

Written evidence submitted by Professor Peter Edwards

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Inorganic Chemistry

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Education Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Committee Members,

Education Committee Enquiry Education and Attainment of White Working-Class Boys

Colleagues will be aware that I have previously sent material to the Committee over the past months, but in the interests of the forthcoming meeting, I repeat some of it here, and also present some recent developments.

I hope that my own experiences as an elected Member of The Royal Society of Chemistry Inclusion and Diversity Committee may be of some assistance to the Committee.

There can now be absolutely no question about the under-achievement of White Working-Class Children...Boys in particular. The economic shock of the Covid crisis – and potentially the (ever-) emerging Brexit situation – brings an urgent need for new thinking and new actions.

My own views – driven by my experiences over the past 2+ years in researching this problem are:

- (1) The plight of White Working-Class Boys is being largely ignored;
- (2) White Boys from poorer backgrounds are faring worse educationally than any other race or ethnicity. This has an important impact upon their future employment and development as well as national issues relating to the future socio-economic, socio-political and indeed social fabric of the UK (see (6) below);
- (3) The subject of the plight of (underprivileged) White Working-Class Boys is still –without question – a taboo subject in many areas of our national government and particularly so in our Higher Education institutions. This subject must now be confronted Head-On and possible solutions advanced;

- (4) A national initiative to address the education, under attainment and under-performance of young White Boys from lower-socio-economic backgrounds is urgently needed;
- (5) An attractive possibility for such an initiative is the emerging “Selective 6th Form” model to improve education, with a major focus on prioritising children from low-income backgrounds (this is where the current Grammar School model simply is not working – as the Committee may have seen recently in *The Times* article;
- (6) I stress – in the strongest possible terms – from my own experience in the areas where I grew up in inner-city Liverpool, and through discussions with my extended family, there will be grave socio-economic and socio-political consequences if this large cohort of young people in the UK feel, and see that they are being left-behind and not afforded the sort of ‘Positive actions’, and obvious advantages, that other racial and ethnic groups now have in the name of inclusion, diversity and equality. This will surely lead to the disturbing narrative of a vicious spiral downwards. This is an utterly critical point; we must not only utilise the huge untapped potential there must surely be in this group of White Working-Class Boys, but also recognise the very real threat of the destabilisation of the very fabric of the country;
- (7) I have particular concerns in relation to STEM subjects. My own focus has been in the future of Chemistry in the UK. The stark facts for my subject are (i) The number of British undergraduate students taking Chemistry is on the slide – and has been for a number of years; (ii) Declining interest in Chemistry matters, if the UK wishes to stay competitive in a global industry worth in the region of (at least) £50 billion each year to the UK economy; (iii) While it is nice to have an international workforce, the UK must ensure it retains – and develops – its expertise in Chemistry (and other STEM subjects).

Some additional Points:

- **A Comment about Accessing and Gathering the Data**

It strikes me that the Free School Meal (FSM) status of young people is the acknowledged indicator of disadvantage – whatever race and ethnicity. I have encountered numerous difficulties, throughout, in actually trying to retrieve such data for White Working-Class Children entering university. This came to the fore when I enquired from Oxford University the statistics for the constitution of the incoming cohort of undergraduates. Specifically, I asked about the statistics of the much-publicised increase in the recent BAME intake at Oxford. Remarkably, it turns out that only *ca.* 25 percent of the BAME intake at Oxford are this year from ACORN 4/5 categories (another recognised indicator of disadvantaged status). Re the issue of the number of the Oxford intake having FSM, I was told that these data were not possible to easily extract.

As noted, I am an elected member of the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) Inclusion & Diversity Committee (I&DC). We are now due to embark on a study of the situation with regards to White Working-Class young people in terms of the undergraduate Chemistry intake and progression to Higher Degrees, etc., in the UK.

The corresponding BAME data for undergraduate students in UK Chemistry departments has recently been gathered by the RSC I&DC and will shortly have a high public profile. Thus, in our RSC Committee, we now have statistics which show that BAME Boys and Girls have an excellent record for actually entering university as undergraduates to read Chemistry, but then a correspondingly extremely bad record for progressing to PhD’s and beyond...it’s called the “Leaky pipeline”. We are to investigate this.

Thus, it seems clear to me from my own data gathering, that White disadvantaged young people are simply not even entering the “Leaky pipeline” for undergraduate Chemistry courses in this country. We are to look into this urgently. I’ll bet similar statistics await examination across most (all?) of the STEM subjects in the UK.

- **On Attitudes**

I have experienced a pattern throughout that closely mirrors that of the Honourable Member, Ben Bradley. (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-02-12/debates/7649792B-6CB3-48A9-872A-6CB6F2B9DCE8/EducationAndAttainmentOfWhiteWorking-ClassBoys>).

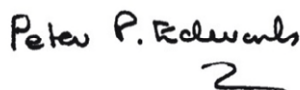
First, one always sees / hears a ‘nodding’ (!) acknowledgement – I would say sometimes a grudging acknowledgement – of the ‘White Working-Class Boys’ problem. But, invariably that’s as far as it goes.

Second, – and remarkably – the clear view that inevitably arises is that my enquiries / initiatives appear to be taken to be as a Far-Right political stance! I have found this to be most prevalent in Higher Education circles. I have even experienced the view that White Working Class under-achievement has nothing to do with disadvantage and inequality in our society – surely the overriding, national issue – but rather has its origins in a lack of those young people’s ‘sense of themselves’ and self-esteem; clearly a racial stereotype.

Thus, in conclusion, it is my experience that the plight of White Working-Class Children – and White Working-Class Boys in particular – is without question a ‘Taboo subject’. Our society is ignoring, at its peril, these young people from unquestionably disadvantaged backgrounds.

If I can help in any way, please do contact me.

Best regards,

Handwritten signature of Peter P. Edwards in black ink, with a stylized flourish at the end.

Peter P. Edwards FRS ML
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Einstein Professor of the Chinese Academy of Sciences

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