

News release

Literature review looks at factors influencing the outcomes for Black, Asian and minority ethnic candidates in professional assessments

02 June 2023

The SRA commissioned the University of Exeter's Schools of Law and Business to look at what causes differences in outcomes for ethnic groups in professional assessments.

Our [annual education and training monitoring reports](https://media.sra.org.uk/sra/how-we-work/archive/reports/education-training-authorisation-monitoring-activity/) [<https://media.sra.org.uk/sra/how-we-work/archive/reports/education-training-authorisation-monitoring-activity/>] show a widely-acknowledged and persistent difference in legal qualification outcomes by ethnicity in the UK, often known as an 'attainment gap' or an 'awarding gap'. This pattern is also seen in school, further and higher education, as well as in other professional assessments and other countries.

The research, which will take until the end of 2023 to complete, should help to increase understanding about the factors that are driving this picture and to identify steps that could be taken to make a difference.

[The first phase of independent research, a systematic literature review](https://media.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/ethnicity-attainment-gap-legal-professional-assessments/) [<https://media.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/ethnicity-attainment-gap-legal-professional-assessments/>], has now been published and shows some of the potential multiple and complex causes of differential outcomes by ethnicity in professional assessments..

The review looked at over 250 UK and international academic, government and professional reports and articles. Researchers also consulted with 25 experts, including other academics, regulators and members of the profession.

The review shows that reasons for differential outcomes in professional assessments are wide and varied, with the key factors beyond the direct control of candidates themselves. These included that exam performance can be influenced by:

- The availability of support in education and work for different minority groups
- Perceived barriers and/or opportunities to entry and progression in a given profession, based on characteristics such as social background and ethnicity
- Positive or negative experiences at school, college or university
- Life circumstances, such as socio-economic status

It also found that existing research was limited in some areas. For instance, there was very little existing research into the variations in performance in legal professional assessments and the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic candidates in England and Wales.

Paul Philip, Chief Executive of the SRA said: 'We know that there is a longstanding and worrying pattern of different outcomes for candidates from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds in many professional qualifications, including those in law. We want to know why this is happening in law and develop a plan to address this, where we can. This independent research is the first step in better understanding what reasons lie behind the picture we are seeing.'

'The literature review is the starting point for that research. What is clear, even at this early stage, is that the factors influencing the outcomes for candidates are complex and beyond the control of the individuals themselves. Getting a greater understanding of the specific situation in the legal sector is an important next step in the research, so that we can help to consider what can be done by us and others, to make the difference we all want to see.'

Dr Greta Bosch, an Associate Professor at the University of Exeter's School of Law, said: 'This is the first systematic literature review to provide extensive cross-disciplinary analysis of differential outcomes in legal professional assessments. Its findings will allow us to identify a set of potential relationships between ethnicity and performance in legal professional assessments that we will go on to test in the next stage of our research. Our research will highlight the lived experiences of individuals alongside focusing on the views and experiences of senior legal educationalists involved with helping candidates prepare for legal qualifications, and senior individuals in law firms responsible for increasing diversity in their firms.'

The systematic literature review has helped inform the second and final phase of the University of Exeter's research. In addition to qualitative research examining lived experiences, the team will test specific predictions about causes of differential outcomes in assessments by examining survey-based data that they have gathered from current students hoping to qualify as solicitors.

The research is expected to be completed by the end of 2023, and the final report will be published in 2024.