



# Diversity in Development

## Background of UK undergraduate international development students

### Evidence briefing #2

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## Background note

Diversity in Development is a UK charity aiming to promote public education about and access to international development. We believe that it is vital for debates about, and access to, international development to involve society as a whole. Failure to achieve this would be ironic for a sector that aims to promote equity and justice globally. It could also impair its effectiveness and make it vulnerable to a lack of public and donor support.

We aim to monitor equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the sector through new studies and reviews of available evidence. We also produce occasional briefings based on recent studies that we feel make an important contribution to the debate.

## This study

Opinions differ on the value of university international development courses. Some argue that having relevant subject-specific skills, such as engineering or economics, is more important to a future career in the international development sector. Others advise that a postgraduate qualification is more important than an undergraduate one. Undergraduate degrees in international development are offered at a limited number of universities, so relatively few people study them. We know little about the motivations of those who do, their demographic characteristics, and what employment they subsequently enter.

Establishing the role that international development degrees can play in creating a diverse profession is important. The opportunity to study for three or four years, particularly when combined with networking and work opportunity programmes, could offer a route for those from underrepresented backgrounds to enhance their experience and contacts. But this potential will only be realised if such qualifications are accessible and well regarded by the profession.

This study explores the background of those studying international development at UK universities. This is important in view of wider evidence that the profession is not currently representative of society as a whole, and might help universities in their future promotion of such courses.

Analysis was undertaken using official data of the 2021-22 student population, supplied by JISC, the not-for-profit body that provides information and digital services to the higher education sector. This was the first year in which international development had been categorised separately. The data concerned only courses specifically defined as international development, and not others (such as international relations) which comprised an international development element.

A total of 3,068 students came into this category. Of these, 52% were at postgraduate and 48% undergraduate level. The proportion undertaking postgraduate-level study was much higher than that for social sciences courses as a whole (18%). However, our analysis focused on the undergraduate group, as JISC does not have comprehensive data on the

socioeconomic background of postgraduates, due to their wider range of application and admission routes. We suggest that postgraduate degrees should be an area for further study.

The tables presented exclude 'don't know' and 'unknown' categories. These are largely explained by JISC as students who did not apply for their course through the national UCAS system, including overseas students. Tests of statistical significance were carried out using the tests of column proportions in SPSS (v29) custom tables. Statistical significance was taken as  $p < 0.05$ .

## The undergraduate population

1,470 students in the sample studied at first degree level. Because university students are not fully representative of society, the characteristics of these were compared with those for the much larger cohort (134,161) studying all social sciences courses. 21.9% of the cohort were studying at Russell Group universities, compared with 24.8% for all social sciences courses. 90.4% were UK-domiciled, compared with 97.4% for all social sciences.

The two cohorts were reasonably closely matched in terms of gender, with 66.0% of international development students being female, compared with 62.9% for all social sciences.

Breakdown of the cohorts by ethnicity is given in Table 1. Both Asian and Black students appear somewhat underrepresented, with 12.8% and 9.9% compared with 14.9% and 12.9% for all social sciences. Difference for all categories except the proportion of white students can be considered statistically significant.

**Table 1: Undergraduate international development students by broad ethnic group**

	International development students		All social sciences students		International development students % difference	Total	
	N	%	N	%		N	%
<b>Asian</b>	163	12.8	18652	14.9	(2.1)	18815	14.9
<b>Black</b>	126	9.9	16224	12.9	(3.0)	16350	12.9
<b>Mixed</b>	141	11.0	9437	7.5	3.5	9578	7.6
<b>White</b>	847	66.3	80981	64.6	1.7	81828	64.6
<b>Total</b>	1277	100.0	125294	99.9	0.1	126751	100.0

## Socioeconomic background of international development students

Our most startling findings relate to the socioeconomic background of students. Four measures were used to indicate this: whether the student had been educated outside the state sector; whether one or more of their parents had studied in higher education; whether the student came from a deprived area (as measured in the index of multiple deprivation (IMD)); and the student's socioeconomic grouping (SEG) as measured by parental occupation.

The results for each are given in Tables 2-5.

**Table 2: Undergraduate international development students by type of education**

	International development students		All social sciences students		International development students % difference	Total	
	N	%	N	%		N	%
<b>Non-state school</b>	221	17.1	11577	9.8	7.3	11798	9.8
<b>State school</b>	1068	82.9	107143	90.2	(7.3)	108211	90.2
<b>Total</b>	1289	100.0	118720	100.0	0.0	120009	100.0

Table 2 demonstrates that international development undergraduate students are over 70% more likely to have been educated outside the state sector than students on all social sciences courses. The measure relates to the last institution studied at before entering higher education; it is possible that some students would have also studied at private schools at earlier stages in their schooling. The figures compare with approximately 7% of the entire UK school population being outside the state sector at any given time.<sup>1</sup>

Table 3 identifies the proportion of undergraduate students for whom at least one parent had studied in higher education. This applied to 65.9% of international development students, compared with 48.6% for all social sciences. The differences in both this and the previous table are considered to be statistically significant.

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<sup>1</sup> [Private schools and British society, UCL Institute of Education \(2023\)](#)

**Table 3: Undergraduate international development students by parental study in higher education**

	International development students		All social sciences students		International development students	Total	
	N	%	N	%	% difference	N	%
<b>Yes</b>	823	65.9	52168	48.6	17.3	52991	48.8
<b>No</b>	425	34.1	55211	51.4	(17.3)	55636	51.2
<b>Total</b>	1248	100.0	107379	100.0	0.0	108627	100.0

**Table 4: Undergraduate international development students by index of multiple deprivation quintile**

	International development students		All social sciences students		International development students	Total	
	N	%	N	%	% difference	N	%
<b>Quintile 1 (most deprived)</b>	141	11.1	22799	20.7	(9.6)	22940	20.6
<b>Quintile 2</b>	208	16.3	24432	22.2	(5.9)	24640	22.1
<b>Quintile 3</b>	274	21.5	22322	20.3	1.2	22606	20.3
<b>Quintile 4</b>	285	22.4	20782	18.9	3.5	21067	18.9
<b>Quintile 5 (least deprived)</b>	365	28.7	19745	17.9	10.7	20110	18.1
<b>Total</b>	1273	100.0	110090	100.0	0.0	111363	100.0

Tables 4 and 5 look at the characteristics of international students by IMD and by socioeconomic group. In each case, international development students were less likely to be from less advantaged backgrounds than the wider social sciences cohort. Table 4 identifies 27.4% of international development students as coming from the two most deprived quintiles, compared with 42.9% for all social sciences. For the two least deprived quintiles, this situation is reversed: 51.1% of international development students, compared with 36.8% for all social sciences.

Table 5 shows very similar results. Of the 1,131 development students for whom background is known, 63.6% came from the highest two socioeconomic groups, compared with 44.9% for all social sciences. At the other extreme, this situation is again reversed. 13.5% of development students had parents with occupations in the routine and semi-routine categories, compared with 23.8% for all social sciences.

**Table 5: Undergraduate international development students by parental occupation**

	International development students		All social sciences students		International development students	Total	
	N	%	N	%	% difference	N	%
<b>Higher managerial &amp; professional</b>	349	30.9	20660	20.4	10.4	21009	20.5
<b>Lower managerial &amp; professional</b>	370	32.7	24844	24.5	8.2	25214	24.8
<b>Intermediate</b>	151	13.4	15896	15.7	(2.4)	16047	15.7
<b>Small employers and own account</b>	70	6.2	9025	8.9	(2.7)	9095	8.9
<b>Lower supervisory &amp; technical</b>	39	3.4	6025	6.0	(2.5)	6064	5.9
<b>Semi-routine</b>	105	9.3	14641	14.5	(5.2)	14746	14.4
<b>Routine</b>	47	4.2	9414	9.3	(5.1)	9367	9.2
<b>Never worked/ long-term unemployed</b>	0	0.0	718	0.7	(0.7)	718	0.7
<b>Total</b>	1131	100.0	101223	100.0	0.0	102354	100.1

## Conclusions

The extent of socioeconomic imbalance varies between different factors, but the overall trend is strikingly consistent. International development students are more likely to have been educated outside the state sector, have parents who studied in higher education, come from a region regarded as less deprived, and come from the two socioeconomic groups ranked highest by parental occupation than their peers studying other social sciences courses. The difference between international development students and wider society is even more substantial. The 30.9% of international development students and 20.4% of social sciences students in the highest SEG category compare with 13.1% of the overall population, according to the Office for National Statistics.<sup>2</sup>

We need more evidence to establish the reasons for these differences. If we had the data for the full sample, it is possible that the picture would have changed, but given the statistical significance of the answers, and that only 10-15% of undergraduates were excluded, this is unlikely.

Other possible explanations are speculative: the possibility that middle-class students have more exposure to international issues, have engaged in gap years or volunteering, or

<sup>2</sup> [Industry and occupation, England and Wales: Census 2021, Office for National Statistics \(2022\)](#)

have more confidence to select less conventional subjects. In some cases, international development may not be the first choice of study.

We should not overestimate the importance of these results in isolation, since they relate to only one route into international development careers. When taken alongside wider evidence of overrepresentation of higher socioeconomic groups in the sector, however, these results represent an additional concern. Given the emphasis now placed on inclusion within the higher education sector, we believe that this concern should be shared by those who provide and market courses.

## Recommendations

1. Where this is not already being done, universities offering international development degree courses should conduct surveys to better understand the motivation of those applying to study them.
2. There should be greater collaboration between course providers and their universities' access and inclusion departments, to raise awareness of international development courses in target schools and colleges.
3. Course providers should consider how to make courses more accessible to students from underrepresented backgrounds – for example, ensuring that any travel to low and middle income countries or project work is not dependent on ability to pay.
4. Stronger links should be developed between employers in the international development sector and course providers, to build a stronger understanding of what undergraduate courses provide and their relevance to employment needs.
5. Further research should be conducted on the participation of underrepresented groups in postgraduate international development degree courses, including the extent to which tuition fees are a barrier to participation.

Several of these recommendations would best be advanced by discussions, benchmarking, and joint promotion of international development courses at national level. Diversity in Development aims to play a role in facilitating such activities.



# Diversity in Development

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