

SOUTH ASIAN YOUNG PEOPLE'S PRE-ENTRY ATTITUDES TOWARDS HE: AN EXPLORATORY APPROACH

ACCESS & OUTREACH TEAM, SEPTEMBER 2026

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Project overview & background

At the University of York students from a South Asian background are currently underrepresented. [Aspire Together](#) aims to support the Access targets outlined in the [University's Access and Participation Plan 2025 - 2029](#), with a particular research focus, through semi-structured interviews, on improving our own understanding and knowledge of the perceived and actual barriers that young people from a South Asian heritage may experience when considering the University of York.

This research focuses on establishing a foundational evidence base in order to better understand the perspectives of the young people and their parents and carers, with the aim of contributing to increasing the percentage of Asian students enrolled at York from 6.1% in 2021/22 to 9.7% by 2028/29.

Throughout the report, you may also refer to the [glossary of terms](#).

Executive summary

This report explores the attitudes and perceptions of young people from a South Asian background when considering Higher Education and the University of York specifically. The research uses semi-structured interviews with young people, the findings of which highlight 9 key themes that emerged from the conversations.

Of those themes, the most distinct findings related to belonging and safety:

- Participants have additional safety concerns that do not apply to their White peers when considering their university choices - this relates specifically to the current political climate and "Raise the Colours" movement
- Participants described a complex relationship with belonging at university - participants emphasised that representation alone does not automatically equate to inclusion and whilst representation matters, genuine inclusion (feeling valued & understood) was significantly more important.

These findings provide greater detail on the risks identified in the [University's Access and Participation Plan 2025 - 2029](#). This insight allows us to refine our targeted strategies for prospective students—supporting our goal to increase Asian student enrollment at York from 6.1% in 2021/22 to 9.7% by 2028/29—while informing wider institutional work to mitigate these risks.

Research aims

There is a wealth of evidence (Sutton Trust, HESA) around barriers to accessing higher education and high-tariff institutions in the UK, both general and specific to certain communities. The aim of this research is to understand if these general population findings are applicable and sufficient when considering access to Higher Education (HE) for South Asian young people, a group that has historically been underrepresented at York. Our research project is specifically designed to ask a focused group of young people general questions about HE to compare with this wealth of existing evidence. The intention for this research is not to explore experiences relevant to ethnicity but instead to understand how higher education, high tariff institutions & the University of York are received by South Asian communities. Consequently, the interview

questions are framed neutrally without reference to ethnicity, ensuring they are appropriate for any participant regardless of demographic background. This research was approved by the University of York's Professional Services Ethics Committee.

Research objective

- Identify key considerations or influencing factors in the decision making process around higher education for young people from a South Asian heritage
- Identify perceptions and attitudes of South Asian heritage young people towards the University of York, specifically
- Identify any perceived and actual barriers to South Asian heritage students in applying to the University of York

Research questions

The interviews aim to understand the following questions:

- What are the perceptions of South Asian heritage young people towards university in general, and are there any differences when considering the University of York specifically? Do these differ to the general population?
- What challenges or barriers do South Asian heritage young people encounter in their journey to Higher Education? Do these differ to the general population?
- What can we learn from the views and experiences of South Asian heritage young people, and how can we use these findings to support the University of York's Access & Participation Plan (APP) targets?

Researcher positionality

It's important to recognise the potential biases and intersecting positionalities of the researchers involved in the project.

Researchers may be positioned as "insiders" where they belong to the group involved in the research, and as "outsiders" where they do not belong to the group involved in the research (Breen, 2007). In identifying as an "insider" or "outsider", in reflexive quantitative research, researchers are encouraged to examine their "own assumption, belief, and judgement systems, and thinking carefully and critically about how these influence the research process" (Jamieson et al., 2023).

This reflexive approach to the research has informed our [research methodology](#), right from determining the interviewer and observer roles, to conducting independent thematic analyses, and subsequently co-determining the final findings of the research.

Figure 1: Interviewer positionality

	Role	Positionality	Note
	Interviewer	Insider	Does identify as being from a South Asian heritage, 3+ years experience working in the HE Widening Participation sector.

			Present for all interviews
	Observer 1	Outsider	Does <i>not</i> identify as being from a South Asian heritage, 9+ years of experience working in the HE Widening Participation sector Present for majority of interviews
	Observer 2	Outsider	Does <i>not</i> identify as being from a South Asian heritage, with 2 years experience as a student worker within the Access and Outreach team, and a subsequent 7 months experience as a staff member working in the HE Widening Participation sector Present for 1 interview

The research team has extensive knowledge and experience with working with young people from underrepresented backgrounds. Additionally, it was important to our research that the interviewer possessed an “insider” positionality, to ensure appropriate language was used and nuance could be picked up on. The positionality of the interviewer and observers as experienced WP practitioners is an important factor and conscious choice in the research design, and as such may influence the interpretation of the qualitative data and methodology approach differently than if the researcher had a research background.

Data reporting notice & quotes

Student numbers used throughout this document are being reported under HESA rounding guidelines to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants.

Participant Selection & Demographics

In order to recruit participants, we circulated information about the research project with current [Next Step York](#) participants in Year 13. Students that identified as being from a South Asian heritage were invited by self-selection to take part in an interview about their experiences and attitudes towards Higher Education. Prior to the interview taking place, we also collected additional demographic information from participants via an online form.

The interview cohort included young people from a range of South Asian ethnic backgrounds, genders and religious backgrounds. The cohort also included young people from the following categories:

- First in Family (FiF) to attend Higher Education
- Young Carer
- Eligible / in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM)
- IMD decile 1 or 2
- Eligible for discretionary payments (incl. some participants who did not share this information with the researchers)

Finally, the cohort interview was made up of participants who are British citizens or have indefinite leave to remain.

A key for student groups is included in [Appendix A](#).

Research consent

To conduct the Aspire Together research, we gained explicit consent from participants and their parent, carer or guardian. It was specifically emphasised that participation was optional, and would not affect any current or future participation in activities with the Access & Outreach team, or any other activity with the University of York. All parties were instructed that they could choose not to answer a question, and that they could withdraw from the research at any time without providing a reason up until the point of transcript anonymisation. Participants were also given the opportunity to read a copy of their interview transcript and provide any amendments or clarifications if they wished.

Research methodology, interview questions & data analysis

Data was collected through 45-60 minute online, semi-structured interviews. All participants were asked the same questions, but the interviewer was able to follow up on participants' responses to draw out further information or clarify understanding of the participants' responses to allow us to better understand if there were any similarities or differences when comparing participants' responses. The interview topics and questions were informed by the findings from previous focus groups with parents / carers / guardians in the Bradford area from a South Asian heritage¹, as well as the key areas of focus within the [University of York APP 2025-29](#), namely:

- Sense of belonging (socially and academically) in HE and at York.
- Perceptions of York (city and university) within South Asian communities
- Applications and enrolments to highly selective universities and York specifically

Audio only recordings were taken for each of the interviews, and a transcript provided for the participant to comment, amend or clarify any details.

Identified Themes

Analysis of the transcripts generated 9 themes in total - it is important to note that these themes have some overlap and should be considered as interconnected rather than as isolated concepts. The themes are presented in no particular order. Please note that verbal hesitations such as "erm" or "like" have been removed from quotes where they distract from the content of the conversation.

Independence

This theme explores university as an opportunity for students to gain more independence, in particular the opportunity to live outside the family home, and developing practical life skills such as budgeting and cooking. Please note that in this context, independence does not refer to financial independence.

¹ *ethical consent was not sought for publication, therefore we are unable to share the findings from these focus groups.*

Findings

All of the young people who were interviewed stated that they were planning to live away from home rather than commuting. Throughout the interviews, participants regularly identified independence as a key benefit of university, and expressed excitement about the opportunity of living away from home.

This was encapsulated by one participant who noted that moving away “was one of the main aims of me going to university. I did want to move out, I did want to live independently, gain those skills”, and another who commented that one of the things that they think they would enjoy most about university is “becoming more independent within myself [...] Relying on myself more in simple tasks”.

Conversely, living independently was also regularly cited as a major worry associated with university, with a particular emphasis on cooking, time management and missing family:

- “I suppose just the logistics of having to deal with your own finances, like, budgeting. I think... and being in a new environment, which is unfamiliar, and also that kind of loneliness thing, like, where - feeling isolated - not knowing anyone.”

Discussion

Independence at university occupies an inherently paradoxical role of increased freedom and concern for young people, and the literature points to this also being felt across the general prospective student population as well as our participants. Moving away from home can provide substantial advantages for personal growth and social integration by allowing students to intentionally build new peer-led support networks rather than remaining dependent on familial ones, but it is also a significant transition for the majority of students (Thompson et al., 2021).

Finance

This theme explores the participants' concerns around living costs whilst at university.

Findings

Throughout the interviews, the participants consistently brought up money as a concern around university life. Interviewees specifically referenced that their concerns were around living costs, as opposed to tuition fees and loan repayment. It is important to note that the interviews took place before recent scrutiny and increased attention on the student loan repayment model in the media.

All of the participants spoke about budgeting, often in relation to the cost of living and student finance. Many of the participants also spoke about their plans to work part time alongside their studies. These financial concerns are exemplified in the following quotes from participants:

- “definitely cost of living. I think that's a new and upcoming issue for lots of people. I think that's quite a barrier to lots as well. Um student fees as well. Finances are a really... big con to university, being able, not being able to pay that much, and not being able to balance your money efficiently, especially if you're living alone. You have to think about housing, if you're not living in accommodation that is, housing, food, bills, going out, transport”.

- "obviously, you get the tuition fee for the £9,535, but then also you get your, sort of, student loan on top of that, depending on your parents' income. And I think, obviously, it's... I don't think it covers everything that you would need... that you need at uni, so I'd have to sort of figure out where I'm gonna get that extra income from".

Discussion

These findings demonstrate that participant perspectives reflect systemic financial pressures rather than superficial concerns, signalling a broader "cost of learning crisis" across the UK higher education sector. Although this study focuses on South Asian prospective students, these findings indicate a universal or widespread tension between balancing academic and financial demands irrespective of demographic. In establishing the UK's first Minimum Income Standard for higher education, Freeman et al. (2024) shifted the cost-of-living debate from anecdotal complaint to mathematical baseline, proving that maximum maintenance loans cover roughly half of actual student living costs. This shortfall forces students into extended working hours that conflict directly with institutional limits (Freeman, 2023, 2024), underscoring the need for institutional and/or national interventions.

Perceived Safety

This theme considers different aspects of perceived safety, and how that influences the perception of specific universities and cities as a potential place of study and safety.

Findings

The majority of participants either stated or intimated that safety was a key factor when considering their university choices. For some participants safety related to feeling that they belong in their institution and associated city, whilst for others safety was brought up in relation to being in an unfamiliar environment, and/or the current sociopolitical landscape. It's important to note that for some respondents their gender identity also influenced their perception of safety, and that safety may have different connotations for different participants.

These concerns were articulated clearly by participants:

- "At the university, so it's a city I don't know, a city I'm not used to, so I don't know what the locals are like, I don't know what the safety is like, so I think that's quite a concern for me"
- "I've been researching a lot about safety within cities, as well as within specific unis. So I've heard about some universities having more criminal levels, in the sense of it may not be safe within the university, so that's quite a thing I research about, especially, I think, as a woman living independently. In a university at my age, I think that's quite a [pause] quite an important thing we need to think about"

During the interviews, some participants independently identified the St George's flag and the current socio-political climate in England as being a source of worry for them and their parent / carer / guardian. These participants equated the prevalence of St George's flags in a city, as an indicator that that particular city may be a more hostile or less safe environment for them:

- “there's a lot of English flags, you know, being raised everywhere. [...] is this something that's also really popular at university? So I did, sort of, you know research it [...] You know, is this university...known to be, you know, quite safe. [...] That's something I did quite a lot, because I know you know, a university can only do so much, until it's just the fact that the city is a certain way. So I really did consider what a city might be like, and if that city is safe, and if there are places in that city that I could...go to, and there are people I can trust.”
- “as a woman, you know, being safe, especially when you go to university is definitely a big thing. And then also just...I think there's a lot of increased, sort of, polarisation in the media today about, sort of, sort of people from an ethnic minority, and people from a Muslim background, err which is unfortunate. [...] I wouldn't want to go somewhere that has a sort of quite a big, sort of, sort of, err far-right, like, hate hate presence”

In a similar vein, one student referenced that an element of inclusion and representation for them was finding people who can understand their experience of “what it's like to walk past, like, 50 English flags while you walk to school, sort of thing. Like, the fear that comes with that”.

Discussion

While safety is a consideration for the majority of prospective students, our research strongly indicates that racialised students face distinct, additional anxieties around racism and hate crime which do not statistically or systematically impact their white peers. Reflecting briefly on Britain's historical relationship with national symbols, research demonstrates how flags have been structurally linked to racialised exclusion, with far-right groups deploying the Union Jack and St George's Cross to enforce white definitions of Britishness (Byrne, 2006; Hall et al., 1978; Gilroy, 1987; El-Enany, 2020). Contemporary analysis shows this legacy persists, as young people from a non-white demographic perceive the sudden public saturation of these flags as actively threatening (Bridger and Sandle, 2026). Consequently, participant safety concerns highlight how general prospective student anxieties are compounded for students of colour by distinct, systemic fears of racism.

Belonging and Social Inclusion

This theme explores the intersection of identity and proactive social diversification at university.

Findings

When expressing their expectations around the social aspect of university all of the participants were mainly excited and looking forward to the prospect of meeting new people, and building connections based on shared interests rather than shared identity. This also included a desire to actively encounter ‘difference’ at university. This preference sat alongside an acknowledgement from the majority of participants, that meeting or seeing people from a similar background² was simultaneously something that would bring a level of comfortability and psychological safety in their social experience of university.

This interest in meeting new people is summarised nicely in the participants own words:

² “similar background” was deliberately not defined for participants, so that participants could interpret this in the way that was most relevant to them.

- "I want to find a good balance between having friends that look like me, are like me, in culture and heritage, but also have friends outside that heritage, so I can experience different cultures and experience different, ways of thinking of life"
- "There are a lot of universities that are called, say, the brown universities informally. Um, and I really want to step outside that [...] my main point of university is to move independently, but also get out of that comfort zone. So, if making friends of my own race and culture is my comfort zone, I really want to step outside that."

Students also articulated that they would like to see people who reflected themselves, or were from a similar background:

- "it would, like I said, be a bit more, like, nicer if I was around people from the same background, because I have more things to relate to them, so it would be just easier for me in that way to, like, connect. And, also, another thing is that... I'm more likely to feel like... you know, belonged as well"
- "I'm from, like, an environment where, even though there's, like, a huge diverse range of lived experiences, they will have, like, the same kind of thread of, like, immigrant mentality, and, I suppose it's difficult to describe, but, like, you know that kind of culture around, which [pause] I say it's, like, people of colour understand. I suppose I'm [pause] I'm kind of a bit nervous that I'm going to go into an environment where no one understands that, like, where no one understands"
- *In the context of faith at university* - "that was...sort of the first thing I thought about, because...erm, it's just... it's really nice to have people that aren't necessarily the same as you, but...sort of, you know, are in that sort of same, you know, global community. Yeah, I'd say I've really thought about that...erm, when I was applying"

It's important to note that whilst this was expressed as something participants would like to see in a Higher Education environment, it was not a dealbreaker for their university choices.

Discussion

While all prospective students negotiate the transition to university by balancing familiar support networks with the desire for new experiences, our findings point towards racially minoritised students navigating a distinct, culturally specific duality - one where seeking new experiences requires a deliberate preservation of cultural safety. Drawing on Stuart Hall's (1990) conceptualisation of identity as an active negotiation between cultural continuity and intercultural expansion, our participants' views on navigating their higher education choices reflect similar themes. Participants actively seek the "vector of difference" through diverse campus perspectives while relying on the "vector of similarity" to guarantee cultural safety, representation, and belonging. This highlights a need for institutions to embed dual-narrative positioning to support students in their choices.

Belonging - Representation ≠ inclusion in Higher Education

This theme explores the participants' distinction between representation and inclusion within the context of Higher Education, particularly in relation to predominantly white or less diverse universities such as the University of York.

NB: following the thread of prevailing literature, this report will refer to the University of York as a predominantly white institution (PWI) when referencing its demographic status. This considers that research examining the institutional landscape of the UK's elite higher education sector consistently characterises Russell Group universities as predominantly white institutions due to systemic patterns of demographic underrepresentation and Eurocentric institutional design (Bhopal, 2018; Boliver, 2016; Nelson-Addy, 2024; Rollock, 2019).)

Findings

All of the participants expressed that representation at university is a positive factor, but doesn't automatically equate to inclusion at an institution. Inclusion was strongly tied to sense of belonging, but crucially, belonging was not dependent on representation alone, rather just one potential contributing factor alongside feeling settled, being part of a group or student community, and feeling valued.

This feeling was exemplified in the participants' own words:

- "it means, like, you fit in there, and, like, you are valued to be, like, somewhere or to someone, and I feel like... with belonging, it's, like, really important, because if you feel belonged, you feel [...] As if you mean something to someone or somewhere, so you're more likely to, like, enjoy being there and, like, making the best out of your time."
- "Within a university context, belonging would be, definitely, I want to see people like me, skin tones at university. But generally, I would say belonging is, like, a place where I don't feel like a foreigner, where I'm not a stranger, I'm not, like, isolated, and just, like, cast aside. I want to be actively part of something, I want to be part of that belonging"

Discussion

While all prospective students navigate questions of whether they will belong or fit in when entering higher education, our participants' experiences reveal that minoritised students face distinct, structural concerns where institutional "diversity" fails to translate into genuine inclusion.

To interpret participant findings, critical scholars argue that diversity must not be treated as a static metric or performative asset, but rather as a mandate for restructuring institutional architectures (Ahmed, 2012; Burke, 2012; Hockings, 2010). Ahmed (2012) cautions that uncritical diversity initiatives can inadvertently position whiteness as the "host," reducing students of colour to welcomed guests who are expected to assimilate, while Burke (2012) notes that widening access initiatives frequently fail to address the embedded institutional cultures that construct minoritised students as "lacking" once enrolled. Addressing these structural shortcomings requires moving toward Hockings' (2010) framework of inclusive pedagogy, where curricula and assessment are intentionally adapted to embrace individual differences. Participants' distinction between representation and inclusion reflects a broader conversation around the continuity between access to university and the rest of the student lifecycle.

Shortlisting & Decision Making

This theme explores what factors participants considered when shortlisting prospective universities, and the level of value placed on these factors within their decision making process. It is worth noting that whilst this theme builds directly on some of the insights of previous sections, it approaches the interview data from a distinct but complementary lens.

Findings

Participants highlighted a variety of considerations that directly influenced their choice of university. These considerations were framed as either preferences, or core requirements / determinants. Preferences included seeing diverse student bodies which could increase their sense of belonging at an institution or the opportunity to find faith-based connections, whilst core requirements or determinants included the likelihood of getting in, the academic rigour of the course and the distance from home. Participants also expressed a willingness and desire to work hard to achieve their aspirations and gain access to their university of choice.

The academic content and rigour of the course were frequently cited as the main consideration for participants. This included the perceived stretch and challenge of a course, as well as how “manageable” the academic content would be:

- “I didn't choose universities based off, like, social wellbeing. I just went, where is the best course? Erm where, where would I have the most, like, academic opportunities”
- “ where I would be tested. I want to be academically challenged when I'm at university. I think that's the point of university compared to college or sixth form. [...] I want the course to be rigorous, and I think a good university... a dream university would include that”

Similarly, many participants noted the entry requirements and likelihood of being made an offer as an important factor in their choices:

- “I was just like where do I have a chance of getting in? What universities would I be happy with? Like, what universities give me the most experience? Like, opportunities”

Discussion

Our participants' preference for academic rigour at university is not out of keeping with findings for the general population, as students broadly express a desire for positive stress in rigorous learning environments that ultimately give them a sense of achievement and better wellbeing. However, students of colour often target prestigious, academically rigorous institutions as a credentialing mechanism to transcend racial hierarchies within a stratified British society (Boliver, 2015). Applying this perspective nuances our understanding, as research distinguishes between “hindrance stressors”—such as systemic racism and bureaucratic barriers—and “challenge stressors” like demanding coursework, which students actively welcome to promote mastery, growth, and positive motivation (Liang et al., 2023). Our participants prioritised this academic stretch over demographic representation, viewing rigor as a catalyst for personal achievement and wellbeing. While all students navigate academic demands, minoritised students must manage constructive challenge alongside severe structural hindrance stressors, highlighting that institutions must dismantle racialised barriers so that academic rigor can foster growth without compromising their wellbeing.

Conversations with Parents / Carers / Guardians around decision making and degree choice

This theme explores how conversations with Parents / Carers / Guardians (PCGs) around Higher Education choices are rooted in encouragement and care, with advice and guidance filtered through the lens of long term financial and professional security, including established career pathways in relation to degree subject choice.

Findings

All of the participants' PCGs had been included in conversations around their Higher Education choices. The advice and guidance provided by PCGs highlighted specific perceived risks³ associated with particular subject choices, graduate outcomes, and university locations. It was clear that participants placed a high value on their family's perspective of their choices.

For some of the young people we interviewed, it was evident that PCGs were a more active collaborator in the participant's decision making about the future:

- "even for applying for unis, we all sat together and decided on what was...[...] if that was the...perfect decision of this uni or that uni. We also... in my personal statement, I needed support, [...] and they... played a role in my application"
- "I think my parents to be fair, quite wisely said, like, wherever you're gonna, wherever you go, you're gonna experience racism. Like, racism is racism, you're gonna, it's, it's, there's no escaping it, just choose a place where the academics would be best"

Most of the participants we interviewed also expressed that their PCG had been supportive of their choices. Following on from this, in some conversations participants acknowledged that their choices or conversations may have been more challenging if their decisions did not align with their PCGs:

- "I think my family's advice was, like, go do it, you know, let us worry about the finances. [...] I think they're very supportive. I think if I had a different degree choice, they wouldn't be so supportive [laugh]. But fortunately, like, what I want to do, what my parents want me to do, like, aligns. [...] [my sister] She wanted to initially, she wanted to study, like, history or anthropology. [...] And they were like, no, that's not happening. You're not doing that. [...] I do think, like, if my parents were a bit more supportive, like, of her [my sister's] initial choices, then maybe it would have ended up being a different degree, so [pause] I don't know, my parents are supportive. I don't want to put them as, like, horrible, because they're not. They've always, like, wanted what's best, and I think they're just doing what they think is best."

Another participant shared that their subject choice was not their PCGs first pick, and the experience of some of their peers from a similar background:

- "there were a lot of barriers to me doing this course, such as my parents, it was not their first choice. So, that's a con. [...]pretty much my entire family are part of the medical and/or the healthcare industry, so they've pretty much seen only that side of the career and that side,

³ Please note that these perceived risks may be informed by intersecting class, cultural, and socioeconomic factors.

that side's impact on individuals, and from their side, I understand it. [...] But, that's caused them to be quite forceful in me picking science or maths A-levels. And some of my friends have similar parents because they're all from similar heritages, so their parents have also sort of influenced or forced them to pick science A-levels. Some of them have gone through with it, and some of them have not, such as myself. Erm, but it's just because I wanted to try something new. [...] I just wanted to step out of my comfort zone"

At least one participant we interviewed also felt that they had been stereotyped by school / college staff:

- "they see me as a stereotype, to, like, just, like, to put it really bluntly. Like, they think. Oh, like, an Indian student who wants to become a doctor, like, falling into that trope of biochem, maths. [...] I think there is a level of, like, people in my school do get, like [pause] pressured to go into the STEM route when they really want to go into the humanities route, but I think it's one of those things, like, I'm not [pause] [laugh] I'm not that, like, I'm not the stereotype, I genuinely do want to do this."

Discussion

While parents and carers naturally influence higher education choices for all prospective students, British South Asian families navigate these decisions alongside damaging, racialised stereotypes. In the UK school system, staff often misinterpret deep family care and career discussions through outdated tropes like the "strict Asian parent" or "tiger parent," assuming students are pressured into STEM fields rather than pursuing genuine interests (Bhandari, 2026). However, research shows that British South Asian families are highly diverse, actively resisting these assumptions by choosing open, supportive dialogue and gentle guidance over rigid demands (Bhandari, 2026; Kodwani, 2022). Consequently, institutions must move away from these unfair assumptions and help challenge racialised deficit narratives within educational settings.

Degree choice

This theme explores the aspirations and motivations of the participants in relation to their choice of subject.

Findings

All of the participants were motivated, and had thought deeply about their future careers when making their degree choices. Half the participants had applied to Medicine and were clearly deeply motivated by it. The participants who had chosen humanities degrees had also made their decisions with the potential careers their chosen courses could lead to in mind.

- "Yeah, so I think the pros is that it's a career I really want to do, it's a degree I really want to study, like, it's a thing which excites me."
- "I'm glad I've got the opportunity to study a subject that I'm really interested in, and that really, like, I really want to know more about and go into, like, further detail. I think, I don't know, some of the potential problems might be that history and politics isn't, like, a sort of a pathway subject, it doesn't necessarily lead to a specific career, but that being said, researching into the

degree, I found that there are lots of different careers I can go into, which are all fairly good earners, and sort of, they erm, interest me, and they're sort of careers that I would want to do"

Discussion

Our research suggests that career aspirations and prospects post university study were important in participants' decision making process, which is echoed in the literature around the general prospective student population. While post-pandemic prospective students generally prioritise post-graduation employability (UCAS, 2021), British South Asian students often face additional layers of complexity, choosing high-status, regulated degrees as a practical shield against future workplace discrimination (Modood, 2004). Research shows that ethnic minority families frequently use higher qualifications to navigate market biases and secure upward mobility, reflecting strong career ambitions (Modood, 2004). However, these students encounter major structural hurdles during the admissions process; UCAS data shows that South Asian applicants target more competitive courses than White peers with matching grades, yet still face an unfair "offer gap" (Del Bono et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant for the University of York's APP targets, and perhaps should be considered as a recommendation for further investigation.

York Specific Environment

This theme explores how participants perceive and relate to both the City of York and the University of York.

Findings

All of the participants expressed a positive view of the University of York⁴. Additionally, all of the participants commented on the ethnic diversity of the University of York specifically, with some anticipating that this would be a big adjustment were they to study here. This adjustment was also occasionally attributed to moving from a larger city to a smaller city.

Participants often referenced that they liked University of York, and felt it was somewhere they could belong. When asked generally about inclusion and representation at institutions such as the University of York, participants independently and consistently shared their observations about the ethnic diversity of the city of York, the University of York, or both. This is typified in the following quotes from participants:

- "I think [pause] York is less diverse. I mean, it is less diverse. [...] I try to choose universities where it would be, like, more diverse [...] more diverse in terms of population. And [laugh] I think York's a bit of the exception to that, but I really like York as the city and all that [when discussing older friends at university] I suppose they're going from, like, an all-girls grammar school with, like, who... with, pretty much everyone, either being an immigrant or, like, a child of an immigrant. To then go into an environment where it's, like, 90%, um, like, British, English people. And [laugh] Yeah, I suppose that they're just feeling, like, uncomfortable. Not uncomfortable, that's the wrong word. Um feeling, like, [pause] isolated, I guess"

⁴ It should be noted that this positive view was often cited in relation to their participation in online and on campus events with the Next Step York programme.

- “having been to the Open Day, it was very much, sort of, just sort of a people from a white, like, a white background. I noticed there wasn't really anyone from, sort of, that had, sort of, brown skin like me, or even, sort of, a black heritage, from what I could tell. And then also just from... I get a lot of information from social media, [...] practically all the accounts that I see are normally just, sort of people from a... a white English background who have... who have gone and...probably, sort of, more middle class”

It was also noted that size of York as a city might also pose an adjustment for students:

“I think people who come from, say, big cities like London or Manchester might find it a bit difficult or challenging to settle in smaller towns such as York. If they're used to big spaces, loud, lots of people. I don't think York is able to offer that size, [...] and extent of... social networks, I think”

Discussion

Unlike the general prospective student population—for whom regional demographics remain a largely invisible factor in university selection—our participants navigate a heightened spatial awareness regarding York’s racial composition. Prospective underrepresented students often evaluate universities based on ethnic diversity and social fit rather than prestige alone, with elite or mono-ethnic institutions frequently perceived as intimidating (Hirst, 2022). For British South Asian applicants relocating from diverse urban hubs, moving to less racially diverse regions can trigger valid anxieties regarding cultural isolation, safety, and a lack of local community support. However, sustained widening access interventions can counter these preconceptions by offering relatable mentorship and fostering an early sense of belonging, which directly supports student wellbeing and academic success (Yong et al., 2025). This highlights the necessity of WP initiatives in countering preconceptions surrounding the University of York and its city, and as aids in dismantling barriers for different student groups.

Limitations

Whilst we did identify a number of themes from the interviews, there are several limits to the research. Firstly, the limited sample size prevents us from being able to draw conclusions or generalise the findings to the wider prospective South Asian student population. Secondly, all interviewees had participated in the Next Step York programme and therefore had an existing relationship with the University of York and/or the City of York. We must assume that their perceptions have been influenced by their experience of the Next Step York programme, and therefore we cannot assume that the interviewees' responses are representative of similar individuals who have had no prior interaction with a Higher Education institution, the University of York and/or City of York. We hope to address some of these limitations by conducting further exploratory research to further enhance our understanding.

Other things of note

Although the research is predominantly focussed on access to university, parts of the conversations naturally extended to the student experience, and are particularly relevant to colleagues within the Continuation stage of the student lifecycle which is beyond the scope of this report. This could be an area that is explored further with current undergraduate students from a South Asian heritage at the

University of York in any future research. Institutional work related to this is already underway, and the University of York is committed to working in partnership with students and staff.

Reflections

While the researchers anticipated findings regarding finance and independence—as these align closely with well-documented literature on the general prospective student population—the participants' insights into "belonging" revealed a much more complex picture. Unsurprising to the research team, this perspective extended far beyond traditional concerns like academic capability, socio-economic standing, or class status. Instead, the participants introduced a highly nuanced layer of additional consideration directly tied to their ethnic identity.

Following on from this, it has been interesting to consider the participants' priorities for their university choices. Specifically, the proportion of the South Asian / global majority student population was not as significant a consideration as the research team might have expected. This is an area we wish to explore further in future work to better understand what the specific barriers are for prospective students from South Asian heritage when applying to or considering York.

The research team has also reflected that the conversations with the young people we interviewed were extremely insightful, and provided a rich set of qualitative data. This data was captured by audio transcription only, and upon reflection the research team could consider the use of interviewer & observer logs immediately post interview to capture additional nuance in any future research - this could include for example participant hesitancy, tone, body language.

More broadly, the research has also reinforced how interconnected the access stage of the student life cycle is to the current student experience. To be successful, both stages should work in partnership.

Next steps & recommendations

- Conduct additional exploratory interviews to further enhance our understanding of the views and experiences of South Asian heritage young people - the additional research and questions should be informed by the themes in this report
 - The research team recommends exploring the theme of "belonging" in further depth based on the nuance in the report
- Use these findings to support the University of York's APP targets - the research team recommends the following:
 - This report is shared with colleagues in other areas of the student lifecycle, including staff who work with pre-entry students outside of the Access & Outreach team
 - The university uses the finding of the report to continue and strengthen the work that it is committed to at an institutional level, in areas of the student life cycle that are outside of the scope of this report (see the [University's Access and Participation Plan 2025 - 2029](#))
 - Pre-entry information, advice & guidance recognises the lived experience of young people from a South Asian heritage, and addresses the additional considerations that this group may face when considering the University of York
- Explore how we can apply the findings of the research to support intentional aspects of our widening access projects and programmes

Acknowledgements & Contact Information

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Appendix A

Student Group	Definition
Young Carer	Students with unpaid caring responsibilities for a family member
First Generation	Students who are the first generation in their family to go to university
Free School Meals (FSM)	Students entitled to, or in receipt, of free school meals
Eligible for Discretionary payments	Students entitled to, or in receipt, of discretionary payments at sixth form / college (16-19 Bursary)
IMD 1 or 2	Measure of relative deprivation. IMD 1 and 2 represent the most deprived areas. <i>Please note, IMD 2019 was used for this YorJourney cohort.</i>