

FEWEEK

The DfE's blanket BAME strategy is cloth-eared.

The government's strategy to increase BAME participation in further and higher education ignores important differences between ethnic groups, argues Safaraz Ali

It is critical for all of us in the post-16 education sector to take action to widen BAME participation in apprenticeships across England, but it is only by recognising missed opportunities that we can move forward.

And while I'm very positive overall about the education secretary's attempts to increase the proportion of BAME young people in apprenticeships, there's much more to be done.

The government's BME 2020 vision set ambitious targets: to increase the proportion of apprenticeships taken up by those from BAME backgrounds by 20 per cent, and to increase those attending university by the same extent. This blanket approach is flawed by design. By lumping all the non-white ethnicities together under one target, we miss the differences in existing patterns and future needs for specific groups.

The proportion of BAME apprentices varies around the country, but low apprenticeship take-up is more significant among British Asians than in other BAME communities, where take-up is nearer the representative population.

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While the proportion of black/African/Caribbean/black British people participating in apprenticeships (3.4 per cent) is similar to the latest census (3.5 per cent), British Asians are significantly under-represented (4.2 per cent compared with 7.8 per cent). So rather than wholesale targets, government support needs focus.

We also need to appreciate that BAME population growth is skewed towards younger people. In Birmingham, more than one in three (36.5 per cent) British Asians and a similar proportion of black people (31 per cent) are under 15, compared with fewer than one in five white British (18.5 per cent).

With more children and fewer elderly people, the BAME population is growing faster than the population as a whole. It means that people from a BAME background need this kind of training more than the overall population.



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Each region of the country is different, and a targeted approach should account for these regional differences in ethnicity and population age, setting clear goals at a local. This could only be achieved by a collaborative approach between government, local and combined authorities and groups representing employers, colleges and training providers.

In terms of university growth targets, we are already on the other side of the coin, as disproportionately many more British Asians and black students go to university than those of white British origin. The government's blanket approach here is therefore not only unnecessary, but could actually be perceived as damaging the apprenticeship agenda.

If nothing is done to address this imbalance, British Asians will continue down the university route with very little thought towards the alternative, vocational pathway. Apprenticeships are still seen by many with an element of stigma, or as a second choice rather a career option.

We all realise there is a lot of work that needs doing, so roughly 18 months ago we launched the Asian Apprenticeship Awards, for which we have just held our second ceremony in Birmingham. This has only transpired with the support of a cross-section of organisations and employers, whose focus is on something practical that will make a positive difference.

In addition to our work with the Asian Apprenticeship Awards, we formed the BAME Apprenticeship Alliance, with the backing and support of prominent training providers and employers, to encourage peer working and further support and promote the apprenticeship diversity agenda.

The question that needs to be asked is this: how do we actively engage and change the mindset within BAME communities to ensure we have a skilled diverse workforce for future economic growth and to ensure a fully integrated society?

I believe this change in mindset needs a proactive approach that engages with the community, using positive role models and creates a buzz around apprenticeships, which will lead to more awareness and acceptance within the community itself.