# UK universities must confront accent bias marginalising Black international students



Accent bias in UK universities is a pressing yet often overlooked issue that continues to marginalise Black international students. Consider the scenario of a Nigerian student hesitant to contribute to a seminar, only to face ridicule for his accent. Despite the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion, incidents like this reveal a pervasive problem—many Black international students endure similar experiences that hinder their academic and social integration.

At its core, accent bias intersects with race, nationality, and class, creating a complex tapestry of discrimination that these students navigate daily. The UK’s 2010 Equality Act does not explicitly cover language and accent, leaving accent bias uncheckable. This vulnerability is compounded for Black students; their accents signal foreignness while their racial identities mark them as “other.” The hierarchy of accents in the UK privileges Standard Southern British English (SSBE), or received pronunciation, as the norm. Accents perceived as “non-standard”—including West African, Caribbean, or African American variants—are often devalued, leading to wrongful assumptions about intelligence or articulation.

The effects of this bias extend far beyond social discomfort. Many Black international students report feeling hyper-aware of their speech, often adopting a “muted voice” strategy to avoid ridicule. Experiences of explicit bias—being laughed at or corrected—leave emotional scars, particularly during the crucial early weeks at university. These initial encounters may instil feelings of anxiety and isolation, impacting mental health and disrupting students' integration into the academic community.

The implications of this bias are significant; students who fear speaking up risk missing out on important academic interactions and networking opportunities. Research indicates that up to 30% of university students have faced mockery or negative treatment because of their accents, a statistic that underscores a wider societal issue of equity in education. Furthermore, many Black international students worry that their accents will adversely affect their future career prospects, reinforcing the barriers already posed by systemic inequalities.

To tackle this entrenched issue, universities must take meaningful action. The introduction of accent equality statements, like those pioneered by the University of Leeds, sets a vital precedent, signalling respect for all accents. Staff and student training initiatives should raise awareness of the impact of accent bias, especially as it intersects with race and international status. Institutions need to foster safe reporting mechanisms for linguistic discrimination, allowing students to share their experiences without fear of repercussions.

Additionally, educational curricula should embrace linguistic diversity, challenging the perception of neutral English accents as the only standard. Celebrating global accents and including discussions about linguistic identity in various subjects will enrich the academic environment. Universities should also showcase cultural diversity through events that highlight the significance of linguistic variation.

Ultimately, the goal must be for educators and assessment processes to shift focus from accent to content. Academic contributions should be evaluated on insight and critical engagement, rather than the conforming to a specific accent.

Addressing accent bias is not merely an optional enhancement of university culture; it is a fundamental necessity for creating truly inclusive spaces where every voice is welcomed and valued. By confronting this "last acceptable form of discrimination," UK higher education can take significant strides towards ensuring that all students feel a profound sense of belonging, regardless of their linguistic heritage. The courage to challenge these biases and redefine institutional norms will pave the way for a more equitable and diverse academic landscape.

Patrice Seuwou, an associate professor of learning and teaching and director of the Centre for the Advancement of Racial Equality at the University of Northampton, advocates for these changes. As universities commit to systemic action and cultural transformation, they can foster an environment where all students, especially those who have been historically marginalised, can thrive in their academic journeys.

**Reference Map**

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
2. Paragraphs 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8
3. Paragraphs 1, 5, 6, 7
4. Paragraphs 1, 3, 4, 6
5. Paragraphs 2, 3, 5
6. Paragraph 5
7. Paragraphs 3, 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/tackling-accent-bias-last-acceptable-form-discrimination> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/tackling-accent-bias-last-acceptable-form-discrimination> - This article discusses the pervasive issue of accent bias in UK universities, particularly affecting Black international students. It highlights how accents intersect with race, nationality, and class to marginalize these students, leading to feelings of exclusion and alienation. The piece emphasizes the need for universities to implement measures such as accent equality statements, staff training, and support systems to address this form of discrimination and foster inclusivity.
3. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/04/17/tackling-accent-bias-in-higher-education-could-improve-students-success-sense-of-belonging-and-wellbeing/> - This article explores the impact of accent bias in UK higher education, revealing that 30% of university students report having their accent mocked and 33% fear it may affect their future success. It emphasizes the need for universities to raise awareness, adopt good practice statements on linguistic diversity, and create safe reporting mechanisms to address accent-based inequalities and improve students' sense of belonging and wellbeing.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/oct/24/its-had-a-lasting-impact-students-on-being-bullied-over-their-accents> - This article features personal accounts from students who have experienced bullying and discrimination due to their accents in university settings. It highlights how such experiences lead to feelings of exclusion, imposter syndrome, and a diminished sense of belonging, underscoring the need for universities to address accent bias and promote inclusivity.
5. <https://www.latl.leeds.ac.uk/news/tackling-accent-bias-could-improve-students-sense-of-belonging-in-he/> - This article reports on research from the University of Leeds indicating that accent discrimination is widespread at UK Russell Group universities. It reveals that 41% of university students from the North of England express concern that their accent may affect their future success. The research suggests that addressing accent bias could improve students' wellbeing and sense of belonging.
6. <https://www.latl.leeds.ac.uk/research-satellites/embracing-linguistic-diversity/> - This initiative at the University of Leeds aims to better understand linguistic diversity and inequalities. It focuses on developing strategies to celebrate linguistic diversity and minimize language-based prejudices and discrimination within the university context, promoting inclusivity and respect for all accents.
7. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/one-three-uk-university-students-teased-over-accent> - This article reports that 30% of university students have been teased or singled out on campus due to their accent, and 33% fear it may hold them back in the future. It highlights that such experiences are particularly prevalent among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and certain regions, emphasizing the need for universities to address accent bias to ensure equal opportunities.