# Breaking Barriers to Progression

**10 years of race equality insights on ambition, opportunity, and support that drive progression.**

June 2025

# Introduction

Business in the Community (BITC) launched the 'Race for Opportunity' campaign 30 years ago to promote race equality in the workplace. To mark this significant milestone, we have published a Leadership: 10-Year Trend Paper[1] and have updated our guidance for Executive Sponsors. We are now sharing over a decade's worth of research data and insights linked to employee ambition and experiences of progression at work. I want to highlight that a lack of access to opportunities is something that all employees, from all backgrounds, have identified as their biggest barrier to progression over the last decade. Employers must act now to increase transparency about the scale and range of available opportunities, so that employees with drive and aspiration remain inspired and encouraged to stay in their organisations rather than feel that they need to leave to progress.

**Sandra Kerr CBE, Race Equality Director, Business in the Community**

*"Employers must act now to increase transparency about the scale and range of available opportunities"*

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[1] Leadership: 10-Year Trend Paper

## Background

In 2009, BITC's Race to the Top research[2] found a disparity in the leadership at the top of organisations. While Black, Asian, Mixed Race, and other ethnically diverse people made up one in 10 of the British population, they represented just one in 15 of those in management positions. Following this insight, we embarked on further research to better understand some of the possible reasons behind this disparity, looking at the educational attainment of students from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

In 2010, BITC published Race into Higher Education, a report into educational ambitions. Using Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data from 2008/9, we found that 1 in 6 UK-domiciled students at university in the UK was from an ethnically diverse background.[3] This finding was a surprise to employers and provided evidence that a lack of higher educational qualifications was not the reason for the lack of representation at management and senior levels in the workplace. In 2022, the Office for Students report[4] found that ethnically diverse students made up 32%

(almost 1 in 3) of UK-domiciled students in higher education in the UK; 14.8% of undergraduate entrants in 2020-21 were from an Asian background, 10.3% were Black, 5.2% were from a mixed ethnic background, and 2.6% were from other ethnically diverse groups (this data is for UK-domiciled entrants only).

In the same year, BITC also published Aspiration and Frustration,[5] which explored fair access to the professions. This highlighted the obscure requirements to accessing the finance, media, politics, and legal sectors, creating a barrier to these highest paying industries. On the other hand, health, police, armed services, and education were transparent in access requirements. Recent research from University College London's (UCL) Inequalities in Access to Professional Careers report 2025,[6] examines longitudinal data and indicates that the disparity of access to the professions still exist, particularly for Black graduates.

We went on to publish other reports using the HESA and Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey data. Race into

[2] BITC Race to the Top
[3] Race into higher education: today's diverse generation into tomorrow's workforce
[4] Office for Students 2022

[5] Aspiration and Frustration
[6] UK employers less likely to recruit disadvantaged ethnic minority graduates - University College London

Work 2011[7] found that one year after graduation, over half (53%), of the White ethnic group had successfully secured full-time employment. In comparison, this was only true for 35% of graduates falling within the Bangladeshi ethnic group. This research highlighted that even with access to higher education, ethnically diverse students waited longer to access full time work than their White counterparts.

In 2011, BITC published the Race to Progress report,[8] which found that the desire to progress was higher for employees from Black African backgrounds than any other ethnic group in the UK.

Our 2012 Race and Recruitment report[9] highlighted the disparity in the labour market linked to job search and the recruitment industry.

And, although 57% of Black, Asian, Mixed Race, and other ethnically diverse candidates were invited to interviews through a recruitment agency, this compared to 73% of White candidates.
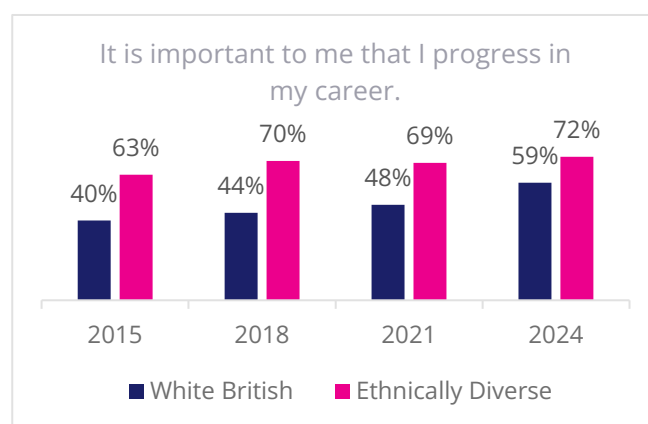
In 2014, BITC published Race at the Top[10] to find out if any progress had been made since the publication of Race to the Top in 2009. Race at the Top found the gap had actually widened, with the gap at management level increasing between 2007 and 2012. Whilst one in 10 of the UK workforce came from a Black, Asian, Mixed Race, or other ethnically diverse background, they held just one in 13 management roles and one in 16 senior management posts.

In 2015, BITC launched the Race at Work research series with YouGov. This survey ran in 2015, 2018, and 2021 and additional trends were captured in 2024 as part of the Leadership, Employees, and Procurement survey.

## Consistency of drive and ambition

Survey data collected over the last 10 years has found that Black, Asian, Mixed Race, and other ethnically diverse employees in the UK are more likely to say *It is important to me that I progress in my career.* This has increased from 63% in 2015 to 72% in

It is important to me that I progress in my career.

| Year | White British | Ethnically Diverse |
|------|---------------|--------------------|
| 2015 | 40% | 63% |
| 2018 | 44% | 70% |
| 2021 | 48% | 69% |
| 2024 | 59% | 72% |

■ White British  ■ Ethnically Diverse

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[7] Race into higher education – update June 2011. The race into work.
[8] Race to Progress 2011
[9] Race and Recruitment: Exposing the Barriers
[10] Race at the Top - Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

2024. We have also seen a significant increase in a positive response to this question from White British employees from 40% in 2015, to 59% in 2024.

Over the last decade, the retirement age has increased, and the cost of living has risen. These changes are likely to have impacted on individuals' desire to progress in the workplace – not only to fully utilise their skills and talents, but to receive the economic benefits and increased remuneration that comes with progression.

## 1 in 3 of all workers in the UK sees a lack of opportunities as the biggest barrier to career progression

All workers in the UK workplace, regardless of ethnic background, are more likely to cite a lack of opportunity as the biggest barrier to progression. Our recent examination of responses to the question '*which, if any, of the following do you feel are barriers to making the next step in your career progression?*' showed that when employees were provided with a list of challenges, the most common response across all ethnic groups was 'a lack of opportunities'. However, in every year surveyed, ethnically diverse workers were consistently more likely to state a lack of opportunities as their biggest barrier. To retain talented employees, it is important
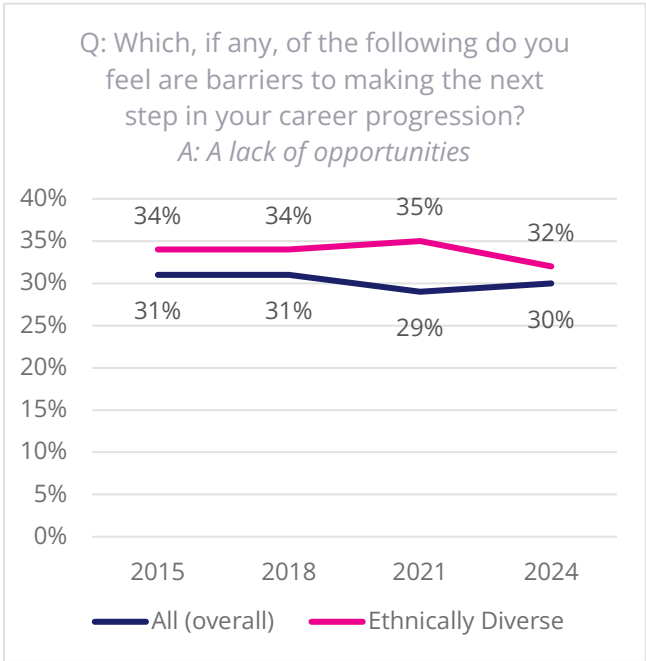


*Source: Race at Work Survey 2015, 2018, 2021; Leadership, Employment, and Procurement Survey 2024.*

that employers focus on fair and transparent access to opportunities for all who desire to progress within their organisations. Employers can ensure that this is a priority for line managers and HR professionals. They can use employee data to track engagement and to review fair access to training, stretch assignments, temporary promotions, and monitoring talent pipelines.

## Over a decade, we have seen an increased desire for mentorship across all ethnicity groups

For Black, Asian, Mixed Race, and other ethnically diverse employees, the desire for a mentor has increased from 1 in 3 (34%) in 2015 to 1 in 2 (54%) employees in 2024.

The desire for mentorship from White British employees has more than doubled over the last decade from just 18% in 2015 to 39% in 2024.

The BITC Cross Organisational Mentoring Circle programme[11] has engaged 96 employers and more than 4,000 employees since its launch in 2013.

## Increased desire for sponsorship

Sponsorship is where a senior leader in an organisation actively advocates to progress talented employees in their careers. The sponsor is proactive, talks to other leaders about employee potential, and helps to identify and create opportunities for progression at work. Sponsorship can help to ensure the recognition and reward for achievements is fairly and accurately attributed.[12]

We have seen a significant increase in the desire for sponsorship from ethnically diverse workers over the last 10 years, rising from 27% in 2015 to 48% in 2024. For White British employees, this has increased from 13% answering 'yes' in 2015 to 28% answering 'yes' in 2024.

**Q: Would you like to have a mentor?**
*A: Yes*
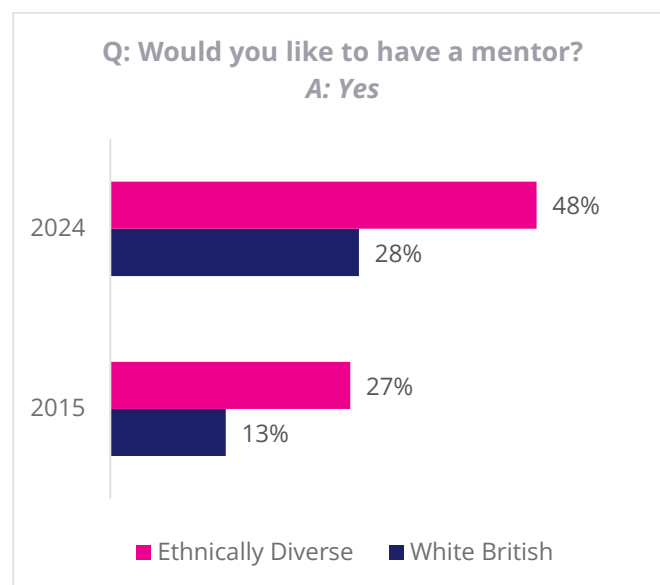


*Source: Race at Work Survey 2015; Leadership, Employment, and Procurement Survey 2024.*

While some employers enable sponsorship through formal programmes, trends over the last decade highlight an increasing demand from employees for this kind of support. Employers should seek to embed sponsorship behaviours into line management and inclusive leadership guidance.

## Increasing transparency through reviewing employee data and measuring progress

Increasing transparency of the opportunities for an uplift in pay, income, and reward can be an incentive for people to develop and enhance their skills and

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[11] Cross-organisational Mentoring Circles

[12] Mentorship, sponsorship and coaching framework 2025

seize opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities at work.

*This indicates that more than 50% of large employers in the UK can use this data to analyse their ethnicity pay gaps.*

We found in the BITC Leadership, Employment, and Procurement 2024 survey that 54% of employees working in large organisations said that their employers were capturing the ethnicity data of their employees at different levels in the organisation.

This is why it is right for the Government to implement mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting, in alignment with gender pay gap reporting. This will ensure we accelerate the progress needed to ensure that employees are working at the right level in their organisations and receiving fair and proper pay.

A strategic plan to narrow the ethnicity and disability pay gap in an organisation will also be a potential attraction and competitive aspect for organisations as highly skilled students in higher education decide where they want to work.

## Networking

In 2024, we found that 71% of all employees from all backgrounds in the workplace believe that networking is important when thinking about their career progression. However, it was significantly higher for ethnically diverse people (82%).

Employee resource groups (ERGs) and mentoring circles provide valuable opportunities for colleagues across the organisation to connect. Encouraging collaboration and cross-team working is another way to broaden employee engagement and encourage leaders to support, inspire, and open doors to their networks. This gives talented and ambitious employees access to stretch opportunities to expand their portfolio of experience and expertise.[13]

## Increasing opportunities for all

Employers must broaden access to opportunities for all employees and use data to track and monitor progress. This ensures that opportunities can be fairly accessed by all employees, regardless of their ethnicity, sex, age, or any other characteristic.

[13] Mentoring, sponsorship and coaching framework 2025

## Encouraging skills development and opportunities through employee volunteering

Our recently published Diverse and Inclusive Supply Chain report14 revealed that *47% of employees in large businesses said that their organisation encourages them to use their skills to support small organisations on a voluntary basis.*

However, 37% reported that their organisation does not. There is a great opportunity for employers to increase and widen access to opportunities for development through encouraging their employees to volunteer. Employers can formally recognise the skills and competencies as they are acquired and demonstrated as part of employee volunteering activities.



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[14] Diverse and Inclusive Supply Chain Insights Report

# CALLS TO ACTION

There are several actions that employers can take to help employees gain the skills and experiences that will facilitate their career progression. From the insight we have gathered, here are three calls to action:

### 1. Implement progression planning for young people and entry level workers

Co-create career plans that include access to mentorship, sponsorship, and coaching at key milestones. This will be of specific benefit to young people entering the workplace. Identify skills gaps and create plans to address them, ensuring individuals receive constructive feedback and coaching sessions. This will help employees navigate the various progression routes within your organisation. [See BITC How-To Guide Mentorship, Sponsorship, and Coaching Framework]

### 2. Create opportunities for employees to expand their professional networks

Explore creative ways to enable great connections across the organisation. Support employee networks and resource groups to run events and enable project working across the organisation. Take a co-creation and consultation approach to introducing new policies and processes in the workplace. Encourage employees to develop and share their skills through volunteering. [See BITC Getting Started with Skills-Based Volunteering Toolkit]

### 3. Use data to increase transparency and fair access to opportunities for all

Employers can increase transparency by creating dashboards and trend data which show that their organisations offer fair access to training, development opportunities, secondments, temporary promotions, stretch assignments, and key projects. Engage internal progression sponsors to ensure that this happens and/or engage an employee advisory group to track progress and increase transparency.

**Business in the Community**

Business in the Community is the UK's largest and most influential responsible business network dedicated to building a fairer and greener world together, supported by His Majesty the King for over 40 years. We inspire, engage and challenge purposeful leaders to take practical action to mobilise their collective strength as a force for good in society.