# Accent bias hinders belonging and mental health for Black international students in UK universities



In contemporary UK higher education, the issue of accent bias has emerged as a significant, yet frequently overlooked, form of discrimination, impacting many Black international students. These students often face subtle, pervasive challenges that can lead to diminished academic participation and a decreased sense of belonging within university communities. For instance, a Nigerian student may feel hesitant to contribute in a seminar, only to be met with laughter at his accent—a disheartening experience that drives him into silence.

Despite public declarations of inclusivity from universities, accent bias often escapes adequate scrutiny, particularly when it intersects with race, nationality, and class. Unfortunately, language and accent are not explicitly protected under the UK’s 2010 Equality Act, making it easier for such biases to persist unchecked. Research indicates that accents perceived as “non-standard,” including those from West African and Caribbean backgrounds, are often seen as inferior, linking them to stereotypes of lower intelligence and diminishing the speaker's credibility.

Black international students thus bear a unique trifecta of disadvantages: their accents mark them as “foreign,” their race sets them apart, and their status as international students exacerbates feelings of exclusion. This intersectional discrimination manifests not only through explicit bias—such as being corrected for one’s speech or told to “tone it down”—but also through more insidious means, such as internalising a fear of speaking in academic settings. Many students report adopting a “muted voice” strategy, opting for silence rather than risking misunderstanding or mockery. Such experiences can severely undermine students’ confidence during crucial transition periods at university, leaving emotional scars and fostering a sense of alienation.

The mental health ramifications of this bias are profound. Anxiety, social isolation, and depression are common among those who feel unwelcome due to their accent. This mental toll compounds the broader pressures of university life and reinforces an unwelcome message: that their voices are not valued. The implications extend beyond emotional well-being, as students who avoid participation may miss crucial academic engagement and networking opportunities, ultimately stunting their professional development. A study from the University of Queensland further affirms these experiences, revealing that individuals with non-standard accents face discrimination not only in academic settings but also during job interviews, particularly affecting women from minority groups. This underscores the far-reaching consequences of accent bias—one that can thwart opportunities for many.

While the issue may seem entrenched, promising initiatives are beginning to emerge. Institutions such as the University of Leeds have embarked on strategies to combat accent bias by enhancing awareness and inclusivity within their academic environments. Their research suggests that addressing this bias can significantly improve the sense of belonging among students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds. Similar initiatives at the University of Edinburgh aim to raise consciousness around linguistic diversity by hosting events that promote inclusivity. These efforts signal a growing recognition that accent discrimination not only hampers individual experiences but also undermines the academic mission of inclusivity.

A pathway forward necessitates systemic change within universities. Institutions should develop clear accent equality statements and provide robust training to educate staff and students about the nuances and challenges of accent bias. Establishing reporting mechanisms for instances of linguistic discrimination can create safe spaces for students to voice their experiences. Moreover, embedding discussions of linguistic diversity within academic curricula is vital, ensuring that students learn to challenge the dominance of conventional English accents while appreciating a broader spectrum of global accents.

As universities increasingly acknowledge the importance of linguistic diversity, they can create an environment where all voices are heard and valued. This approach not only enhances student well-being but contributes to a richer, more inclusive academic culture. Educators too have a role to play; assessments should focus on the quality of ideas presented rather than conformity to a specific accent, encouraging a diverse range of perspectives in scholarly discourse.

Confronting the issue of accent bias—dubbed by some as the “last acceptable form of discrimination”—is essential for fostering inclusive academic environments. The call for action is not merely a matter of equity but a commitment to ensuring that every individual feels a genuine sense of belonging in the educational landscape. Addressing these disparities is critical for UK higher education to move towards a more equitable future, where all students can thrive academically and socially.

Patrice Seuwou, an advocate for equality within educational contexts, succinctly argues that tackling accent bias is essential in building inclusive universities that truly celebrate diversity in all its forms.

### Reference Map

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

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.uq.edu.au/news/article/2022/11/uq-research-reveals-accent-discrimination-hiring> - A study by The University of Queensland found that individuals with 'non-standard' accents face discrimination in job interviews, particularly women from minority groups. The research highlights the prevalence of accent bias in hiring processes and its impact on employment opportunities for those with diverse accents.
3. <https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/news/article/2753/tackling-accent-bias-could-improve-students-sense-of-belonging-in-higher-education-institutions> - Research from the University of Leeds indicates that addressing accent bias in universities can enhance students' sense of belonging and well-being. The study reveals that accent discrimination is widespread, especially among students from the North of England, and suggests that universities should implement strategies to combat this issue.
4. <https://ppls.ed.ac.uk/linguistics-and-english-language/news/tackling-accent-bias-at-an-elite-university> - The University of Edinburgh's School of Philosophy, Psychology, and Language Sciences has initiated efforts to tackle accent bias through events like 'Speaking Out: Tackling accent bias at an elite university.' These initiatives aim to raise awareness and promote inclusivity regarding linguistic diversity within academic settings.
5. <https://www.circe-project.eu/accentism-in-education/> - The CIRCE Project focuses on accentism in education, emphasizing the detrimental effects of accent discrimination on students' motivation and self-esteem. The project aims to raise awareness and develop resources to promote tolerance towards accent variation in educational environments.
6. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/snobbery-against-regional-accents-hurting-university-teaching> - An opinion piece in Times Higher Education discusses how prejudice against regional and foreign accents negatively impacts university teaching. It highlights the need for inclusive curricula that embrace linguistic diversity to foster a more inclusive learning environment.
7. <https://www.chicagobooth.edu/research/rustandy/stories/sils-hidden-bias-behind-judging-people-by-how-they-talk> - Research from the University of Chicago's Rustandy Center explores how language and accent serve as social signifiers, affecting perceptions of competence and intelligence. The study underscores the importance of addressing hidden biases related to how people speak in educational and professional contexts.