

**The Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic  
Academics: Multiple Identities and Career Progression**

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# The Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Academics: Multiple Identities and Career Progression Executive Summary

This report explores the experiences of Black and minority ethnic (BME)<sup>1</sup> academics in the UK, the benefits of an ethnically diverse staff body, and the factors affecting the inclusion of BME academics and their career progression.

The views of thirty five BME academics are drawn on for this study. The BME academics who participated were from a diverse range of backgrounds; they held positions of lecturer, senior lecturer, reader, professor, head of department, and research fellow at a range of levels and were from different academic disciplines. They included women and men and those from Asian, Black, mixed heritage and other ethnic origins<sup>2</sup> and were from of UK as well as non-UK origin. The age range of respondents varied from under 30 to 60.

The study found that BME academics no longer, with individual exceptions, find many overt experiences of racial discrimination. They are more likely to talk about day-to-day differences, related to their ethnicity, which are subtle and difficult to identify, but which result in differential treatment. Key findings are:

- The value of having BME staff can go unrecognised in the UK higher education system. They often provide informal support for BME students. Students can be attracted to a university and the specific department *because of* the fact that there are BME staff in the department. However, as this appears to be largely unrecognised by senior staff/heads of department and by the institution more widely, it can result in an undue burden on BME staff as they spend time with BME students over and above other duties. Support for BME students, it was noted by some respondents, was an emerging need. This included those who felt the need for more BME role models, and those who were entering under widening participation schemes.
- Many respondents felt that the work of White academics, and White male academics in particular, is profiled and celebrated in institutions, rather than that of BME staff. When BME staff are included in this way there is a positive impact for the individual and for the institution.
- BME staff are generally under-represented at senior levels in UK universities. Having a more diverse and aware group of senior staff would have an impact on the way decisions are made, including decisions about staff progression and promotion. It was felt by several respondents that a homogeneous group in senior posts can lead to decisions about what constitutes a credible academic being based on a narrow viewpoint rather than being familiar with and acknowledging diverse approaches. The Research Excellence Framework<sup>3</sup> (REF) process is an example where this was felt to be important.

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<sup>1</sup> In this research the term 'Black and minority ethnic (BME)' includes those from Asian, Black or mixed ethnic heritage.

<sup>2</sup> Respondents self-identified their ethnicity and these grouped into Asian included principally Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Sri Lankan, East African Asian, British Asian and Taiwanese. Black included Black African, Black African Caribbean and Black British; mixed heritage included Asian and White; Black African, or Black and White; other included Indonesian.

<sup>3</sup> The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. In 2014, higher education institutions will be assessed on the 'excellence' of their research based on a process of expert review.

- Several BME academics raised the issue of a lack of trust in them, compared to the trust invested in White colleagues. This manifests itself in, for example, White staff questioning the credibility of a BME academic. BME academics talked about being over-scrutinised, and in these instances felt they had little or no support from other colleagues.
- There were contrasting views on the REF and how it operates to assess academic outputs. Some BME staff welcomed the REF – describing it as ‘neutralising ethnicity’. A possible negative element to the REF was also identified by respondents and one which may disproportionately affected BME academics because, although it was understood that the stated intention was that articles from all sections of the academic community would be considered for the REF, some respondents doubted that this was in fact the case, and therefore, for some, their belief in the credibility of the system was undermined.
- Several respondents reported they felt students sometimes responded in a discriminatory way to BME staff, taken aback when faced with a BME lecturer and questioning their credibility. In turn, White colleagues could be unsupportive, possibly inadvertently, and showed bias which in many cases may well be unconscious. This is an important issue particularly when student feedback has the potential to affect individual performance appraisals.
- There is an acknowledged ethnicity pay gap in the higher education sector, in favour of White academics (ECU, 2012). Some BME academics reported that they suspected they had been appointed on a lower starting salary than White colleagues.
- Some of the respondents doubted that BME academics progressed at the same rate as White colleagues, and perceived that they needed to work harder compared to their White colleagues, and to meet higher thresholds for promotion.
- BME respondents reported feeling ‘outsiders’ in their own university, whilst not in the sector as a whole. This feeling of being an ‘outsider’ resulted in part from experiences of subtle exclusion, and the need to develop ways of interacting in culturally specific ways in order to progress, for example by adapting their communication style to be more accepted by their colleagues.
- Although there are many commonalities of experience amongst BME academics, it is important to recognise that ‘BME’ academics are not a homogenous group and there are various factors which affect an individual’s experiences. These include gender, class, nationality, age, religion, culture and other factors such as communication style.
- Overall there was extensive and enthusiastic support for mentoring systems, with several positive experiences of career progression.

Most if not all higher education institutions state a commitment to equality and diversity through their policies. However, there is limited evidence of the impact of the policies which are in place and without comprehensive programmes of targeted action and more diverse staff profile at senior levels, it is unclear when and if change will take place.

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# **The Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Academics: Multiple Identities and Career Progression**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This report explores the experiences of Black and minority ethnic (BME)<sup>4</sup> academics in the UK, the benefits of an ethnically diversity staff body, and the factors affecting the inclusion of BME academics and their career progression.

Similar to several other fields of work, there is a higher percentage of BME staff at lower grades in the higher education sector compared to their representation at senior levels – this is often referred to as the ‘glass ceiling’, a term also used with reference to the low percentage of female staff at senior positions (Newman, 2008; Bagilhole, 2009; Davies, 2011). Although in the higher education sector there are examples of BME academics in senior positions, there remains a picture of a lower percentage of BME staff of UK nationality and of non-UK nationality in senior posts compared to their overall representation. Of academic staff of UK nationality who are senior managers, 3.9 per cent are of BME origin, compared to 7.5 per cent of staff at other academic levels. Of academic staff of non-UK nationality at senior management level, 10.2 per cent are of BME origin compared to 28 per cent of academic staff at other academic levels (ECU, 2012, p.98).

This report examines the factors considered by BME staff to be important in contributing to successful careers in higher education. It also covers aspects of BME academic experience which are considered to be negative and have the effect of excluding or contributing to their career progression in the university sector. The report makes recommendations to address the negative aspects of BME experience and to support the career progression of these groups.

### **1.1 The context**

There are common recurring themes which emerge from studies of the experiences of entry and progression of BME people in a wide range of different employment sectors. These include issues relating to the individual, for example individual prejudices and behaviours, and to organisational culture and the systems in place which can serve to discriminate or exclude those from BME backgrounds (Macpherson, 1999; Esmail, 2004).

Research into racial inequality and discrimination in the Education sector over the last few decades has included concern about the inclusion and progression of BME staff. A 2002 report highlighted under-representation of BME staff as principals of Further Education Colleges (Commission for Black Staff in Further Education, 2002). It found that BME staff were more likely than White staff to report feeling blocked in their career progression and promotion. In addition, it highlighted experiences of racism and discrimination and a lack of promotion opportunities for BME staff (Commission for Black Staff in Further Education, 2002, p.81).

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<sup>4</sup> In this research the term ‘Black and minority ethnic (BME)’ refers to those from Asian, Black or mixed ethnic heritage backgrounds.

Research carried out by Deem and Morley (2006) focused on the imbalance between the equality of staff and teachers. They argue that the increased focus on student equality whilst ignoring staff equality can be attributed to a focus on the student as a consumer and the accompanying fear of litigation by universities. Equality for staff and students is generally addressed through separate policies which compete for funding and resources, resulting in equality for students often taking priority.

Research suggests that BME academic staff who are as qualified as their White counterparts are often overlooked for promotions or are not encouraged to apply for senior positions (ECU, 2011). As acknowledged above, the concept of a 'glass ceiling', which refers to the simultaneous visibility and apparent accessibility of senior level posts representing subtle barriers to progression, is widely acknowledged in relation to women and their lack of progression to senior levels in a range of sectors (Bagilhole, 2009; Davies, 2011, ECU, 2012). The term 'ivory ceiling' has been used to refer to a similar situation for BME staff in academia (Sanders, 2005). Several articles have appeared in the Times Higher Education (THE) relating to concerns about the lack of opportunities for BME academics to progress the UK university sector (Bunting, 2004; Sanders, 2005). These follow on from earlier studies outlining the under-representation and disadvantage of BME staff in the academic labour force. Carter *et al* (1999) and Fenton *et al* (2000) explored the experiences of BME staff, as well as their under-representation, and found evidence of discrimination, with 18 per cent of BME British staff in the study reporting discrimination in gaining promotion (Carter *et al*, 1999, p.38). More recent reports have highlighted the continuing under-representation of BME staff in higher education and demonstrate that the under-representation is particularly evident in senior positions (ECU, 2009; UCU, 2012).

Research has also suggested that work on diversity in higher education has primarily become a matter of documentation, audits and bureaucratic paper trails, and that, although these are important in that they can expose 'the gap between words, images and deeds' (Ahmed, 2007, p.607), there is a need to ensure that they lead to action (Ahmed, 2007; Pilkington, 2011). Common factors behind the unsuccessful implementation of initiatives to date have been 'the absence of resources and authority for the initiative, and sometimes fatigue and apathy towards new initiatives where previous staff experiences tend to be of unsuccessful initiatives that achieved neither substance nor sustainability' (ECU, 2011, pp.46-47). Deem and Morley's research demonstrates similar observations which include a shift from "redistributive equality" policies to a generic form of equality focused on difference (Deem and Morley, 2006).

BME academics who enter and progress in traditionally White 'space' have been described as 'space invaders' and 'out of place', for example as MPs (Puwar, 2004) or architects or engineers (CABE, 2005), as well as academics (Puwar, 2004). This can lead to a disorientation of Whiteness, resulting in what Puwar refers to as a 'double-take'... occurring 'because authority is sedimented and naturalised in white bodies' (Puwar, 2001, p.659). According to Puwar, 'While they now exist on the inside, they still do not have an undisputed right to occupy the space' (Puwar, 2004, p.1) and there is some evidence to suggest that staff from BME groups experience 'hyper-surveillance' (Pilkington, 2013, p.232). Anecdotal evidence reported in the THE refers to resentment

from White colleagues towards BME academics who have been promoted to a senior level (Bunting, 2004).

According to Puwar, the mere presence of BME staff will not in itself bring about change. In addition, she argues that 'it is commonly assumed that the mere presence of more black bodies will create diverse organisations. This is clearly not the case, diversity can only be measured by looking at the conditions of their existence' (Puwar, 2001, p.668). Building social and cultural capital in order to progress is relevant across many areas of employment. Social capital has been described as 'a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002, cited in Puwar, 2004, p.122), which includes 'largely intangible, unquantifiable resources such as informal networks' (Goulbourne, 2006, p.239). Those in positions of power and privilege, 'have utilized a variety of political, cultural, and economic assets, including networks and social capital, to secure privileged labour market outcomes in the West' and these 'have to be addressed in any analysis of labour market discrimination' (Ruwanpura, 2008, p.80).

This connection of people 'through intermediate social structures – webs of association and shared understandings of how to behave' (Halpern, 2005, p.3) is a necessity and of particular relevance to BME academics who continue to be under-represented in the higher education sector. There is a plethora of research which has highlighted the importance of mentoring and networking in order to progress to senior positions (CABE 2005; Giscombe and Mattis, 2002, cited in Kalra *et al* 2009, p.109). Fenton *et al* (2000, para 18.3) identify networks as 'critical to academic careers'. However, 'what is social capital in one social context may not be social capital in another context' (Goulbourne, 2006, pp. 239-240), making it harder for BME academics to access predominantly White middle class, male networks in higher education.

To achieve success, 'diversity efforts' need to have a two-pronged approach, 'classified into those designed to support individuals within the system and those that are designed to change organisational culture' (Kalra *et al*, 2009, p.11). Esmail argues that there is little action regarding the representation of BME staff at senior levels, 'exhortations and intentions abound but action is virtually non-existent' (Esmail, 2004, p.1449). Chan argues that institutional racism in higher education is 'transmitted in routine practices that form part of the normal functions of an organisation' and that 'racist stereotyping and negative assumptions about the abilities of BME people are allowed to influence judgement and procedural outcomes' (Chan, 2005, p.229), thus resulting in differential treatment and disadvantage. Other research (Jones 2006, p.156) has identified an unfair burden on BME academics, who are expected to take on the responsibility for equality and diversity in their departments.

The next section sets out a description of the sample of academics who participated in the research.

## **1.2 The sample**

A total of thirty five academics participated in the study. Interviews were carried out during the period 2009-2013. The BME academics who participated in the

research were from a diverse range of backgrounds. They held positions of lecturer, senior lecturer, reader, professor, head of department, and research fellow (at a range of levels) in different academic disciplines. They included women and men and those from Asian, Black, mixed heritage and other ethnic origin and they were of UK nationality and of non-UK nationality. The age range of respondents varied from 30 to 60.

**Table 1: The sample (35 interviews)**

<b>Job type</b>	Lecturer	17% (6)
	Senior lecturer	31% (11)
	Reader	9% (3)
	Professor	31% (11)
	Research Fellow	11% (4)
<b>Gender</b>	Female	60% (21)
	Male	40% (14)
<b>Ethnic origin</b>	Asian	57% (20)
	Black	20% (7)
	Black and White mixed heritage	20% (7)
	Other	3% (1)
<b>Age group</b>	30 and under	3% (1)
	31-40	29% (10)
	41-50	43% (15)
	51 and over	26% (9)
<b>Nationality</b>	UK	69% (24)
	Non-UK	31% (11)

## 2. FINDINGS: THEMES EMERGING FROM INTERVIEWS WITH BME ACADEMICS

As highlighted above, studies of BME academics have identified a range of exclusionary practices, for example lack of transparency in promotion procedures, of 'not being encouraged to 'apply' for promotion, and of being not part of the 'club' (ECU, 2009; ECU, 2011; Mirza, 2006).

The academics in this study were more likely to talk about day-to-day differences, due to their ethnicity, which are subtle and difficult to identify, but which result in differential treatment, rather than overt racism. These are 'small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognised by the perpetrator' (Rowe, 1990, p.153). Our research supports these findings. Respondents reported positive and negative experiences in their careers. The positive experiences included being welcomed in to the university; and supported in terms of being provided with facilities, such as office space and computer equipment, to carry out the range of their work including teaching and research; being included in the department through involvement in departmental meetings and the university as a whole; and support from colleagues. In contrast, however, several respondents identified negative experiences, for example being excluded from informal networks, feeling 'overscrutinised' or believing that they had been put on a lower starting salary.

Achieving greater representation of BME staff across universities is challenging for the higher education sector. What is required is an acknowledgment by senior management of the need for action to ensure inclusion, identification of the value of diversity, and an understanding of the ways in which subtle and unconscious discrimination can act as a barrier to exclusionary practices.

## 2.1 Benefits of an ethnically diverse academic staff group

The value of having BME staff as members of departments is often unrecognised by heads of department and other senior academic staff in the UK higher education sector. BME staff are often approached by BME students for support and they can serve as positive role models for BME students. Additionally, some respondents noted that students can be attracted to the university and the specific department *because* there are BME staff in the department. This can be beneficial for the institution as it increases student applications and diversifies the student group. Support for BME students was identified by respondents as increasingly important. However, the work in supporting BME students informally can result in an undue burden on BME staff as it adds to their workload but is often unacknowledged by senior staff.

*I recruited students from [overseas], who contributed quite a lot financially. I was taking the name of the university forward through recruiting for a new programme. I was giving newspaper interviews [overseas], I was actively promoting the university. That's good for me as well. But, in some sense, nothing of that was recognised.*

**Senior lecturer**

*And I am not saying that I am any more empathetic to ethnic minority students than other lecturers might be, but it's perhaps training that we perhaps need? How we deal with widening access issues...they might feel more comfortable knocking on my door.*

**Lecturer**

*I think the Black students look up to me. They make greater connections with me and respond positively to my presence.*

**Senior lecturer**

*But the Black and Asian students identify with me. And they talk to me and I know I make a difference, my presence and support makes a difference and this keeps me going even when going through difficult times. I am a role model for them and I get so much satisfaction from this. It is very rewarding. It doesn't get you promoted but it gives a lot of satisfaction.*

**Senior lecturer**

Some respondents reported that having greater numbers of senior BME academic staff not only serves as role models for junior BME staff, but also projects positive messages to White colleagues, as illustrated below:

*And the interesting thing also was that White lecturers started to come and talk to me confidentially about issues they were having with some of their students, be it Black/Black issues, Black/White issues, Black/Irish issues. And also sometimes issues that were going on between staff as*

*well. Word had got out that certain issues which [to date] certain people felt couldn't be discussed could be discussed.*

**Professor**

Respondents also identified the importance of having greater numbers of BME staff as role models in predominantly White universities.

*I think being an ethnic minority in a predominantly White [environment] is very positive. It is very positive for the students. We are very open in discussing ethnicity and, having an ethnic minority teaching them, I can give the students increased insight. I can take the issue further and provide more information and more open discussions than they can get from a textbook.*

**Head of Department**

Many respondents felt that it was the work of White male academics that was profiled and celebrated in their institutions. When BME staff were included in this way there was a positive impact for the individual and also the wider academic community. When examples of BME staff achievements were communicated, for instance by public recognition from senior staff, or in university-wide communications, other BME staff were pleased to see the positive messages about the work of BME staff being recognised and acknowledged.

*Lots of other people from other minority ethnic backgrounds, for instance some Chinese people asked me, some other colleagues from Middle East, asked me about the article, and said they were pleased to see the article. And not just me, but I also see others.*

**Reader**

*You open any of these university magazines, all these various ones that come in. I think then it's like, White male, White male, White male scientist, White male engineer, White, you see what I am saying? Quite often.*

**Senior lecturer**

Having a diverse group of senior staff at universities would have a positive impact on the way in which decisions are made about staff progression and promotion. In particular, the REF process was seen as an area where this was felt to be important.

*Definitely my White male colleagues are much more kind of, they are quite, irrespective of their age, they are much more comfortable with each other because of these old boys' networks and things like that. And it's almost amazing to see it in the 21st century I find. Because it's like, this is stuff you read about.*

**Senior lecturer**

*The REF panel should include minority ethnic academics. It should include them.*

**Senior lecturer**

Respondents did not want their roles to be tokenistic, for example, being asked to take on certain roles because of their ethnic identity.

*I did get pictured in the university magazines and all that, to a point where I got quite resentful. And if somebody said 'you should go and do this', I had to ask them why? Is it because I am Black you want me in the picture, or because you think I can contribute?*

**Professor**

*I mean as I said when things come up we're wheeled out because of our background to show that the university is representative.*

**Senior Research Fellow**

## **2.2 Lack of trust and overscrutiny by senior colleagues**

Several respondents raised the issue of a lack of trust in them from colleagues questioning their credibility – checking whether they were the lead contributor to an event or publication; or querying whether their publication was a 'real book'. Other examples included instances of respondents being challenged on how they had marked students' work; not met a deadline; or being constantly overscrutinised about their work. Some expressed the notion that they did not have a 'buffer', that is, support from their White colleagues.

*So I just found that encounter with my junior colleague, just fascinating that someone would ask: did you do the background work, or were you actually interviewed? That [was the] very first question.*

**Senior Lecturer**

*I am the first marker for my exam scripts. He got an English guy to actually always challenge me on my marking. He would never accept my request for a specific moderator. He would get someone to challenge my marking. Problems again and again.*

**Reader**

*I do not have buffers, I can't rely on buffers. And I know that if I make a couple of mistakes my job would be gone, compared to other people that might have buffers... And also if you have buffers you also have power.*

**Lecturer**

Additionally, some respondents commented on the generalisations and stereotyping of BME academics. This is illustrated by the following comment from a respondent:

*At that time I think he was the only non-White guy, and caused trouble. My guess is that the Director thought, these guys are troublesome... I think it took a long time for the idea to go away that "these kinds of people" might be causing some problems, the way they use and spend resources... I wouldn't say they would say it to me alone, but I think the emphasis [to me] was a little bit higher.*

**Senior lecturer**

This stereotyping from a bad experience of one person created an environment where BME staff 'must stick to the rules', 'must meet deadlines', even if White colleagues do not adhere to these requirements so rigidly. BME staff felt they had to pre-empt criticisms of them, for example one mentioned feeling overcriticised if they made just one mistake, and another mentioned it was important not to be late with marking.

*I think there is a bit more to prove, a bit of a burden on me. I must say this is a perception. You feel like you have got to do a bit more. It's in your psyche that you have got to demonstrate a bit more. In the sense that you have got to have some sort of added value.*

**Senior lecturer**

*Deadlines are often quite challenging. In this case, for instance, one of the decisions that we made was that we should provide feedback to students as early as possible... And I thought, we should do it, just do it. Others would think, don't worry, don't put pressure on yourself. So there are differences.*

**Reader**

*You are judged differently. Especially when you make mistakes. They don't treat your mistakes the same way as a White colleague. They don't say 'oh, she's having an off day'. They dump on you like a load of bricks.*

**Professor**

*I think all those elements perhaps count against them. So, really, my view is, if you are working as hard as anyone else, and if there are two people, one an ethnic minority, one an English person vying for the same job, I believe they'll take the English person, unless the ethnic minority is doing much more, at a higher level.*

**Professor**

Respondents reported that this feeling of being over-scrutinised sometimes led to self-excluding, behaviour, when sometimes BME staff have said they 'wouldn't even bother' to, for example, submit their work for profiling in a university newsletter, or to apply for promotion.

*...stopping myself from applying because I felt I had to be that much better before I even applied. But many of us [minority ethnic staff] feel that way. So that self-regulation.*

**Senior lecturer**

The need for BME staff to 'prove' themselves was evident. This was in contrast to White members of staff who were not readily doubted or scrutinised.

### **2.3 Research Excellence Framework (the REF)**

A mechanism for scrutiny in the sector is the REF, the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions and the process of expert review. Respondents reported differing views on the REF about how it operated to assess academic outputs. Some respondents welcomed the REF – describing it as 'neutralising ethnicity'. The specific point made here was that

the REF had objective criteria which individuals could be measured against. Some respondents suggested this had the potential to remove unfair discrimination against individuals because of any personal characteristics.

*A Black colleague used to say: "I would not be a Professor if it was not for the REF." Simple as that. And I think, as a young academic following him, I agree. Because the REF puts pressure on university management generally. And therefore they need to appoint people either who can publish, or have the potential to publish, or have published. Now, that literally neutralises the ethnicity, it just eliminates ethnicity. So, it creates a level playing field. Which means that if you publish and perform, off you go. If you don't, you stay. It doesn't matter whether you are White or Black. So, in that sense the REF is critical.*

**Senior lecturer**

Some respondents reported negative elements of the REF. Although it was understood that the system was that articles from anywhere in the globe would be considered for the REF, there was some scepticism that this was in fact the case, and this undermined its credibility among some BME staff. It was unclear to some respondents to what extent articles published outside the UK or the USA, for example in Africa, in the Indian sub-continent or in East Asia, were in reality given the same recognition and standing as those published in the UK or USA. There was some doubt as to whether they would be given equal weight compared to those with a 'Western' research focus. This would affect all academics, however those who originate from, for example, Africa or the Indian sub-continent and whose work, or part of whose work, relates to those regions, may find themselves disproportionately disadvantaged. BME staff, because of their background, may well have networks in those regions and therefore have to make decisions as to whether to build up these networks or concentrate on building up their work and contacts in the 'West'.

Some respondents were strategic about where they chose to publish, selecting leading UK or USA journals; others who worked on researching race and ethnicity widened their research itself beyond ethnicity as they felt that working on ethnicity alone would not be acknowledged in the same way as other subject areas and some respondents specifically chose to avoid any kind of journal that might be perceived as 'niche' or focussed on their own ethnic group.

*Most of the good journals are in America, and of course there are quite good ones also here in the UK. I am publishing in the journals in Africa, those journals are ranked relatively lowly. What I can say is, is it because there is a particular focus on Africa? Or does the focus on Africa impact on them negatively? Or is it that really they get bad, weak articles published in them? Maybe it's both. Coming back to this sense of self-consciousness, which is once you have African in your title you have got to do a bit more, to be seen as doing a very good job [...]if you have got African in your title you have got to do a little bit more to be recognised. Now, if you are publishing in those ones, those ones would have no impact for the REF. My hope is that publishing in them brings those into the mainstream as well. So, you do both, trying to bring them into the mainstream.*

**Senior lecturer**

*I think, for example, even my own experience, if I wanted to publish in East Asia, in a journal in English, for one thing people know who you are [so it would help getting published]. Networking is not the right word, but if I wanted to publish an article in East Asia it would be easier for me. Personally I would think that is an achievement, for me. It's still your own achievement. But I know it doesn't count in this country.*

**Lecturer**

Some respondents identified that having BME academics on REF panels was an important element to ensuring diversity of views and perspectives. The analysis of panel membership for REF 2014 shows some diversity, but identifies that the 'proportion of some minority ethnic groups... in the REF panel membership are generally lower than in the comparator academic staff populations' and that 'more needs to be done in future for REF panels to reflect the diversity of the community' (HEFCE, 2011, p.18).

A potential detriment to international BME staff was the element of 'impact' in the REF. It was suggested that if an academic member of staff had come to the UK at Lecturer level, without having prior knowledge of UK culture, it was more difficult for them to understand which UK industries or government bodies they had to target for their research. This lack of in-depth knowledge of the UK industry and public sector and their 'outsider' status could be disadvantageous if they were required to demonstrate 'impact' in the UK context. One respondent explained this as follows:

*There is something in REF called impact. It's all about how you take your work to the outside, rather than the university. So if you are someone from here, you have grown up here, you really know where your work will be feeding. Whereas if you are coming here as a kind of lecturer starting, you take time to understand which industry, or which policy, all those things are a bit difficult to put down. Which government department historically has been interested in this.*

**Senior lecturer**

## **2.4 Reaction from students to BME academics**

A further source of scrutiny and feedback regarding the performance of BME academics which has become more institutionalised in recent years, is student evaluation of lecturers and courses. Respondents report that students sometimes responded in a discriminatory way towards them and questioned their credibility.

*It is a kind of credibility issue. There was one particular instance where I remember a student said: probably I should check this. I said, that's fine, crosschecking. And then the student came back to me and said, sorry. Finally the student admitted it. I didn't know the student was always trying to [consult with other lecturers]. And the student admitted it.*

**Reader**

In addition, some respondents reported having received negative comments in student feedback which they felt were unfair and related to their ethnicity. A positive example of dealing with this was an instance where the staff member

had raised their experience of negative student feedback with their mentor (White) who understood the potential for this unfairness.

*If you compare, for example, the amount of work you put in to give individual level support, or group support, compared to the other modules, you feel like you have done way too much anyway, double the amount, or triple the amount sometimes. But then when you just look at the evaluation forms they might not say great things, or they might think, oh, I don't have to say anything to her. So it doesn't really come back in the way one would expect.*

**Lecturer**

*I feel a little discomfort when the student body is practically all White [...]. And so once... When I taught on a particular module... the comments were a bit snide... I don't know whether it was my lecturing style, the content, and you can't tell. Sometimes it gets all mixed up.*

**Lecturer**

*Sometimes I also find that students are also tough on ethnic minority lecturers. I find that you do a lot and sometimes the credit is not given.*

**Lecturer**

## 2.5 Equal treatment - pay

There is an acknowledged ethnicity pay gap in higher education (ECU, 2012, pp.102-115). Due to a general lack of information about the salaries of colleagues, it is rarely possible for individual staff to know if they are being paid at the same level as other comparable colleagues. Some respondents suspected that they had been put on lower starting salaries than comparable White colleagues.

*The area where I am not sure, I don't know whether I can attribute it to race and ethnicity, to gender, or to just the circumstances of the timing of when I was hired, I don't know... is the pay level at which I was hired. The level at which other people have been hired since then was different. And I don't know what, I can't say what to put that down to at all.*

**Lecturer**

*One clear way in which I was treated badly, was that despite being the most qualified person in the department I was put on the lowest salary. A White, male colleague, who had begun at the same time as myself, but who was less qualified, was put on the top scale. I didn't find this out until 2-3 years into the job, and that too only accidentally.*

**Lecturer**

*[my colleague] thinks that, because I am a woman and I am not British, not White British, he thinks sometimes because of this I have been taken advantage of in terms of payment... but that's what the head of department told me and I agreed. And I don't think I should complain because I agreed.*

**Lecturer.**

## 2.6 Career progression and promotion – the ‘higher threshold’

A further area where respondents identified potentially unequal treatment was that of career progression and promotion. Respondents reported that White colleagues were encouraged to apply for promotion if they showed ‘promise or potential’, whereas respondents felt they had to show a track record of achievements, with evidence, rather than merely potential.

*...sometimes I have felt that it might not be unexpected that more senior colleagues might be ‘nudging’ less senior colleagues [...] it is not unbelievable that maybe some other colleagues might get that kind of hint to make an application.*

**Senior lecturer**

*...being a minority I am also aware of the kind of unintended, unintended but nevertheless existence of systematic bias that might be there against minority scholars, where, again unintended, but the expectations [of them] might be a bit higher. And in that sense it might delay the making of your application, because you want to meet that higher threshold which subconsciously is being set for you.*

**Senior lecturer**

*One has had to struggle in a way, in order to receive that support which certainly, I have felt, has been much more readily available to White people.*

**Professor**

*If we take racism seriously, and we know it’s there, you [have to do better]. And it’s an extra burden. And it is unfair, but we live in an unfair world...if you say there is racism, there is exclusion, then that is part of your calculation.*

**Professor**

Additionally some respondents suggested they felt they had to work harder than their White colleagues to meet the requirements for promotion.

*...you have got to work harder than everybody else, if you want to get anywhere. Because you do. I only got there because I worked hard. I definitely had to work harder than White people earlier on [...] in the ‘70s and it was just dreadful...and I don’t think it’s that much better today in the White middle class suburbia. It’s just the same as it was.*

**Professor**

*I’ve definitely had to publish more books than my White colleagues. I’ve had to be 2 times as good or even three times as good to be promoted. A White colleague, who had one publication and I had four, got promoted and we were up for the same position. Ethnic minorities have to be that much better to go for promotion, and even then they might not get it. It’s not gender.*

**Professor**

*...they can't trust that 'this guy will bring it through, deliver'. That's in the back of their mind, not necessarily racist or anything, people can't just think this guy can do the job. So the element of trust is somehow not there. And it just doesn't happen here, it's a UK-wide problem.*

**Senior Lecturer**

*From the perspective of trust it becomes less offensive in terms of discussion, but this thing still remains there. But the question remains – why should you trust somebody more because of their racial background?*

**Senior Lecturer**

*I also cannot but notice that there are White colleagues, in the university and in other universities, who with an equivalent research profile have progressed more rapidly than me. That is very obvious.*

**Senior lecturer**

*...sometimes you see that some people can just move up the ladder very quickly, without doing very much and then you wonder if it is objective.*

**Lecturer**

*I don't get the sense of an easy progression... colleagues of mine since I've been there have progressed. I mean a member of staff that joined after I joined the institution has since become a reader very quickly and moved up and become a professor and I haven't. And I do feel in higher education it's much easier if you are a White male.*

**Senior lecturer**

Respondents reported a lack of role models or support groups and some found it difficult to voice their aspirations about their future careers and to put themselves forward for more senior positions. One respondent described this as not having the same confidence as White colleagues – not having the 'sell' required.

*Well, if you look at the levels of people's jobs. People doing exactly the same thing, but not getting promotion. Part of it might be that they are not speaking up for themselves, I don't know. Partly, possibly. There is a cultural thing there as well about self-promotion.*

**Professor**

One respondent reported that BME staff may not put themselves forward for positions such as head of department because they feel they may not be accepted by White academics who may doubt that a BME academic could provide the department with the leadership and credibility required to take on such a role.

*Most people are English. You should be able somehow to provide leadership to them. And a lot of English people they wouldn't...I wouldn't say they wouldn't accept it, they would accept it, only if they believe that a person can provide leadership. Which is unlikely. The problem is the ethnic minority people they simply do not have the dominating power.*

**Reader**

Many respondents felt 'very lucky to be here', for some respondents there was a lack of a sense of 'entitlement' to aspire to the most senior levels of management, because they did not 'fit in' with the institution.

## 2.7 Identity and 'fitting in' – not part of the club

Although some BME academics felt that they were positioned as insiders, (as they collaborated and socialised with their White colleagues) others felt that they were positioned as 'outsiders' even within their own university. In fact, several respondents reported feeling an 'insider' in their subject area nationally and internationally but not in their own institution. This was evidenced by different external invitations. This feeling of being an 'outsider' resulted in respondents' experiences of subtle exclusion, and the felt need to develop ways of interacting in culturally specific ways in order to progress. This exclusion happened in a low-level, intangible way. Many respondents commented that they 'don't even realise this is happening'. However, at the same time, respondents did not always assume that such exclusion was due to their race or ethnic background. There was a need to 'fit in' with the majority, whilst retaining 'one's own identity'.

*If we are going to make it, if we are going to make a real change in the system we have to do it as ourselves and be true to ourselves. And we are going to suffer for that. I think we are going to suffer for that because we are not going to get anywhere fast, but if we do it with integrity and we work hard, then I am hoping it will pay off in the long run to make the whole system more inclusive.*

**Research Fellow**

For some respondents, forming social relationships were particularly hard because of the need to change in order to 'fit in' with the White majority culture. This meant being conscious of how they dressed, how they communicated and how they socialised. Consequently, many respondents adopted a Western style of dress rather than 'traditional' clothing, although there were exceptions, for example some Muslim women retained wearing the headscarf. Different communication styles, such as being perceived to be 'loud' in comparison with a perceived 'British' norm, resulted in pressure to change a natural communication style in order to 'fit in' with a stereotypical 'British' style of communicating.

*Just that I think it is a struggle, it is a struggle. And you feel like you are constantly battling to fit in...it's not that I am trying to be someone different, but maybe I am more conscious of it being visible, to show that I can fit in.*

**Research Fellow**

*In the psyche, the two are not correlated, being coloured and a professor. It doesn't fit easily into your minds. And there is a huge problem of acceptance that comes with that.*

**Professor**

Many experiences of exclusion were intangible, some examples included a perception that White colleagues felt more 'at ease' with other White colleagues.

*It would be, for example, when people were talking in the corridor. And their body language intimates that they are not welcoming you to participate. It would be that they quieten down when you are talking, for example.*

**Lecturer**

*... the way that people sit in meetings. And the ways in which they cluster or kind of close off spaces between them. And it's very difficult to know if that is a decision on their part, whether it is conscious or not is one thing. And why they do it another. I feel that does happen.*

**Lecturer**

*Let's put it this way. If I was putting a point forward, and someone was busy, and a White colleague was putting forward the same point, he would listen to the White colleague, but he would say to me: make an appointment. It's there, I don't know how to cure it.*

**Senior Lecturer**

*A lot of things are said, as you know, outside of meetings and I am not included in the discussions. It is only in meetings when these things come up I ask, where was I? Why don't I know about these things? And you get a sense of feeling excluded.*

**Professor**

*...Left out of the social parties, left out of...you would know that others have gone somewhere but you didn't know it. Or everyone reiterates their relationships between them. Or there is always some indirect or direct message that they are planning something and they will tell it in front of you without inviting you. All those little games that go around in the back. I find that very difficult...*

**Lecturer**

*We need to get the sense that we're part of the club instead of feeling like you're a token gesture, you not privy to private jokes and things like that. For me I try not to focus on it, I try to overlook it or look past it, it's my coping mechanism.*

**Professor**

Respondents felt that these issues led to feelings of exclusion and isolation from their (mainly White) colleagues. However, due to their intangibility and ambiguity, these were often difficult to identify.

## **2.8 Multiple identities and intersectionalities**

Whilst there are commonalities of experience amongst BME academics, they are not a homogenous group. Identities include a multiplicity of factors such as gender, class, nationality, age, religion, culture and other factors such as communication style. Many female respondents spoke about the importance of the different aspects of their identities.

*And I do know that the gender thing, maybe at this point in my career gender is going to play a bigger role perhaps than ethnicity. Maybe after five years, and I have got [children] it will be, ok, she is not going to go on maternity leave again. Then it's going to switch back, and it's going to come back to having a different surname and all those types of things. That's going to play more of a role. Ethnicity is always an issue, always. Depending on what stage you are at in your career one is going to take precedence over the other in the way it comes out.*

**Research Fellow**

*It's not about the combined effects of the different forms of oppression, I don't want to make it sound that simple. But there is something about the interaction of those different aspects of my being that get played out. That I am always a Black woman, I am not sometimes just a woman, or sometimes just Black. I am always a Black woman. If you look around, when I go to the professorial meetings in this university, they are dominated by men. I am the only Black person there. But I am also one of a very, very small number of women. So women are less likely to be represented and Black people even 'more' less likely.*

**Professor**

Respondents spoke about how generally White senior academics often provided nurturing support to other junior White academics, such as information on how they could submit grant applications, and suggesting which journals they should publish in. The informal nature of this behaviour of the majority group acted to exclude others, particularly BME women.

*And you know they wouldn't think twice sometimes to, I mean, I am talking about my [male] peers, who wouldn't think twice about lingering on after a meeting to have a little informal chat with the senior men while the women colleagues usually go away. And that happens quite frequently...*

**Senior lecturer**

Some respondents had family obligations, such as looking after their parents and parents-in-law which added to their responsibilities outside work and conflicted with their pressure to publish.

*And there is so much pressure for me from my family that I don't, I can't look to them to give me support. And they will not understand the academic pressures. So, their support is not going to help me. So I think for ethnic minorities that could potentially be an issue because the cultures could interact with the professional. And then if you marry an ethnic minority person who is very traditional, as well as being female, it gets much more difficult because you have roles in the family where you have to cook and clean and entertain guests, and take care of in-laws and parents. I can imagine all these things could hamper someone.*

**Lecturer**

Some respondents spoke about their visible identity such as their gender, age, physical size and communication style. For example, young, quietly spoken BME female academics were stereotyped, particularly in predominantly male

departments, where assumptions were made about them, for example that they would not be able to teach or manage male students.

*I am small and I am a female. People sometimes are not confident that I will be able to stand in front of the class, especially in front of males, to teach.*

**Lecturer**

*I think when I go to conferences, or industry events, people don't trust me, i.e. they think I am a student. I cannot push myself to wear high heels, I have never worn them. If you wear high heels and a feminine suit they might think you are a secretary, that happens. So, I think, if I go with my male colleague, let them negotiate. I don't mind when it comes to the work not being the main person, possibly a collaborate (co-investigator). I think it's better to do it like that, because we have lots of work to do anyway.*

**Lecturer**

Having a communication style which was felt to be different from a stereotypical 'low-key' British style was also an example of 'difference' which was often judged negatively by White colleagues.

*Generally people would know if we were talking. It was quite obvious that people were aware of that. And the fact that we were both not White, that we were different ethnically. So, that way of talking, that way of being social is also very different. It's a very, I find it a very buttoned down way of being social. And on the one hand it's nice and civil and polite. But culturally I am not big on those things really....and it's not really to do with race, it's to do with culture I suppose. But your ethnic identity is kind of intertwined with the way that you are and you socialise. And I think for both of us we both found it a little bit, we felt we wanted to make a scene almost, we wanted to show that we are here...but it is slightly uncomfortable for me to socialise only at that level. And I miss that kind of camaraderie.*

**Lecturer**

Some Muslim respondents commented on the effects of their religious and cultural background in the academy; this was related to stereotypical notions of how they were seen and perceived by their White colleagues.

*...being a young Muslim man makes a difference. I'm treated probably a little bit more hostile, with a little bit more hostility than if I was a young Muslim woman. Conversely because I suspect if I was a young Muslim woman, I'd suffer greater disadvantages in society at large but [laughs] not in an academic environment. Because White liberal academics want to champion certain people, they like to have pet projects, and I don't fall into that category. I fall into it because I'm brown, but then I fall out of it because I'm Muslim. I fall into it because I'm young, but then I fall out of it because I'm a man. I certainly don't want to make this to appear as a complaint...that's not my point at all. My point is that White liberal academics can have the wrong prejudices. If you see what I mean, they want people to champion and promote but they prefer them to be non-threatening.*

**Research Fellow**

Some BME staff recognised the potential for exclusion from networks which provided information to progress within the academy, and consequently tried to develop a network of contacts themselves to address this.

## **2.9 Networks and mentoring**

Respondents reported that networks were seen as an important way of gaining access to academic jobs and progressing in the academy. Networks were also a recognised important aspect of career progression, particularly in the promotion process. Respondents also reported that mentoring was of particular importance for gaining promotion. It served two main purposes: 1) learning how to get access to facilities or other support; and 2) gaining career advice – having someone ‘interpreting’ of what was needed for career progression and promotion and the best means of achieving this.

Several respondents felt that there was a particular need for BME staff to be mentored and this should extend to all levels of academic staff, not only to those in more junior positions. Allocation of mentors and support networks was not consistent for BME academics working in different universities. Many respondents expressed the need to have mentoring and support networks which would enable them to succeed and progress within the academy.

*But I think on top of that really is that to go through the process I think you need to get somebody, you need a promoter. What I have seen in the academic world, you need somebody who identifies you early on, and your potential and pays interest in that sort of process. And if you have that the chance of rising is higher.*

**Senior Lecturer**

The majority of respondents reported enthusiastic support for mentoring systems, with several positive experiences of mentoring identified and the generosity of individual mentors appreciated. The important element in a mentoring system was that the mentor took an interest in the career of the individual they were mentoring, was knowledgeable in their field, and could guide their career at different stages. Though neither gender nor ethnic matching appears to be widely viewed as a significant factor, it was acknowledged that in some instances, depending on an individual’s needs, this could be an important and valuable element. Respondents had no expectation of having a mentor from the same ethnic background because of the relatively few senior BME academic colleagues in their institutions.

## **3. CONCLUSIONS**

The respondents in this study expressed particular concerns regarding their academic careers; a feeling of higher thresholds being set to meet requirements for promotion; doubts about equality in relation to pay; exclusion from informal networking; and multiple issues of race, gender and class associated with communication styles and cultural norms.

Higher education institutions state a commitment to equality and diversity through their adherence to equality policies. However, there is limited evidence

to assess the real impact of such policies. Comprehensive programmes of targeted action against which progress is carefully monitored is required at all levels which recognise and acknowledge the value of ethnic and cultural diversity which includes equal access and support leading to career progression and promotion. Clearly more research is needed in this area which will directly influence policy and decision making in higher education institutions.

There are several recommendations which emerge from this research. These relate to leadership, organisational culture, and support mechanisms including mentoring, networking and training.

- It is important that senior managers acknowledge that discrimination and exclusionary practices exist and that such practices can impact negatively on the careers of BME academics and the contribution that they can make to their institutions. Giving consideration to how BME and women staff are treated should be part and parcel of an aspiration to be a leading university.
- There is a need to recognise within institutions the potential for unconscious bias towards BME academics, particularly at key career points such as recruitment or promotion.
- Strategies are needed which support and explicitly include BME academic staff once they are in the university – ensuring visibility, without overburdening individuals, in a range of committees, including internal REF groups, and in positions of responsibility and decision-making in departments and faculties.
- Developing a positive work environment for BME staff through the profiling of the work of BME staff to the same extent as that attributed to White staff would contribute to a culture of inclusion.
- Develop and support formal and informal networks for BME staff which includes a consistent and comprehensive approach to mentoring for all staff.
- Consideration should be given to the development of cultural exchange and interaction. This is particularly important for early career academics (both UK and international staff).
- BME staff need a specific point of contact to raise informal concerns and to for advice for promotion and career progression.
- A recognition from senior management of the role BME staff play in supporting BME students, such as considering the setting up of training for all academic staff on supporting students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.
- Systematic regular monitoring is needed for the profiling of BME academic staff profile, with actions identified to address under-representation which are subsequently implemented and communicated to University Equality and Diversity committees.

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**Note on Research Method**

This is a qualitative research study of BME academic staff in the UK higher education sector with interviews with a sample of BME academics as well as drawing on earlier interviews conducted with minority ethnic academic staff in a number of UK universities. For this research, Black minority ethnic was defined as Asian, Black or those from mixed heritage backgrounds (White/Black, Asian/Black). There is no sampling frame of BME academics in individual universities, as personal ethnicity data, when collected by employers, is treated as confidential and is only published in summary statistical format, usually for the whole institution. Therefore, to identify the potential sample, and to aim for diverse backgrounds and views, an 'essentially strategic' approach (Bryman, 2008, p.458) was taken. This approach aimed for a mix of interviewees, avoiding the risk of using one source, which may replicate similar views. The main source used to identify the sample was a systematic search of Faculty and Subject areas webpages (staff lists) - using photos supplemented by studying profiles for any indication of ethnicity which individuals themselves identified. This was supplemented by snowball sampling, specifically asking existing contacts to suggest suitable people who we might approach.

The response rate was over 40 per cent. We consider the response rate to be high given the voluntary nature of the study and the potential for academic staff to have other commitments clashing with the research period. A few who we contacted did not wish to participate in the study, mostly due to other commitments, and a small number did not wish to identify as a BME academic.

**The interview format**

A semi-structured interview format was used, exploring career progressions to date, experiences of support mechanisms such as mentoring, perceptions of being an insider or outsider in the academy, experiences of the Research Excellence Framework, career progression, advice they would give prospective BME academics, and any suggestions for action. Interviews lasted on average from 30 minutes to an hour and a half. Each interview was transcribed and given a random reference code for confidentiality. The interviews were analysed to explore issues identified by the sample as either a barrier, or as something which had helped in their career progression and/or would help others progress. Interviews were analysed by generating themes and codes. As the evidence built up, the emerging key themes were identified from the quantity of data under each heading (see Charmaz, 2006).