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Exploring the impact of ethnicity on access, success & progression to higher education: East & Southeast Asian Students

SsREE Working Group Meeting
NERUPI

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Content

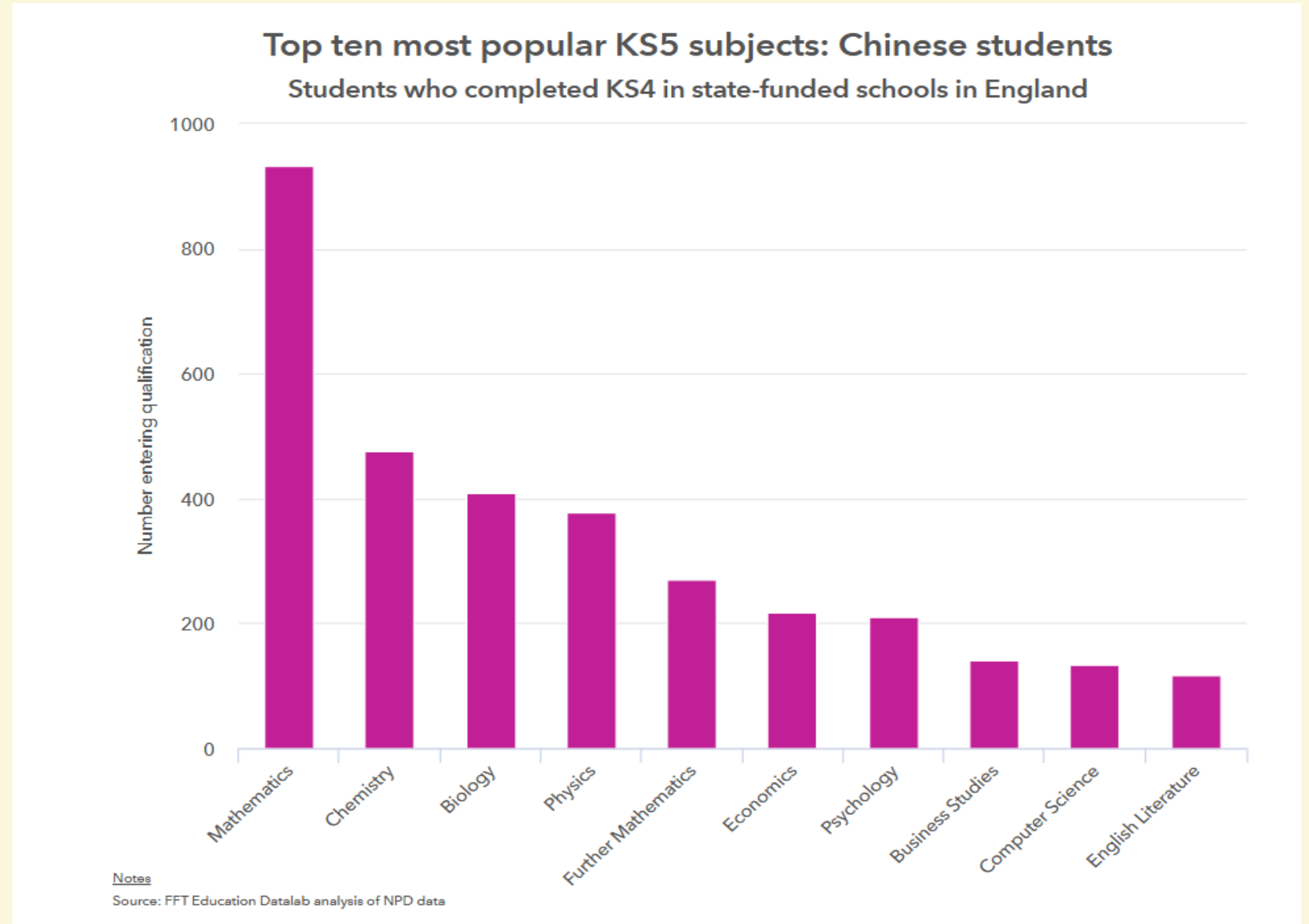
- Brief introduction about the East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) communities in the UK
- HE Students: UK-domiciled & international students
 - Pathways & Attainment
 - Challenges: Racism & racialisation
- Relevant research & resources on ESEA in UK higher education

ESEA in the UK

- East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) – a new collective term from UK grassroot groups; more familiar terms include British Chinese, British East Asian, ‘Oriental’ (outdated)
- Very diverse communities - includes Brunei, Cambodia, China, Timor-Leste, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Korea (North & South), Laos, Macau, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam
- A long history of structural racism and discrimination against ESEA people in the UK (but not well understood or documented due to fragmented data) – racism increased and became more visible during the pandemic
- 0.7% (2011 Census) of the UK population are of Chinese ethnicity, largest ESEA community in the UK; estimates are around 1-2% of the population or up to 1.2 million are from other backgrounds and countries
- In 2023, three out of the top 10 non-EU countries where international students come from East & Southeast Asia (China with 151,690, Hong Kong SAR with 17,630, and Malaysia with 12,135)

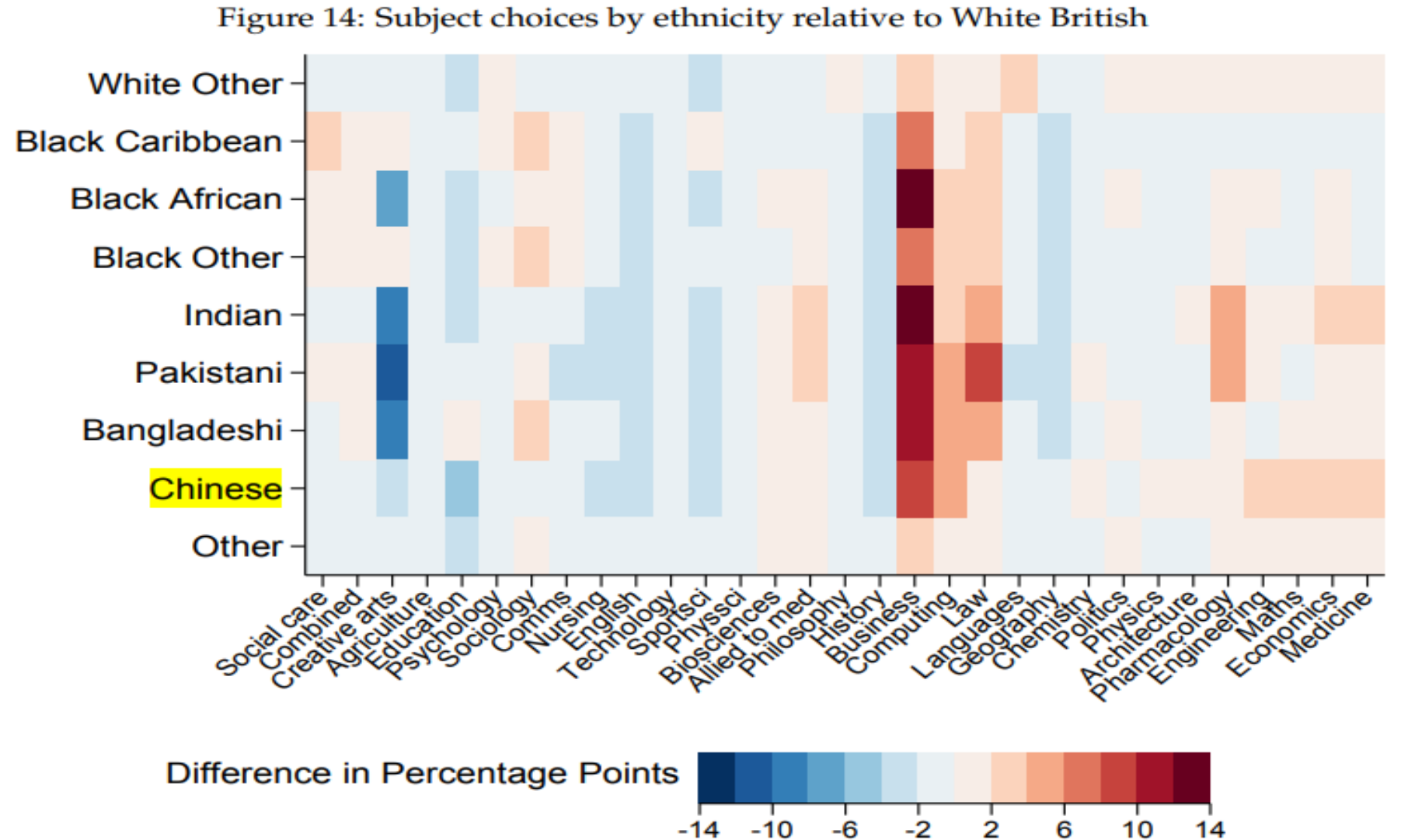
Pathways & Attainment for UK-domiciled students

‘Safe routes’ -
Concentrations
in certain subjects



Pathways & Attainment for UK-domiciled students (cont'd)

‘Safe routes’



Source: [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#) (2021)

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.

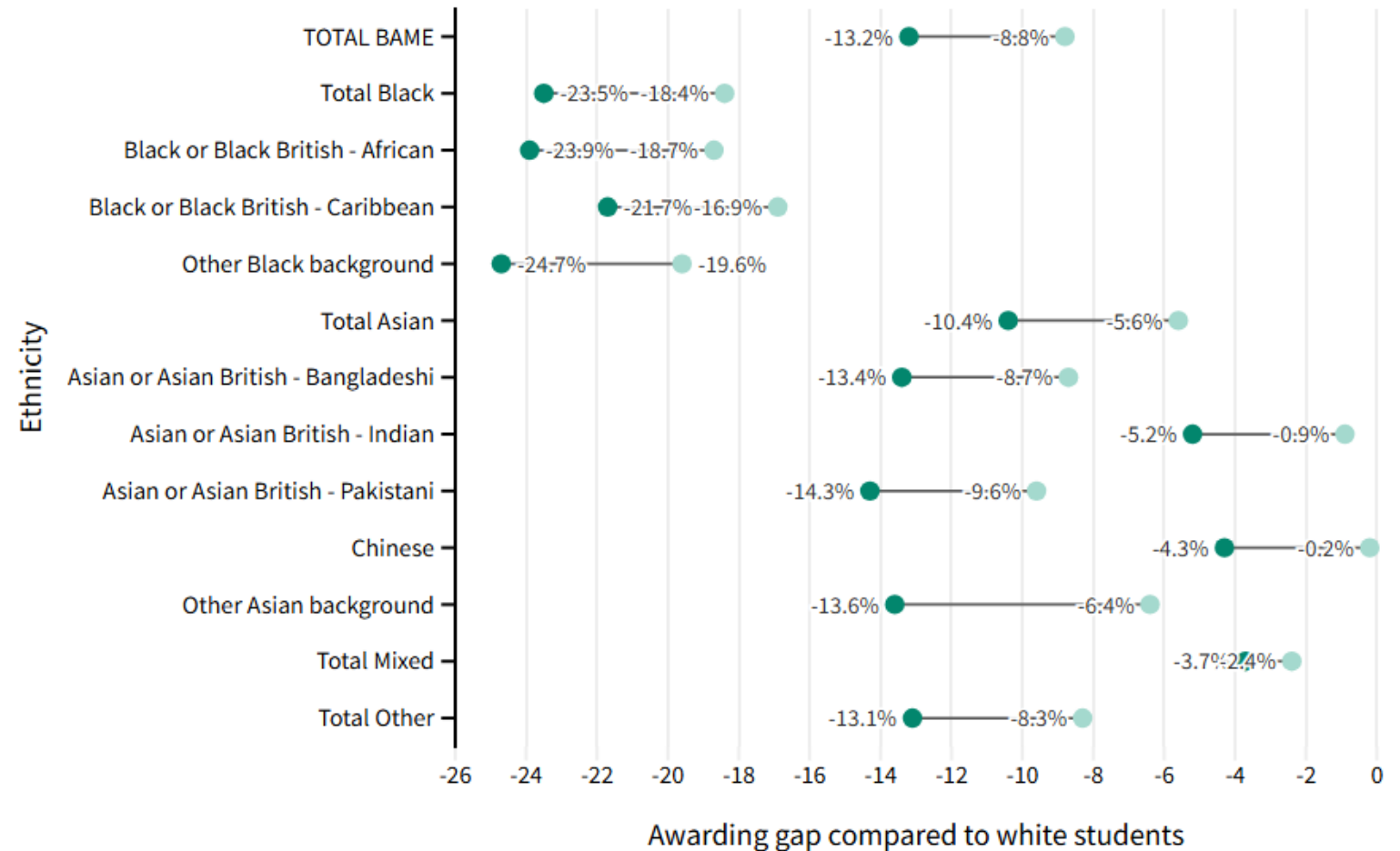
Pathways & Attainment for UK-domiciled students (cont'd)

Awarding gaps

Source: [Universities UK](#)

Awarding gaps in the rates of Firsts and 2:1s between white students and students of other ethnicities (2017/18–2020/21)

Year ● 2017/18 ● 2020/21



Source: [HESA Student Qualifiers 2017/18, 2020/21](#)

Pathways & Attainment for UK-domiciled students (Cont'd)

- Reduced awarding gaps – The awarding gap for Chinese students was 6.6 percentage point in [2015/16 data](#), and is less than 1% according to [2020/21 data](#)
 - People from the Chinese ethnic group had the highest HE entry rate in every year from [2006 to 2022](#) (Chinese 70.7%, Asian 53.9%, Black 50.6%, white 32.2%)
 - Pupils from Chinese ethnic group had the highest average GCSE score out of all ethnic groups ([2023](#)); for A level, 27.4% of students from the Chinese ethnic group got 3 A grades or better – the highest percentage out of all ethnic groups (comparing to 13.6% of white British students) in [2023](#)
 - Actual awarding gaps at individual HE institutions and subjects vary, e.g. Graduates with a Chinese background at 8 percentage points in pharmacy ([2022/23](#)), awarding gap in [medical education](#)
 - ***Why did the high attainment in school did not continue at HE for Chinese students?***

Challenges: Racism & racialisation

- Orientalism (Said, 1978) and Sinophobia, ‘everyday racism’
- Existing racism towards ESEA people (e.g. racist name calling, food cultures, ‘model minority’, ‘working too hard’)
- Racialisation & racism linked to COVID-19 (e.g. being blamed for spreading or causing COVID-19, food cultures, mask wearing)



'Rich Asians' Stereotypes & Covid-related Racism

Lisa, aged 20, British mixed ESEA & white heritage, university student (research on ESEA young people in London, Lu & Mau 2024)

On stereotypes:

"I think relating to Asian people, I think a lot of people hold on to the stereotype of rich international Asian students and they're perceived to be really rich and fashionable. That does generate quite good attention."

During the outbreak of Covid – explicit racism:

"I can't think of any on campus but my friend did say that in the supermarket it was like having an aura around him that no one wanted to go near. He said that people were literally clearing aisles to get away from him. I think there was another uni where these Chinese students in the supermarket were getting harassed by younger people and having shopping trolleys basically thrown at them, pushed in their direction and stuff"



Sinophobia & 'Casual' Racism

Cui, aged 20, Chinese American, Foundation course with many international students (research on ESEA young people in London, Lu & Mau 2024)

Cui: I chaired a debate for one of the classes. We were chairing a debate because it was academic English and it was debating about, this was back in late February, whether or not COVID travel restrictions were overreacting or not. So I was helping to chair the debate. One of my classmates, who I don't even know because we were combining two or three different classes together in front of 70 people said, "Well I don't eat bats soup so I'm fine by that." I heard that a lot. There was a lot of prejudices against specifically the food that East Asians eat. So that was the first thing I heard a lot.

Interviewer: Those comments, what backgrounds were those people making those comments?

Cui: Mostly Middle Eastern, Turkish and Black and white.

(Cui concluded the incident was not properly dealt with by staff members at university and he felt very uncomfortable)

International Students – Lack of Support

- How do institutions deal with racism and microaggression towards ESEA students?
 - Absence of anti-ESEA racism discourse in the UK context (Yu et al, 2024)
 - *‘it is not racism’, ‘it is normal’, ‘it is my fault’ and ‘we are invisible’*
- Recent [HEPI report](#) on experiences of Chinese international students-
 - Some Chinese international students feel like they are being treated as revenue sources rather than as valued members of the community
 - Chinese international students find it more difficult than international students from elsewhere to find employment; most did not receive any support
 - Survey results reveal only 20 per cent of Chinese international students feel truly integrated in the UK; many students wanted to integrate better and have more diverse friendship groups but felt unable to do so

Discussions & Emerging Issues

- Supporting ESEA students to reach full potential and to succeed in different pathways
- Addressing issues of racism and including of ESEA experiences in anti-racist discourse
- Inclusion of international students – beyond just Access Participation Plan (APP) and Race Equality Charter (REC)

ESEA related research & resources

- Gram L, Mau A (2024) 'We are not the virus'—Experiences of racism among East & Southeast Asian heritage young people in London during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. *PLOS Glob Public Health* 4(1): e0002016. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0002016>
- Yu, J., Rai, R., Lim, M.A. et al. The post-racial myth: rethinking Chinese university students' experiences and perceptions of racialised microaggressions in the UK. *High Education* 88, 1695–1710 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01126-5>
- **ESEA Hub** - resource package for universities and workplaces: <https://www.eseahub.co.uk/>
- **besea.n** Britain's East and South East Asian Network - launched **ESEA Heritage Month** (September): <https://www.besean.co.uk/>
- **On Your Side**, UK-wide support and reporting service for anyone in the UK who identifies as ESEA who has experienced racism or any forms of hate: <https://www.onyoursideuk.org/>
- **Remember & Resist** - project seeking to expand abolitionist practice and thinking in E/SE Asian diaspora in UK: <https://www.instagram.com/remember.resist/>

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Thank you!

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