

Number of Black UK professors rises by 25% in one year

Initiatives such as grass-roots campaigns are likely to have contributed to the uptick, but barriers to progress remain.

By [Elizabeth Gibney](#)

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Diversity in research groups produces more impactful science. Credit: FG Trade/Getty

The number of Black professors in the United Kingdom has risen by 25% in one year, according to the latest figures from the country's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). There were 40 new Black professors in the 2022–23 academic year, bringing the total to 210 (HESA data are rounded to the nearest 5).

“These numbers are a step in the right direction, but they are still woefully inadequate,” says Ijeoma Uchegbu, a pharmaceutical nanoscientist and envoy for race equality at University College London. Figures show that people of Black heritage are under-represented at UK universities — they make up 3% of the wider UK academic workforce and 4% of the working-age population.

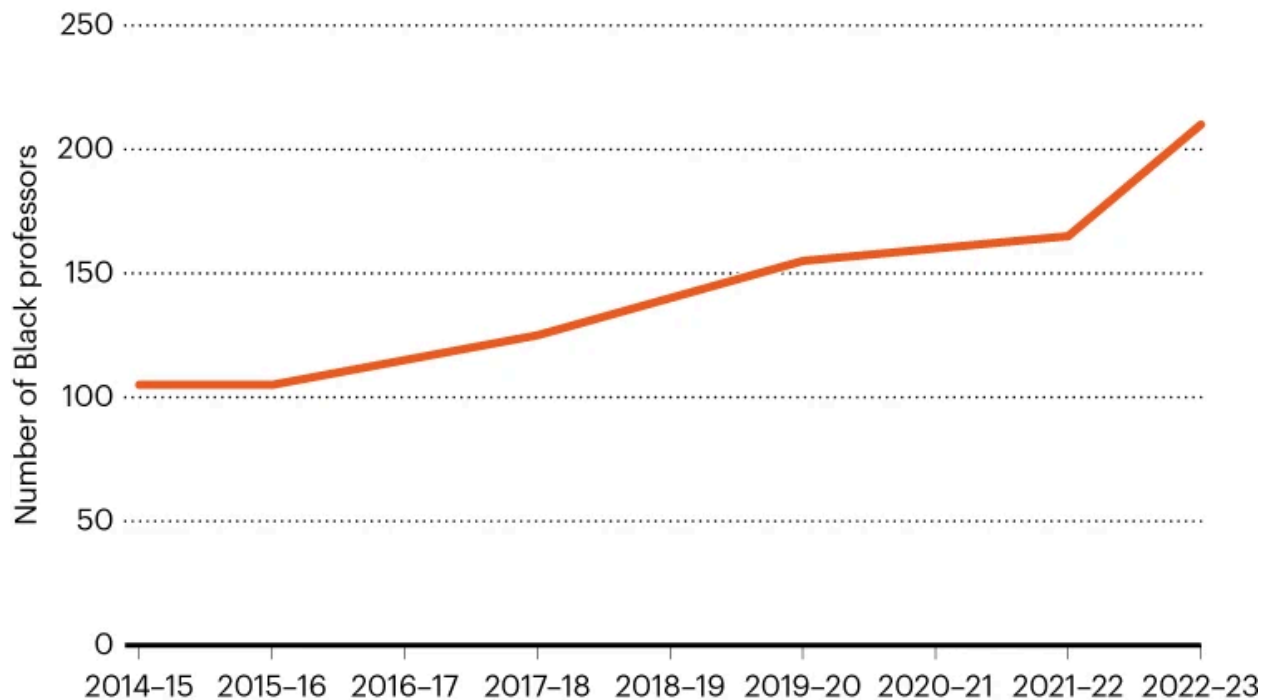
According to [HESA](#), 13% of UK professors — the highest level of seniority in UK academia — are from minority-ethnic backgrounds, and 65% of those academics are of Asian descent. The rise in the proportion of all UK professors who are Black is modest: only 0.2 percentage points, from 0.7% in 2021–22 to 0.9% a year later (see ‘Small proportion’). But it previously took from [2015 to 2022 for representation to grow by the same proportion](#).

“Our system is not yet taking full advantage of the talent available. It is crucial for the health of UK academia that the nature of our research is informed by multiple perspectives,” says Uchegbu. Evidence shows that diverse groups do [better, more impactful science](#)¹.

Uchegbu adds that the dearth of Black professors makes it harder for the next generation of talent to break through. Barriers to progression include a lack of access to information, social networks and support, as well as marginalization in the workplace and systemic biases in granting and promotion processes.

SMALL PROPORTION

There were 40 more Black professors at UK universities in 2022–23 than in the previous academic year — a 25% rise. But despite the increase, Black professors still make up less than 1% of the total.



UK professors by ethnicity



Growing visibility

Several drivers could be behind last year's uptick, say researchers who study race and higher education. Nicola Rollock, an academic specializing in racial justice at King's College London, says that her [2019 research](#) into the experiences of Black British female professors increased awareness of how few there were. "I hope this, in turn, has caused institutions to take our achievements and our promotion more seriously," she says. A swell of grass-roots campaigns and the Race Equality Charter, an award that universities can apply for to show progress in representation, are among the factors that are likely to have raised awareness, she says.

Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have also probably accelerated change, says Wayne Mitchell, a molecular biologist at Imperial College London and member of Imperial As One, the university's race-equality advisory group. Although inclusion seems to be increasing, "the details highlight that there is still a long way to go to bridge the gap to anything remotely looking like equality", says Mitchell.

To further level the playing field, each organization needs to understand the specific challenges it faces and take actions such as examining the criteria listed in job descriptions, providing training to mitigate bias and making efforts to attract people from minority groups, says Mitchell. Among the measures Rollock would like to see are dedicated funding for Black doctoral students and greater transparency in application processes.

Positive action

One related initiative launched on 25 January. The biomedical-research funder Wellcome in London launched a £20-million (US\$25-million) scheme aimed at supporting researchers of Black, Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage. This comes after Wellcome acknowledged in 2022 that it had [perpetuated systemic racism in research](#).

In open funding calls, the organization plans to introduce a strategy it calls positive action, similar to the US approach affirmative action, which considers race in applications. Wellcome's approach will allow it to open more places on a shortlist when there are good applicants from under-represented backgrounds who might otherwise have just missed out.

Such schemes form part of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies, which attempt to remove barriers faced by people from minority groups. But they are facing attacks in the United States, where the country's Supreme Court last year ruled that universities [could not use affirmative action](#) when admitting students.

"The landscape of DEI will always face opposition, because it means recognizing that groups have been discriminated against and making adjustments for greater inclusion and participation of these groups," says Mitchell. Opposition will always be expected, "because some are very happy with the current position that maintains their privilege", he adds.

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UPDATES & CORRECTIONS

Clarification 02 February 2024: Wellcome's 'positive action' approach has been clarified.

Correction 05 February 2024: The original version of this story wrongly described Nicola Rollock as a sociologist. The description of her academic focus has been updated.

References

1. AlShebli, K., Rahwan, T. & Woon, W. L. *Nature Commun.* **9**, 5163 (2018).
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