend university, while less than a quarter of the bottom SES quintile do.

Figure 2 shows the equivalent shares for our different ethnicity groups. Consistent with the previous evidence from the UK (Crawford and Greaves, 2015; DfE, 2020), we see that participation is lowest amongst the White British (the largest group), at less than 40%, while it is around 50% for many of the other ethnicity groups. Participation is highest among Indian students (70%) and Chinese students (nearly 80%).

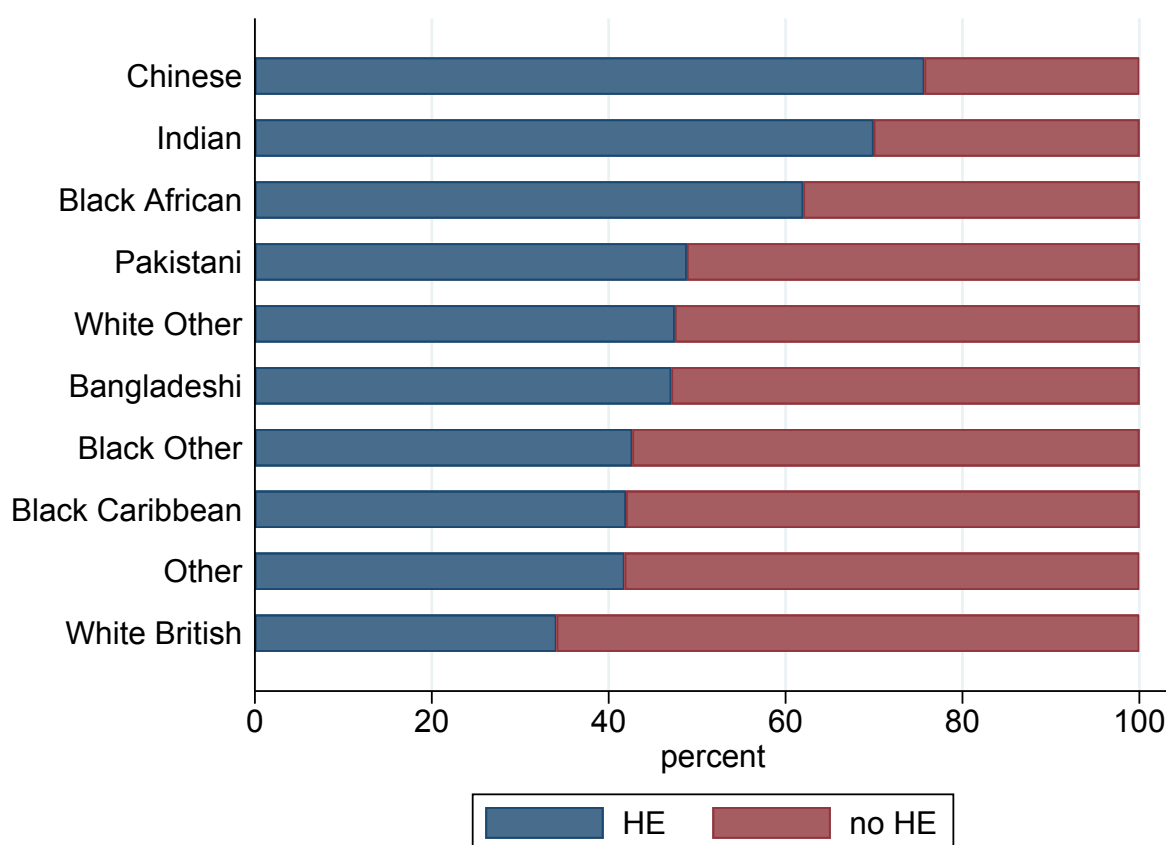
Figure 1: HE participation by SES



Note: Quintiles refer to the distribution of socio-economic status among the state-educated. Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups. Only those who have studied on standard undergraduate degrees are counted in the HE group. Students who have pursued sub-degree qualifications are counted as 'non-HE', and those recorded in the data as pursuing postgraduate but not undergraduate qualifications are excluded from the sample.



Figure 2: HE participation by ethnicity



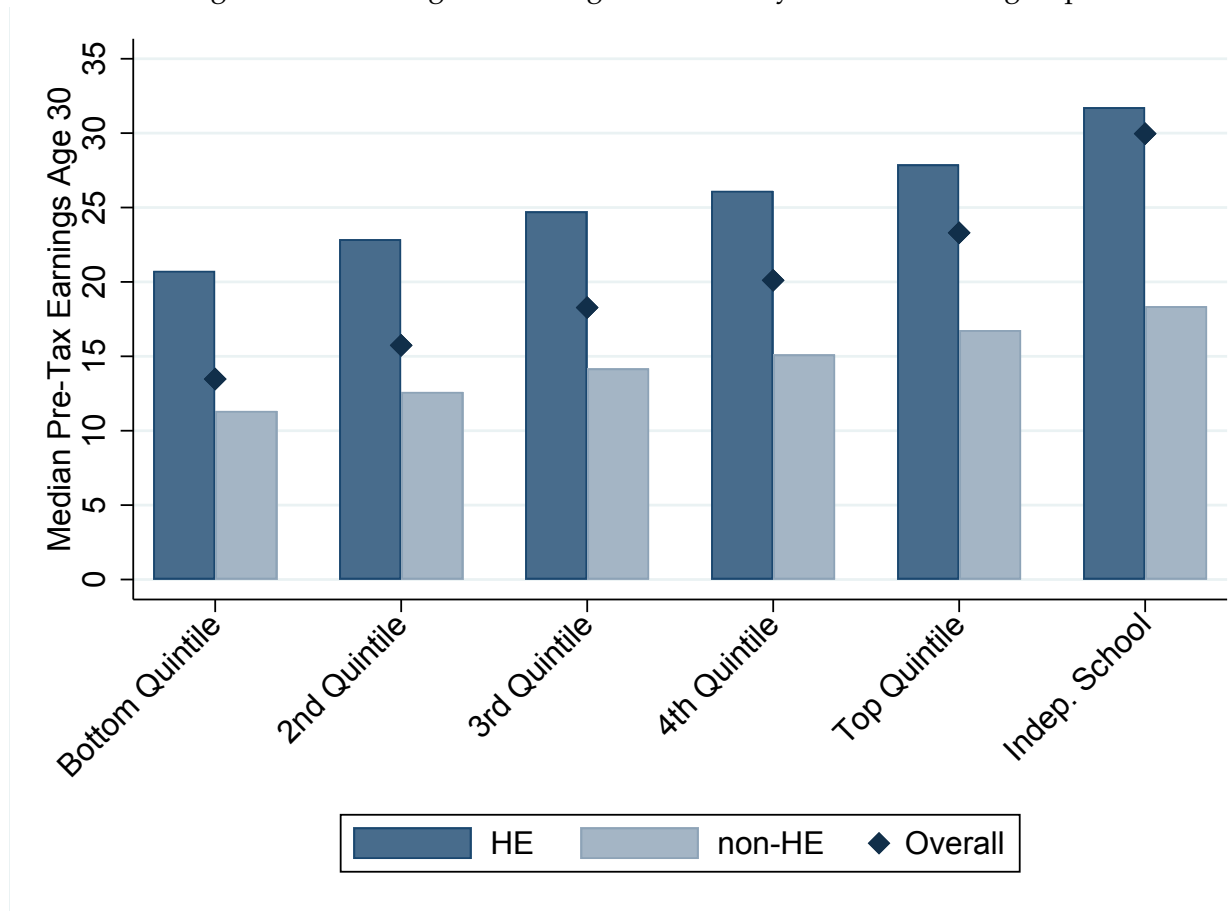
Note: Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups for people who attended state school only; people who attended independent schools are excluded from the sample, as their ethnicity is not recorded in most cases. Only those who have studied on standard undergraduate degrees are counted in the HE group. Students who have pursued sub-degree qualifications are counted as 'non-HE', and those recorded in the data as pursuing postgraduate but not undergraduate qualifications are excluded from the sample.

### 3 Differences between socio-economic and ethnic groups

In this section, we first document differences in earnings at age 30 between socio-economic and ethnic groups for men and women and for graduates and non-graduates. We then look at some of the factors that could explain the observed earnings differences. Socio-economic and ethnic groups differ in their school attainment and their regional concentration, which may drive differences in earnings. Furthermore, people from different groups who go to university also make different choices about where and what to study, which also influence their later-life earnings.

### 3.1 Earnings at age 30

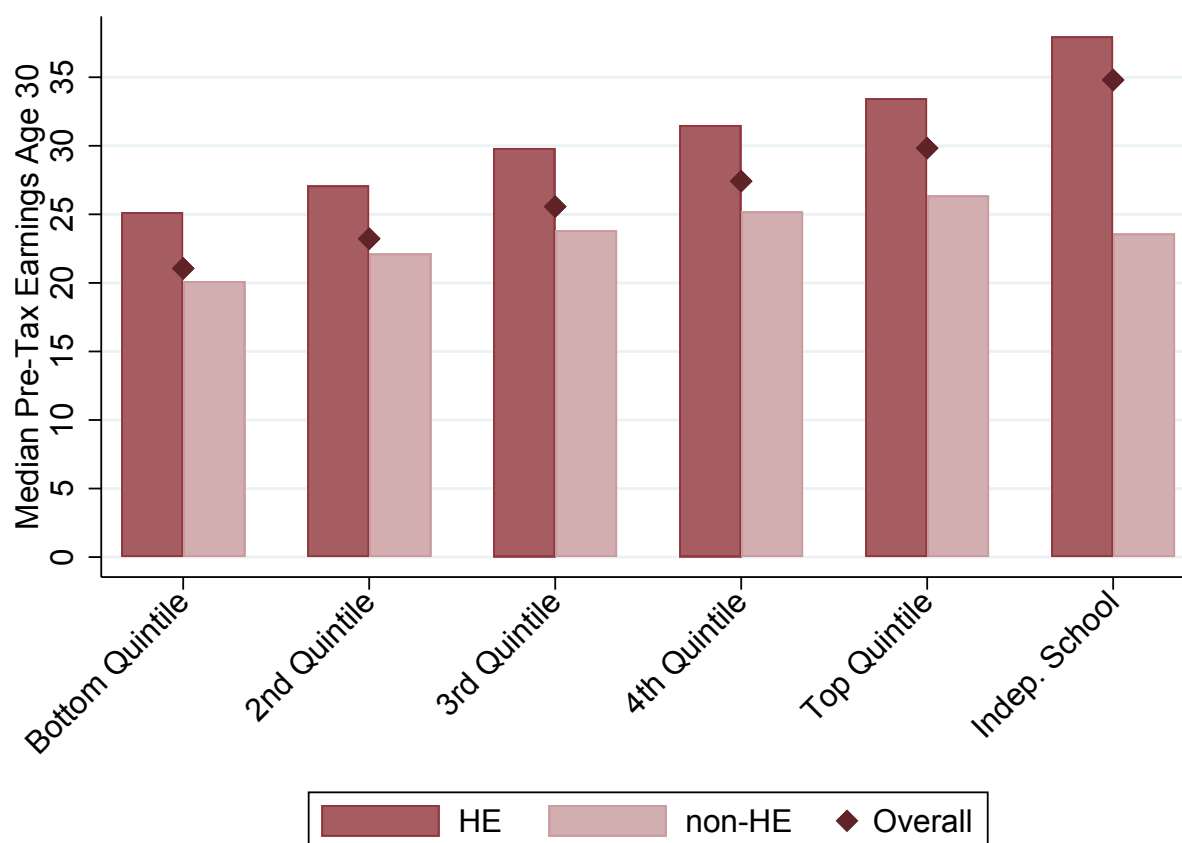
Figure 3: Median age-30 earnings of women by socio-economic group



Note: Median earnings from employment and self-employment for women from the 2002 GCSE cohort at age 30 (2016/17 tax year) by socio-economic group, in thousands of pounds. Excludes individuals with zero or negative earnings.

Figure 3 shows the median earnings at age 30 for women from the 2002 GCSE cohort by socio-economic group. There is a clear gradient with socio-economic status for both HE and non-HE women: women from wealthier backgrounds generally earn more. As more women from higher-status groups attend university, the overall gradient in median earnings is steeper than the gradient for the HE and non-HE groups taken individually.

Figure 4: Median age-30 earnings of men by socio-economic group

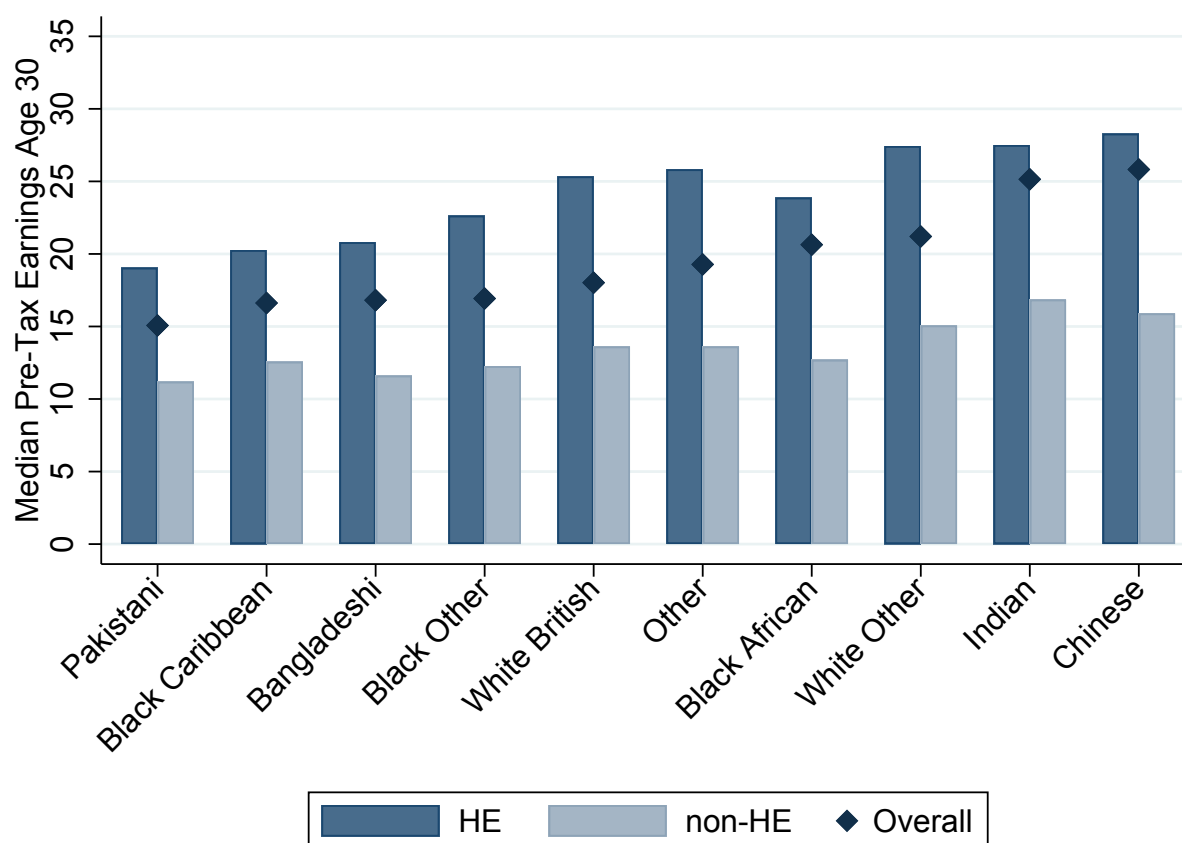


Note: Median earnings from employment and self-employment for men from the 2002 GCSE cohort at age 30 (2016/17 tax year) by socio-economic group, in thousands of pounds. Excludes individuals with zero or negative earnings.

Figure 4 is the equivalent graph for men. It shows a similar pattern, although the difference in median earnings between the HE and non-HE groups is much smaller for men. An exception is men who went to private schools: for privately educated men who did not go to university, median earnings are actually *lower* than for state-educated high-SES men who did not attend university. As a result, the gap between the HE and non-HE groups is much larger for privately educated men than for state-educated men.

Notably, men in all groups have substantially higher median earnings at age 30 than women in the same group. As shown in Figure A1 in the appendix, gender earnings gaps are larger between non-HE men and women than between HE men and women within all socio-economic groups except independent school students. The overall gender earnings gap falls with socio-economic status, but the earnings gap among the HE group rises with socio-economic status.

Figure 5: Median age-30 earnings of women by ethnicity

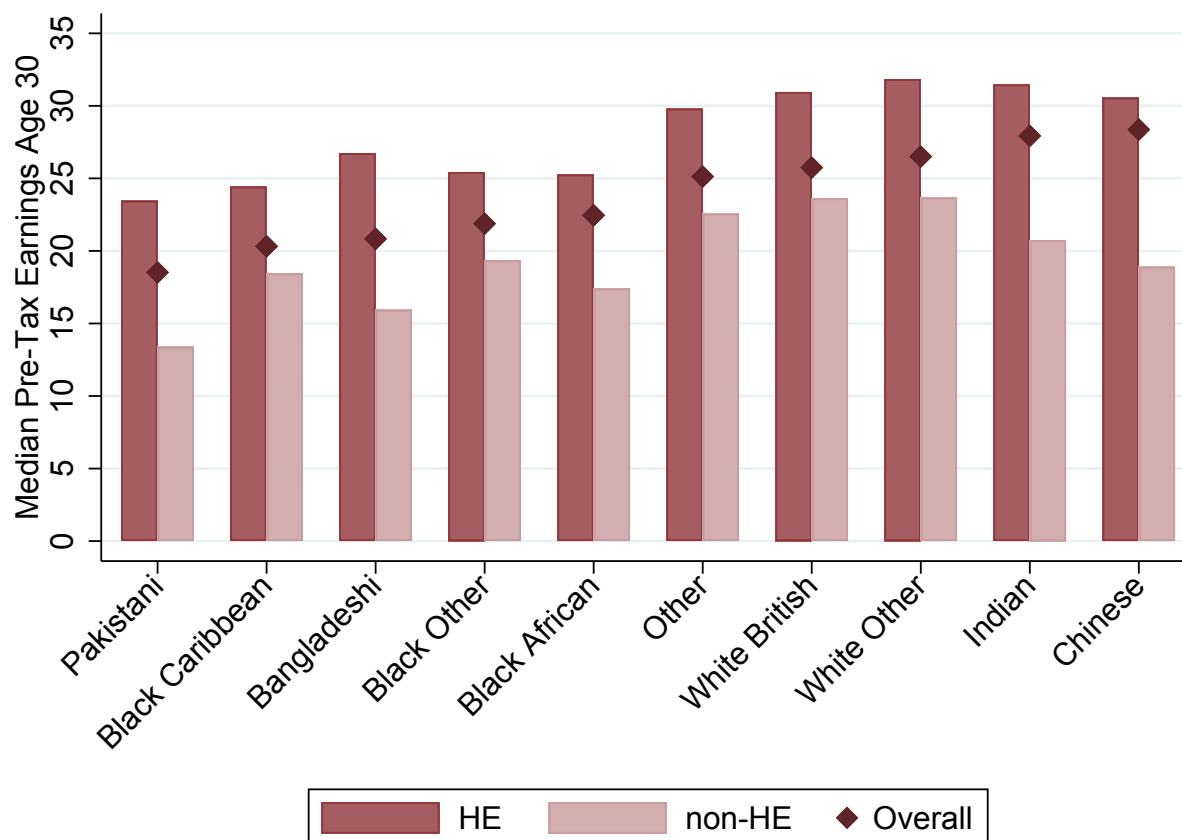


Note: Median earnings from employment and self-employment for women from the 2002 GCSE cohort at age 30 (2016/17 tax year) by ethnicity, in thousands of pounds. Excludes individuals with zero or negative earnings and those who were privately educated.

Figure 5 shows the median earnings at age 30 for women from the 2002 GCSE cohort by ethnic group. Pakistani, Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi women have the lowest median earnings at age 30, at just above £15,000; at the other end of the spectrum, the median income of Indian and Chinese women at age 30 is more than £25,000. By far the largest ethnic group, White British, has median earnings of around £18,000.

Figure 6 is the equivalent graph for men. The ordering is very similar, with Pakistani, Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi at the low end and Indian and Chinese at the high end of the spectrum. Notably, among those who do not go to university, Indian and Chinese men actually have *lower* earnings than White British men, and those who go to university have roughly the same median earnings. Overall median earnings for Indian and Chinese men are higher only because a higher

Figure 6: Median age-30 earnings of men by ethnicity



Note: Median earnings from employment and self-employment for men from the 2002 GCSE cohort at age 30 (2016/17 tax year) by ethnicity, in thousands of pounds. Excludes individuals with zero or negative earnings and those who were privately educated.

share of them attend university.

As shown in Figure A2 in the appendix, gender earnings gaps are larger among White British people than among all minority groups. Black African, Chinese and Indian are the ethnic groups with the smallest gender earnings gaps. Interestingly, for ethnic Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, gender earnings gaps are larger among the HE group than among the non-HE group, reversing the usual pattern.

Table 4: Median age-30 earnings by SES and ethnicity

	Bottom Q	2nd Q	3rd Q	4th Q	Top Q
<i>Women</i>					
White British	12,661 (21,896)	15,133 (26,887)	17,764 (31,231)	19,863 (34,852)	23,116 (36,349)
White Other	16,629 (796)	17,845 (831)	22,169 (899)	22,177 (853)	27,040 (894)
Black Caribbean	15,475 (1,249)	16,731 (695)	19,061 (427)	15,660 (135)	23,232 (58)
Black African	19,902 (1,096)	20,374 (480)	25,115 (251)	22,188 (75)	23,478 (46)
Black Other	13,422 (590)	18,314 (363)	19,656 (225)	21,382 (124)	20,870 (61)
Indian	20,757 (793)	23,165 (1,464)	26,625 (1,448)	27,652 (739)	28,524 (539)
Pakistani	13,677 (1,547)	15,531 (1,269)	17,325 (558)	17,889 (184)	20,412 (120)
Bangladeshi	15,784 (931)	17,098 (251)	21,271 (96)	18,855 (56)	. (17)
Chinese	25,479 (144)	23,960 (111)	24,046 (145)	27,724 (110)	30,667 (123)
Other	15,839 (1,652)	17,153 (1,756)	19,556 (1,683)	21,303 (1,605)	23,893 (1,674)
<i>Men</i>					
White British	21,294 (23,815)	23,309 (29,247)	25,522 (34,312)	27,420 (37,965)	29,813 (39,071)
White Other	22,232 (926)	24,749 (869)	26,968 (944)	28,576 (872)	31,820 (897)
Black Caribbean	18,560 (1,136)	20,777 (632)	22,248 (439)	23,546 (145)	25,120 (54)
Black African	21,320 (943)	23,078 (472)	23,768 (221)	25,993 (84)	26,365 (47)
Black Other	19,895 (548)	23,168 (332)	24,114 (222)	22,663 (94)	26,557 (53)
Indian	24,527 (881)	25,272 (1,650)	30,336 (1,583)	31,529 (808)	31,551 (564)
Pakistani	16,440 (2,002)	19,695 (1,554)	21,321 (680)	21,747 (206)	25,937 (131)
Bangladeshi	20,247 (1,125)	20,897 (306)	22,403 (109)	28,187 (41)	25,262 (32)
Chinese	27,600 (150)	28,323 (136)	28,998 (133)	30,188 (130)	24,642 (115)
Other	21,593 (1,757)	23,056 (1,816)	25,306 (1,784)	26,635 (1,681)	29,604 (1,731)

Note: Median earnings from employment and self-employment in pounds for students from the 2002 GCSE cohort at age 30 (2016/17 tax year) by SES group and ethnicity. Excludes individuals with zero or negative earnings, and those who were privately educated. Sample sizes are shown in parentheses. ‘.’ indicates excluded to guard against statistical disclosure.

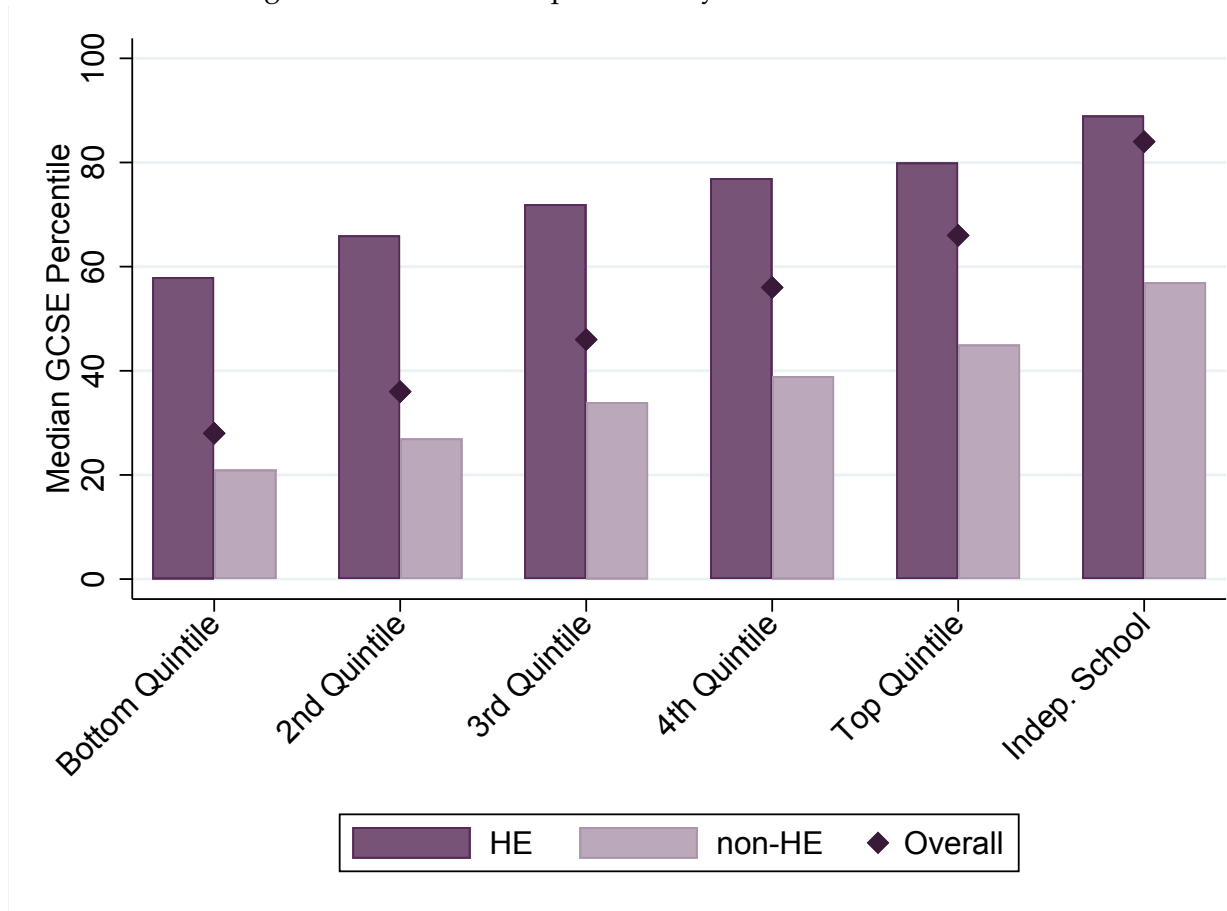
Table 4 shows median earnings of women and men by ethnic group and socio-economic status. Within each ethnic group, higher socio-economic status is generally associated with higher median earnings at age 30. Exceptions are Indian, Bangladeshi and Chinese men in the highest SES cohorts. Comparatively low earnings for these groups may be explained by a high prevalence of postgraduate study and therefore delayed labour market entry.

Within each socio-economic group, women from ethnic minorities tend to outearn their White British peers. For men, the picture is more mixed, with Chinese and Indian men mostly earning more than White British men with the same socio-economic background and men from other ethnic minorities mostly earning less. In line with the overall results, ethnic Chinese and Indian women also tend to be the highest earners within each SES group.

### **3.2 Prior attainment**

We now consider one potential driver of these differences: prior attainment. We show the median GCSE percentile rank by SES in Figure 7 and by ethnicity in Figure 8. In both cases, differences in prior attainment align quite closely with differences in age-30 earnings, suggesting that prior attainment could be a major factor in explaining differences between groups.

Figure 7: Median GCSE percentile by SES and HE attendance

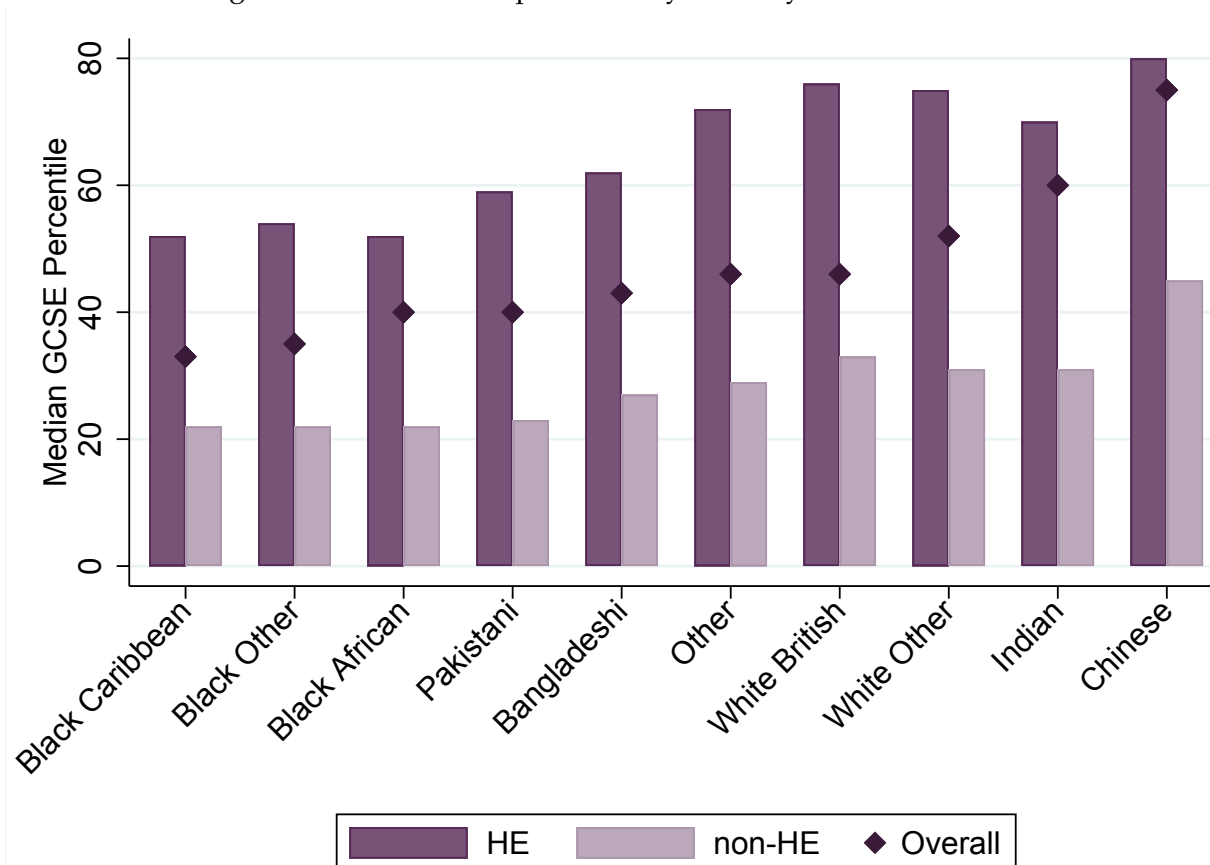


Note: Quintiles refer to the distribution of socio-economic status among the state-educated. Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups.

Figure 7 shows that GCSE grades increase monotonically with SES for both undergraduate participants and non-participants. For participants, there are gaps of 20 percentiles between the top and bottom quintiles and around 30 percentiles between the privately educated and the bottom SES group. The gap is even more substantial for those who do not go to university, with average GCSE performance of the privately educated who do not attend roughly equivalent to the average GCSE performance of those in the bottom quintile who do attend, and around 35 percentiles higher than that of those in the bottom quintile who do not. These dramatic differences in prior attainment align with previous studies (e.g. Chowdry et al., 2013).



Figure 8: Median GCSE percentile by ethnicity and HE attendance



Note: Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups for people who attended state school only; people who attended independent schools are excluded from the sample, as their ethnicity is not recorded in most cases.

Figure 8 then documents prior attainment by ethnicity. Black students have the lowest GCSE results, while Indian and Chinese students achieve the highest scores. Notably, the range of median GCSE scores is nearly as wide among ethnic groups as it is among SES groups.

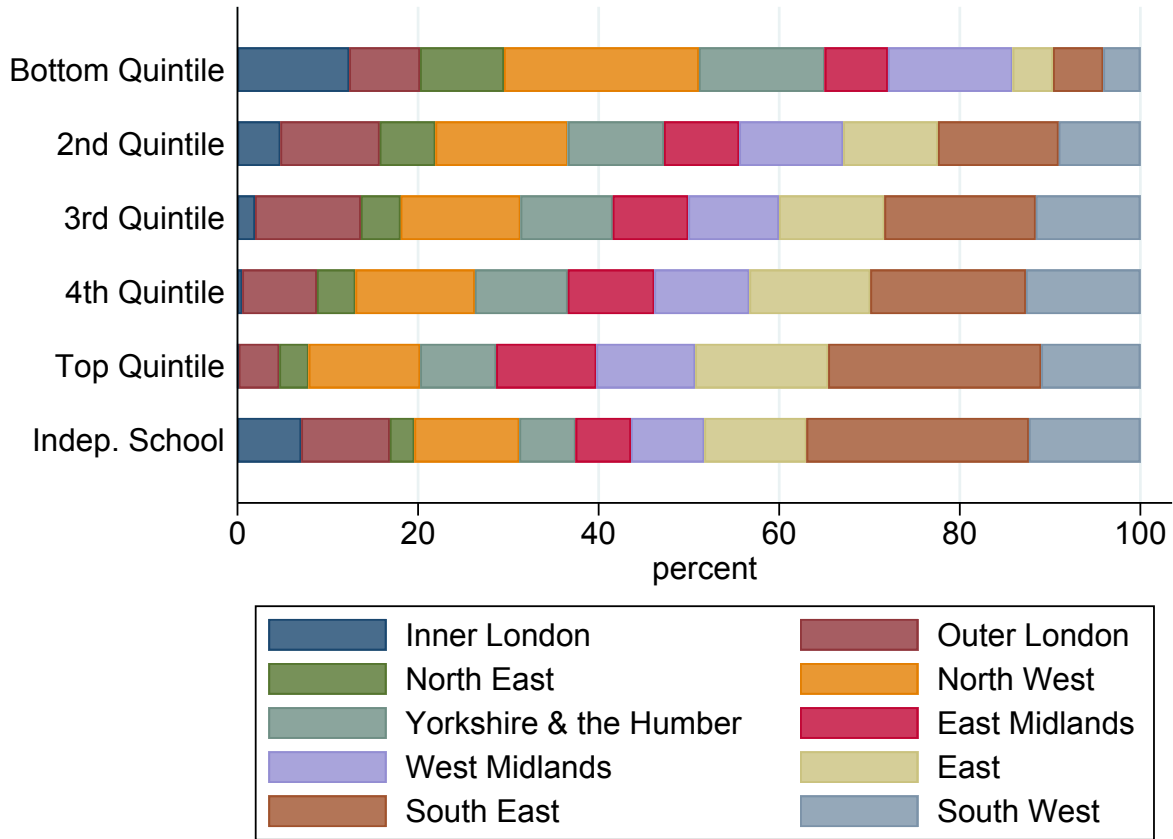
### 3.3 Location

Location is another factor that could influence earnings. We start by highlighting the geographical distribution of our different SES groups in Figure 9. This is shown at the Government Office Region (GOR) level<sup>9</sup> and is based on where the students lived in the year they took their GCSEs. People from the lowest SES quintile are more likely to have grown up in Inner London, the North East and the North West, and less likely to have grown up in the South East. At the other end of

<sup>9</sup>All are in England because we do not have NPD data or equivalent for the other parts of the UK.

the spectrum, people from the highest SES quintile and those who went to independent schools are disproportionately likely to be from the South East.

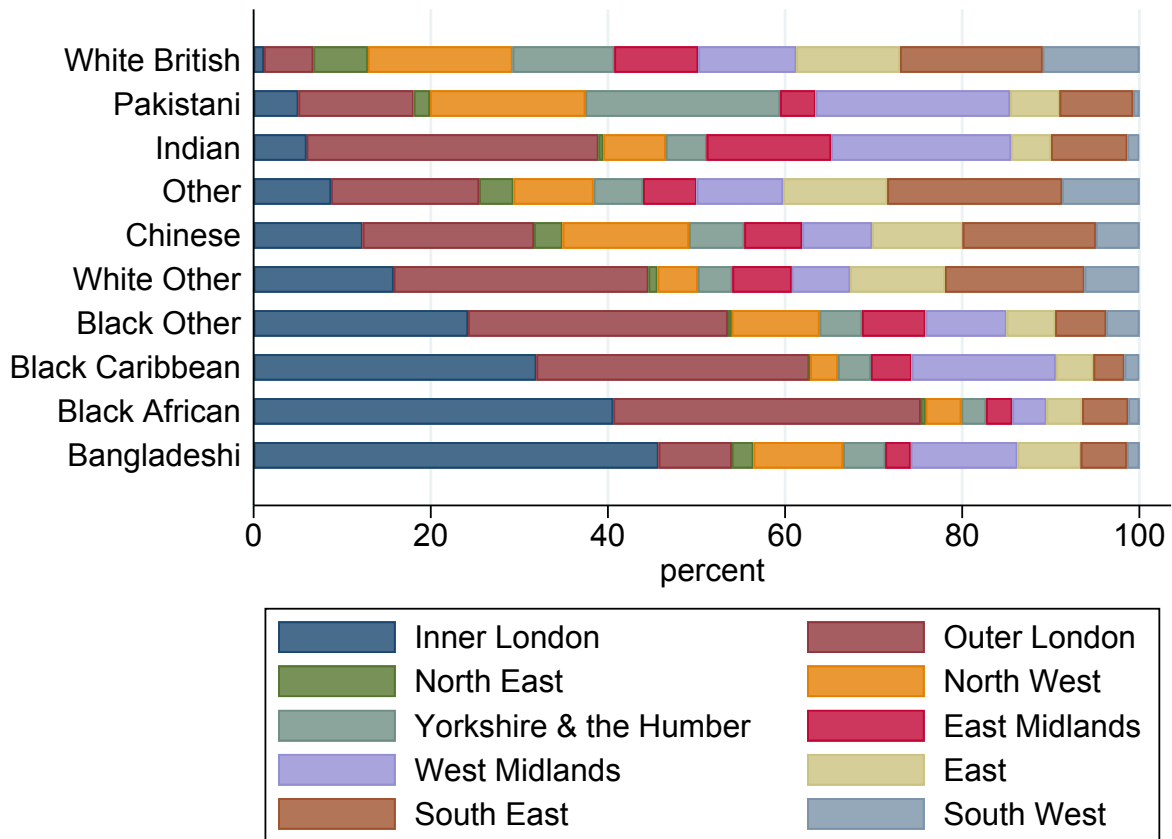
Figure 9: Socio-economic status: distribution across regions



Note: Quintiles refer to the distribution of socio-economic status among the state-educated. Regions are based on where the students lived in the year they took their GCSEs. Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups.

Figure 10 then shows geographical distributions by ethnicity. There are very stark differences. Less than 10% of White British students lived in London at the age of 16. In contrast, over 40% of Bangladeshi and Black African students are from Inner London and over 50% of Black Other, Black Caribbean, Black African and Bangladeshi students have grown up in either Inner or Outer London. There are also notably large shares of Pakistani and Indian students in the West Midlands, a large share of Pakistani students in Yorkshire & the Humber and fairly large shares of Other, White Other and Chinese students in the South East.

Figure 10: Ethnicity: distribution across regions



Note: Regions are based on where the students lived in the year they took their GCSEs. Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups for people who attended state school only; people who attended independent schools are excluded from the sample, as their ethnicity is not recorded in most cases.

### 3.4 Universities attended

Figure 11 looks at the distribution of universities attended by SES group for those who go on to higher education. We follow Britton et al. (2020) and divide universities into four groups based (roughly) on their selectivity. Specifically, these are: Russell Group, Old universities, Other (more selective) universities, and Other (less selective). The selectivity of the 'Other' groups is based on the average GCSE scores of their students.<sup>10</sup>

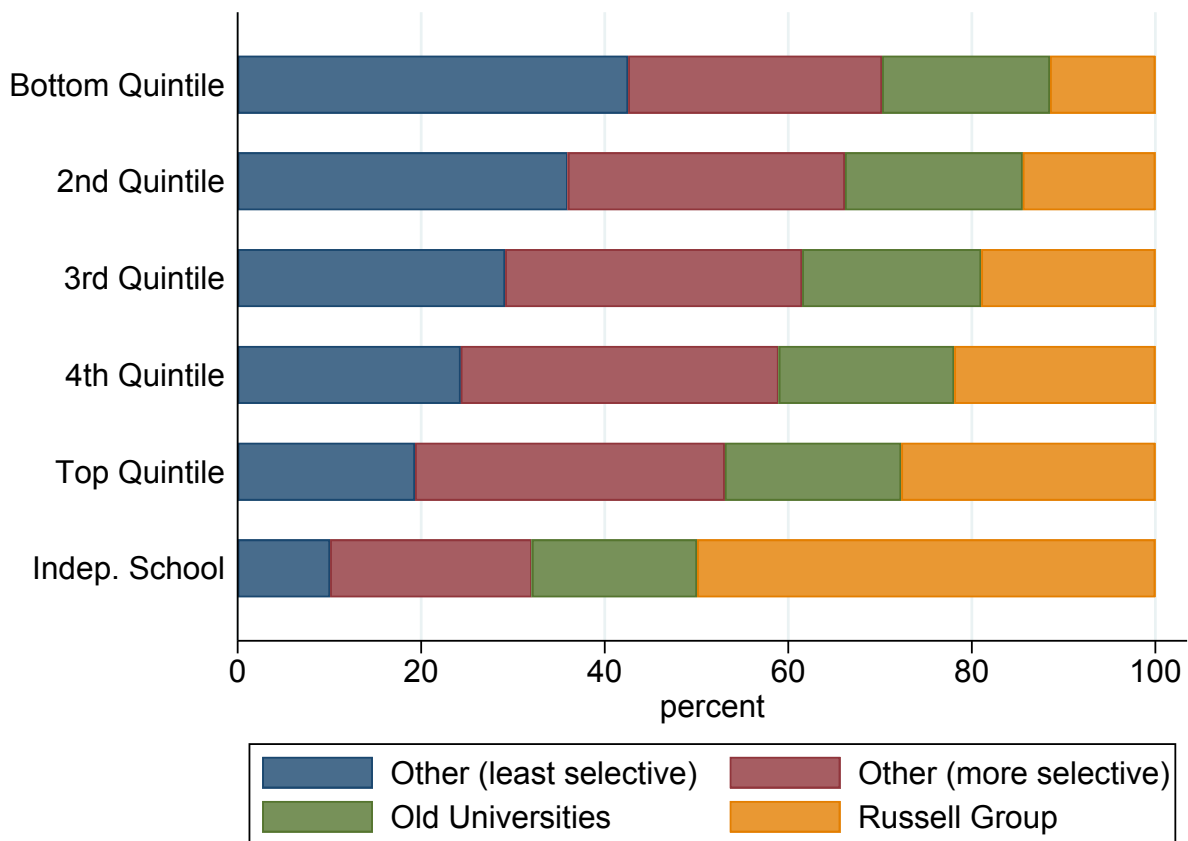
The most striking feature of Figure 11 is that around half of privately educated students who go to university at all attend the elite Russell Group universities. This translates to around 36% of

<sup>10</sup>While GCSE scores are typically not the primary measure universities use to select their students, they are the most comparable measure across students and are highly correlated with other attainment measures such as A-level marks.

all privately educated students going to Russell Group universities, or more than twice the share of state school students from the highest SES group. In total, around 28% of places in Russell Group universities are taken by private school pupils.

Participation at Russell Group universities by those in the lowest SES group is around 10% of those who attend any university and less than 3% of the total group. While there are not huge differences in participation rates at the middle two university groups by SES, we do see a very clear SES gradient in participation at the least selective universities. More than 40% of university students from the bottom SES quintile attend these institutions, but only around 20% of students from the top SES quintile and only 10% of privately educated students do.

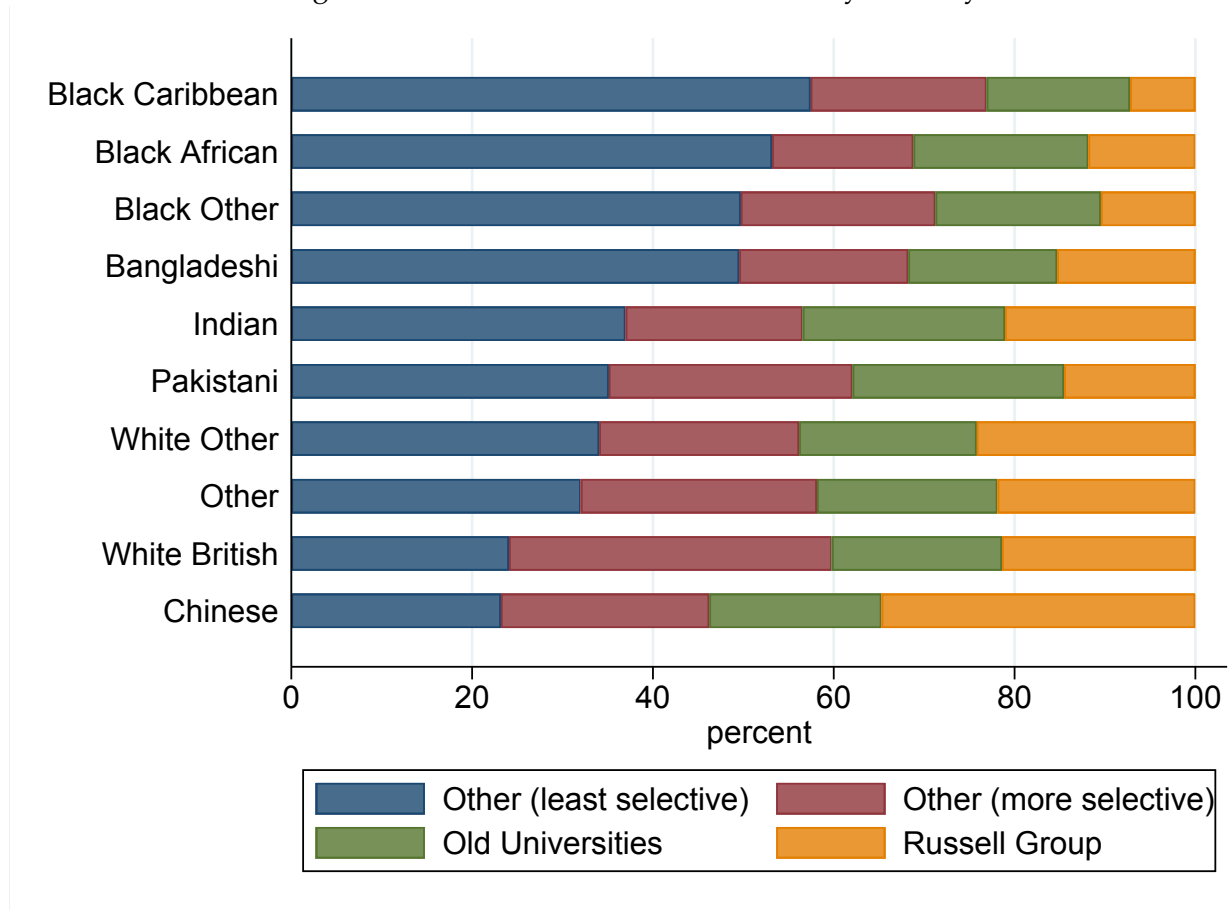
Figure 11: Distribution across institutions by SES



Note: Quintiles refer to the distribution of socio-economic status among the state-educated. Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups. Only those who have studied on standard undergraduate degrees are included. Students who have pursued sub-degree qualifications and those recorded in the data as pursuing postgraduate but not undergraduate qualifications are excluded from the sample.

Figure 12 then shows the distribution of universities attended by ethnicity. There are large differences in attendance at Russell Group institutions, with the lowest attendance rates of around 10% among Black Caribbean, Black African and Black Other students. White, Other and Indian students have participation rates of around 20% at Russell Group institutions, while the figure among Chinese students is around 35%. White British students are most over-represented in the Other (more selective) institutions, while Pakistani and Indian students are especially likely to attend the Old universities. More than half of Black Caribbean and Black African students attend the least selective institutions, while less than 25% of White British and Chinese students attend institutions in this group.

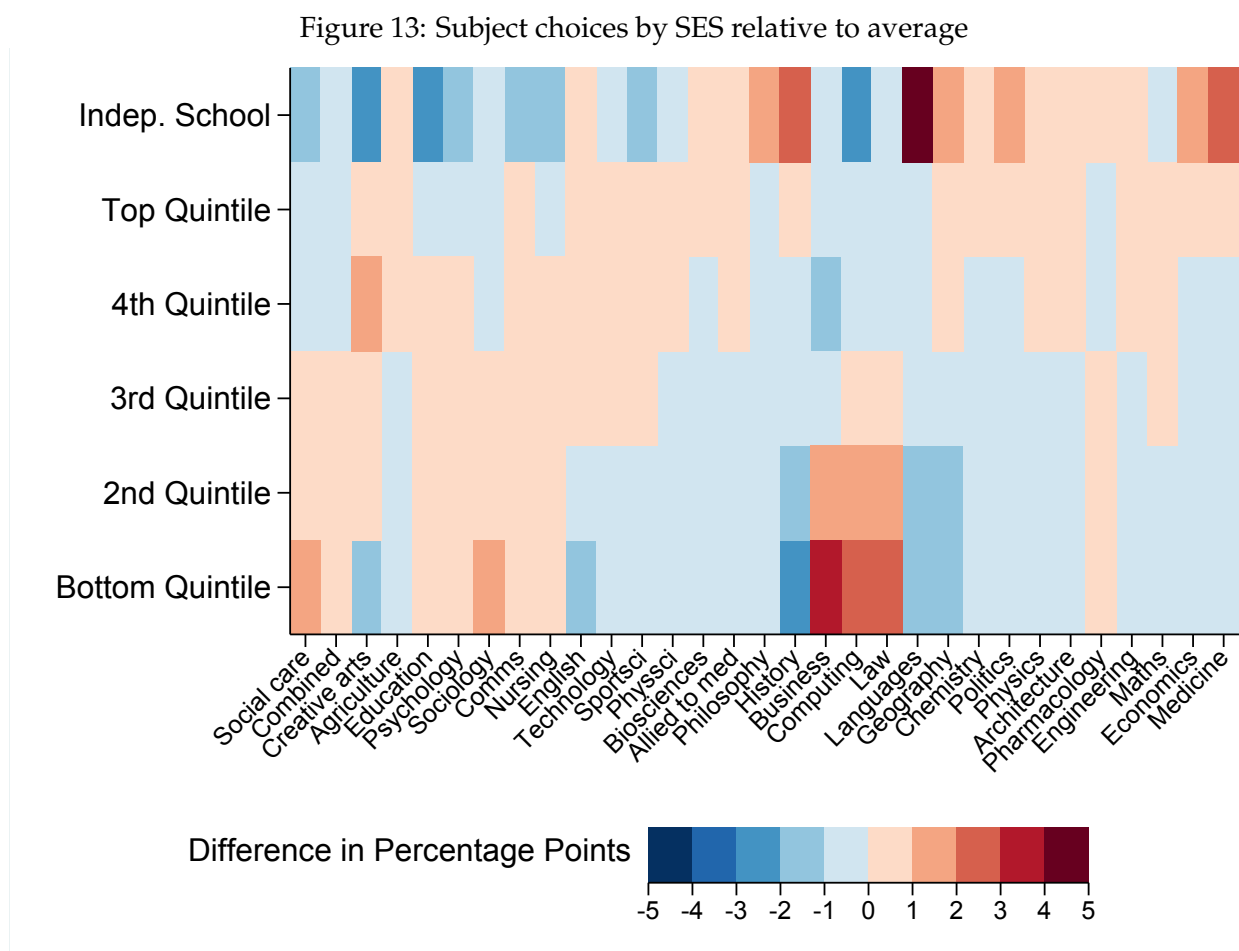
Figure 12: Distribution across institutions by ethnicity



Note: Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups for people who attended state school only; people who attended independent schools are excluded from the sample, as their ethnicity is not recorded in most cases. Only those who have studied on standard undergraduate degrees are included. Students who have pursued sub-degree qualifications and those recorded in the data as pursuing postgraduate but not undergraduate qualifications are excluded from the sample.

### 3.5 Subjects studied

We now turn to consider differences in subject choices, again among the set of people who study for an undergraduate degree. Figure 13 shows subject choices by SES, comparing the subject choices of each group by showing the percentage point difference from the average rate of enrolment in each subject. Reds in increasing intensity show increasing positive differences from the average enrolment rate and blues in increasing intensity show negative differences. Subjects are ordered by median earnings at age 30.



Note: Quintiles refer to the distribution of socio-economic status among the state-educated. Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups. Subjects are ranked by median earnings at age 30.

In general, there are more reds in the top right of the chart, showing higher enrolment in higher-earning subjects from wealthier students, and in the bottom left, showing higher enrolment in lower-earning subjects amongst poorer students. However, there is also very high enrol-

ment of poorer students in computing, business and law. In addition to the high-earning medicine and economics, the privately educated are disproportionately enrolled in languages, history, geography, politics and philosophy and are less likely to be enrolled in creative arts, education and computing.<sup>11</sup>

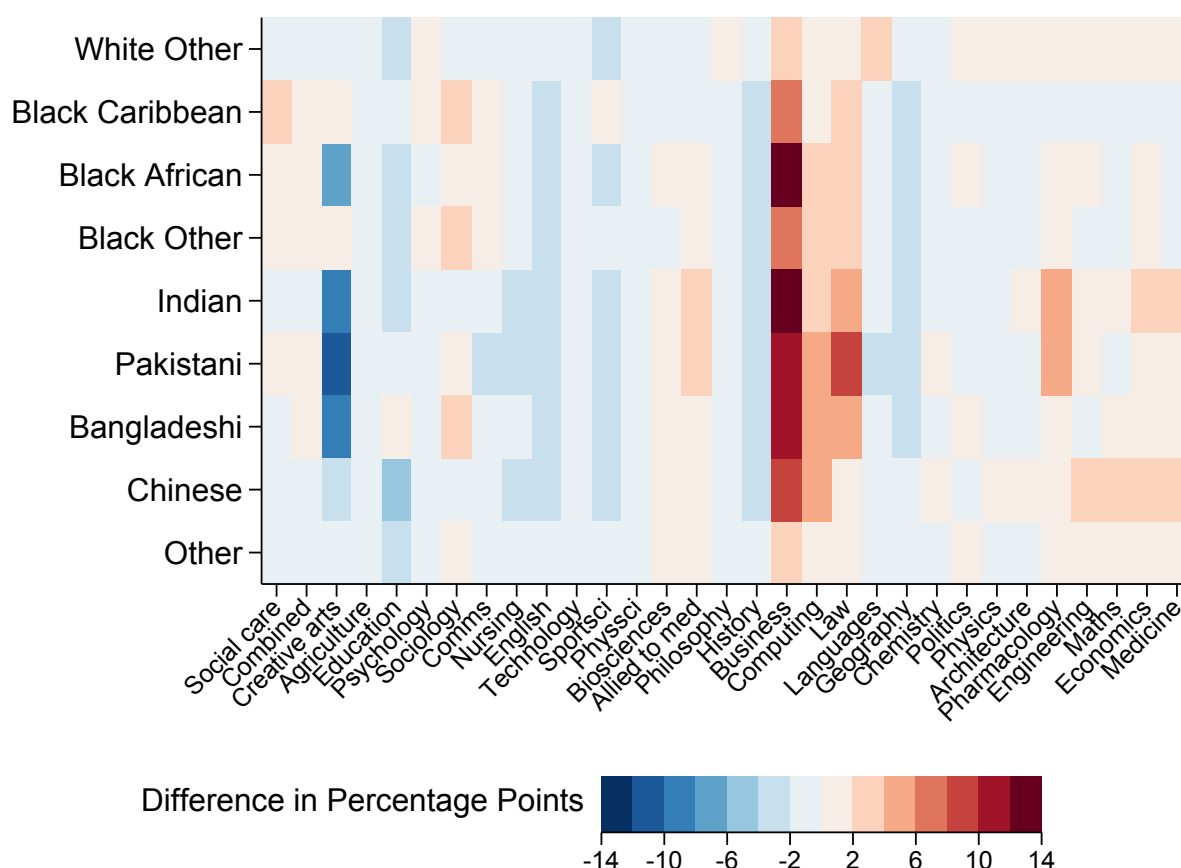
Figure 14 then displays subject choices by ethnicity group. Now the percentage point differences are relative to a base category of White British. The most striking feature is the very high enrolment of Black and South Asian students in business degrees, and to a slightly lesser extent in law and computing. Indian and Pakistani students are much more likely to study pharmacology and also more likely to take subjects allied to medicine. Alongside Bangladeshi and Black African students, they are also much less likely to take creative arts courses than White British students.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>For versions of Figure 13 split by gender, see Figures A4 and A5 in the appendix.

<sup>12</sup>For versions of Figure 14 split by gender, see see Figures A6 and A7 in the appendix.

Figure 14: Subject choices by ethnicity relative to White British



Note: Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups for people who attended state school only; people who attended independent schools are excluded from the sample, as their ethnicity is not recorded in most cases. Subjects are ranked by median earnings at age 30.

## 4 Methodology

We are interested in estimating the returns to university for our different sub-populations at age 30 and over the life cycle. Following Belfield et al. (2018), we estimate earnings returns at age 30 using a regression model, accounting for observed background characteristics and prior attainment from the National Pupil Database. In order to estimate *lifetime* returns for the different subgroups, we proceed in two steps as in Britton et al. (2020): we first simulate lifetime earnings based on earnings patterns of earlier cohorts, and then estimate returns from the simulated data. As in that report, we take into account student loan costs, forgone earnings and any additional taxes paid in our returns estimates.



## 4.1 Estimating earnings returns at age 30

Our main estimates reported in Section 5 rely on a regression model of the form:

$$\log y_{it} = \delta_0 + \delta_1 t + \delta_2 t^2 + \sum_{s=1}^{\bar{S}} (\beta_0^s + \beta_1^s t + \beta_2^s t^2) HE_i I[S_i = s] + x_i'(\gamma_0 + \gamma_1 t + \gamma_2 t^2) + \sum_{c=2003}^{2007} \alpha_c I[C_i = c] + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where  $t$  is the number of years since student  $i$  was 24 years old,  $y_{it}$  is earnings for individual  $i$  at time  $t$ ,  $HE_i$  is a dummy for having done an undergraduate degree,  $S_i$  is an individual's subgroup (i.e. their SES or ethnicity) numbered from 1 to  $\bar{S}$ ,  $C_i$  is an individual's GCSE cohort,  $I[\cdot]$  is the indicator function and  $x_i$  is a vector of control variables.<sup>13</sup> We use this model to predict the implied return at age 30.<sup>14</sup> The model is estimated on the (unbalanced) panel of earnings from age 24 for the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts.

This model structure allows us to draw on a larger amount of data, which improves the precision of our estimates. We focus specifically on the returns at age 30, the latest age where we observe individuals with tax records and a full set of background characteristics. To check the robustness of this approach, we also estimate a regression model of the form:

$$\log y_i^{30} = \delta_{30} + \sum_{s=1}^{\bar{S}} \beta_{30}^s HE_i I[S_i = s] + x_i' \gamma_{30} + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

using data from the 2002 GCSE cohort only, for which we observe age-30 earnings.

We also investigate the role of university and subject choices in driving any differences in returns between subgroups. We do this by including controls for university type and subject group. This allows us to decompose the returns relative to a base case to see whether the returns for people in certain subgroups are particularly low or high due to their choices regarding where and what to study at university.

<sup>13</sup>This model aligns with our previous work in Belfield et al. (2018). To capture background characteristics, we control for special educational needs status, English as an additional language, school type (state or independent), region, socio-economic status quintile and ethnicity. To capture prior attainment, we control for Key Stage 2 scores in English, maths and science; overall Key Stage 4 scores and scores in maths and English; Key Stage 5 scores (overall academic and vocational); and dummy variables for Key Stage 5 subjects taken (maths, science, social science, arts, humanities, languages, other). To account for pupils without a Key Stage 5 record, we add an indicator variable for whether Key Stage 5 variables are observed, and set all Key Stage 5 variables to zero in cases where they are not observed. All regressions also control for whether a student entered university after age 18, so that all of our results should be interpreted as capturing the effect of pursuing an undergraduate degree at age 18.

<sup>14</sup>For each group  $s$ , the implied return at age 30 ( $t = 6$ ) is given by  $\hat{\beta}_{30}^s = \hat{\beta}_0^s + 6\hat{\beta}_1^s + 36\hat{\beta}_2^s$ .

## 4.2 Simulating lifetime earnings

To simulate earnings for individuals in the 2002 GCSE cohort, we follow Britton et al. (2020) and estimate a copula model that predicts the percentile rank in the earnings distribution for individuals at any age  $t$ , conditional on their position in the distribution in the previous year,  $t - 1$ , and the year before that,  $t - 2$ .

For the HE group, we use HMRC data for estimating the copula up until age 40, while for the non-HE group we can only use HMRC data up to age 30. We therefore use LFS data for ages 40–67 for the HE group and for ages 30–67 for the non-HE group. Where we use LFS data, we have to use a more stripped-back model where rank next year only depends on rank this year. In general, we estimate the copula model separately by gender, university group and subject. Where we run into sample size difficulties, we sometimes pool some of these subgroups.

The advantage of the copula approach is that we can use it to simulate rank at each age independently of the actual levels of earnings in the cross-section. We then take cross-sectional earnings distributions at each age from the HMRC data up to age 40 for the HE group and up to age 30 for the non-HE group, and from the LFS otherwise, up to age 67. Cross-sectional distributions are further split by socio-economic status and ethnicity. We also model employment/unemployment and re-entry earnings based on the same data sources.

## 4.3 Estimating lifetime returns

We then use our simulated lifetime earnings profiles to estimate the overall lifetime returns to higher education. For returns after age 30, we broadly follow the approach of equation (2), but hold the parameter vector governing the effect of background conditions fixed at its estimated age-30 value ( $\hat{\gamma}_{30}$ ). In particular, for each age  $a$ , we estimate

$$\log \dot{y}_{ia} = \delta_a + \sum_{s=1}^{\bar{S}} \beta_a^s HE_i I[s = S] + \epsilon_{ia} \quad (3)$$

where

$$\log \dot{y}_{ia} = \log y_{ia} - x_i' \hat{\gamma}_{30}. \quad (4)$$

Once we have our returns estimates at each age  $a$ , we can construct the counterfactual earnings path for each individual.

To calculate the discounted present value of lifetime returns, we remove taxes and student loan repayments (if appropriate) and add maintenance loans received (if appropriate) from both the simulated and counterfactual profiles. We then subtract net counterfactual earnings from the net simulated (or actual) earnings at each age. We sum differences across all ages, applying a discount factor that discounts returns that occur a long time into the future by more.<sup>15</sup>

## 5 Early-career returns

We now present our estimation results. In Section 5.1, we investigate gross earnings returns by SES and ethnicity at age 30, the latest age at which we observe earnings records and a full set of conditioning variables. We then turn in Section 5.2 to the importance of subject and university choices in determining the differences in returns across the different groups. Section 5.3 reports the implied unexplained differences in earnings between socio-economic and ethnic groups for both graduates and non-graduates.

### 5.1 Gross returns at age 30

Table 5 shows the returns estimates for the different SES groups, separately by gender.<sup>16</sup> It shows the sequential addition of control variables in the three columns. We see that the control variables make a very large difference to the returns estimates. This is almost entirely driven by the prior attainment controls, which dramatically reduce the returns estimates.

---

<sup>15</sup>For this, we use a discount rate of 3.5% for the first 30 years and 3.0% thereafter, based on recommendations from the Treasury's Green Book. For further details, see Britton et al. (2020).

<sup>16</sup>For a graphical illustration of these results, see Figure A8 in the appendix.

Table 5: Age-30 returns by SES

	Women			Men		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bottom quintile	0.467*** (0.009)	0.457*** (0.009)	0.270*** (0.010)	0.195*** (0.011)	0.216*** (0.011)	0.069*** (0.011)
2nd quintile	0.471*** (0.008)	0.458*** (0.008)	0.258*** (0.008)	0.202*** (0.009)	0.211*** (0.009)	0.052*** (0.009)
3rd quintile	0.456*** (0.007)	0.444*** (0.007)	0.232*** (0.007)	0.222*** (0.007)	0.221*** (0.007)	0.048*** (0.008)
4th quintile	0.473*** (0.006)	0.470*** (0.006)	0.246*** (0.007)	0.229*** (0.007)	0.229*** (0.007)	0.044*** (0.007)
Top quintile	0.458*** (0.006)	0.458*** (0.006)	0.231*** (0.007)	0.272*** (0.006)	0.275*** (0.006)	0.079*** (0.007)
Indep. school	0.518*** (0.013)	0.513*** (0.013)	0.307*** (0.013)	0.476*** (0.013)	0.475*** (0.013)	0.251*** (0.013)
<i>Controls</i>						
Background	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Prior attainment	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Observations</i>	3,209,196	3,209,196	3,209,196	2,764,936	2,764,936	2,764,936

Note: Includes students with five A\*-C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. (1) includes only socio-economic status controls and a dummy variable for over-18 entry. (2) additionally includes region dummies and various demographic characteristics. (3) is the full specification including information on Key Stage 2, 4 and 5 attainment. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

The most striking result is the large gender differences, with much larger gross earnings returns for women, in line with Belfield et al. (2018). However, our focus here is on the differential returns across the different SES groups within each gender. For this, we observe relatively little variation in returns among the state-educated but much higher returns for the privately educated, especially men.

For men, the returns are 6.9 log points (around 7%) for the lowest SES group, dropping slightly to around 4.5 log points for the middle SES groups, before rising again to 7.9 log points (8%) for the highest SES quintile. Returns are much higher for the privately educated at 25 log points (29%). For women, returns are much higher for all groups at around 25 log points. They are highest for the lowest SES quintile at 27 log points (31%) before dropping to around 24 log points for the middle and higher quintiles. For the privately educated, returns are higher again at 30.7 log points (36%).

It should be noted that these returns by socio-economic group are in each case relative to the

non-HE baseline *for that group*. So, for example, the estimated return for people from the bottom socio-economic group takes into account that non-graduates from that group tend to have lower incomes than those from wealthier backgrounds, even conditional on their school attainment and other background conditions. As a result, unexplained differences in non-graduate earnings between groups can be as much of a driver of differences in returns as are differences in graduate earnings.<sup>17</sup>

The relatively high returns for students from the bottom SES quintile are consistent with Card's (2001) observation that instrumental variables estimates of the return to education are typically *larger* than OLS estimates. He suggests an explanation based on the marginal cost of education: if the marginal cost of education is higher for marginal students, we would expect to observe high returns for those who do decide to go. By the same mechanism, we might estimate high returns for the bottom SES quintile, because among that group, only those with the highest expected returns from attending university actually decide to go.

A striking result is the high returns for independent school students, especially for men. This is partly attributable to very high earnings for some university graduates who went to private school. Perhaps more surprisingly, it is also partly due to the relatively modest earnings (given their high school attainment) of independent school students who do not go on to university. For men in particular, as shown in Figure 4, median non-HE earnings at age 30 are *lower* for the privately-educated than for all except the poorest state school groups, despite much higher GCSE attainment.

A variety of explanations could account for this finding. First, those who attend independent schools may delay labour market entry, leading to lower pay at the same age due to lower labour market experience. Second, those who went to independent school may choose to work fewer hours or in less lucrative occupations as a result of higher family wealth. Third, as a larger share of independent school students go to university, non-graduates may be more negatively selected on unobservables such as health, leading to bias. Fourth, if independent schools prepare students better for standardised tests, these students' prior attainment scores may overstate their true ability, which would also lead to biased estimates. Fifth, our data do not capture the dividend income

---

<sup>17</sup>Unexplained conditional differences in earnings between socio-economic groups, as estimated in the same regression model, are shown in Table A3 in the appendix.

of business owners running limited companies, which might be disproportionately important for this demographic.

Table 6: Age-30 returns by ethnicity

	Women			Men		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
White British	0.487*** (0.004)	0.459*** (0.004)	0.244*** (0.004)	0.253*** (0.004)	0.231*** (0.004)	0.058*** (0.005)
White Other	0.473*** (0.021)	0.439*** (0.021)	0.224*** (0.021)	0.297*** (0.022)	0.270*** (0.022)	0.109*** (0.022)
Black Caribbean	0.285*** (0.036)	0.240*** (0.036)	0.090* (0.035)	0.206*** (0.041)	0.191*** (0.040)	0.065 (0.040)
Black African	0.340*** (0.053)	0.306*** (0.053)	0.180*** (0.052)	0.284*** (0.056)	0.280*** (0.056)	0.140* (0.055)
Black Other	0.402*** (0.050)	0.364*** (0.050)	0.208*** (0.049)	0.212*** (0.054)	0.187*** (0.054)	0.035 (0.053)
Indian	0.439*** (0.029)	0.405*** (0.028)	0.240*** (0.028)	0.331*** (0.028)	0.303*** (0.028)	0.151*** (0.028)
Pakistani	0.534*** (0.029)	0.495*** (0.029)	0.333*** (0.029)	0.464*** (0.033)	0.444*** (0.033)	0.306*** (0.033)
Bangladeshi	0.461*** (0.041)	0.436*** (0.040)	0.266*** (0.040)	0.297*** (0.046)	0.274*** (0.046)	0.132** (0.045)
Chinese	0.257*** (0.073)	0.255*** (0.073)	0.137 (0.071)	0.325*** (0.068)	0.321*** (0.067)	0.197** (0.066)
Other	0.478*** (0.014)	0.443*** (0.014)	0.225*** (0.014)	0.278*** (0.014)	0.264*** (0.014)	0.082*** (0.014)
<i>Controls</i>						
Background	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Prior attainment	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Observations</i>	2,830,229	2,830,229	2,830,229	2,402,885	2,402,885	2,402,885

Note: Includes state-educated students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. (1) includes only ethnicity controls and a dummy variable for over-18 entry. (2) additionally includes region dummies and various demographic characteristics. (3) is the full specification including information on Key Stage 2, 4 and 5 attainment. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 6 then shows returns estimates by ethnicity.<sup>18</sup> Again, we see the raw differences heavily reduced by the inclusion of control variables, and again it is the prior attainment controls that make by far the most difference to our estimates, despite the large regional variation in ethnicity shares that we saw in Section 3.3. It is notable that many of these groups are quite small and therefore the estimates are relatively imprecise, even with the panel structure that we use to boost

<sup>18</sup>For a graphical illustration of these results, see Figure A9 in the appendix. For unexplained conditional differences in earnings by ethnicity from the same regression, see Table A4 in the appendix.

our sample sizes by incorporating multiple cohorts.

For women, we observe large and significantly positive returns for all groups except Chinese students.<sup>19</sup> South Asian students do particularly well, with Indian (24.0 log points or 27%), Pakistani (33.3 log points, 40%) and Bangladeshi (26.6 log points, 30%) students all achieving large returns. Estimated returns for Black women are somewhat lower than for White women. Returns for Black Caribbean women are particularly low at 9.0 log points (9%).

For men, we again observe on average much lower returns, but notably all point estimates are positive. The largest estimates by some distance are for Pakistani students at 30.6 log points (36%), while returns are also high for Indian students (15.1 log points or 16%) and for Chinese students (19.7 log points or 22%), but the latter are imprecisely estimated. Returns for White British students are close to the overall age-29 estimates from Belfield et al. (2018) and are precisely estimated, as they are by far the largest group.

## 5.2 Importance of institution and subject choices in age-30 returns

Importantly, the above estimates do not control for institution and subject choices. Yet these could be very important drivers of returns – we know from Belfield et al. (2018) that different institutions and subjects can dramatically affect earnings prospects, and from Section 3 that the distributions of subjects and university types are very different across our different subgroups. For example, the privately educated are much more likely to attend the elite Russell Group institutions than any of the other SES groups, while there are also very different patterns in subject choices by SES.

In Tables 7 and 8, we show the impact of controlling for institution and subject choices on our returns estimates, separately by gender.<sup>20</sup> We can only control for subject and institution *within* the set of people who go to university, as there is no such thing as an institution or subject for those who do not go to university. We therefore show how the effect sizes change *relative to a base case*. In each case, we first show the equivalent returns estimates to before, but now relative to the base case. We then add in subject controls and finally institution controls.

Table 7 shows our estimates by SES, with the highest SES quintile among state school students (the largest group) as the reference group. In the first column, we see that returns for the bottom

---

<sup>19</sup>Returns for Chinese students are imprecisely estimated for both women and men due to the very small share of Chinese students in our sample who do not go on to higher education.

<sup>20</sup>We also show these estimates graphically in Figures A10 and A11 in the appendix.

quintile are 4.0 log points higher for women and almost identical for men, reproducing the results from above. In the second column, we add subject controls and see that the relative returns mostly go down. This implies that the highest state school SES group chooses lower-return subjects relative to the other groups; if all groups made the same subject choices as the highest state school SES group, their returns would be lower. It is especially notable that the relative returns estimates decrease for the lowest SES groups, suggesting that their relatively high returns are partly driven by their subject choices. This is likely driven by the high share of such students selecting relatively high-returning business, law and computing degrees.

Table 7: Impact of subject and institution on relative returns by SES

	Women			Men		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bottom quintile	0.040*** (0.011)	0.033** (0.011)	0.045*** (0.011)	-0.010 (0.012)	-0.021 (0.012)	-0.002 (0.012)
2nd quintile	0.027** (0.010)	0.024* (0.009)	0.035*** (0.009)	-0.027* (0.010)	-0.029** (0.010)	-0.014 (0.010)
3rd quintile	0.001 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.009)	0.007 (0.009)	-0.031*** (0.009)	-0.027** (0.009)	-0.018* (0.009)
4th quintile	0.016 (0.008)	0.016 (0.008)	0.022** (0.008)	-0.034*** (0.009)	-0.031*** (0.009)	-0.024** (0.009)
Indep. school	0.076*** (0.014)	0.066*** (0.014)	0.050*** (0.014)	0.172*** (0.014)	0.166*** (0.014)	0.136*** (0.013)
<i>Controls</i>						
Subject	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
University	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Observations</i>	3,209,196	3,209,196	3,209,196	2,764,936	2,764,936	2,764,936

Note: The top quintile of state-educated students is the omitted category. Includes students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. (1) restates the main returns results by socio-economic status relative to the omitted category. (2) includes a full set of controls for subject studied. (3) also controls for university attended. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

When we include institution controls, however, we see that returns estimates generally go up again, suggesting that the highest SES quintile, on average, chooses institutions with higher returns. For the state-educated, this takes the estimates back above the overall relative estimates, meaning that the adverse earnings effects of institution choices outweigh the positive effects of subject choices in these cases.

For the privately educated, returns again go down, suggesting that *both* their subject and uni-



versity choices benefit their earnings relative to the highest SES base case. This is perhaps unsurprising given the very high share of privately educated students at top universities and the dominance of these students in the higher-earning subjects, although it is important to note that the results here show the effects of subject and institution choices *conditional* on prior attainment.

Table 8: Impact of subject and institution on relative returns by ethnicity

	Women			Men		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
White Other	-0.021 (0.021)	-0.023 (0.021)	-0.029 (0.021)	0.051* (0.022)	0.046* (0.022)	0.034 (0.022)
Black Caribbean	-0.154*** (0.035)	-0.166*** (0.035)	-0.168*** (0.035)	0.007 (0.040)	-0.005 (0.040)	-0.001 (0.040)
Black African	-0.064 (0.052)	-0.111* (0.051)	-0.120* (0.051)	0.082 (0.055)	0.032 (0.055)	0.023 (0.055)
Black Other	-0.037 (0.049)	-0.053 (0.048)	-0.052 (0.048)	-0.024 (0.053)	-0.039 (0.053)	-0.041 (0.053)
Indian	-0.004 (0.028)	-0.063* (0.028)	-0.078** (0.028)	0.093*** (0.028)	0.022 (0.028)	-0.001 (0.028)
Pakistani	0.089** (0.029)	0.024 (0.028)	0.014 (0.028)	0.248*** (0.033)	0.173*** (0.032)	0.178*** (0.032)
Bangladeshi	0.022 (0.040)	-0.015 (0.039)	-0.018 (0.039)	0.074 (0.045)	0.003 (0.045)	0.004 (0.045)
Chinese	-0.108 (0.072)	-0.149* (0.071)	-0.168* (0.071)	0.138* (0.066)	0.088 (0.066)	0.063 (0.065)
Other	-0.019 (0.014)	-0.028* (0.014)	-0.033* (0.013)	0.024 (0.014)	0.009 (0.014)	0.002 (0.014)
<i>Controls</i>						
Subject	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
University	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Observations</i>	2,830,229	2,830,229	2,830,229	2,402,885	2,402,885	2,402,885

Note: White British is the omitted category. Includes state-educated students with five A\*-C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. (1) restates the main returns results by ethnicity relative to the omitted category. (2) includes a full set of controls for subject studied. (3) also controls for university attended. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 8 shows the equivalent estimates by ethnicity, all relative to the White British case. We now see that all estimates drop once we include the subject controls. This suggests that, on average, White British students are choosing subjects with lower earnings potential than ethnic minority groups. The biggest drops in returns are for Asian and Black African students, reflecting the high propensity of these students to choose subjects with high earnings potential such as business and pharmacology. On the other hand, we see only negligible changes to the relative returns

estimates for Black Caribbean and Black Other students, suggesting that they choose subjects that have very similar earnings potential to those chosen by White British students.

Finally, when we include the institution controls in column 3, we generally see only quite small changes compared with column 2. For Indian and Chinese students, the estimates drop again, suggesting they tend to choose institutions with higher earnings potential, but the differences are very small. Notably, after adding in subject and institution controls, the unexplained returns difference from White British students is statistically insignificant for most groups.

### 5.3 Unexplained differences in earnings

The relative *return* for each group is directly related to the unexplained differences in *earnings* between groups: the relative return to HE for each group is the difference between graduates and non-graduates of a given group in the unexplained difference in earnings between that group and a reference group. While the focus of this report is on differences in returns, this section shows unexplained differences in earnings between groups, for both graduates and non-graduates, to put these differences in returns in context.<sup>21</sup> A key finding is that unexplained differences in earnings are mostly smaller for graduates than for non-graduates, implying that differences in the returns to higher education ‘even out’ some of the unexplained earnings differences between non-graduates.

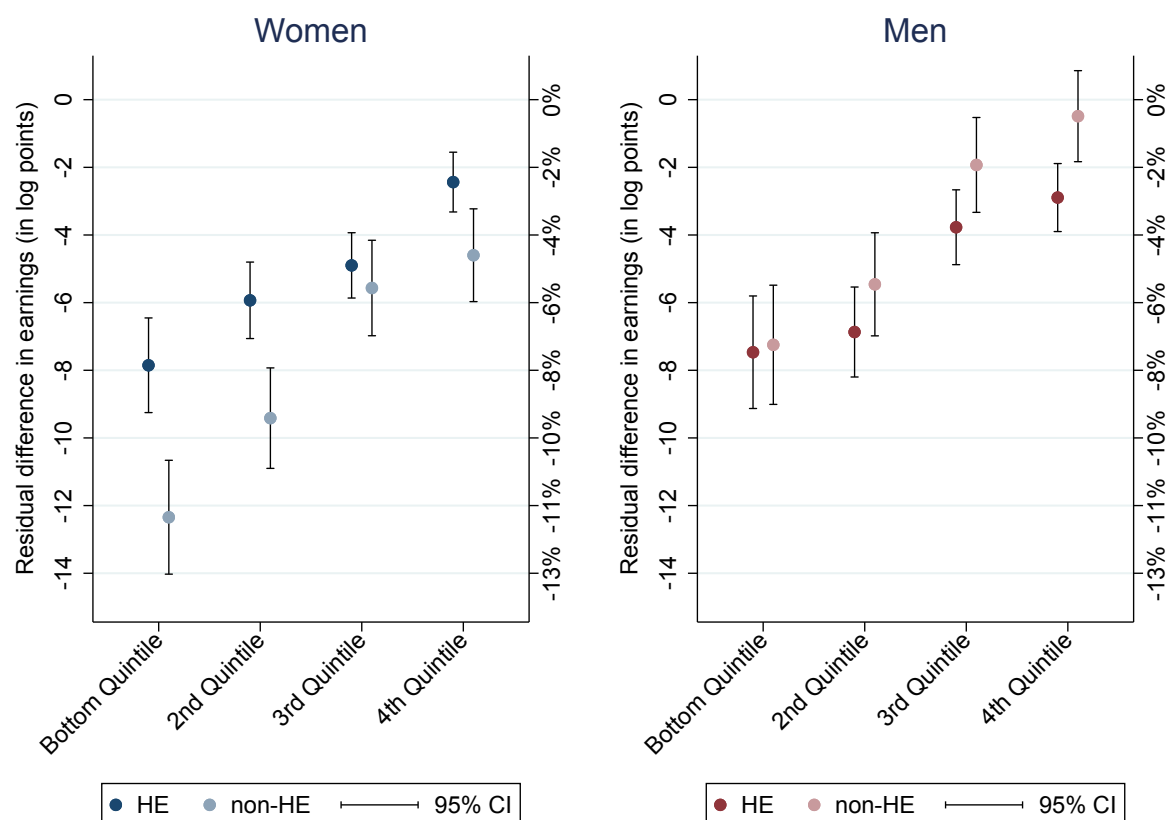
Figure 15 shows the unexplained gaps in earnings between SES groups after controlling for the full set of explanatory variables as in column 3 of Table 7. Differences for graduates are relative to graduates from the top SES quintile of the state-educated, and differences for non-graduates are relative to non-graduates from the top SES quintile of the state-educated. Whiskers indicate the 95% confidence interval.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> As for returns, we only look at differences between groups *within* each gender, as all of our analysis is done completely separately for men and women. For evidence on how much of the difference in earnings *between* graduate men and women can be explained by observable differences such as subject choices, see Figure A3 in the appendix.

<sup>22</sup> Unexplained gaps for independent school students are not reported, as they are not meaningful. The reason is that school records from independent schools contain a smaller set of background variables, so any estimated difference between state and independent school students will be biased by the effect of the missing background variables.

Figure 15: Unexplained earnings gaps between SES groups: HE and non-HE



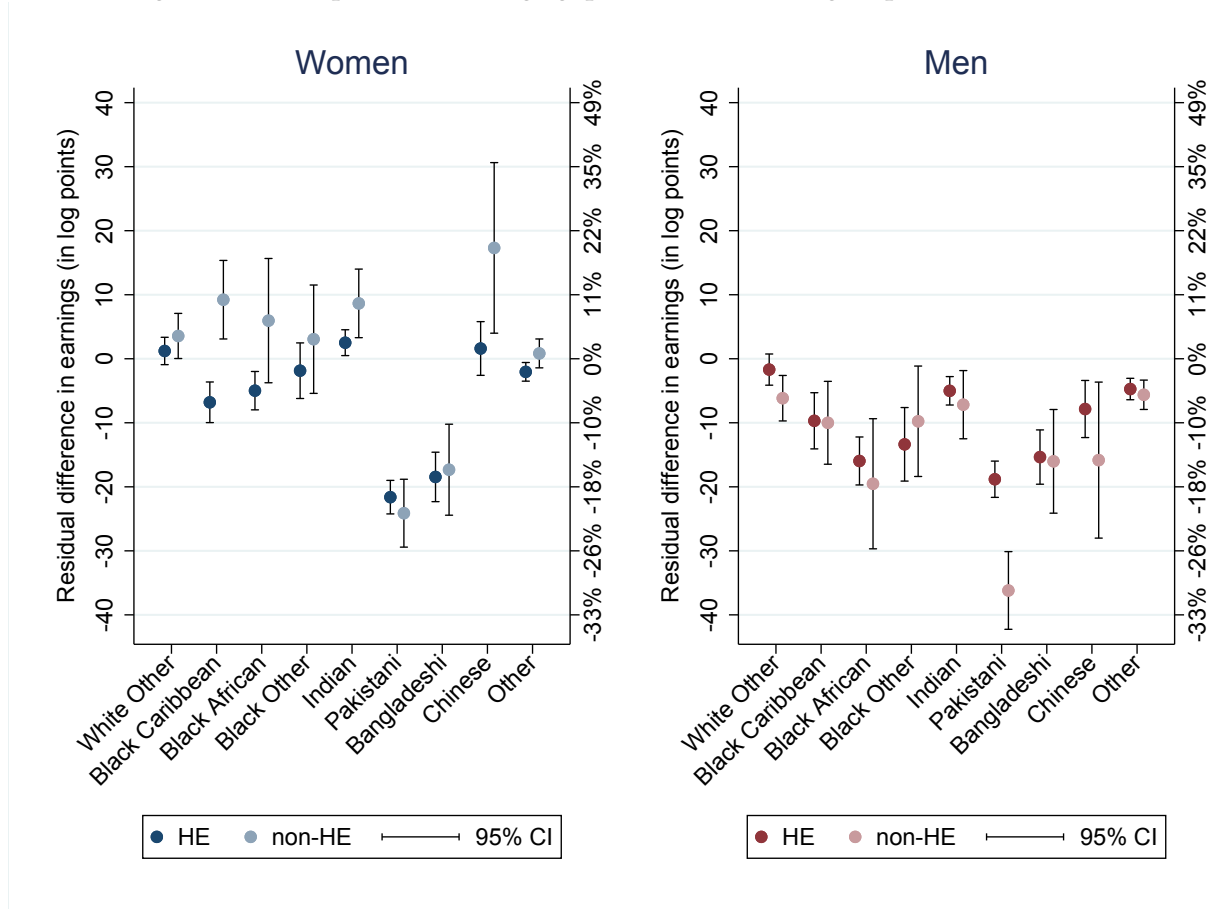
Note: Unexplained gaps in earnings between SES groups after controlling for the full set of explanatory variables as in column 3 of Table 7. The top quintile of state-educated students is the omitted category. The vertical distance between HE and non-HE markers is the relative return reported in column 3 of Table 7. Includes people with five A\*–C marks at GCSE. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. Unexplained gaps for independent school students are not reported, as they are not meaningful (see fn. 22).

After accounting for our full set of controls, both female and male graduates and non-graduates from nearly all other SES groups earn significantly less than the top SES quintile of the state-educated.<sup>23</sup> There is a clear gradient with socio-economic background for both graduates and non-graduates, with those from lower socio-economic groups earning less after controlling for our full set of control variables. For women, the unexplained earnings gaps between different groups are smaller for graduates than for non-graduates. This suggests that conditional on prior attainment and other background characteristics, university attenuates differences between women from dif-

<sup>23</sup>The only exception is men from the second-highest SES group among the state-educated, who earn insignificantly less.

ferent socio-economic backgrounds.

Figure 16: Unexplained earnings gaps between ethnic groups: HE and non-HE



Note: Unexplained gaps in earnings between ethnic groups after controlling for the full set of explanatory variables as in column 3 of Table 8. White British is the omitted category. The vertical distance between HE and non-HE markers is the relative return reported in column 3 of Table 8. Includes state-educated students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year.

Figure 16 is the equivalent figure for different ethnic groups. The omitted category is White British, so differences for graduates are relative to White British graduates, and differences for non-graduates are relative to White British non-graduates. Unexplained differences in earnings between ethnic groups are smaller for graduates than for non-graduates for both women and men. For women, this is because Black, Indian and Chinese non-graduates have substantially *higher* conditional earnings than White British women, which is not the case for graduate women (although note that the confidence intervals for non-HE women from these ethnic groups are wide). For men, this is largely driven by the results for Pakistani men: for Pakistani non-graduates, condi-

tional earnings are nearly 40 log points lower than those of White British non-graduates, whereas the same figure for graduates is less than 20 log points. This suggests that going to university can help level the playing field between people from different ethnic groups to some extent.

Nonetheless, the results presented in Figure 16 also point to significant unexplained earnings differences between graduates from different ethnic groups. Results for men – which are easier to interpret as a large majority of men work full time – suggest that not only non-graduates but also graduates from *all* ethnic groups except White Other have significantly lower earnings than White British men after controlling for a large array of potential confounding factors. This may reflect the effects of labour market discrimination.

## 6 Lifetime earnings

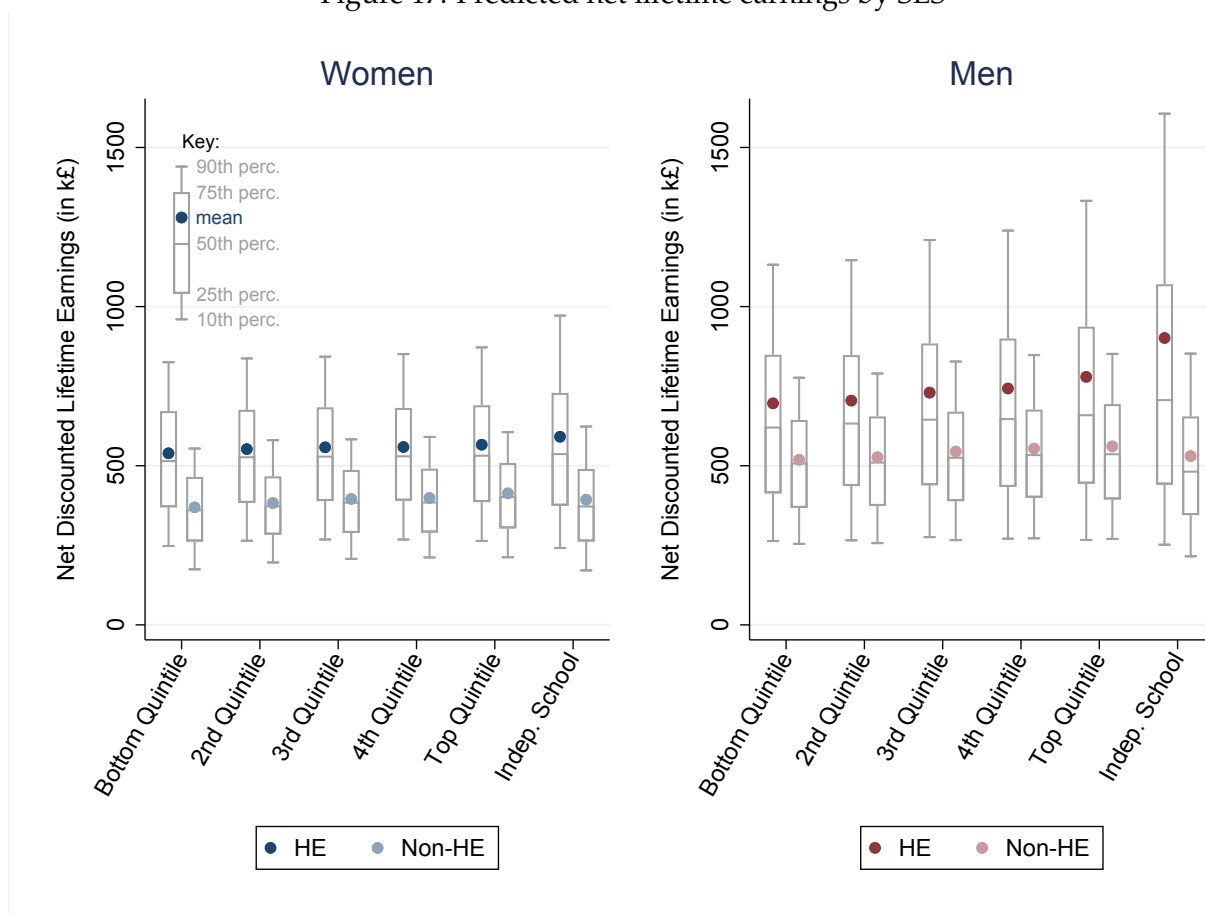
We now consider returns to higher education at different ages and across the lifetime. As these returns are based on long-run earnings projections, they are subject to a much higher degree of uncertainty than the estimates in Section 5.<sup>24</sup> Before discussing the returns estimates, we start by reporting some of the results from our lifetime simulation exercise. We then move on to show our estimates of returns at ages 30, 40 and 50 drawing on these simulations. Finally, we show our estimates of the discounted net present value of attending higher education.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>It should also be noted that this section is aligned with Britton et al. (2020) rather than with Belfield et al. (2018) in terms of methodology and sample selection, which can explain minor discrepancies between the estimates.

<sup>25</sup>We exclude 'Black Other' and 'Chinese' throughout this section. The reason is that these groups are so small that no reliable statements about lifetime earnings and returns can be made.

Figure 17: Predicted net lifetime earnings by SES



Note: Predicted real lifetime earnings after taxes and student loan repayments, discounted using Green Book discounting, based on predictions for the 2002 GCSE cohort. Includes students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE and a Key Stage 5 record. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample.

## 6.1 Lifetime earnings simulations

Figure 17 documents the distribution of the projected *net* discounted present value of lifetime earnings for each of the SES groups, by gender and HE status. It plots not only the mean but also the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th and 90th percentiles from the distribution.

We observe a clear SES gradient in the means amongst the HE group, for both men and women. For women, the mean net discounted present value of lifetime earnings increases from £540,000 for the lowest SES quintile to around £570,000 for the highest SES quintile and around £590,000 for those from independent schools. In terms of (non-discounted) average *net* annual earnings between ages 18 and 67, this roughly corresponds to £24,000 for the bottom quintile, £25,000 for

the top quintile and £26,000 for those who went to independent schools. For men, the gradient is steeper, with an upward tick for those from independent schools. Interestingly, there does not appear to be much of a social gradient in the lower percentiles of the distribution, while there is a very strong gradient amongst the higher percentiles. Most notably, the 90th percentile of net discounted present value of lifetime earnings for men from independent schools is well above £1.5 million, corresponding to life-cycle average non-discounted net annual earnings of £77,000.<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, the SES gradient is less clear amongst the non-HE group. In particular, mean net discounted present values of lifetime earnings are lower amongst the non-HE group from independent schools than for those in the highest SES quintile, for both men and women.

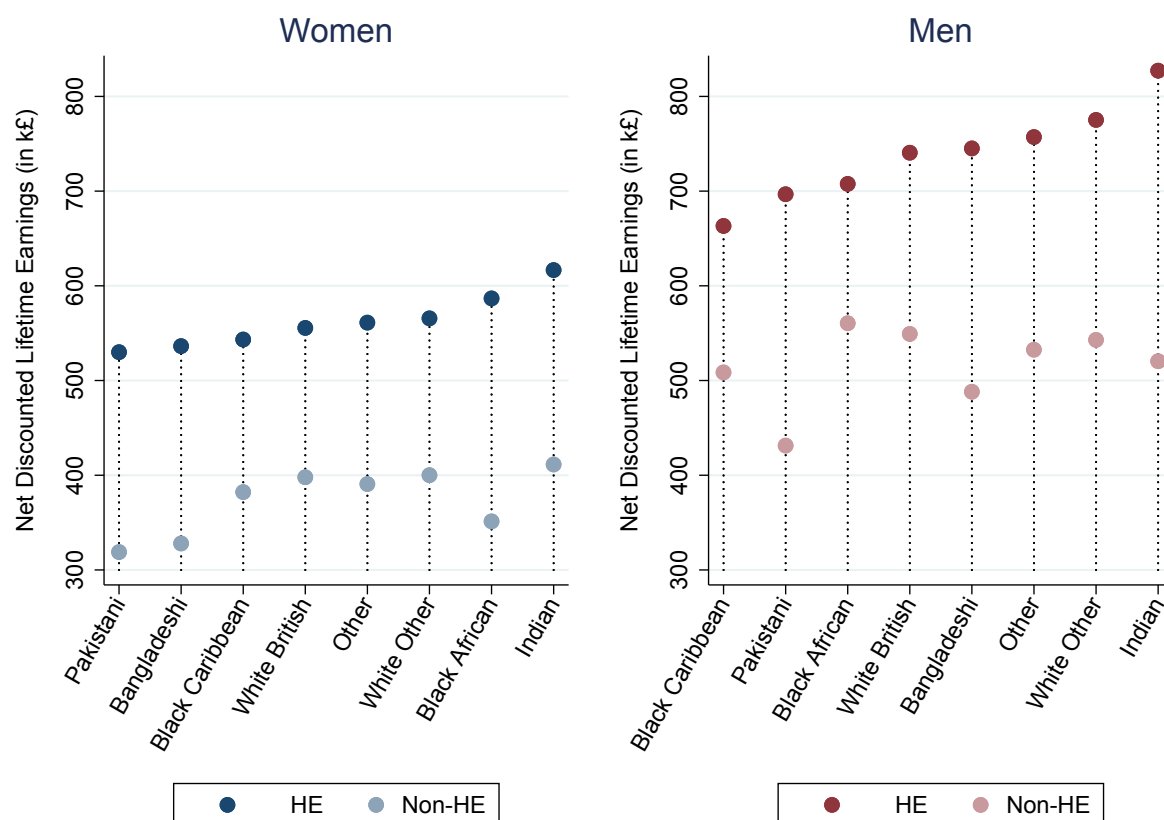
Figure 18 then plots the equivalent figure by ethnicity group, although for this we only show the mean rather than the distribution due to the smaller sample size. It is sorted on the mean of net discounted present value lifetime earnings of the HE group. Indian and White Other are at the top end for both men and women and Pakistani students at the bottom end. For men, the discounted present value of net lifetime earnings is around £800,000 for Indian HE students (annual average non-discounted earnings of £38,000), while for Pakistani students it is around £700,000 (annual average non-discounted net earnings of £32,000). For women, the estimates range from just over £600,000 (annual average £27,000) for Indian HE students to around £530,000 for Pakistani students (annual average £24,000).

There is also quite a lot of variation in lifetime earnings for the non-HE groups. For women these typically range between £300,000 and £400,000 (average net annual earnings of £14,000 to £17,000), while for men they are typically between £500,000 and £550,000 (average net annual earnings of £21,000 to £25,000). The exception to this is Pakistani men, for whom non-HE lifetime earnings are only just above £400,000. Indeed, the gaps between HE and non-HE for Pakistani students is notably large for both men and women.

---

<sup>26</sup>This may reflect an effect identified by Zimmerman (2019) using data from Chile: men from independent schools at elite universities appear to form ties with classmates from similar backgrounds, which helps these students achieve higher managerial positions.

Figure 18: Predicted net lifetime earnings by ethnicity



Note: Mean predicted real lifetime earnings after taxes and student loan repayments, discounted using Green Book discounting, based on predictions for the 2002 GCSE cohort. Includes state-educated students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE and a Key Stage 5 record. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample.

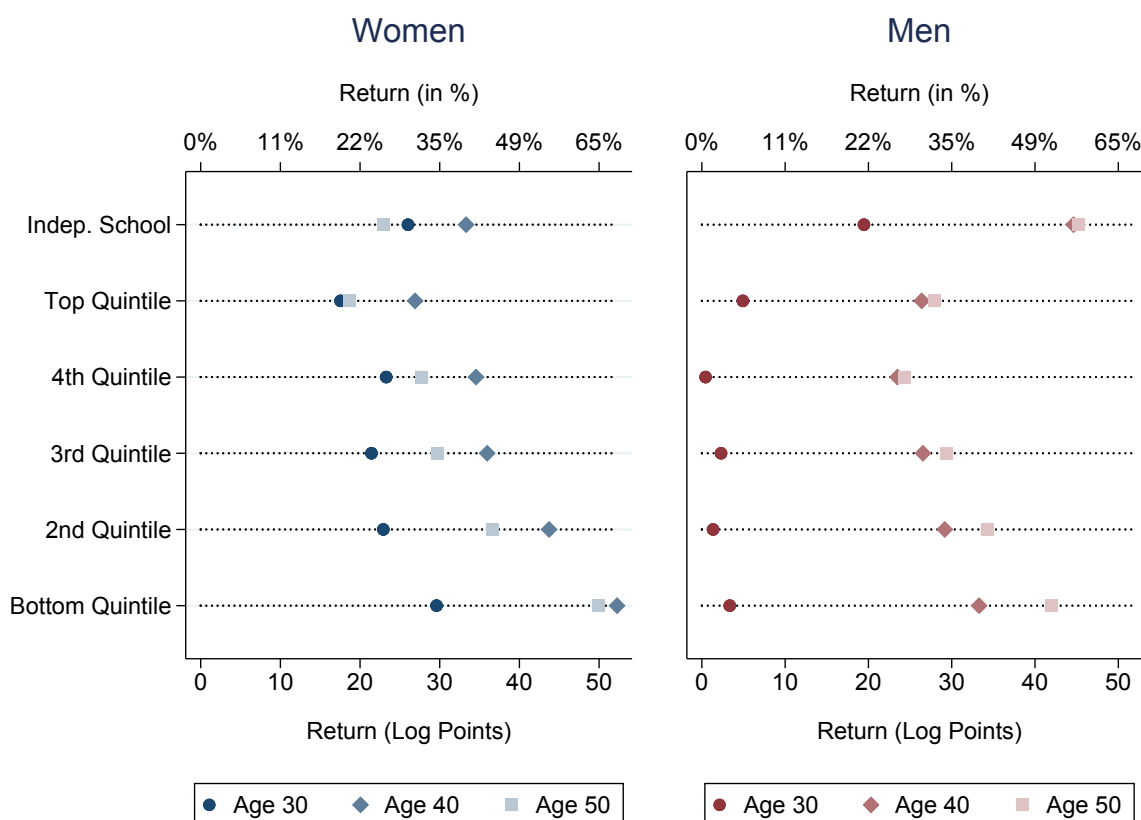
## 6.2 Gross returns at older ages

We now draw on the lifetime simulations to estimate gross earnings returns at later points in the life cycle than we estimated in the previous section. Figures 19 and 20 show the returns at ages 30, 40 and 50 by SES and ethnicity, respectively, done separately by gender.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup>The sample restrictions and model specification in this section fully align with Britton et al. (2020) to guarantee the comparability of lifetime returns estimates. As a result, the age-30 returns presented in these plots do not precisely match the results presented in the previous section.



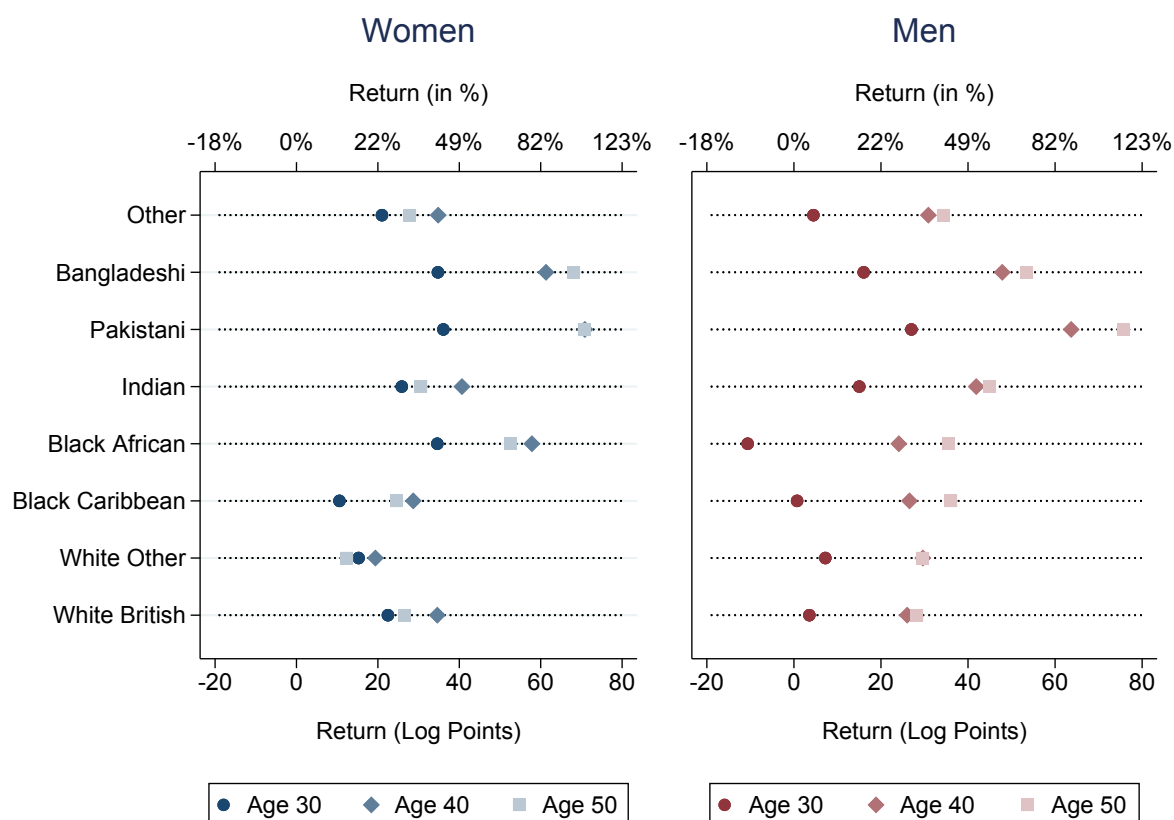
Figure 19: Gross returns at older ages by SES



Note: Includes students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE and a Key Stage 5 record from the 2002 GCSE cohort only. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample. The effect of background conditions is held constant at age-30 levels, as explained in Section 4.

From Figure 19, we see that returns to higher education grow for all groups after age 30. For both men and women, we observe large earnings growth between ages 30 and 40, although the growth is more substantial for men, considerably reducing the differences in average returns between men and women. After age 40, returns level off for men, although they continue to grow for the lower SES groups. For women, on the other hand, they shrink back towards the age-30 estimates (although less so for the lower SES groups), perhaps reflecting increases in working hours amongst non-HE women at these ages. Interestingly, for both men and women, growth in returns after age 30 is largest for the bottom SES quintile; later-life returns for this group are very large at over 50% for both genders.

Figure 20: Gross returns at older ages by ethnicity



Note: Includes state-educated students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE and a Key Stage 5 record from the 2002 GCSE cohort only. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample. The effect of background conditions is held constant at age-30 levels, as explained in Section 4.

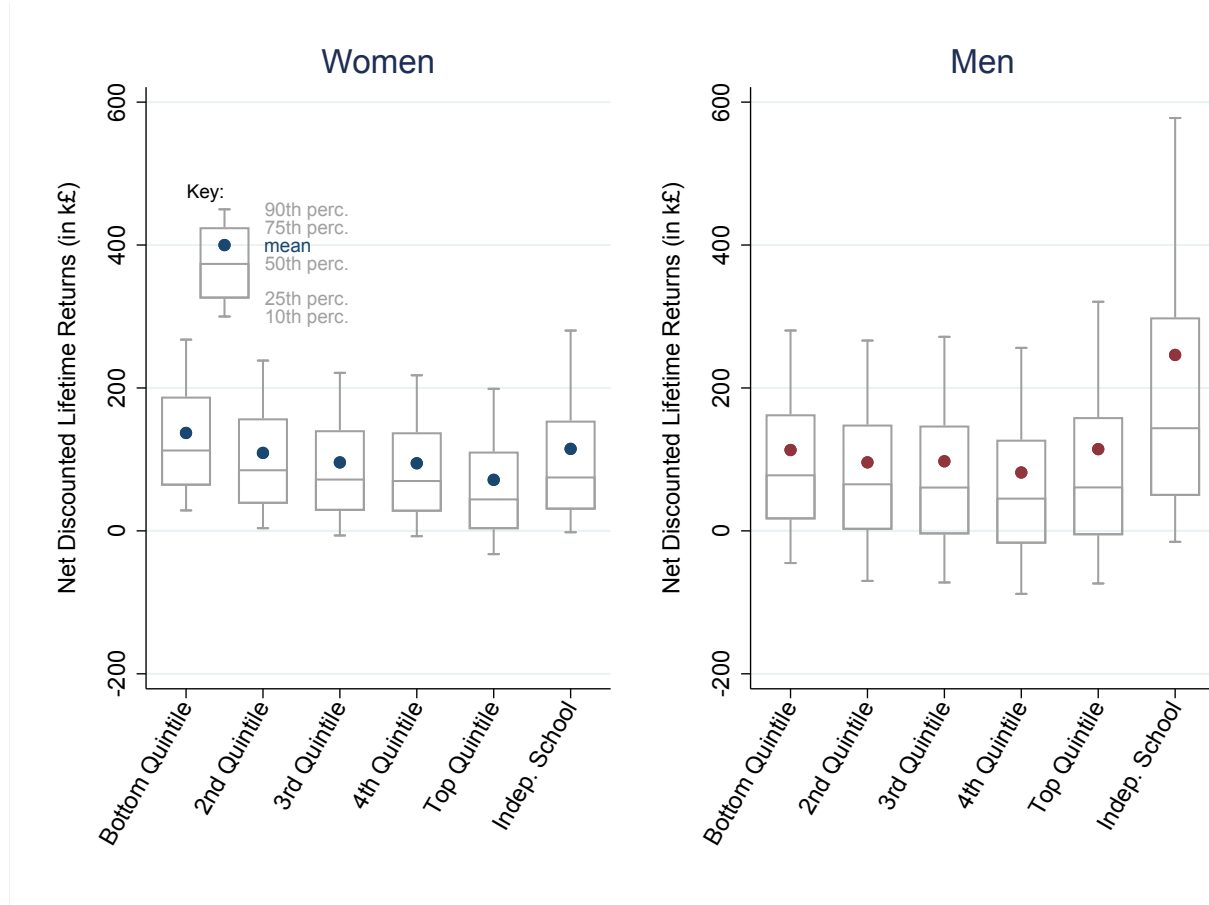
Figure 20 then shows the equivalent estimates by ethnicity. Again, we see large growth in returns after age 30 for both men and women (noting that the scale is slightly different from that on Figure 19). Again we see returns falling back after age 40 for women in most cases, and a levelling-off effect for men. The most notable growth in returns is for Pakistani and Bangladeshi students, who are projected to see very substantial increases after age 30.

### 6.3 Lifetime returns

We now consider how these differences in gross returns at specific points in time translate into lifetime returns. Our headline estimates are in discounted net present value terms, which means they account for any change in earnings associated with attending, any change in taxes and any

net loss (or gain) from student loans.<sup>28</sup> They also discount returns that occur in the future at the Treasury Green Book discount rate of 3.5% in the first 30 years and 3% thereafter. The easiest way to interpret the estimates is that they roughly capture what going to university is worth, on average, to individuals at the point when they make the decision over whether to go or not.

Figure 21: Predicted net lifetime returns by SES



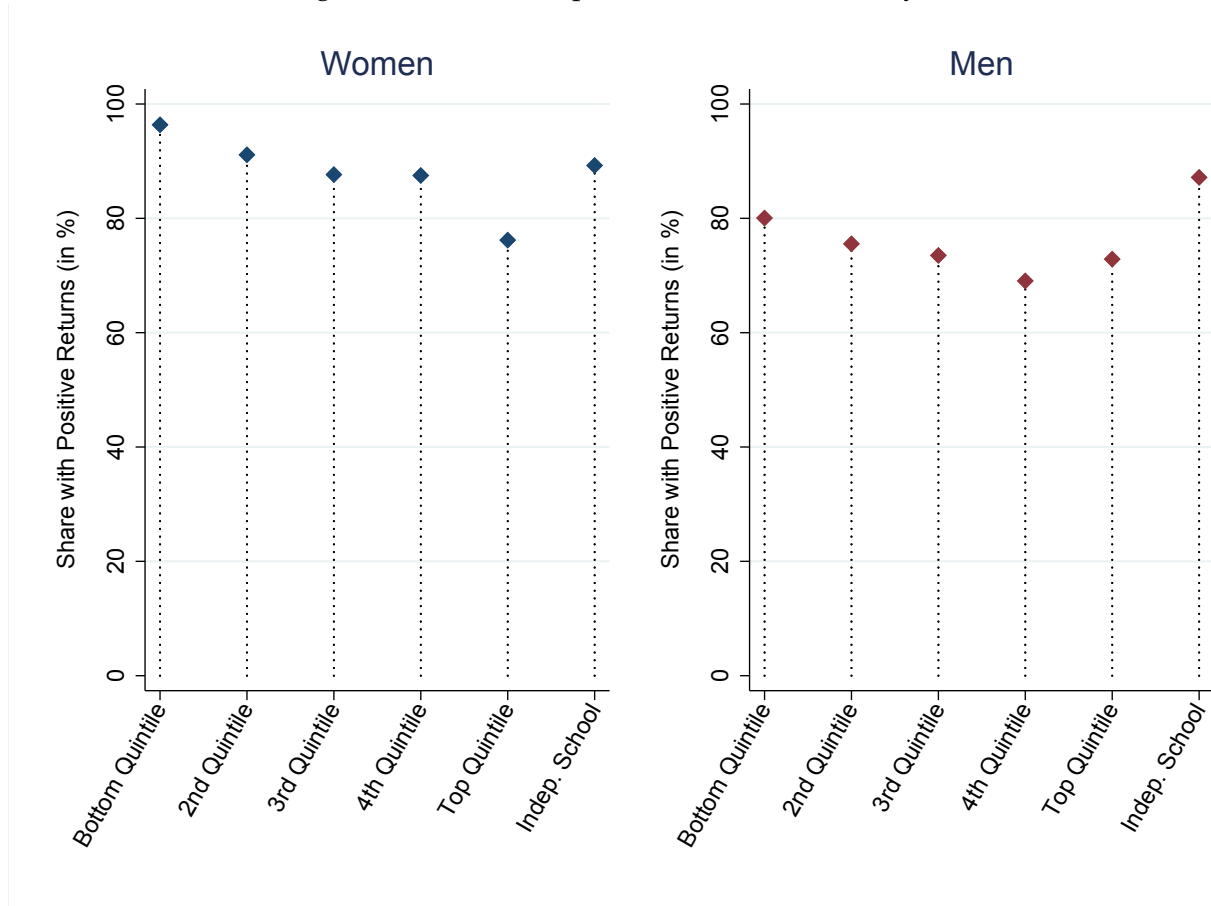
Note: Returns are net of taxes and student loan repayments and discounted using Green Book discounting. Includes students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE and a Key Stage 5 record from the 2002 GCSE cohort only. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample.

Figure 21 shows the estimates by SES group. We observe a U shape in the relationship between SES and lifetime returns. For women, the return for the bottom quintile group is around £140,000. This drops to around £100,000 for the second to fourth quintiles and drops again to around £70,000 for the top (state) quintile. It jumps back up to around £110,000 for women from independent schools.

<sup>28</sup>Individuals gain from student loans if they borrow more in maintenance support than the discounted present value of what they repay in income-contingent loan repayments.

For men, the returns are similar to the estimates for women for the bottom four SES quintiles. However, they are higher for the highest SES quintile, at around £110,000, while for the privately educated the returns are much higher at around £250,000. These estimates are directly comparable to the overall average returns estimated in Britton et al. (2020) of £130,000 for men and £100,000 for women.

Figure 22: Share with positive lifetime returns by SES



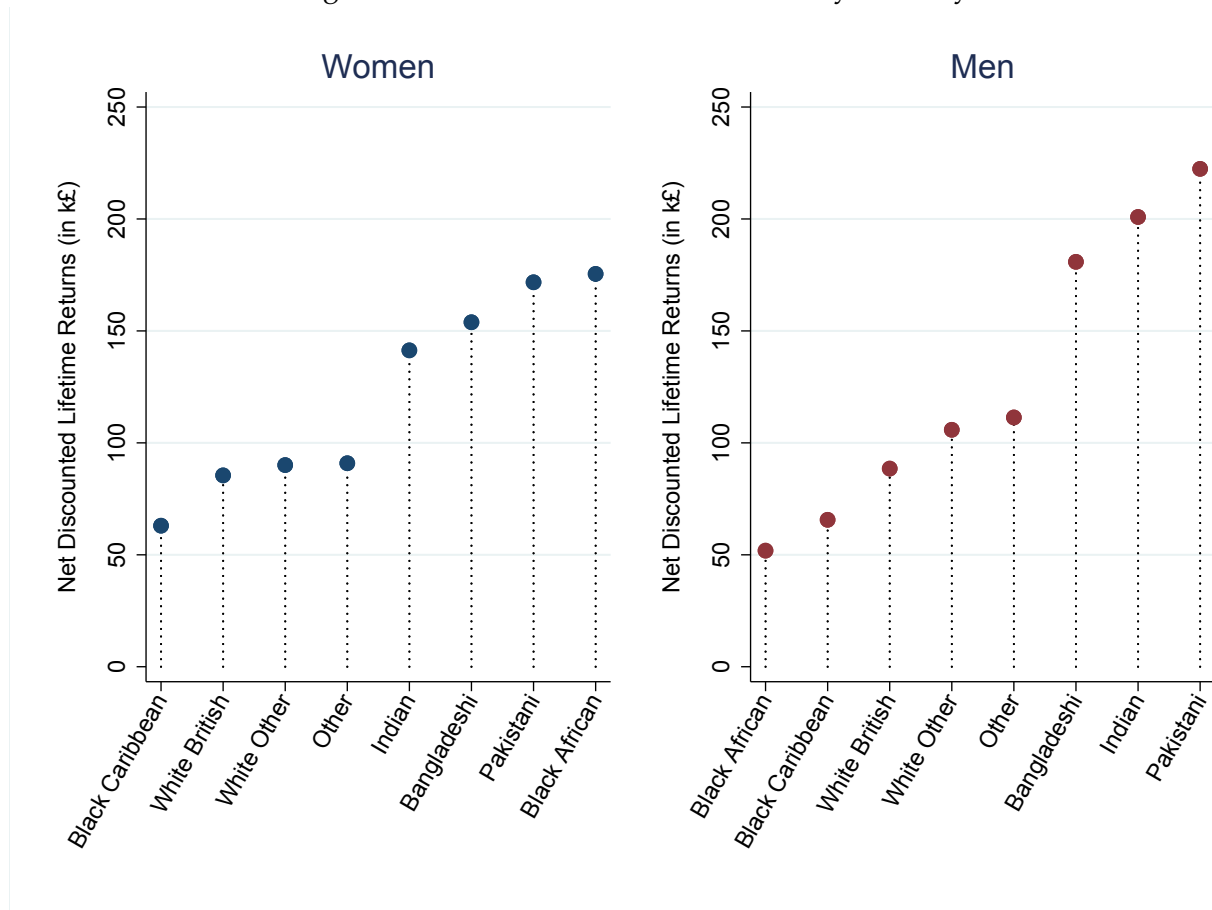
Note: Returns are net of taxes and student loan repayments and discounted using Green Book discounting. Includes students with five A\*-C marks at GCSE and a Key Stage 5 record from the 2002 GCSE cohort only. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample.

The box plots behind the mean estimates give a sense of the distribution of returns. For women we see a range of somewhat more than £200,000 between the 10th and 90th percentile returns estimates, while for men it is typically larger, at more than £300,000. The range is particularly big for privately educated men, with the difference between the 90th and 10th percentiles being around £600,000. A quarter of men in this group benefit from higher education by more than

£300,000.

We see from the box plots that the lower tails overlap with zero in several cases. This means that in these groups, there are at least 10% of people for whom the financial benefits of attending higher education are outweighed by the costs. Figure 22 shows the precise estimated shares with positive net lifetime returns within each SES group. We see that for women, the share with positive returns decreases with SES quintile before picking up again for the privately educated, mirroring the overall returns results. Notably, around 95% of those in the bottom SES quintile who go to university are projected to benefit financially from doing so, suggesting higher education is a very good option for women in this group. This share dips to around three-quarters of those from the top SES quintile who go to university.

Figure 23: Predicted net lifetime returns by ethnicity



Note: Returns are net of taxes and student loan repayments and discounted using Green Book discounting. Includes state-educated students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE and a Key Stage 5 record from the 2002 GCSE cohort only. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample.

For men, the shares of those attending who gain financially from higher education are uniformly lower than for women. Again, we see a drop in the positive shares when we move up through the SES quintiles, from around 80% of those in the bottom quintile to around two-thirds of those in the fourth quintile. The share picks up again for the highest SES quintile before increasing to nearly 90% for the privately educated.

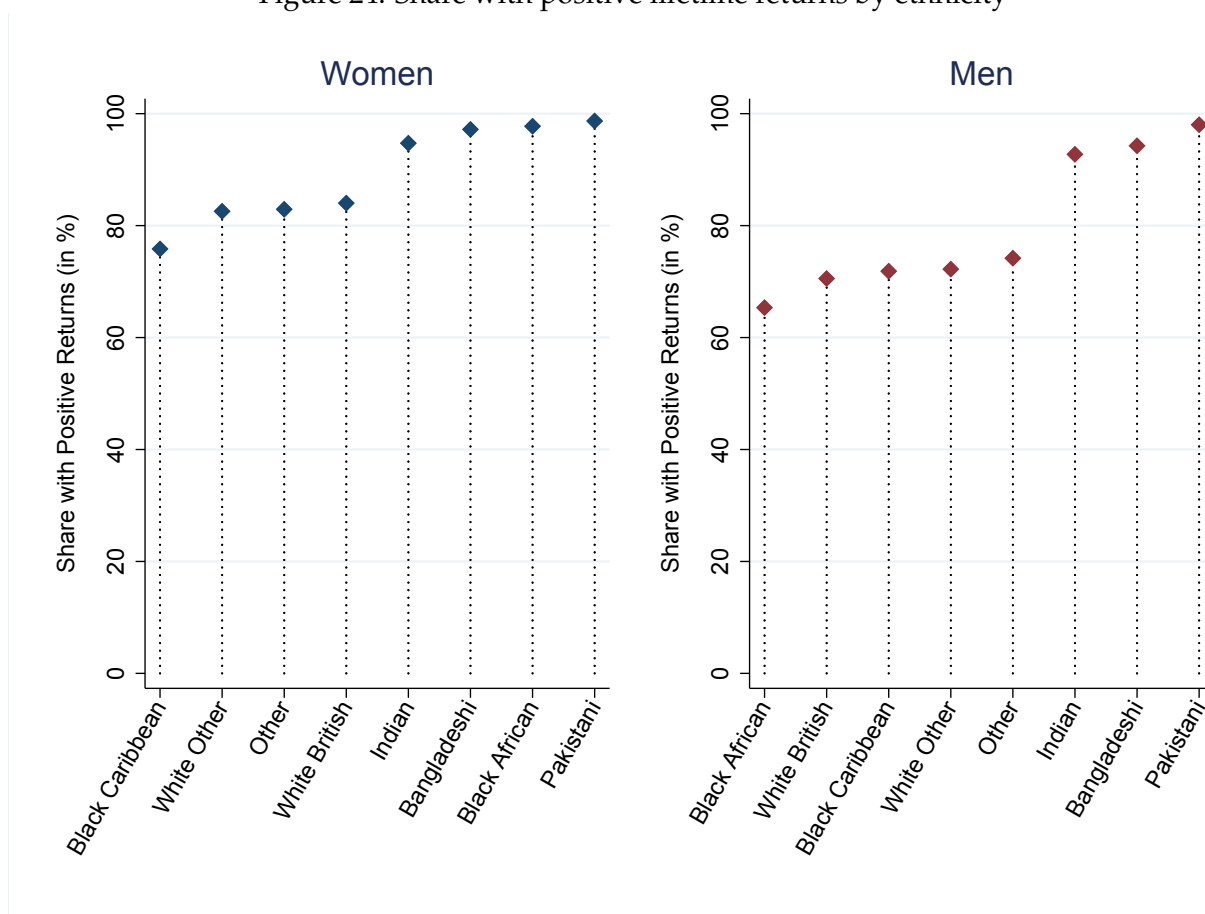
Figure 23 then shows the lifetime returns by ethnicity. As before, we only show means and exclude both Black Other and Chinese students from the figure due to insufficient data. Notably, the returns for all (other) ethnicity groups are positive. In general, the returns are very high for South Asian students. For men, Pakistani students have the highest average lifetime returns of around £220,000, almost double the overall average. For women, Black African students have the highest average lifetime returns, at around £175,000; this is in stark contrast to Black African men, for whom we estimate the lowest average lifetime returns at just above £50,000.<sup>29</sup>

We do not show the distribution plots by ethnicity as we did by SES, partly because the smaller sample sizes make the distributional estimates much less precise. However, we again give a sense of the distribution in Figure 24, which shows the estimated shares with positive returns by ethnicity. We see that for the ethnicity groups with the highest lifetime returns, almost all university students are set to benefit financially from attending. For women, the positive shares drop to around 80% for Black Caribbean, White British, White Other and Other students, while for men the positive shares fall further, to around two-thirds for Black Caribbean, Black African, White British and White Other students.

---

<sup>29</sup>However, it should be noted that Black African students only make up around 1% of all secondary school students, so these returns are relatively imprecisely estimated.

Figure 24: Share with positive lifetime returns by ethnicity



Note: Returns are net of taxes and student loan repayments and discounted using Green Book discounting. Includes state-educated students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE and a Key Stage 5 record from the 2002 GCSE cohort only. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample.

## 7 Conclusion

Our analysis shows that over the whole life cycle, university pays off on average for men and women from all socio-economic and ethnic groups. Within all groups, more than two-thirds of university students benefit financially from their degrees. However, there are substantial differences in average returns between groups.

Returns vary relatively little by socio-economic status, with only those who went to independent schools – especially men – getting substantially higher returns from their degrees. Net lifetime returns are also high for those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds, especially for women. At the other end of the spectrum, returns for state-educated men and women near the

top of the socio-economic status distribution are relatively modest.

Returns are mostly lower for Black students than for White students, and higher for South Asian students. In particular, Pakistani graduates achieve very high returns, despite having the lowest earnings at age 30. Black African women are a possible exception to the rule: we estimate that they will on average achieve around twice the average net lifetime return of White women, although this estimate is subject to a large amount of uncertainty.

These differences are partly driven by university and subject choices. There is a clear socio-economic gradient in university choices, with privately educated students and students from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds studying at higher-return institutions. In explaining differences between ethnic groups, subject choice plays a larger role: ethnic Asian students tend to choose higher-return subjects than their Black and White peers.

Remaining differences in estimated returns between groups stem from differences between graduates and non-graduates of different groups that are not explained by their institution and subject choices, prior attainment or other observable background conditions. These will include the access to social networks, rates of part-time work, unobserved non-cognitive skills, and the effects of labour market discrimination. For instance, elite social networks are likely to be important in explaining the exceptional returns of some men who went to private schools. Differential rates of part-time work by socio-economic status may be an important factor behind the high estimated returns of women from poorer families.

Notably, unexplained differences in estimated returns between groups are, to some extent, the mirror image of unexplained differences in non-graduate earnings conditional on prior attainment and other background conditions. This suggests that, among students from different socio-economic or ethnic groups but with the same prior attainment and other background characteristics, university education can help level the playing field in the labour market. However, substantial unexplained differences remain even for graduates. In particular, graduate men from all ethnic minority groups have lower earnings than male White British graduates even after controlling for prior attainment and a host of other background characteristics.



## Bibliography

- Altonji, Joseph G, Erica Blom, and Costas Meghir.** 2012. "Heterogeneity in human capital investments: High school curriculum, college major, and careers." *Annual Review of Economics*, 4(1): 185–223.
- Arcidiacono, Peter, and Michael Lovenheim.** 2016. "Affirmative action and the quality-fit trade-off." *Journal of Economic Literature*, 54(1): 3–51.
- Belfield, Chris, Jack Britton, Franz Buscha, Lorraine Dearden, Matt Dickson, Laura van der Erve, Luke Sibieta, Anna Vignoles, Ian Walker, and Yu Zhu.** 2018. "The impact of undergraduate degrees on early-career earnings." *Department for Education Report*.
- Blinder, Alan S.** 1973. "Wage discrimination: reduced form and structural estimates." *Journal of Human Resources*, 436–455.
- Britton, Jack, Lorraine Dearden, Laura van der Erve, and Ben Waltmann.** 2020. "The impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings." *Department for Education Report*.
- Britton, Jack, Lorraine Dearden, Neil Shephard, and Anna Vignoles.** 2019. "Is improving access to university enough? Socio-economic gaps in the earnings of English graduates." *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 81(2): 328–368.
- Card, David.** 2001. "Estimating the return to schooling: Progress on some persistent econometric problems." *Econometrica*, 69(5): 1127–1160.
- Chetty, Raj, John N Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner, and Danny Yagan.** 2017. "Mobility report cards: The role of colleges in intergenerational mobility." National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Chowdry, Haroon, Claire Crawford, Lorraine Dearden, Alissa Goodman, and Anna Vignoles.** 2013. "Widening participation in higher education: analysis using linked administrative data." *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*, 176(2): 431–457.

- Crawford, Claire, Lorraine Dearden, and Ellen Greaves.** 2014. "The drivers of month-of-birth differences in children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills." *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*, 177(4): 829–860.
- Crawford, Claire, and Ellen Greaves.** 2015. "Socio-economic, ethnic and gender differences in HE participation." Department for Business Innovation and Skills.
- DfE.** 2020. "Widening participation in higher education (statistical release)." Department for Education.
- Dynarski, Susan, CJ Libassi, Katherine Micheltmore, and Stephanie Owen.** 2018. "Closing the gap: The effect of a targeted, tuition-free promise on college choices of high-achieving, low-income students." National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Hoxby, Caroline M, and Christopher Avery.** 2013. "The missing 'one-offs': The hidden supply of high-achieving, low income students." *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 1.
- Kitagawa, Evelyn M.** 1955. "Components of a difference between two rates." *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 50(272): 1168–1194.
- Neumark, David.** 1988. "Employers' discriminatory behavior and the estimation of wage discrimination." *Journal of Human Resources*, 279–295.
- Oaxaca, Ronald.** 1973. "Male-female wage differentials in urban labor markets." *International Economic Review*, 693–709.
- UCAS.** 2018. "End of Cycle Report." UCAS.
- Walker, Ian, and Yu Zhu.** 2011. "Differences by degree: Evidence of the net financial rates of return to undergraduate study for England and Wales." *Economics of Education Review*, 30(6): 1177–1186.
- Walker, Ian, and Yu Zhu.** 2018. "University selectivity and the relative returns to higher education: Evidence from the UK." *Labour Economics*, 53: 230–249.
- Zimmerman, Seth D.** 2019. "Elite colleges and upward mobility to top jobs and top incomes." *American Economic Review*, 109(1): 1–47.

## Appendix

### A1 Robustness: using IDACI instead of our SES measure

Table A1: Sample size by SES and IDACI

IDACI quintile:	Bottom Q	2nd Q	3rd Q	4th Q	Top Q	Total
SES bottom quintile	503,566	100,076	3,754	135	50	607,581
SES 2nd quintile	105,496	375,737	130,018	15,387	2,493	629,131
SES 3rd quintile	3,449	140,481	333,423	139,545	30,045	646,943
SES 4th quintile	66	13,717	151,151	309,817	183,501	658,252
SES top quintile	29	222	26,744	190,911	446,203	664,109
Total	612,606	630,233	645,090	655,795	662,292	3,206,016

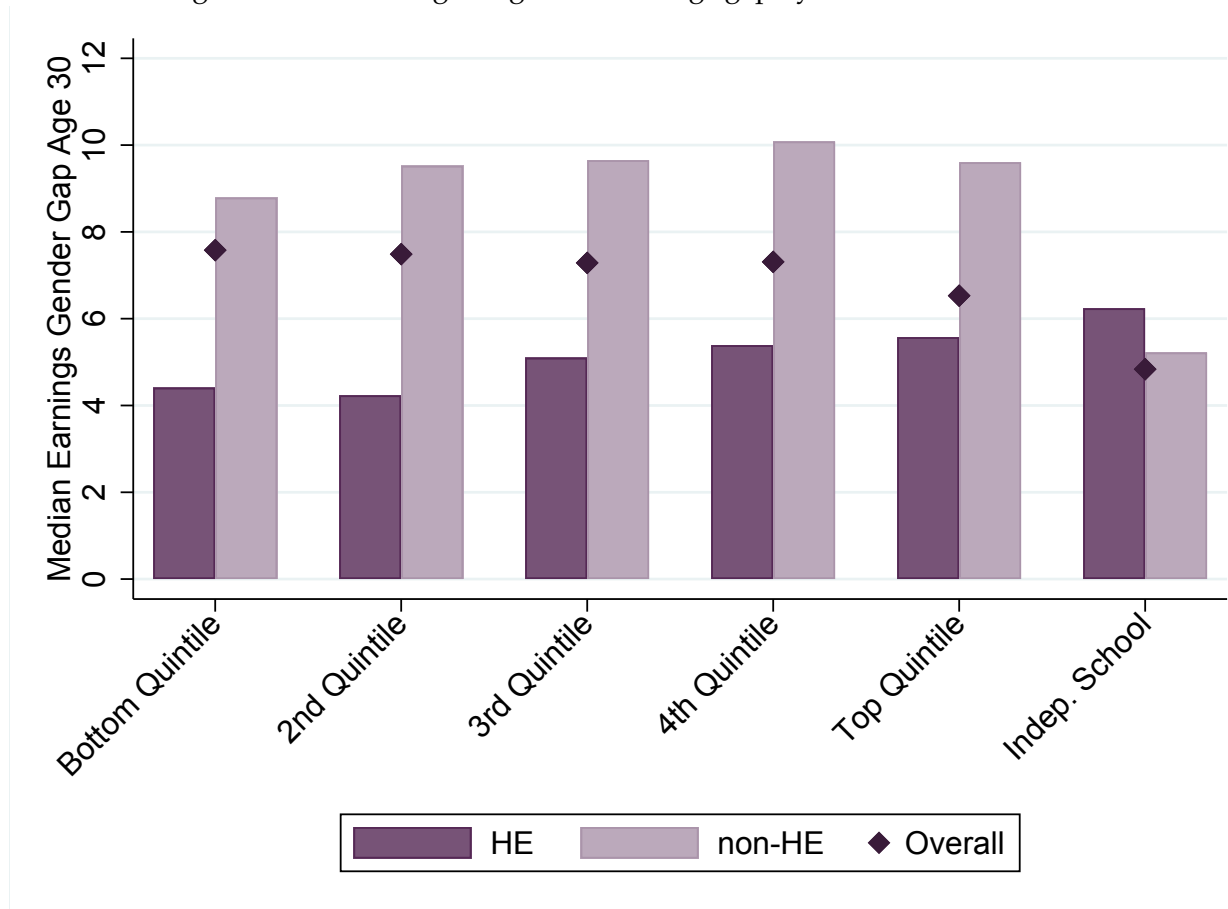
Table A2: Age-30 returns by IDACI

	Women			Men		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bottom quintile	0.472*** (0.009)	0.452*** (0.008)	0.258*** (0.008)	0.196*** (0.010)	0.209*** (0.009)	0.053*** (0.009)
2nd quintile	0.471*** (0.008)	0.449*** (0.006)	0.246*** (0.006)	0.207*** (0.008)	0.217*** (0.007)	0.050*** (0.007)
3rd quintile	0.476*** (0.007)	0.446*** (0.005)	0.233*** (0.006)	0.241*** (0.007)	0.232*** (0.006)	0.057*** (0.006)
4th quintile	0.478*** (0.006)	0.455*** (0.005)	0.238*** (0.005)	0.246*** (0.007)	0.239*** (0.005)	0.056*** (0.006)
Top quintile	0.461*** (0.006)	0.476*** (0.005)	0.248*** (0.005)	0.265*** (0.006)	0.258*** (0.005)	0.069*** (0.006)
Indep. school	0.519*** (0.013)	0.513*** (0.013)	0.307*** (0.013)	0.477*** (0.013)	0.475*** (0.013)	0.251*** (0.013)
<i>Controls</i>						
Background	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Prior attainment	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Observations	3,208,944	3,208,944	3,208,944	2,764,613	2,764,613	2,764,613

Note: Includes students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. (1) includes only socio-economic status controls and a dummy variable for over-18 entry. (2) additionally includes region dummies and various demographic characteristics. (3) is the full specification including information on Key Stage 2, 4 and 5 attainment. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

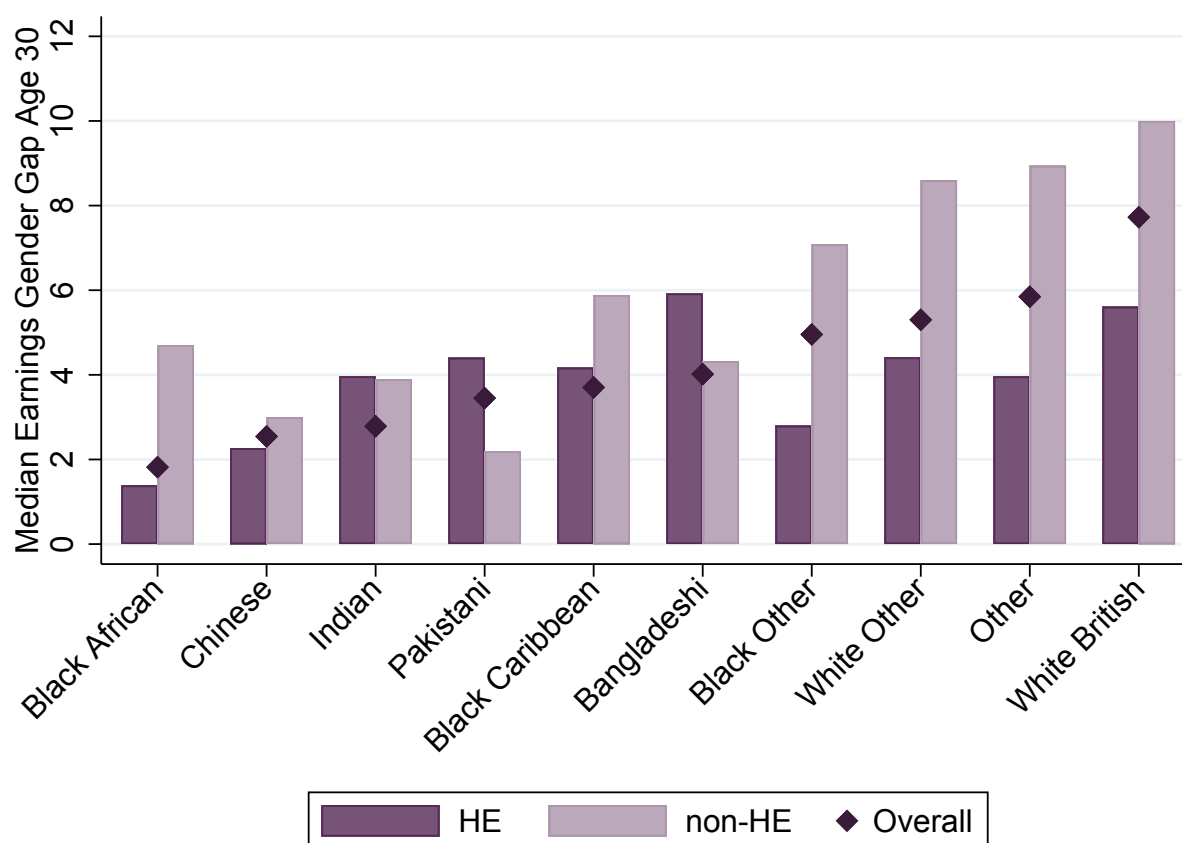
## A2 Gender earnings gaps

Figure A1: Median age-30 gender earnings gap by socio-economic status



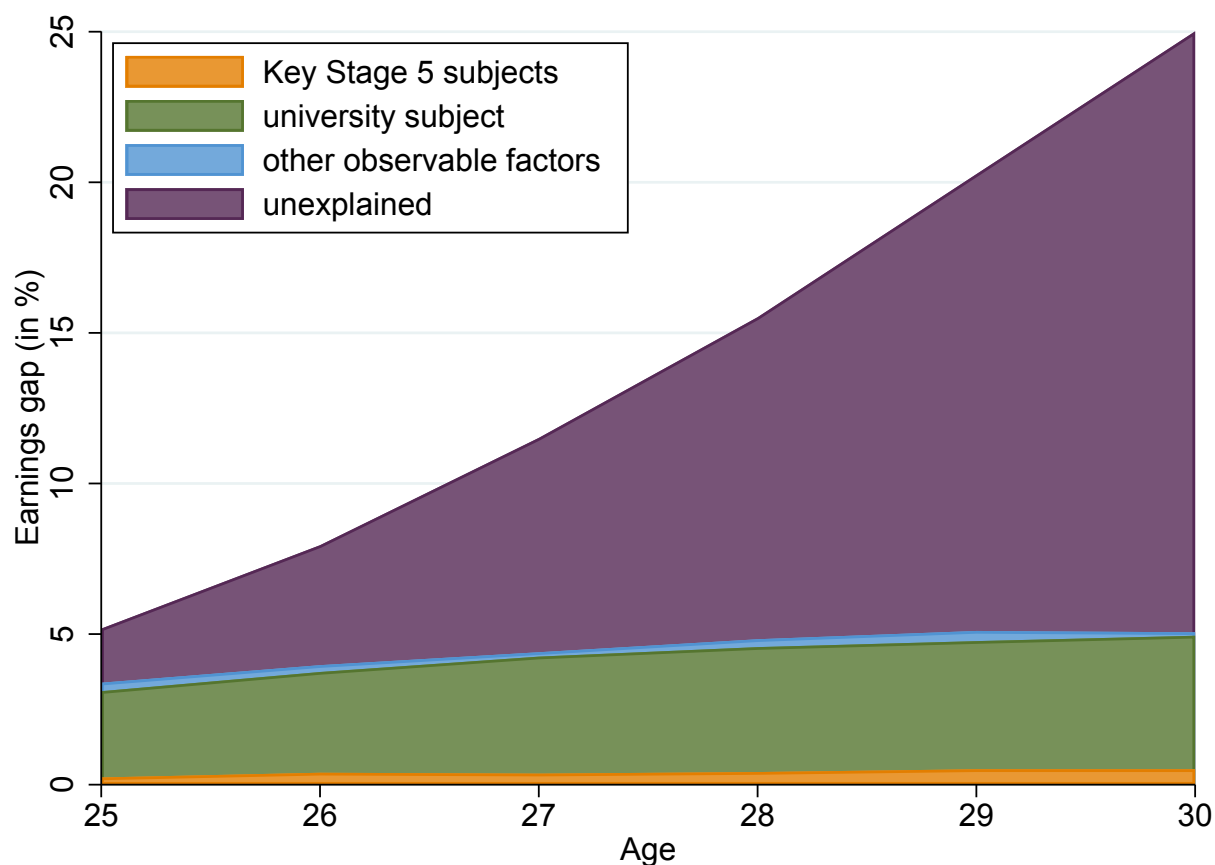
Note: Gap in median earnings between men and women from the 2002 GCSE cohort at age 30 (2016/17 tax year) by socio-economic group, in thousands of pounds. Excludes individuals with zero or negative earnings.

Figure A2: Median age-30 gender earnings gap by ethnicity



Note: Gap in median earnings between men and women from the 2002 GCSE cohort at age 30 (2016/17 tax year) by ethnicity, in thousands of pounds. Excludes individuals with zero or negative earnings and those who were privately educated.

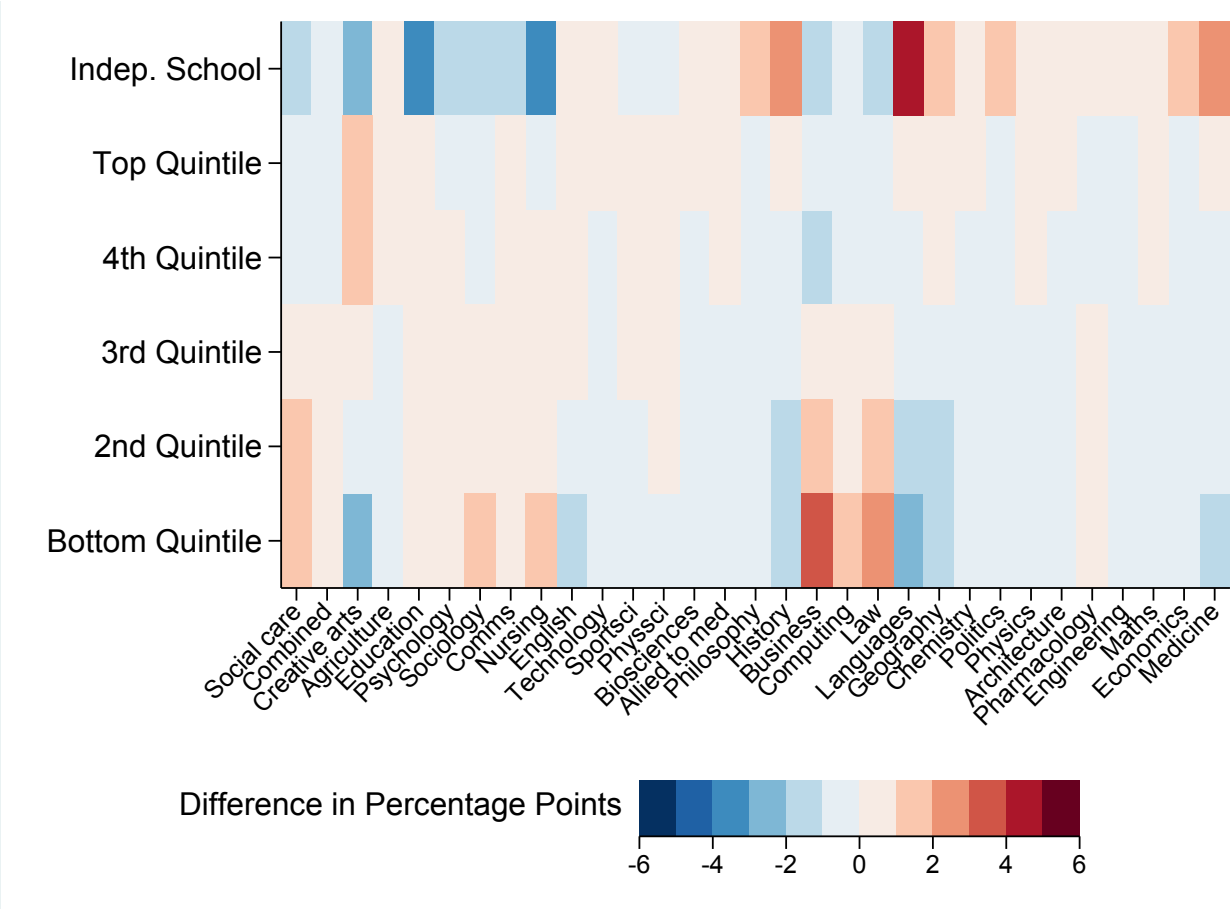
Figure A3: Decomposition of the overall graduate gender earnings gap (in %)



Note: Percentage gap in earnings between men and women who attended university from the 2002-2004 GCSE cohorts at ages 25-30 (using data from the 2013/14 to 2016/17 tax years). Includes students with five A\*-C marks at GCSE. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. The earnings gap is decomposed using a two-fold Kitagawa-Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition (Kitagawa, 1955; Oaxaca, 1973; Blinder, 1973). Following Neumark (1988), we estimate the non-discriminatory reference coefficient vector using a pooled regression over both men and women (including an indicator variable for gender). Results are broadly robust to using the coefficients for either men or women as reference coefficients instead.

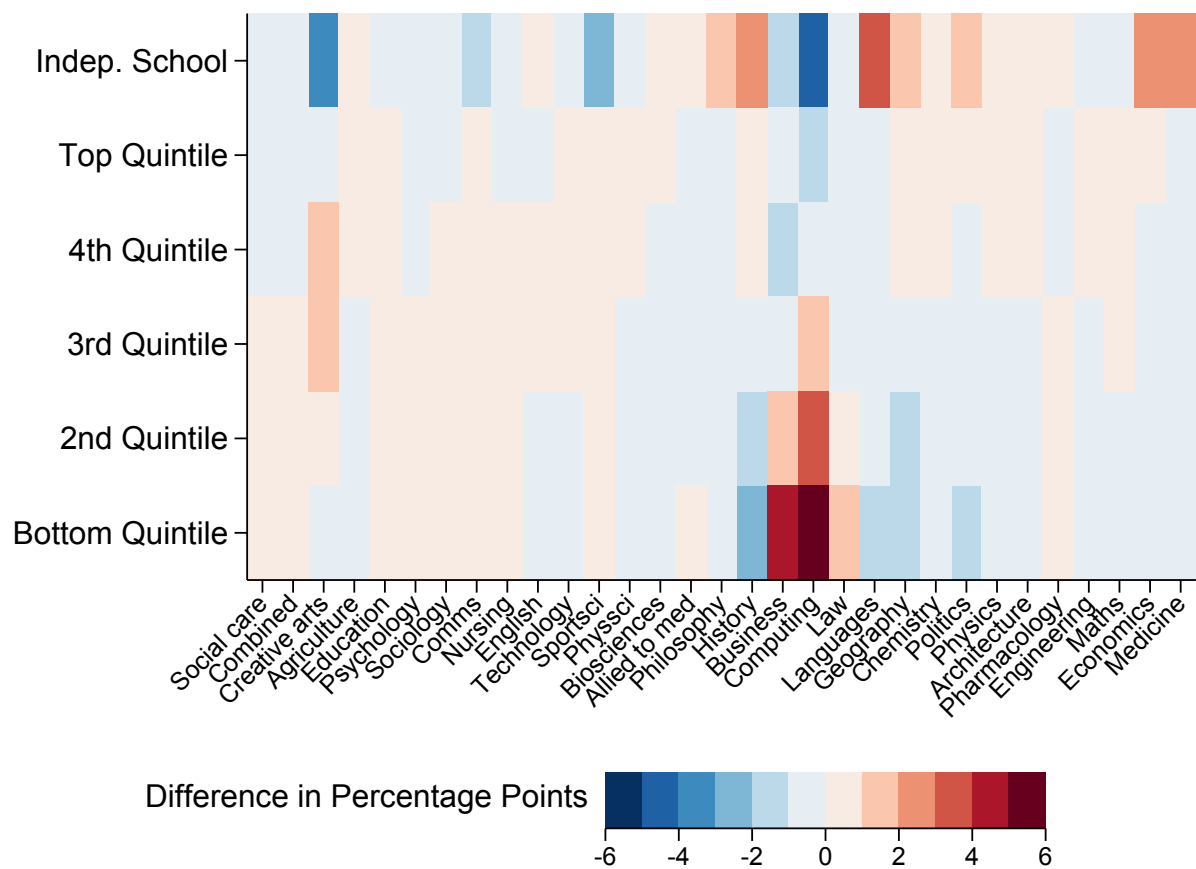
### A3 University subject choice by gender

Figure A4: Subject choices by SES relative to average, women



Note: Quintiles refer to the distribution of socio-economic status among the state-educated. Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups. Subjects are ranked by median earnings at age 30.

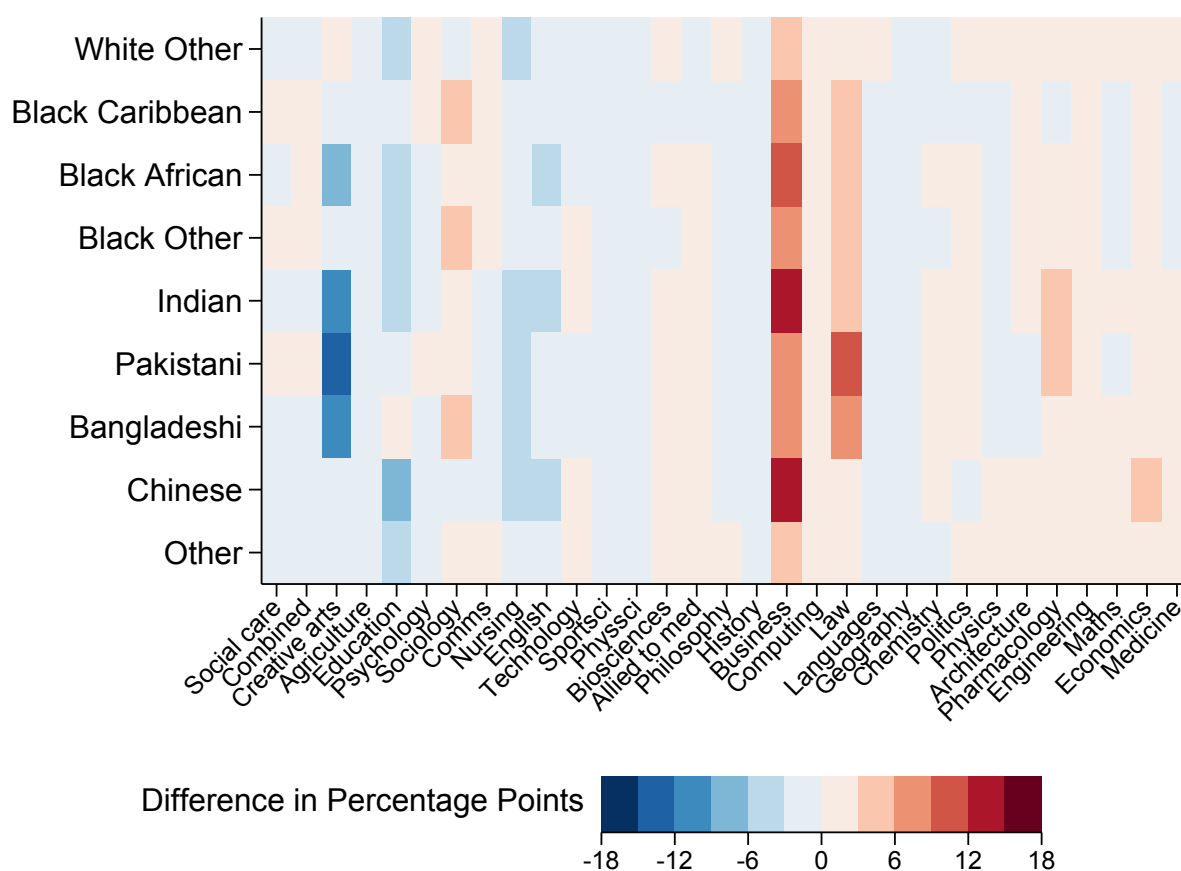
Figure A5: Subject choices by SES relative to average, men



Note: Quintiles refer to the distribution of socio-economic status among the state-educated. Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups. Subjects are ranked by median earnings at age 30.

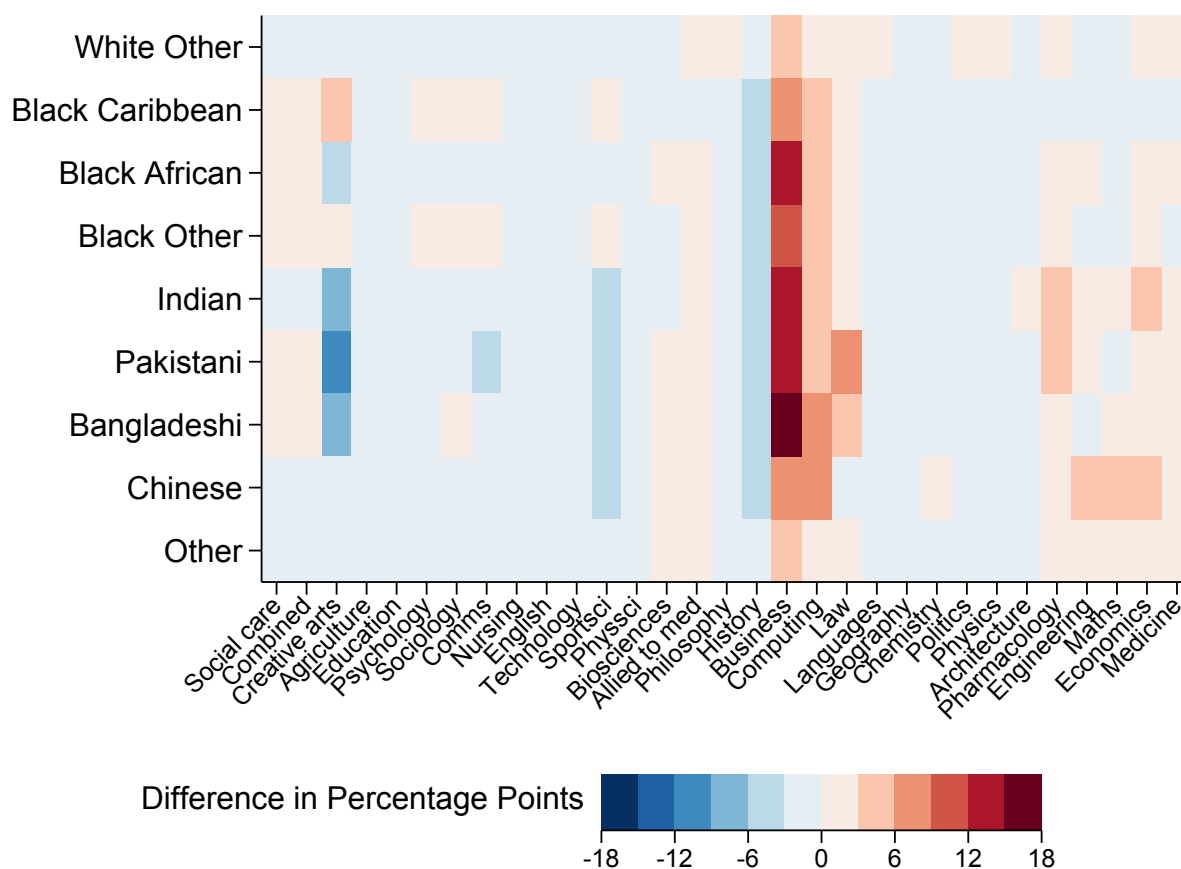


Figure A6: Subject choices by ethnicity relative to White British, women



Note: Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups for people who attended state school only; people who attended independent schools are excluded from the sample, as their ethnicity is not recorded in most cases. Subjects are ranked by median earnings at age 30.

Figure A7: Subject choices by ethnicity relative to White British, men



Note: Includes data from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE groups for people who attended state school only; people who attended independent schools are excluded from the sample, as their ethnicity is not recorded in most cases. Subjects are ranked by median earnings at age 30.

## A4 Age 30: unexplained gaps in earnings by SES and ethnicity

Table A3: Unexplained gaps in earnings by socio-economic status: age 30

	Women			Men		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Bottom Quintile	-0.204*** (0.009)	-0.179*** (0.009)	-0.125*** (0.009)	-0.143*** (0.009)	-0.100*** (0.009)	-0.070*** (0.009)
2nd Quintile	-0.146*** (0.008)	-0.137*** (0.008)	-0.094*** (0.008)	-0.092*** (0.008)	-0.076*** (0.008)	-0.053*** (0.008)
3rd Quintile	-0.087*** (0.007)	-0.085*** (0.007)	-0.055*** (0.007)	-0.041*** (0.007)	-0.034*** (0.007)	-0.018* (0.007)
4th Quintile	-0.068*** (0.007)	-0.066*** (0.007)	-0.045*** (0.007)	-0.020** (0.007)	-0.014 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.007)
<i>Controls</i>						
Background	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Prior attainment	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Observations</i>	3,209,196	3,209,196	3,209,196	2,764,936	2,764,936	2,764,936

Note: The top quintile of state-educated students is the reference category. Includes students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. Unexplained gaps for independent school students are not reported, as they are not meaningful (see fn. 22). (1) includes only socio-economic status controls and a dummy variable for over-18 entry. (2) additionally includes region dummies and various demographic characteristics. (3) is the full specification including information on Key Stage 2, 4 and 5 attainment. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

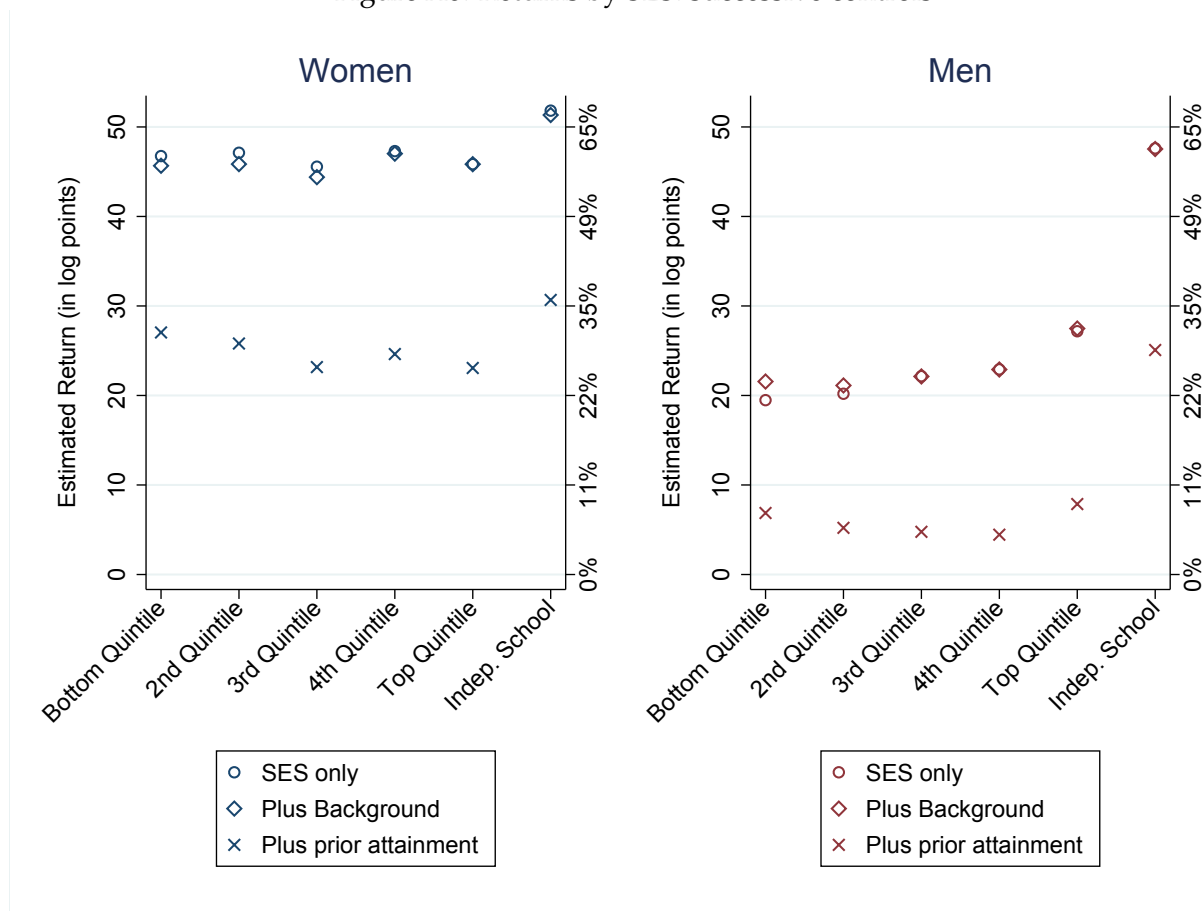
Table A4: Unexplained gaps in earnings by ethnicity: age 30

	Women			Men		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
White Other	0.092*** (0.019)	0.052** (0.018)	0.036* (0.018)	-0.014 (0.019)	-0.049** (0.019)	-0.063*** (0.018)
Black Caribbean	0.084** (0.032)	0.088** (0.032)	0.099** (0.032)	-0.109** (0.034)	-0.118*** (0.034)	-0.092** (0.033)
Black African	0.129* (0.051)	0.113* (0.051)	0.056 (0.050)	-0.188*** (0.053)	-0.202*** (0.053)	-0.195*** (0.052)
Black Other	0.038 (0.045)	0.046 (0.044)	0.034 (0.044)	-0.113* (0.045)	-0.102* (0.045)	-0.096* (0.044)
Indian	0.121*** (0.028)	0.126*** (0.028)	0.071** (0.028)	-0.063* (0.027)	-0.048 (0.028)	-0.092*** (0.027)
Pakistani	-0.305*** (0.027)	-0.214*** (0.028)	-0.256*** (0.027)	-0.437*** (0.031)	-0.351*** (0.032)	-0.378*** (0.031)
Bangladeshi	-0.207*** (0.037)	-0.148*** (0.037)	-0.182*** (0.037)	-0.218*** (0.042)	-0.145*** (0.042)	-0.175*** (0.042)
Chinese	0.320*** (0.070)	0.297*** (0.070)	0.148* (0.069)	-0.093 (0.064)	-0.089 (0.064)	-0.189** (0.063)
Other	0.022 (0.012)	0.010 (0.012)	0.009 (0.012)	-0.041*** (0.012)	-0.060*** (0.012)	-0.056*** (0.012)
<i>Controls</i>						
Background	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Prior attainment	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Observations</i>	2,830,229	2,830,229	2,830,229	2,402,885	2,402,885	2,402,885

Note: White British is the reference category. Includes state-educated students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. (1) includes only ethnicity controls and a dummy variable for over-18 entry. (2) additionally includes region dummies and various demographic characteristics. (3) is the full specification including information on Key Stage 2, 4 and 5 attainment. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

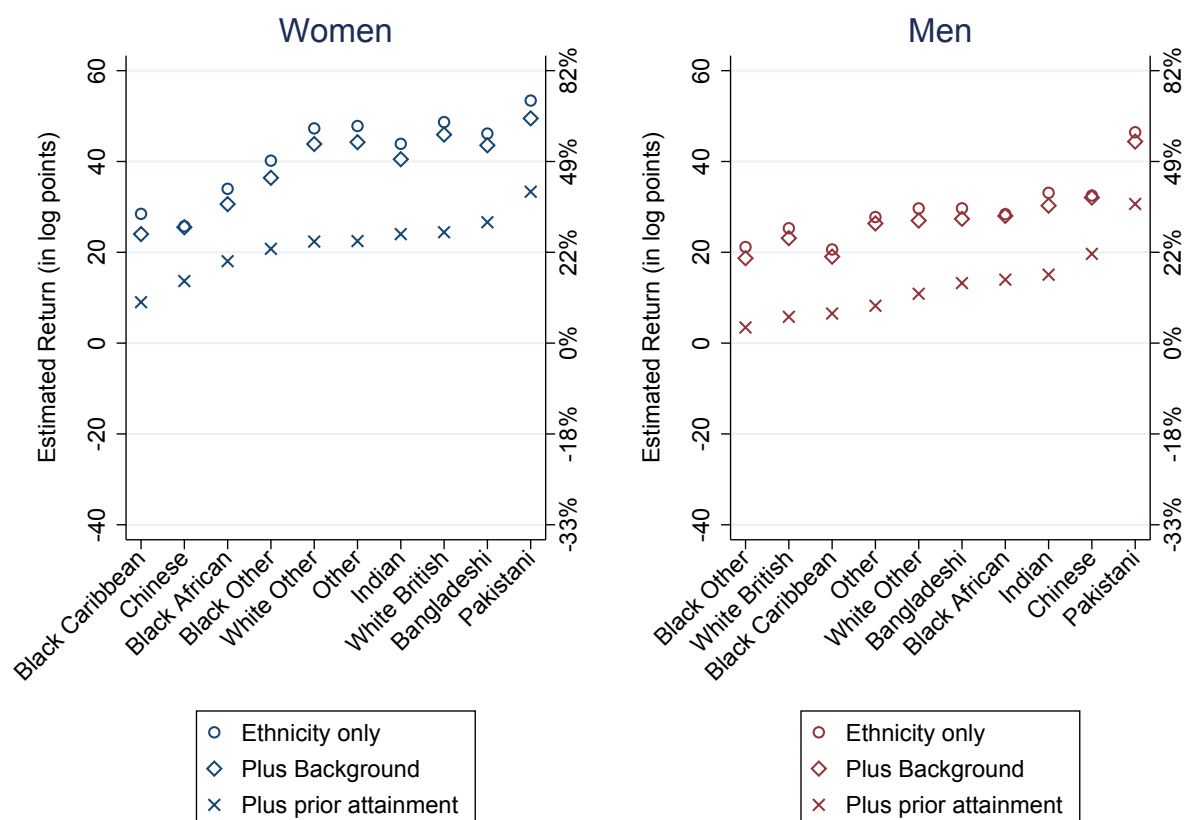
## A5 Age 30 returns: graphs

Figure A8: Returns by SES: successive controls



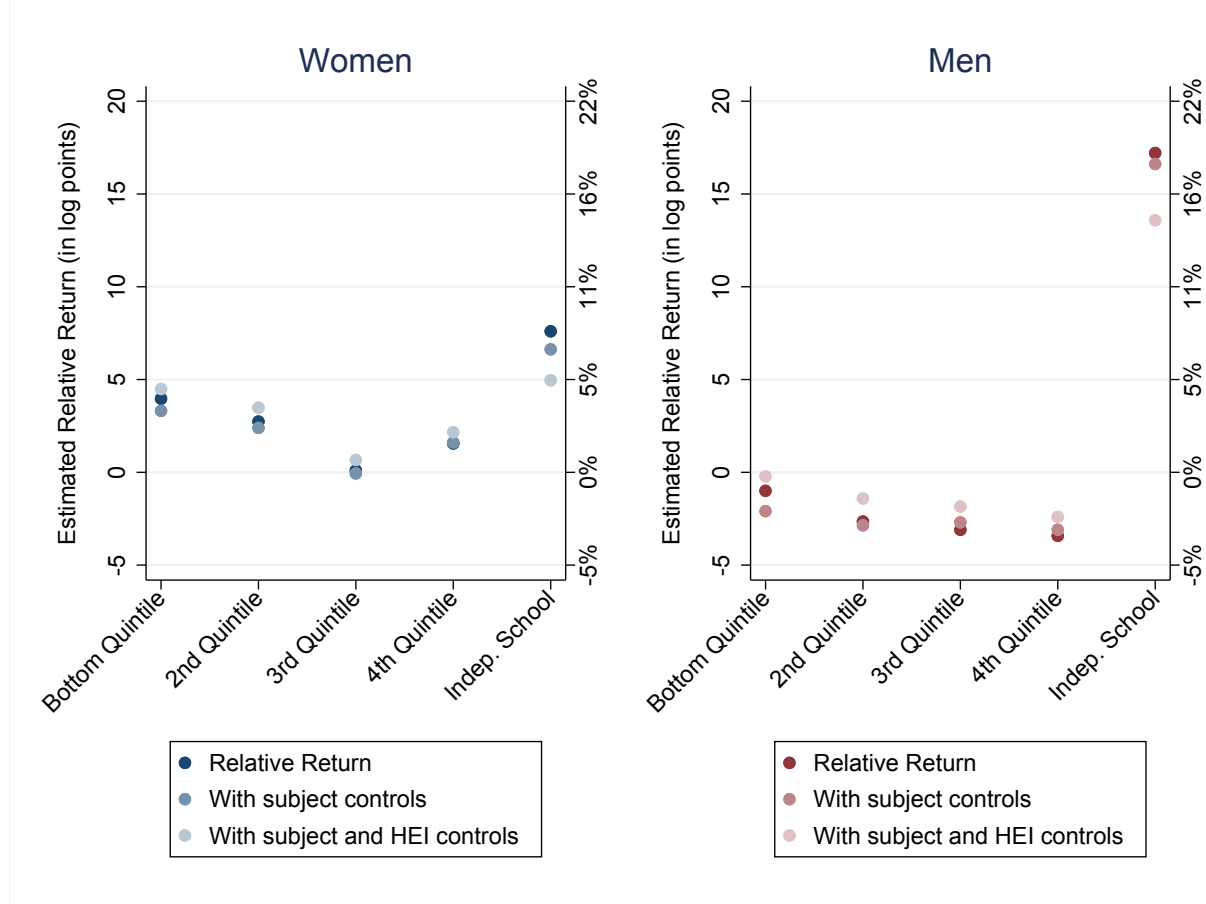
Note: Includes students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. For standard errors, see Table 5. The secondary axis (on the right-hand side) indicates the percentage return.

Figure A9: Returns by ethnicity: successive controls



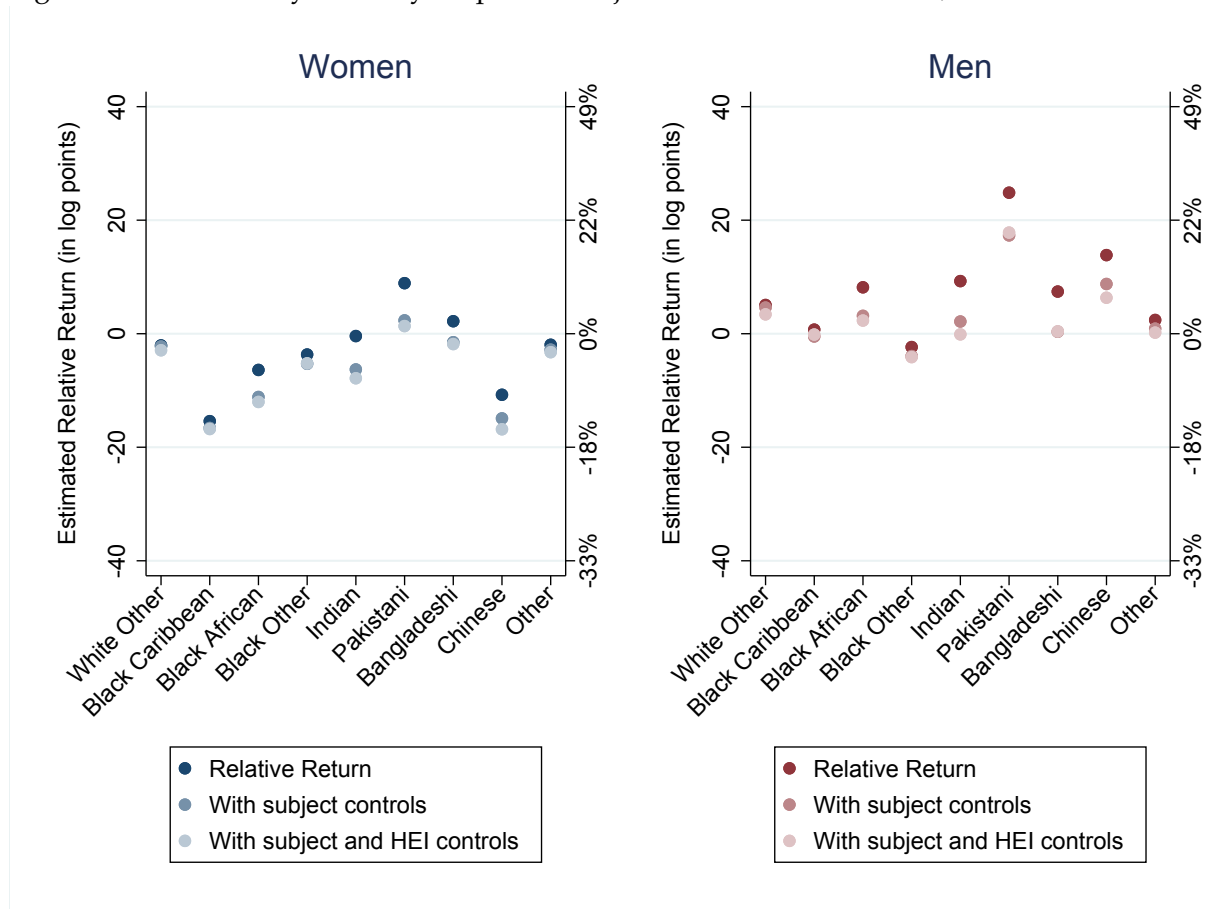
Note: Includes students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. For standard errors, see Table 6. The secondary axis (on the right-hand side) indicates the percentage return.

Figure A10: Returns by SES: impact of subject and institution choice, relative to highest SES quintile



Note: The top quintile of state-educated students is the omitted category. Includes students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. For standard errors, see Table 7. The secondary axis (on the right-hand side) indicates the relative percentage return.

Figure A11: Returns by ethnicity: impact of subject and institution choice, relative to White British



Note: White British is the omitted category. Includes state-educated students with five A\*–C marks at GCSE from the 2002 to 2007 GCSE cohorts. Mature and part-time students are dropped from the sample, as are people with earnings of less than £1,000 in the tax year. For standard errors, see Table 8. The secondary axis (on the right-hand side) indicates the relative percentage return.





Department  
for Education



© IFS 2021

**Reference: DFE-RR996**

**ISBN: 978-1-83870-244-1**

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at:

[thomas.warren@education.gov.uk](mailto:thomas.warren@education.gov.uk) or [www.education.gov.uk/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus)