

Investigating Socio-Economic Inequality and Class Discrimination at the University of Exeter



BREAKING BARRIERS
A SOCIAL MOBILITY
INITIATIVE

June 2023

**A report by Group 14 of the Social
Inequality Challenge**

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Introduction

The focus of this report is to assess attitudes towards socio-economic differences within the University of Exeter, with the aim of supplementing the University's existing body of research and developing ways to tackle socio-economic inequality and class discrimination amongst the student body.

Socio-economic differences have come to the forefront of diversity issues in most of the world due to the financial impact of the pandemic on the general population. This is especially important given Exeter's historical reputation as 'Surrey-on-the-Sea' – over 30% of students in attendance were privately educated, putting them in the top five universities with the highest proportions of privately educated students as of 2022 (The Sunday Times, 2022).

We also believe that class divide shouldn't be looked at as a distinct issue. Rather, the intersectionality of class inequality and other markers allows for a better framework of analysis (Crenshaw, 2017). As such, our report discusses strategies for overcoming class stigma at Exeter by also looking at its interplay with race & ethnicity.

This report will thus address the ways in which the University helps students of different backgrounds through their current policies on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), students' attitudes towards class in the university and how the university could help change the mindset towards these differences. Finally, the report aims to be the starting point for deriving a student lead campaign addressing attitudes in Exeter's student culture.

Current policies

The Provost Commission

The Provost Commission was established in response to the Bracton Law Society incident, where Exeter students were suspended for using racist language online. The commission was created as part of the university's pledge to foster a more open, diverse, and supportive environment and serves as a platform to discuss ideas and initiate new projects. Members include University academics and professional service colleagues, along with representatives from various student groups.

In the years since its establishment, the Commission has enhanced reporting tools for harassment and discrimination with the creation of the Exeter Speak Out Guardians in 2018. In addition, they participated in the 2019 AdvanceHE project titled 'Embedding Inclusivity' with a view to develop recommendations and resources for making curriculums more inclusive. They have also held multiple on-campus events to raise awareness on the subject. However, it also appears that a number of the Commission's plans have yet to be enacted, such as the launch of the Massive Open Online Courses programme as well as the development of an equality dashboard, which aimed to create a collection of key equality and diversity metrics.

However, much of the work done only addresses racial or gender diversity - socio-economic diversity has not been treated with the same importance. When formulating policies on diversity, it is important to consider all facets and not just sensationalised issues.

Access and Participation Plan 2020/21 – 2024/25

The data available on the University of Exeter's diversity within the student body is sparse and limited. However, some figures were detailed in the Access & Participation Plan.

On the student body's diversity, in the year 2021/22 we can see that 17% of entrants were from the South-West. However our survey showed, for the year

2022/23, a result of 33%. Unfortunately we could not compare our figure with Exeter's, as available figures are outdated. However, it is important to note that figures for Diversity in Exeter's student cohort show improvement over the last few years. Diversity stood at 7.2% in 2013/14, vs 11% in 2017/18 (Access and Participation Plan (2020)). More updated information would be valuable for our analysis.

Updated figures on Continuation Rates for students in Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN) would also be valuable. The latest figures we could find showed that for the year 2020/21: Continuation Rates of LPN Q1 students were at 94%, compared to 98% for the average student at Exeter. Although it should be recognised that the last decade shows an upward trend with regards to the number of students coming from LPNs: 12% in 2013/14, vs 15% in 2017/18 (Access and Participation Plan (2020)). Again, the data is outdated, and newer information would be valuable.

Overall, the plan gives a good outline of Exeter's current measures and future plans to increase equality of opportunity for students at all stages. However It's clear it would be beneficial for more comprehensive datasets on the makeup of the student body, to be made available publicly. This is one of our recommendations to Exeter's Equity, Diversity & Inclusion team.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Statement

The most recent EDI Statement, published in October 2022, aims to establish behavioural standards for all university employees based on societal diversity. To better communicate the university's position on discrimination, there are some parts of the statement that could be improved. In general, the statement lacks specificity and comes off as being broadly descriptive, especially with regards to the university's responsibilities. Aside from this, the policy could be strengthened by the university expressing its values and stance more assertively, demonstrating a greater eagerness and willingness to uphold crucial university values of equality, diversity, and inclusion.

One way to make the policy better is to give more detailed instructions on how to handle discrimination cases. This might involve defining discriminatory behaviour precisely as well as outlining what people can do if they see or experience discrimination. The policy might also benefit from a stronger declaration of the university's commitment to diversity and inclusion. This could entail highlighting particular programmes or initiatives that uphold these ideals as well as vocally denouncing discrimination when it occurs. The university will be able to make its community feel more welcomed and included by taking these actions.

The University's EDI policy is a step in the right direction, but there is still room for improvement. The policy could use more specificity and a louder declaration of the university's principles and anti-discrimination position, which can better promote and protect the significant values of equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Dignity and Respect Advisors

Dignity and Respect Advisors are staff members that volunteer and train to undertake the role of confidential advisors to people that wish to speak to someone about harassment or bullying they might be facing within the university.

One of the more prominent and more successful initiatives implemented, it is evidence of clear support systems being provided to those in need. However, it does not do much to necessarily fix the problem. In order to prevent more issues of bullying happening within the university it is necessary to carry out a more interactive approach with students, where there is a clear outline of the policy the university has in the event someone is found to be guilty of bullying or harassing someone. It is also important to understand the value of regularly emphasising the importance of tolerance by engaging with students.

Strategy 2030

Through the power of education and research, the University's Strategy 2030 aims to create a more 'sustainable, healthy, and socially just' future. Of specific interest to our discussion is the section on 'Our People', which describes the University's commitment towards implementing strategies for reducing socio-economic inequality. To that end, they have established the Wellbeing, Inclusion, and Culture Committee (WIC) and attempted to accelerate the delivery of widening participation plans. Furthermore, the University also participates in the Southwest Social Mobility Commission, working together with other bodies in the region to research social inequality and improve access of underprivileged students to higher education. They have also launched Elevate, a free leadership and professional development programme targeted towards women from minority ethnic groups.

Having been awarded the Silver Award in the 2022 UK Social Mobility Awards, the University has had its efforts in this area recognised. However, there has not been much change in the attitude of the student body towards class differences. Thus, university policies must not focus simply on improving the accessibility of higher education for disadvantaged students but should also engage the participation of the student body in creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment for all.

Student bursaries

The university offers an Access to Exeter (ATE) bursary to help those who need it with help from the information they receive from the relevant funding authority. The amount of financial help that you receive depends on your household income. This scheme is a huge way to provide relief to those that do not necessarily have the means to pursue higher education. The university also does provide a scope for those that apply for these bursaries to have their situations reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

Many disadvantaged students can be forced to drop out of university due to their finances and ATE helps keep these students in school.

Interview with Leanne Heath

We were kindly given the opportunity to speak with Leanne Heath, a member of Exeter's Wellbeing, Inclusion and Culture (WIC) Committee, through which we gained valuable insight into current projects with regards to improving the quality of diversity and inclusion at Exeter. Examples of such projects include:

- **Establishment of the WIC Committee in 2021**
- **Access, Participation and Outreach Recruitment Operations**
- **Transition Support and Enhanced Induction Programme**
- **Bystander Training**
- **Success for All scheme**

The issue of student participation in these groups was also raised. According to Leanne, Exeter's Committees on the topic of Diversity and Inclusion are fairly staff-facing. We concluded that there is scope for improving this part of Exeter's committees. Increased student participation would allow for more staff-student collaboration, and therefore solutions which tackle the problem from both a top-down and grass-roots level.

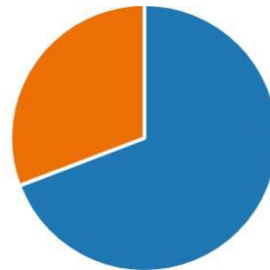
Student survey

As part of our investigation, we conducted a survey in which our group aimed to understand the student body's attitudes towards certain factors that affect background such as financial status, region, ethnicity and more. The survey also aimed to find out how exactly the students have been affected by their class differences and whether there is a correlation between the lack of diversity in the university to the number of cases of discrimination we see.

Question 1

What is your student status?

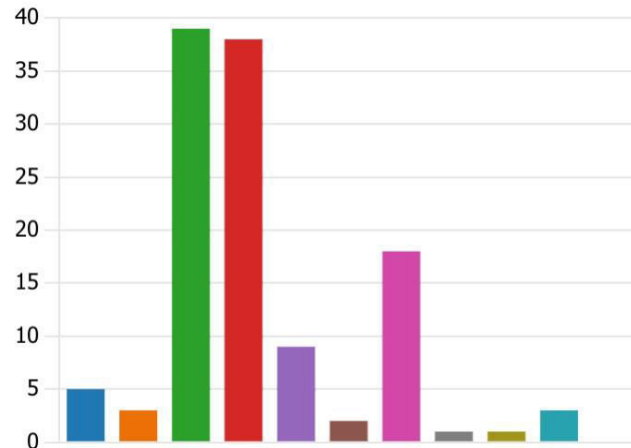
● Home	119
● International	53



Question 2 (Home students only)

What region in the United Kingdom are you from?

North-West England	5
North-East England and Yorkshire	3
South-West England	39
South-East England	38
Midlands	9
East of England	2
London	18
Northern Ireland	1
Scotland	1
Wales	3
Other	0

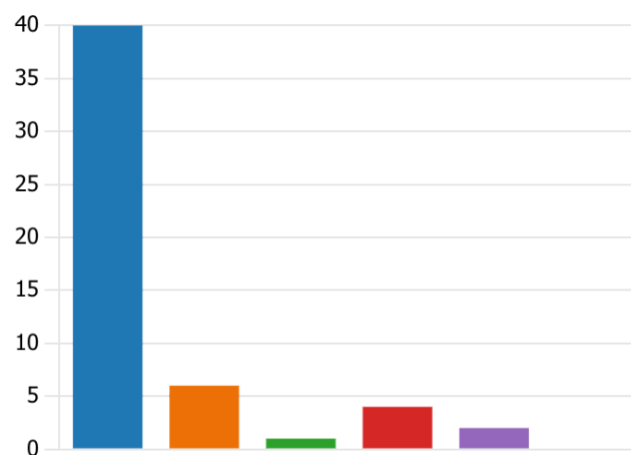


Reflecting the student demographic in the university, 119 respondents out of 172 are from the UK. Out of this 119, 77 or 81% come from the south of England. This is indicative of the lack of regional diversity at the university.

Question 3 (International students only)

What continent are you from?

Asia	40
Europe	6
South America	1
North America	4
Africa	2
Australia	0

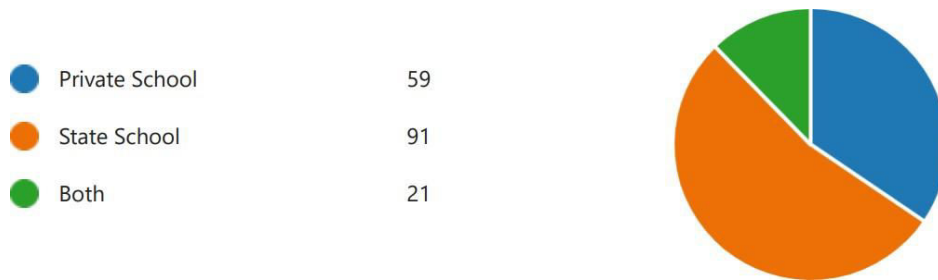


Out of 53 international students, 40 or approximately 75% of them came from Asia. This is again indicative of the student demographic as most international

students tend to be from Asia, further showing the lack of diversity in the university. While it is good to have international students, having a large number from one specific ethnic group is not exactly diverse.

Question 4

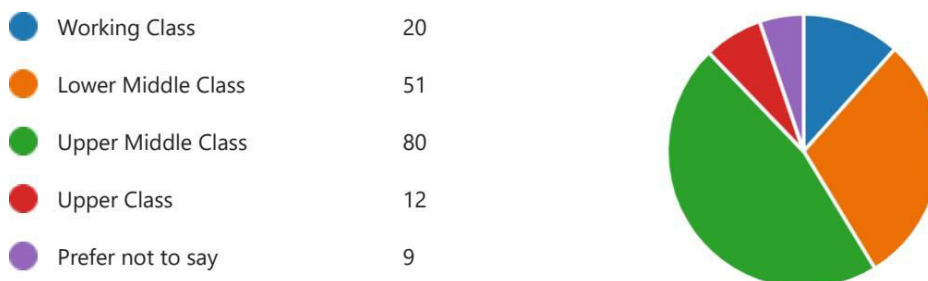
Did you go to a private or state school?



These responses do not separate the home students from international students, however it can be noted that about 46% of respondents were privately educated, in line with the results of Question 5 in that a majority of students at the university come from wealthier backgrounds. Statistics online suggest a figure in the low 30% bracket for Exeter in most years, a figure higher than the Russell University average. Our survey is only representative of around 170 responses, therefore figures above are not necessarily a perfect representation of Exeter’s entire student makeup.

Question 5

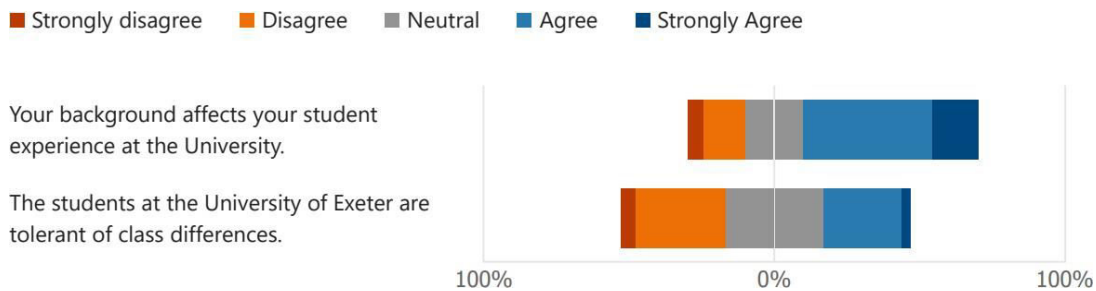
What socio-economic group do you believe you fall under?



As mentioned in the observation from Question 4, the majority of respondents at the University come from wealthier backgrounds. Specifically, more than half (54%) of the students fall under either upper middle or upper classes, whereas those from working class or lower middle classes account for 41% of the results.

This indicates a diverse socio-economic makeup amongst the respondents, suggesting that there are a number of classes in the University's student body. It is important for the university to put in more effort to ensure that there is no explicit divide created between students and foster an environment of inclusion.

Questions 6a and 6b



Question 6a reveals strong evidence for the fact that Students' background at Exeter, has a huge impact on the University experience. This suggests that there is room for improvement with regards to fostering an inclusive multicultural environment.

Question 6b provides further evidence of this point. Although the figures are much closer (all in the 30% bracket), it is still important to note that the majority of responses argued that students at Exeter are not tolerant of class differences (36.5%). This suggests that socio-economic discrimination within the student body needs to be addressed.

Question 7

Have you experienced discrimination based on your socio-economic background at the University?



While Question 6 reveals the lower tolerance of class differences at Exeter, the results from Question 7 support the existence of class-based discrimination within the University community. And though a large majority of respondents did not report experiencing any discrimination based on class, a significant number (19%) still did. This result suggests that nearly one in every five students were discriminated against, indicating the necessity for the University to take measures in order to reduce such occurrences.

Questions 8 and 9

Are you currently a member of any student societies at the University?

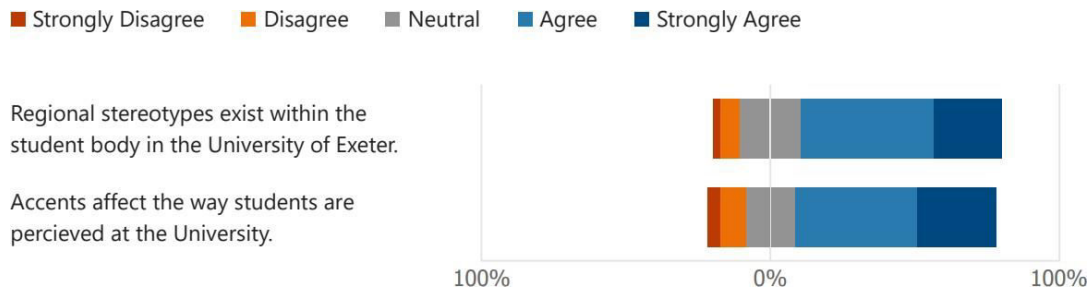


Do you believe society membership fees are too expensive?



90% of 155 respondents are part of student societies, out of which 111 or approximately 71% believe that society membership fees are too expensive. It indicates a possible reluctance to join societies due to the fees. This can impact a student's ability to fully participate and immerse themselves in desired activities and that certain societies possibly become 'closed-off' to those who may not be able to afford the fees.

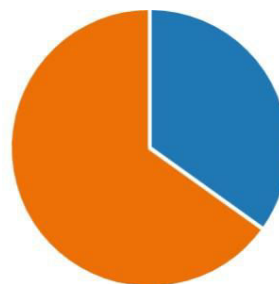
Questions 10a and 10b



Questions 10a and 10b show that there exists stigma surrounding perceived backgrounds within student culture. In both questions, about 70% of responses agreed that regional stereotypes were prevalent, and that accents played a part in this stereotyping. These are overwhelming figures that evidence the extent of the issue.

Question 11

Have you ever had to modify your accent in any social context?

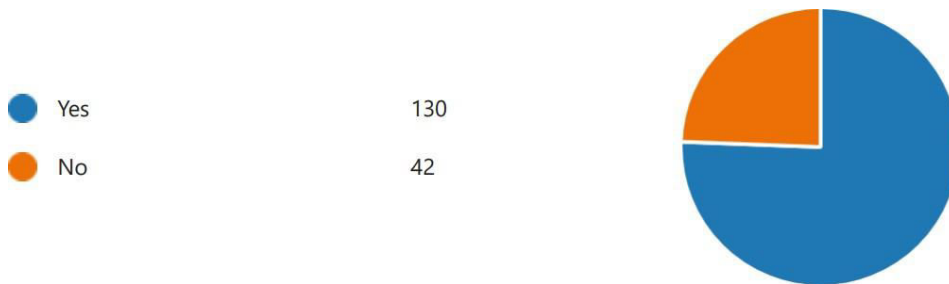


There seems to be consensus among the student community on the perpetration of regional stereotypes within the university. In accordance with the results of Question 7, it shows that despite policies put in place by the University to increase class diversity, students themselves need to be engaged to reduce these figures.

Interestingly, a large majority of respondents who reported not having to modify their accent were from southern England; of the 60 people who modified their accents, most were from the north of England or foreign, suggesting that there is a bias towards accents that do not sound like those from the south.

Question 12

Do you believe that the University fosters an inclusive environment for its students?



Question 12 reveals that most responses believe that the University faculty itself does foster an inclusive environment. This is in line with our independent research on Exeter's policies regarding Diversity and Inclusion, which we found to be extensive and proactive. Although almost 25% of students did believe more work could be done by Exeter, this question points to the conclusion that there is a cultural issue in terms of student attitudes.

Our recommendations

From the results of the survey and our analysis of the University's current policies on promoting class diversity and inclusion, we have formulated several recommendations that we believe will greatly assist in tackling social inequality and discrimination at the University.

1 Updating the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Statement

Currently, the EDI statement only outlines legal obligations. By revising it to clearly express the University's commitment to socio-economic diversity and inclusion, the university sets a tone and a concrete commitment towards these values.

2 Improving access to public data

An issue we encountered in our research was the lack of data available on the background of students in Exeter's student body. Publishing yearly figures on the diversity of the student body would be a step in improving accountability and transparency between faculty and students at Exeter. In addition, the University could establish a system to evaluate the effectiveness of student involvement in EDI groups.

3 Inclusive Societies Programme

The survey results showed that a significant 71% of respondents feel society membership fees are too high. By offering greater financial aid to fully cover or subsidise these fees, the University would promote participation in societies by students of all socio-economic backgrounds.

4 Reviewing and updating the Provost Commission

The fact that no updates have been provided since 2019/20 suggests that the Commission's work in promoting diversity and inclusion may not be ongoing or effective. By reviewing and updating its mandate, the University

can ensure that it continues to make progress in this area and also help display its commitment to actually correcting issues within the University.

5 Peer Mentorship scheme

The majority of survey respondents identified as upper-middle-class or higher. A mentorship program would provide students from lower socio-economic backgrounds with role models and guidance, helping to ensure that they too can thrive at the University and beyond.

6 Impact measurement for continuous improvement

Without a way to measure the impact of diversity initiatives, it's hard to know if they're effective or if there's room for improvement. By regularly reviewing and updating its strategies, the University can ensure it continues to meet its diversity and inclusion goals.

7 Increased student involvement

Inclusion of student representatives from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in each faculty's EDI discussions and hold regular meetings. This ensures a broad range of perspectives in creating and implementing EDI initiatives, as well as in revising relevant policies. It also fosters a culture of transparency and inclusivity, where all students have a voice via the feedback mechanism (i.e. online platform) and the power to influence decisions that affect them. As well as providing training and workshops to equip student representatives with the necessary skills.

8 Social Mobility Schemes

Exeter currently only has the Pathways to Law scheme, while other universities have much bigger programmes that aim to help high-achieving students from low-income and minority ethnic backgrounds to access higher education. Examples include The Sutton Trust, King's College's K+ Scheme, Target Oxbridge, Opportunity Oxford, Warwick Observatory, and Bristol's Flying Start.

9 Wider Campaigning

Our findings strongly evidence that Exeter attracts a large number of students from the South of England, as such it follows that attracting students from a wider range of regions would improve the quality of Diversity in the student body. However, we recognise that the University's location is of consequence, and that the proportion of A-Level Grade As is much higher in the South of England compared to other areas.

10 Affordable Accommodation and Meal Options

Financial challenges can affect a student's ability to afford housing and meals, potentially impacting their overall student experience. Providing more affordable options addresses this issue directly, echoing the sentiments of the Students' Guild in launching the Super Savour Kitchen where students can enjoy a £2 hot meal during term time.

Conclusion

Our analysis of Exeter's current policies reveals a great deal of initiatives from The University to promote diversity and inclusion. There are many visible efforts aiming at reducing socio-economic barriers, and helping students feel included in student life. In effect, our Survey reveals that 76% of students believe that the University itself does try to foster an inclusive environment. However, this is at odds with the fact that almost 20% of students reported facing discrimination based on background and 70% believe regional stereotypes exist within the student body. This points to the conclusion that the issue is cultural, that attitudes within the student body should also be tackled.

It is therefore clear that fostering a multicultural environment which promotes inclusion, on all aspects (class, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, etc.) is an effort which has to be tackled simultaneously by looking at Exeter University's Policies, and by tackling student culture. Our survey strongly evidences the impact of student culture on creating an inclusive environment, hence we believe that tackling this topic from the student perspective would really improve the quality of Inclusion at Exeter. We concluded that this project would benefit from a student-lead campaign.

This report served to outline our findings on attitudes to socio-economic differences at the University of Exeter. We have included our recommendations for changes at Exeter, from a policy perspective. The aim of the report was also to be a starting point for this Grand-Challenges Group's future work, as such, we aim to look into continuing the project, mainly by working on a student-lead campaign to tackle the issue within the student body's culture.

Next steps

- Increasing our survey response size
- Further collaboration with Exeter faculty staff
- Launching a student-lead campaign aiming to change attitudes towards class differences within Exeter's student body.
- Further investigation on opportunities for more student involvement at a decision-making level.

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