

The experience of BME academics in higher education: aspirations in the face of inequality

Stimulus paper

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Stimulus Paper Series

The Leadership Foundation is pleased to present this latest series of 'Stimulus Papers' which are intended to inform thinking, choices and decisions at institutional and system levels in UK higher education. The themes addressed fall into different clusters including higher education leadership, business models for higher education, leading the student experience and leadership and equality of opportunity in higher education. We hope these papers will stimulate discussion and debate, as well as giving an insight into some of the new and emerging issues relevant to higher education today.

First published July 2014

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

Published by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

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ISBN 978-1-906627-70-6

Designed & produced by Smith Creative

Printed in the United Kingdom

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1
For this paper, the term black and minority ethnic (BME) is used to describe those who were from Black British, Black African, Black African American and British Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origins. The term BME is not a homogenous category and there are vast differences between groups from different ethnic backgrounds.

3
Hefce (2012)

3
Equality Act (2010)

4
Bhopal and Jackson (2013); ECU (2011; 2012); Pilkington (2013); UCU (2012)

5
This paper is not looking at the experiences of all professional staff in higher education, but is specifically focusing on the views of senior academics in leadership roles.

6
Bhopal (2015 forthcoming)

7
Current HESA (2014) data shows that there are only two vice-chancellors from BME backgrounds in universities in the UK.

1. Introduction

There have been some significant advances in achieving race equality in higher education in the UK since the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000. The representation of students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)¹ backgrounds attending universities has increased² and universities are required to eliminate race discrimination and proactively advance race equality³. Despite such advances, there is still evidence to suggest that inequalities for BME students and staff in higher education persist.⁴

This stimulus paper addresses the following themes in relation to BME academics:

- 1.** *Racism in higher education:* the prevalence of covert and subtle racism in higher education works to marginalise BME academics.
- 2.** *Intersectionalities:* differences of class and gender impact on the career progression of BME academics, particularly in senior leadership roles.
- 3.** *Inequalities in the academy:* the current economic and social downturn has significantly affected the element of risk in individuals' personal and professional lives both within and outside the academy. For BME academics in the UK, this is possibly exacerbated by the competitive structures of the current Research Excellence Framework (REF), whilst similar pressures are evident in the experiences of US academics faced with significant funding cuts and threats of job insecurity.

The paper uses empirical data to examine the experiences of BME academics⁵. Respondents participated in this study as part of a larger piece of empirical research that used a comparative perspective to examine the discourses of identity related to the career trajectories of BME academics in the UK and US.⁶ In this paper, the focus is on the responses of male and female professors in senior leadership roles in universities; ten in England and 12 in the US. Given such a small sample, the paper does not attempt to generalise to the experiences of all BME groups, but rather provide data to explore current challenges for BME leaders in universities and suggest some policy recommendations. The paper argues that despite recent policy changes in the UK such as the Equality Act 2010, and increasing competition for jobs in higher education in the USA, the overwhelming majority of these respondents still regularly experienced marginalisation and exclusion in relation to racism and described their experiences in academia as one that positioned them as 'outsiders' and 'others'. The paper suggests that greater change is needed in academia for the inclusion of BME academics, particularly in relation to the issues of promotion and progression. Despite the persistence of inequalities, some BME academics are able to progress to senior leadership positions, but these numbers continue to remain low, which may be due to exclusionary barriers such as racism and sexism.⁷ Consequently, this paper argues that greater support is needed for BME academics in senior and, importantly, junior positions so as not to hinder their chances of career progression.

The research

The respondents were contacted through a snowball sample and via personal networks and links to specific organisations. In order to identify the sample and to aim for a diverse range of backgrounds, seniority positions and views, it was important to take an 'essentially strategic approach'.⁸ All of the participants were professors in senior roles in their universities. Ten respondents participated in the UK; of these, two men and three women defined themselves as Black British (from Caribbean ancestry), four women identified as British Asian, and one man defined himself as British Indian. Twelve respondents participated in the US; six women and four men described themselves as being from African American backgrounds, and one woman described herself as Latina and another as American (but whose ancestors originated from India).

The interviews were digitally recorded, and transcribed and analysed using methods of grounded theory so that the text could be broken up into individual segments (such as paragraphs or lines) for analysis. Each unit was then represented as a category to be analysed. The categories were used to develop the theory so that the theory was organised in relation to the data.⁹ Grounded theory was used to develop an understanding of what is common amongst a set of data so that it can be conceptualised as part of the theory.

Equality legislation and its impact

The Equality Act was first introduced in the UK in October 2010. It integrates the various strands of discrimination against 'protected characteristics' and provides a single, consolidated source of discrimination law, covering all types of discrimination that are unlawful. It simplifies the law by removing anomalies and inconsistencies that developed over time in existing legislation, and extends the protection from discrimination to certain areas. Organisations cannot unlawfully discriminate against individuals because of their sex, race, disability, religion or belief, age and sexual orientation (protected characteristics). Protected characteristics also include individuals who are pregnant or undergoing gender reassignment.

Although legislation such as the Equality Act marks a positive step towards greater inclusionary practice, there are few mechanisms in place that are able to monitor and enforce such policies.¹⁰ There has been a great deal of research that has explored this issue, particularly in relation to how equality policies are understood and adhered to in organisations in which a limited view of equality operates, leading to a failure to adequately address the requirements of equality legislation.¹¹ Furthermore, there are significant disparities between commitments made publicly by institutions on equality policies and the day-to-day experiences of BME staff.¹² Centralised policies are not always applied at departmental levels, which can result in individual managers influencing workload, responsibilities, recruitment and promotion,¹³ with the clear potential to encourage favouritism and unequal treatment of some staff:

[Higher education institutions] have a legal duty to advance equality of opportunity and prevent discrimination, harassment and victimisation; however institutional policies and actions may focus on legal compliance, rather than realistic strategies and actions to promote institutional change in work practices, including recruitment, promotion and development.¹⁴

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Bryman (2008) p458

9

Charmaz (2006)

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Pilkington (2013)

11

Aouad et al(2012); Crofts and Pilkington (2012)

12

ECU (2011)

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ibid

14

ibid p44

15
Deem and Morley (2006)

16
Hey et al (2011)

17
Pilkington (2013)

18
Bhopal and Jackson (2013)

19
Dovidio and Gaertner (2000)
p315

20
Deem et al (2005) p82

Deem and Morley¹⁵ note that whilst there have been benefits for universities from a range of equality policies, this has resulted in an auditing and managing structure in which the emphasis on student diversity has become critical, yet problems still remain for staff in relation to equal pay, career promotion and progression, particularly for women and those from BME backgrounds. Others have suggested that due to the widening participation agenda and an increase in students from a diverse range of backgrounds, many institutions interpret this trend as a solution to equality of opportunity in higher education.¹⁶

In the UK, legislation such as the Equality Act appeared to identify issues of racism within universities but not to work effectively to eliminate them. Instead it worked to control and regulate *public* behaviour; respondents felt that in consequence racism often took place in covert, subtle ways that were difficult to prove. The performance of non-racist behaviour to mask more discreet racist behaviours took place at all levels including senior managers who by failing to acknowledge or recognise covert racism were effectively complicit in encouraging a discriminatory culture. The same managers often occupied leadership roles closely aligned to decision-making, including recruitment, retention and promotion decisions, setting departmental objectives for the implementation of equality policies and establishing notions of department ethos and culture.¹⁷ An inevitable cycle of discriminatory practice emerges in which the presence of equality legislation is promoted publicly but discreetly ignored in practice. As a result, BME colleagues are routinely subjected to biases that are condoned and reproduced in the decision-making of departmental management.¹⁸ Consequently, covert, subtle racism works to further marginalise BME groups. In the White liberal academy, such racism can 'be hypothesised as to characterise the racial attitude of many Whites who endorse egalitarian values, who regard themselves as non-prejudiced, but who discriminate in subtle, 'rationalisable' ways'.¹⁹ In harmonising previous equality legislation, the Equality Act 2010 inadvertently homogenised general characteristics and by doing so the *specificity* of differences (such as race and gender for example) are not addressed by institutions; rather, they focus on overarching generic concerns. Consequently and counterintuitively, in some respects, institutions are freed from adhering to statutory obligations in relation to race.

Research has examined the important role that senior managers play in their commitment to equality in higher education institutions (HEIs). According to Deem et al:



*the extent and importance of managers in higher education has increased considerably in recent years as UK higher education has expanded... and the commitment of senior managers to equality of opportunity is of considerable significance.*²⁰

Differences continue to persist in individual understandings of diversity and equality and those perceived by senior management.²¹ As Crofts and Pilkington state,

*where equality issues are more visible and when for example you have a high number of BME students, equality issues are more pronounced. However, this perception does not always sit comfortably with the perception of some staff and students within the institution, who have pointed to a number of areas which they feel demonstrate either instances of discrimination, or at the very least, a failure by the institution to take equality issues seriously, even when the data suggests there may be a problem.*²²

According to the University and College Union (UCU):

*Forty-two years on from the first legislation on equal pay, and some ten years since the first positive equality requirements for public bodies, it is clear we still have a long way to go.*²³

Evidence suggests that senior managers in the liberal academy are reluctant to recognise or indeed act upon exclusionary practices such as subtle forms of racism, often dismissing it as an 'exaggeration' or based on a 'clash of personalities' between the racist and the victim.²⁴ As Bonilla-Silva and Forman suggest, a new 'racetalk' has emerged in which those from White backgrounds avoid 'appearing' to be racist so that, 'Colour blind racism allows Whites to appear 'not racist' and preserve their privileged status'.²⁵

Many of the respondents from the US also emphasised how, despite being successful, they still often felt excluded and were aware of racism. Julian,²⁶ a Black African American, felt that despite advances in equality, universities were still finding it difficult to deal with racism:

I think my White colleagues are pleasant to me on the surface, but I feel very few people consider me a colleague because my work is more geared towards activist/grounded engaged research [and] many in my department don't consider it valid research.

Julian felt that because he is Black *and* because his work is politically motivated and contributed to community activism, many of his White colleagues positioned him as an 'outsider'. He also went to say that greater changes were needed if universities were to become inclusive:

More needs to be done so that universities consider hiring faculty of colour in clusters and set up structures for supporting faculty if they have a tenure track position. We have come a long way, we have more Black professors and more Black female professors in our faculty, but we still need to do more.

21
ibid

22
Crofts and Pilkington (2012)
pp26-27

23
UCU (2012) p1

24
See also Bhopal and Jackson
(2013)

25
Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000)
p78

26
All names are pseudonyms.

Many of the respondents in the US spoke about the difficulties associated with gaining tenure. This was often associated with the acquisition of tenure being a subjective process and one that was affected by relationships with colleagues in the faculty, particularly with those involved in the decision-making process. Sheila had been a professor for over ten years:

I think they were fearful that if they didn't give me my tenure there would be a backlash against my work. My work is respected and well known not just here in the US, but on an international scale and that makes a difference. From their decision to grant me tenure, I still think and feel (and have seen evidence of it) that my White colleagues don't think my file was deserving of tenure, even though I know my portfolio was strong and met the criteria.

Julia emphasised the effectiveness of the equality policies and how they had worked and made a difference to the positioning of Black colleagues in the faculty and the department:

We do have specific policies that deal with aspects of inclusion and whether we are an inclusive faculty and how we deal with those aspects of diversity. Here in the USA we don't just have the policies, we make sure we stick to them and do what they are asking. We also do this not just because we are senior staff who believe it is morally just, but because we know it will affect how we are seen as a faculty, a department and a university. And of course, if we are not sticking to these policies we can get into a lot of trouble, legally.

Despite emphasising the inequalities related to racism and continued exclusionary practices in universities, respondents were able to achieve and gain positions of seniority and power. Whilst representation at the most senior level clearly shows some advancement and progress, the persistence of subtle and not-so-subtle racism was a continuing factor that affected the careers of senior BME leaders.

2. Racism in higher education

There is a plethora of research to suggest evidence of institutional racism in higher education.²⁷ This includes conscious and unconscious bias in recruitment and promotion exercises.²⁸ Pilkington²⁹ describes recruitment processes in which a candidate's potential to 'fit in' becomes muddled with their suitability criteria and in consequence cultural and ethnic differences can inform employment decisions. Throughout their careers, BME academics report a variety of discriminatory practices including examples of covert racism such as challenges to their work and high levels of scrutiny as well as overt racism in the form of differential pay compared with their White colleagues.³⁰ Bassanini and Saint-Martin³¹ suggest that racial inequality in the recruitment and promotion of BME groups compared with their White counterparts continues to represent a persistent source of social and economic injustice.

The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) has identified that BME staff 'receive lower levels of pay on average, and are less likely to benefit from a permanent/open-ended contract of employment'.³² Fourteen years on from research carried out by Fenton et al³³ which also showed that those from BME backgrounds were disadvantaged in the labour market and in the academy, more recent research suggests that little has changed. According to recent HESA data,³⁴ in 2012/13, out of a total of 17,880 professors, only 85 were Black (less than 1%), 950 were Asian (5%), 365 were 'other' (including mixed) (2%) and the overwhelming majority (15,200) were white (85%). HESA data (2014) further suggests that in 2012/13 less than 1% of senior managers were Black; 3% were Asian and an overwhelming majority of 92% were White. Individuals from BME backgrounds in leadership roles continue to experience exclusionary practices such as racism, but at the same time are able to make conscious decisions affecting their career trajectories.³⁵

These figures reflect findings from other industries such as the National Health Service (NHS), where BME staff are less likely to be represented at senior and managerial levels.³⁶ Kline reports: 'In 2012 just 1% of NHS executives were from a BME background and there was just one non-White face in the 2012 Health Service Journal List of the one hundred most influential people in healthcare.'³⁷ In the Civil Service, there are also low numbers of BMEs in senior positions; for example between 2009 and 2013, the proportion of promotions awarded to BME staff fell in most Civil Service departments.³⁸

Recent research also suggests huge disparities in the numbers of BME students at different types of university and their progression in the labour market³⁹. It is clear, then, that in the UK, BME staff in higher education and students continue to experience disadvantages compared with their White counterparts.⁴⁰ Pilkington argues that anti-discrimination policies implemented within universities are often ineffective and that 'formal procedures can act as a smokescreen for judgements which may be indirectly discriminatory'.⁴¹ Such inequalities are not particular to the UK; similar findings have been found in the US,⁴² Australia,⁴³ Canada⁴⁴ and Europe.⁴⁵ Research in South Africa, for example, suggests a silencing of issues to do with race in higher education, particularly in relation to those who are in senior positions. Issues of racism, sexism and challenges when applying for promotion to senior positions have been found for BME women in the Canadian context.⁴⁷

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ECU (2011); Matthews (2013); Pilkington (2013)

28

Beattie and Johnson (2012); Curtis (2005); ECU (2013)

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op cit

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Bhopal and Jackson (2013); ECU (2009; 2011); UCU (2012)

31

Bassanini and Saint-Martin (2008)

32

ECU (2009); UCU (2012)

33

Fenton et al (2000)

34

HESA (2014)

35

Coleman and Campbell-Stevens (2010); Bush et al (2006)

36

Kline (2013)

37

ibid p4

38

Brekneil (2014)

39

For example Elevation Networks (2012)

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Bhopal and Jackson (2013); Pilkington (2013)

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Pilkington (2013) p230

42

Kandola (2009)

43

Booth et al (2009)

44

Pendakur and Pendakur (1998)

45

Kogan (2011)

46

Jawitz (2012); Robus and Macleod (2006)

47

Wane (2009)

48
Gregory (2006)

49
'Black African American' is a term that is commonly used in the US to refer to those who have ancestors who originated from Africa; it was also a term that was used by the US respondents who participated in the study.

50
Jackson (2008); Williams and Williams (2008)

51
ibid

52
ibid p1005

53
Erikson and Shultz (1982); Trix and Psenka (2003)

54
Alger (1998)

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ibid

56
Allen et al(2000)

57
Jackson (2008)

58
Dovidio and Gaertner (2000)
p315

Gregory,⁴⁸ for example, commenting on BME experiences in the Caribbean, suggests that female academics in senior positions perform well in supportive environments in which they feel valued, but they tend to rely on external rather than internal support for their career advancement and mentoring.

Race equality in the US

In the US, there has been a different historical experience of race relations compared with the UK, particularly in terms of employment law regarding the inclusion of Black African Americans (BAA)⁴⁹ and other BME groups. Since *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act 1964, certain legal regulations have been implemented in the US. These cases resulted in changes in employment regulations in which individuals cannot be discriminated against on the grounds of colour or racial background. Those working in public organisations and in organisations with 15 or more employees are obliged by law to assert this rule. Despite this legal ruling, there is still evidence to suggest that discrimination and racism exist in the workplace.⁵⁰ Jackson⁵¹ suggests that there are differences by gender in the experiences of BAA men and women in the academy. BAA men are more likely to suffer greater disadvantages compared with BAA women in the academy. Jackson argues that, 'it is quite possible that implicit discriminatory practices in higher education produce race segregation.'⁵² Jackson and others⁵³ also highlight recruitment and retention processes which work to disadvantage those from BAA backgrounds. Alger⁵⁴ argues that evaluation processes for tenure and promotion can be subjective, such as the use of narrow definitions of 'merit'. The vague concept of 'collegiality' has also been used as a criterion for assessing tenure and promotion, but Alger⁵⁵ argues that collegiality is often used to refer to a shared sense of belonging based upon similar backgrounds, mutual interests and shared personal and social perspectives. This notion of 'collegiality' can work to disadvantage BAA academics who may share few of the traits and identifiers of those in senior managerial decision-making positions. Such decision-makers often attended prestigious universities associated with privileged, White, middle-class backgrounds. Consequently BAA academics are less likely than their white colleagues to have a shared sense of belonging to those in senior powerful positions.

Allen et al⁵⁶ argue that BAA academics tend to be concentrated in less prestigious universities in the US, and experience difficulties in gaining tenure in such institutions. Other themes that have been identified in relation to the experiences of BAA academics in the US include a lack of support for their roles and for career promotion and progression; stereotyping (eg, only those from BAA backgrounds can teach courses on race and ethnicity and serve on diversity committees) and tokenism (eg, BAA academics are only hired because they are Black rather than because they have the experience and qualifications to do the job).⁵⁷ Dovidio and Gaertner argue that 'aversive racism' contributes to processes of discrimination which is

*...hypothesised to characterise the racial attitudes of many Whites who endorse egalitarian values, who regard themselves as non-prejudiced, but who discriminate in subtle, rationalisable ways.*⁵⁸

Bonilla-Silva and Forman⁵⁹ suggest that there has been a change in the ways in which the concepts of race and racism are understood in the US, particularly in relation to how racism is expressed publicly, with individuals very conscious of not wishing to *appear* racist or display racist behaviours, and yet

*We believe... that there has been a rearticulation of the dominant racial the and... a new way of talking about racial issues in public venues – a new race – has emerged. Nonetheless, the new racial ideology continues to help in the reproduction of White supremacy.*⁶⁰

The emphasis here is on racism being explained by those from White backgrounds as a result of Black people being 'culturally deficient' rather than due to structural inequalities and disadvantages.

The subtleties of racism

All of the respondents from this research in both the UK and the US specifically referred to aspects of racism they had experienced. Respondents tended not to describe overt instances of racism but rather, more subtle experiences of exclusion that they attributed to their ethnic background or skin colour. This was often related to other aspects of how they were treated in the university, such as a greater profiling of the work of White members of staff compared with their own. Many felt like 'outsiders' in their institutions, feeling they did not belong in the White space of the academy. Julie, a Black British professor, received her Chair three years ago and referred to the racism that she experienced:

I do get the sense sometimes that I don't belong here from colleagues. Maybe it's their own feelings of inadequacy or maybe it's racism. It's difficult to put your finger on it. Being a Black professor here causes a lot of tension. How people view me, they don't expect that a Black woman who is a professor to be clever and articulate. So I feel I have to downplay my achievements sometimes to be accepted. You can be good, but you can't be so good that you challenge your White colleagues.

Others such as Fiona (UK respondent) said there were other subtleties around racism:

There is a certain amount of exclusion, which comes out at meetings. It is problematic, but it is also interesting because when you have the title of professor and head of department, people treat you differently. As a Black female you have that tension but it is worse for lecturers and Black junior members of staff; it's difficult for them to be listened to and heard. For me, there is some respect, although it is reluctant respect from my colleagues for the position. I am involved in a lot of stuff that is high profile and they hear about that and it can create tension but it also changes the way people treat you. The other part is that there are higher standards and expectations of you. You are judged differently from your White colleagues, especially when you make mistakes. [White colleagues] don't treat your mistakes the same way as [those made by] White colleagues. They don't think, 'she's having an off day', instead they dump on you like a ton of bricks.

59

Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000)

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ibid p52

61

The reference to **canteen culture** is often based on specific behaviour and codes of conduct that exist in certain occupations. This term has been used to refer to behaviour in the police force in England.

Nadir, a UK respondent, said racism was embedded within the culture of the institution and was often acted out by senior staff in managerial positions:

I suppose something that you don't consider is how racism happens in the day-to-day culture of the institution, where practices are reinforced or recreated not intentionally but through the traditions of behaviour which people external to that kind of 'cop culture' or what is sometimes referred to as 'canteen culture' can't really know of until they enter it. I think that's alive with senior professors, I have seen it in senior meetings particularly with heads of departments running the place. I see it as a professor, as someone who is in a senior role. But that's the point isn't it? If you are in a more junior role perhaps you don't see it. Because that kind of 'cop culture'⁶¹ behaviour only happens with other senior people.

3. Intersectionalities

Many of the UK respondents spoke about how their race, gender and class made a significant difference to how they were treated in the White space of the academy. Julie explained:

I think it is more race. Women have come on a lot. There are a lot of women in the department and many of them are professors. It has more to do with race. It's a psychological thing as well. Because in the psyche, the two are not correlated, being coloured and being a professor and then on top of that being a woman who may be working class. And there is a huge problem of acceptance that comes with this. I feel more accepted in overseas settings. There is a lot more gelling and a lot more acceptance. For example, there is a lot more acceptance in America, you feel more valued there.

Peter, a Black male, felt that his race was more important than his gender:

Blacks are not properly represented in the hierarchies of power in terms of being a professor and I don't think there are any Black vice-chancellors, are there? I think race has more of an impact on how you are seen; I come from a middle-class background, but still do not feel accepted into the academy. It is because I am Black; it is because of my racial background.

Nadir, a professor at a traditional leading red-brick university, felt his position as a Muslim man was a threat to his colleagues:

I think I am probably treated... with a 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 not in an academic environment. Because White liberal academics like to champion certain people, they like to have pet projects, but I don't fall into that category. I fall into it because I am brown, but then I fall out if it because I am Muslim. My point is that White liberal academics can have the wrong prejudices; they want people to champion and promote but they prefer them to be non-threatening.

Jaswinder spoke about how her gender, class and race impacted on her role:

There are lots of quite subtle ways in which other senior staff can be sexist to you, even though they are on the same grade as you – they are also professors or senior managers and yet they think that you won't notice their sexism. It's the subtle ways that this works, to make you feel inferior and that you can't do the job. But then the race dynamic comes in and that is really interesting, because their other prejudices of what it means to be Black, brown or mixed comes in and they can't quite place you [and] then because you are a double minority in their eyes and sometimes even a triple minority if you are working class.

Jim, who worked in a prestigious university in the US, spoke about how his identity as a Black gay man impacted on his role as a professor:

Some people treat me with respect and dignity and others tolerate me as a person of colour who is queer and who is interested in social justice policies. I think it's been easier for people to say that my research is 'too political' or 'too subjective' or it is 'not really research' and you have to be careful about that. But I think those labels are based on particular types of prejudice. A Black male is threatening, but a Black queer male is even more threatening to what is considered the stereotype of what a Black male is and what he should look like.

Nita, who had been a professor for five years, spoke about her identity as a working-class woman who was not fully accepted as being American:

My parents are from India and I grew up here but I know there are some prejudices I get from my colleagues – they seem to make me feel that I shouldn't be here, shouldn't be in this space. I have not been to an Ivy League college like some of my colleagues and they know that, so [they] position me as being different to them. There are different kinds of prejudice at play in faculties, and they may not always be related to race.

Intersectionalities of difference such as class, gender and sexuality clearly played a significant part in how BME academics were positioned and placed in universities in the UK and the US. Whilst race clearly has a significant impact on the treatment of BME academics, other factors also play a part in the segregated and racialised spaces of the academy.

Women often felt that their gender as well as their racial identity positioned them as outsiders. In spaces traditionally occupied by White, middle-class men, BME women from working-class backgrounds faced a triple oppression. Many respondents reported a sense in which their own identity as a successful Black academic only ever emerged in a distorted fashion that was distinct from their understanding of who they were. Often the professional identity that emerged was one shaped by the particular desires and stereotypes insisted upon by White colleagues. BME women, for example, felt that in order to negotiate their professional roles as senior leaders they had to exhibit a particular *persona* typified by high levels of professionalism (such as always meeting deadlines or publishing in high-quality journals). If they failed to exhibit such attributes, which, they felt, far exceeded the expectations placed upon White, female colleagues, then they were seen as failing to demonstrate their commitment and levels of professionalism. So for example, where a White colleague might arrange aspects of her professional life (eg, attending meetings or leaving work early) based on childcare responsibilities, Black female academics found that if they needed to make similar arrangements, it would often be regarded as indicative of their *lack* of commitment.

Black gay men also noted an expectation from White colleagues that their work would generally be politically motivated and concentrate on issues of gay or gender politics. For many BME academics, it proved near impossible to present either a professional persona that reflected their personal self or to be accepted within departments if their professional subject matter was not neatly pigeonholed within the specifics of their class, gender or ethnicity. One consequence of this stereotyping was that despite their relative success within academia, many well-respected Black academics still feel like 'outsiders' in their professional lives.

The dynamics of power within departments were centred on a White elite of professors and senior managers who performed roles that understood and privileged their own status, backgrounds and world views. Julie, for example, noted:

Many of the senior people here and those who are in the highest ranks are those who have access to the power and they are the ones who can make the decisions, particularly around who to employ and who to promote. There is an underlying tension for me because I feel these White colleagues are in some ways furthering their own positions by keeping the institution White.

For those colleagues who did not share a White, middle-class background but had still achieved success within the academy, their power was mediated through the different roles assigned to them, for example, 'Melissa is a Black lesbian' or 'Sami is a Muslim African'. Assigning such roles to colleagues was a trite and objectionable response to trying to establish how difference was understood within the workplace. That such behaviour materialised within the most senior ranks of the academy demonstrated very clearly how the ethos of departments and institutions was effectively led and managed by small groups of successful White academics. In particular, race and class accounted for the two most overriding elements of discrimination within universities. Julie went on to say:

There are three types of burdens for us – we are Black, we are women and we are from a working-class background and these things do come to the surface even when you have reached a senior position. But I do firmly believe that it is my race first that positions me and because all universities – by virtue of what we do – are middle class that is also a factor, as is gender.

Gender equality and race

There have been significant advances in the position of women in leadership roles,⁶² although women continue to remain in the minority at the most senior levels such as on senate groups and as vice-chancellors.⁶³ Recent research suggests that women's representation significantly declines at senior management levels. Only 17% of vice-chancellors and principals in the UK are women (29 out of 166 in 2013-14).⁶⁴

62

Lumby (2012)

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Breakwell and Tytherleigh (2008)

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Beer and Manfredi (2014)

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Morley (2013)

There is evidence to suggest that men and women in higher education have differential access to leadership roles.⁶⁵ However, there has been some progress regarding the inclusion and advancement of women in higher education, such as Athena SWAN. The Athena SWAN charter was introduced in June 2005 by ECU as a UK-wide initiative. It was introduced to examine women's participation in science, technology, engineering, medicine and mathematics (STEMM) subjects. Institutions participating in the scheme are awarded a bronze, silver or gold award depending on their ability to demonstrate the advancement of women in these particular areas. The ECU has also recently (September 2013) announced its commitment to race and diversity issues by introducing a Race Equality Charter Mark. This will include a framework that will address race equality in the workplace and explore how institutions are addressing race equality. This mechanism will force institutions to outline how they will specifically address aspects of race equality in the same ways in which gender inequalities have been challenged through Athena SWAN. However, the Race Equality Charter Mark must focus on instigating organisational and cultural change; for example in relation to promotion, career progression and pay. The ECU states that it should not merely be a 'tick-box' exercise so that institutions awarded the charter mark can claim to have dealt with the issue of race equality in their institutions. Such significant advances in gender and race equality instigated by the ECU are positive steps to encourage universities to think about their own practices and procedures in relation to equality and diversity.

In the academy, inequalities of gender appeared to have been tackled in some sense, no doubt in some respect due to the successes of Athena SWAN and the greater political visibility of gender inequalities throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. However, it often appears that gender is taken out of the equation only in relation to middle-class, White women, ie women who share the backgrounds of the traditional academic elites. Women who were additionally understood through a racialised background or from a working-class background found their identities did not sit comfortably within the academic elites. In many respects this also appeared to contribute to the positions made available to them: there is a noticeable concentration of BME academics within post-1992 universities rather than Russell Group universities. The impression of such divisions for an outsider, a potential student from a non-traditional background for example, could well be that Russell Group universities are built around the contexts and expectations of a self-serving, exclusionary, White middle-class.

4. Inequalities in the academy

The REF and race equality

Respondents in the UK were asked about the impact of the REF on their working practices and their institutions as a whole. The REF represents one of the most visible elements of competitiveness within the British academy and in some respects represents a cycle in academic life in which over a seven-year period, academics produce work that is then effectively judged by colleagues with a view to understanding their institutional standing. Many welcomed the REF and saw it as an exercise in 'neutralising ethnicity' and suggested that the REF was based on a set of objective criteria by which individuals (or their work) could be judged. Consequently, the process had the potential to be objective and remove unfair discrimination due to individual or personal circumstances. Julie felt the REF was one opportunity in which BME academics could make a positive contribution. She was heavily involved in her department's submission and was responsible for drafting its narrative account:

Part of the REF process and the build-up towards the REF is the assurance that you have staff who can publish; staff who you know will deliver their four outputs – simple as that. So in some sense, it doesn't matter whether you're Black, White or orange; whether you're male or female, working class or upper class – if you can publish, great. If you can't, you can't. It's about what you can deliver not who you are, though I will admit in other instances it does matter who you are, but for the REF it's about numbers – how many people are there in your department that can deliver four outputs and how many of them can deliver quality that is high level such as a three-star or four-star article – who cares where they're from?.

Others spoke about how the REF process 'neutralises and eliminates ethnicity and creates a level playing field'. However, some respondents did not necessarily agree that the REF was entirely positive. They indicated that the REF was a subjective exercise in which some recognised journals (from the US and UK) would be positioned higher than others (from Africa and Asia). Farida pointed out:

It does matter where you publish and for one to think it does not is being naive. If there are articles that are published in journals which are not well known by the reviewers, then of course those papers will be judged differently to those articles which are in journals that are well known.

Exercises such as the REF tend to highlight the extreme ends of competition within the academy, not least because of the direct relationship that is established between the most influential published research and funding made available to universities. In some respects this accounts for the ability of the most able BME academics to secure positions within elite or Russell Group universities, even if it does not necessarily ensure their successful promotion to senior roles within such institutions. Interviewing very successful BME academics, it is apparent that the intellectual value placed upon journal articles that will score three or four stars in the REF and work that has a high impact or demonstrates an international reputation is at a premium that institutions cannot ignore; by doing so they would undermine their potential funding and status. Therefore, such academics often find the REF a useful counter to the prevailing attitudes and ethos in their departments. In some respects, the REF acts as a reality check for the status quo.

Competition: the need for networks

Many respondents discussed how the current climate of higher education contributed to greater competition between colleagues:

It does seem to be very competitive, [and] people are worried about becoming redundant so that makes them scared and so they look out for themselves. In that way it will matter who your friends are. If you know people who are in senior positions that will help you and they will look out for you. People have become more individual in their outlook because they are only looking out for themselves.

Others felt that it would be them and their junior Black colleagues who would be disadvantaged because of their connections:

I think in this competitive mind-set we will see that those from Black backgrounds will be disadvantaged because they don't have those networks that other White academics have – they don't have friends in other universities who can support them or tell them if there is a job coming up or an opportunity. That networking and association [make] a difference to your career and many Black people don't have those connections, which can be vital in gaining a reputation.

Another respondent also emphasised this point:

It matters more and more who you know and what your connections are in this climate where people are worried they may be unemployed if their course does not recruit enough students. I have seen it happen, [so] if you know people who can help you, they will, and those connections can make the difference between progress and demotion. Black people tend not to have those networks or connections because other [Black people] are not in positions of power where they can make a difference to your career. It is Whites who occupy those positions.

Those respondents working in the US spoke about the insecurity of their careers in the light of significant funding cuts in education and the threat of redundancy, although there is evidence to suggest that job insecurity is a feature of the current labour market in general.⁶⁶ Many respondents indicated that they had to work harder and produce more to be seen as worthy of their jobs and their institutions:

The different changes that we have experienced here in the USA are a reflection of the whole economic crises that is experienced elsewhere and so you are made to work harder, faster and longer hours. You are expected to do much more now than you were five years ago. The workload has doubled and many are fearful [for] their jobs and so don't make any complaints because they want to ensure they are employed. This has created an environment in which everyone feels they have to be working all the time, because if they are seen to slack they will be the first out. Black colleagues are worried because they think they will be the first ones to go.

Others spoke about the competitive nature of the academy and the effect this had on junior members of staff who were applying for tenure:

It is getting harder and harder for the more junior members of staff who have to work harder than we did and they are also faced with the funding cuts and the threats to their jobs. This means the tenure process is much harder and more is required to gain that tenure; more publications, more serving on committees, more teaching, more grant success. With all this pressure it seems that something gets lost in the process of what we are supposed to be doing as academics.

Below the level of senior and very successful academics, there is a fear that competitiveness for job security is far more likely to still privilege those from White, middle-class backgrounds. Respondents in both the UK and US indicated that fragility and risk within the academy were greatly heightened due to the current economic and financial climate, which had resulted in greater competition for new posts and threats of pay cuts, job security and tenure for those already in post. Black academics are less likely than their White counterparts to have access to powerful 'insider' networks in which job offers are made and opportunities for career advancement are discussed. These may include recommendations and access to particular institutions and processes, and friendship networks with 'academic gatekeepers' with the power to provide access to jobs, promotion and funding. There is a fear that 'who you know' often counts higher than 'what you know' when jobs are scarce. As Fiona pointed out:

The academy is very incestuous. A lot of connections are made through being on journal editorial boards and other panels and committees. There are only certain individuals who have access to those kinds of networks. Why is that? It's because they have the right connections, the connections which mean first of all people know who you are and secondly you will be asked. Black colleagues are often disadvantaged because they are not attached to these kinds of networks

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Dixon et al (2013)

In many respects, fears of job insecurity within the academy actively work to promote the interests of the established elites. Whilst it is clear that BME academics in junior positions feel themselves to be vulnerable, a similar sense of exposure and fragility materialises in the professional lives of successful BME academics. As discussed, many successful academics felt they had to occupy and act out a persona that was different from their true identity in order to remain within the boundaries delineated as acceptable for BME academics. Such positioning is heightened at times of insecurity and less likely to be openly challenged if it is feared it could have a significant detrimental impact on future careers. In this respect an environment of insecurity is of great value to elites wishing to maintain their ascendancy. Power relations are established in which even the success of individual BME academics based on their intellectual value to the institution is mitigated by a requirement to marginalise their influence within the institution. So whilst it might be generally assumed that having achieved success, and having demonstrated intellectual capital and secured senior roles within the academy, BME academics would be in a position to direct the future direction of their university – as might be anticipated of their White colleagues – this is not the case. If anything, there is a suspicion that beneath the surface, should a successful BME academic attempt to change the *status quo*, this would be demonstrative of their failing to work within their acceptable persona. In a fragile world this may have serious consequences for their future career.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Whilst it is clear that there have been some advances in improving equality in higher education, there is still a long way to go regarding the full inclusion of BME groups into the academy. In order for significant change to take place, institutions must be proactive in their approaches to equity and inclusion and demonstrate comprehensive programmes of targeted action to demonstrate their commitment towards diversity, equality and inclusion. Despite personal career trajectories that are indicative of their success and ability within academia, many BME academics still report the prevalence of racism in UK and US universities. Much of the racism that they described was acted out in a subtle or covert fashion that would either be unnoticed or could be ignored by senior managers. When confronted by examples of racism, senior managers often dismissed it as an 'exaggeration' or a 'conflict of personalities'. Whilst public displays of overt racism were rare, a more pernicious set of behaviours emerged that mask racist positions by overtly acting out liberal sentiments and by situating individuals within legislative frameworks designed to identify racism. Such behaviours, for example, included respondents feeling excluded in meetings (not given eye contact or asked for their opinions), and constant undermining and criticism of their work or opinions. The promotion of covert racism inevitably further marginalises the professional standing and career progression of BME academics.

The internal cultures of HEIs often present a picture of themselves to the world that highlights liberal sentiments, progressive values and a commitment to meritocracy. Almost instinctively we regard our 'seats of learning' as institutions that rise above the inequalities and injustices of society at large. However, this is clearly too rosy a picture. Within many HEIs, embedded sets of beliefs and internalised codes of collegiality seem to work to reinforce and promote the interests of small elites. This needs to be challenged. Whilst policy legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 is clearly a positive move, such policy works only to curb *public* behaviour in the confines of the largely White, liberal academy. A greater representation of BME individuals is needed in senior positions in higher education and they need to be afforded comparable status with their White counterparts. Such positions cannot be seen as a 'token gesture'; rather, HEIs must think about how their own practices in recruitment, retention and promotion processes can be changed in order that they can contribute to an inclusive equality agenda, and indeed a recognition that racism persists in higher education. As Bhopal and Myers state:

To argue that post-Macpherson has resulted in a post-racial society is utterly absurd. Such discourses serve only to further disadvantage and marginalise Black and minority ethnic communities. Racism exists at every level of society; it permeates our schools, our colleges and our universities. It is alive in all elements of society, our popular culture, our media and the social spaces that we occupy.⁶⁷

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Bhopal and Myers (2011) p7

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ECU (2013)

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ibid p4

Drawing on findings from this stimulus paper, there are several policy recommendations that senior leaders should consider in relation to the inclusion of BME academics in higher education:

During recruitment and promotion processes, greater thought needs to be given to the possibility of unconscious bias. Many institutions implement extensive and systematic data collection regimes to identify the ethnic background of applicants and interpolate such data collection as addressing their commitment to equality of opportunity. Often this does little more than ensure the institution meets its statutory duties through the most basic box-ticking exercise.

Clear and concise monitoring is needed in selection and recruitment processes in which institutions should consider who is applying for which posts, who is shortlisted and why, and who is successful. If there are few BME candidates applying for jobs, universities should explore why this may be the case and be proactive in instigating change in how their institutions are represented in order to attract more candidates from minority backgrounds (eg, in their publicity, marketing and advertising campaigns). Data should be collected during these processes for systematic, regular monitoring and analysed in order to identify specific actions to address the underrepresentation of certain groups. This can be implemented and communicated to equality and diversity committees and diversity managers. A process of transparency is needed to ensure consistency and equity at all stages of the recruitment process.

The Equality Challenge Unit in its recent report⁶⁸ suggests that a process of anonymous shortlisting could help to address issues of inequity during selection processes: such robust and systematic recruitment processes can in fact help to reduce discrimination. The ECU suggests that, 'People and institutions not only have a moral responsibility for their implicit biases, but a business responsibility; institutions need to be efficient and effective, and decisions and actions need to be taken based on evidence and fact, rather than stereotypes and hunches.'⁶⁹

Similar processes regarding transparency and monitoring should also be used for promotion processes, particularly in relation to those who are applying for promotion to senior academic and managerial posts. Regular monitoring of data should take place, covering who is applying for promotion; which stage of the promotion process individuals are reaching; and who is successful. Such data should be analysed in a robust, standard and consistent way in order to ensure that decisions are made based on fairness and transparency. Again the collation of statistics relating to promotion within departments needs to be a starting point for the implementation of action to redress inequalities rather than be regarded as an end in itself.

Institutions should also examine the types of support they offer to colleagues who are considering promotion to senior managerial and academic roles, such as offering training for the application process and interview. This would also demonstrate the institution's commitment to staff retention.

Institutions should consider the development of formal support networks for BME and other minority staff. Faculty and diversity managers should explore how such formal networks can work to enhance access to developmental opportunities through mentoring processes. Whilst the existence of informal support networks have shown to be extremely important for BME groups,⁷⁰ the development of formal networks has the potential to provide individuals with access to information and resources to assist and guide them in their career trajectories and increase exposure to key people and organisations (for example, representation on decision-making bodies such as internal and external REF panels and senate).

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Bhopal and Jackson (2013)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education for providing financial support for this stimulus paper, and particularly Helen Goreham and Jane Bebbington for their continued support throughout the process. I am grateful to Martin Myers, John Lumby, Daniel Muijs, Mark Pease and the two anonymous reviewers for reading earlier drafts and providing useful and insightful comments.

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Biography

Kalwant Bhopal is Reader in Education at the University of Southampton. She has published widely on the experiences of BME and White marginalised groups. She is currently carrying out research (funded by the Equality Challenge Unit) exploring minority ethnic academic flight from UK higher education. She is also writing a book (to be published by Routledge in 2015) on the experiences of BME academics in universities in the UK and the US.

Notes

Notes

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