



## Fighting the tide: Understanding the difficulties facing Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Doctoral Students' pursuing a career in Academia

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# Fighting the tide: Understanding the difficulties facing Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Doctoral Students' pursuing a career in Academia

## Introduction

There are a plethora of issues within higher education (HE) which continually reinforce aspects of inequality and discrimination. These particular issues are aligned to institutionally racist structures, which continue to disadvantage and oppress Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)<sup>1</sup> individuals attempting to navigate their academic careers within the Academy (Leading Routes, 2019).

In September 2019, Leading Routes produced a ground-breaking report which revealed that there were a total of 15,560 full time United Kingdom (UK) domiciled PhD students in their first year of study and just 3% of those students were Black (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 2019). A Freedom of Information request to UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) revealed that over the last three academic years (2016/2017–2018/2019) of the total 19,868 PhD funded studentships awarded by UKRI research councils collectively, 245 (1.2%) were awarded to Black or Black Mixed students, with just 30 of those being from Black Caribbean backgrounds (Leading Routes, 2019).

A contradictory position often adopted within the Academy posits universities as being a micro-cosm or a reflection of society. The counter-narrative to this – is that within HE there continues to remain a dearth of BAME representation among academic staff workforces, which is not reflective of ever-increasing diverse, university student populations (AdvanceHE, 2018; Alexander & Arday, 2015; Arday, 2019; Bhopal et al., 2016). Historically, HE within the UK has been situated within a White, Eurocentric majority context, which has often conflicted with egalitarian ideals associated with diversification and representation within predominantly White spaces (Arday, 2019; Tate & Bagguley, 2017). The constant disillusionment with discriminatory practices in academia has seen a subtle resistance begin to emerge in relation to challenging the existing normative orthodoxy and the overt racial inequality which permeates issues such as BAME university access and transition; BAME attainment gap; racialised experiences of BAME academics within HE; and the barriers faced by BAME academics attempting career progression within HE (Arday, 2017; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal, 2014; Shilliam, 2014).

## BAME representation and diversification in HE

Recent discourses and social commentaries have begun to explore and reveal the depth and extent to which institutional racism pervades within HE and its continual systematic disadvantaging of BAME individuals (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Rollock, 2016; Law, 2017). The packaging of HE curricula has historically resembled a dominant Eurocentric curriculum, often omitting particular canons of knowledge subsequently leaving BAME individuals on the periphery of academia. Contention emerges when considering the types of embodied knowledge that are valued within normative White academic spaces (Andrews, 2019; Leonardo, 2002; 2016). Attempts to

decolonise the existing curriculum within HE, have often resulted in a reluctance to acknowledge the role that BAME individuals play in explaining and relaying their own histories, in a way that is not distorted or conveniently processed for the 'consumer' (Andrews, 2019; Pilkington, 2013). Such contexts are further exacerbated when aspects of representation and diversification are considered, especially as numbers continue to increase with regards to the number of ethnic minority students entering HE. Presently, ethnic minorities are healthily represented within the sector, with just under half of the UK's student population coming from the BAME backgrounds (AdvanceHE, 2018; HESA, 2019). Sadly, this is not reflected in the recruitment of academic staff, particularly when focusing on the lowly percentage of BAME academics within UK universities which constitute just 13% of the academic workforce throughout the sector (Alexander & Arday, 2015; AdvanceHE, 2018).

Commentaries examining (Alexander & Arday, 2015; Arday, 2017; Mirza, 2018) racial discourse within education, aligned to inequality have highlighted concerns regarding issues concerning marginalisation and adequate career progression opportunities for BAME individuals. The AdvanceHE Statistical report 2017/2018 suggests that BAME individuals within HE institutions are less likely to benefit from permanent or open-ended contracts of employment in comparison to their White counterparts (AdvanceHE, 2018). Despite legislation (Equality Act, 2010; Race Relations Act, 1976) to address inequality within society which often pertains to rhetoric, evidence suggests that BAME staff and students continue to experience significant disadvantage in HE in comparison to their White counterparts (Leading Routes, 2019; Mirza, 2018). Within HE matters of representation and diversification are often intertwined with race equality documents which are used as a barometer and indicator for equality and diversity practices and competence (Ahmed, 2012). Similarly, Pilkington (2013) notes that such surface approaches often provide a masquerade for the underlying issues which allow racial inequality to be fluidly maintained and flourish through overt and covert discriminatory institutional mechanisms.

The present context for addressing issues of race inequality and systematic racism within HE institutions lies in the hands of senior university stakeholders and administrators, best positioned to prioritise this agenda (Arday, 2018; Miller, 2016). Central to this argument is the need to prioritise diverse staff populations to reflect better representation. Disappointingly, this often ranks low on the agenda of senior university stakeholders tasked with the responsibility of facilitating equality endeavours (Arday, 2018; Miller, 2016). Current strategies for challenging inequality have led many to question the extent to which HE institutions are addressing issues concerning racial inequities, particularly regarding access to HE for aspiring BAME academics (Bhopal et al., 2016; Boliver, 2016; Leading Routes, 2019; Rollock, 2016). Further research (Arday, 2018; Leadership Foundation, 2015) also signifies the dearth of BAME staff at senior management level and Professorial level, when drawing comparisons with White counterparts. Most notably the extent of this paucity has been illuminated within the Staying Power report produced by Dr Nicola Rollock (Reader in Equality and Education at Goldsmiths, University of London) which explores the career experiences and strategies of UK Black Female professor. Rollock's report elucidated that within the UK (at the time the report was published in February 2019) only 27 Professors were Black women in British HE. This inequity is compounded with other statistical lacerations revealing alarming disproportionate figures which indicate that overall, there are just under 20,000 University Professors within the UK, with over 14,500 being White Men (AdvanceHE, 2018). Compared with only 150 Professors from BAME backgrounds (AdvanceHE, 2018; Rollock, 2019). In attempting to unpack such inequality it is important to acknowledge recruitment processes which continuously facilitate unconscious and implicit biases which inevitably disadvantage BAME individuals wishing to pursue academic careers (Arday, 2019).

Research undertaken by Mirza (2018) suggests that these types of biases occur automatically and are triggered by making judgments and assessments of people's capabilities and situations, influenced by backgrounds, cultural capitals and personal experiences. Arday (2019) states that individuals in positions of power and authority must recognise and acknowledge potential

personal biases and mitigate their impact on tacit and instinctive behaviours and decision-making. This anecdote becomes a powerful tool for the validation of existing racial inequality within HE when we begin to integrate which institutional actors maintain power and perhaps more pertinently how is this power exercised (Andrews, 2019; Modood, 2012). Traditionally, Gillborn (2008) asserts that the beneficiaries of power and privilege within academia have been White-middle class individuals. This cycle of inequality has been maintained by prevailing, normative orthodoxies which are reinforced through various facets of inequity and disparity (Ahmed, 2012; Mirza, 2015). Consequently, the landscape of academia operates within a patriarchal, hegemonic normatively White backdrop, where White privilege is consciously and unconsciously advocated as habitual practice, which subsequently marginalises and excludes ethnic minority groups (Arday, 2017; McIntosh, 1990; Warren, 2007). Research indicates (Alexander & Arday, 2015; Burke, 2012; Pilkington, 2013) that attempts to address racial inequality within HE have been regarded as futile and underpinned by rhetoric and superficial endeavour in attempting to readdress the imbalance of equality regarding racial discrimination in HE (AdvanceHE, 2018; Arday & Mirza, 2018). Dominant discourses suggest that insidious racism and organisational discrimination have become interwoven into the fabric of universities, with the authenticity of targeted widening participation interventions now heavily scrutinised and criticised for failing to address the structural and cultural inequalities that discrimination thrives upon within the sector (Ahmed, 2012; Law, 2017).

### ***Equality and policy interventions***

Equality policies tasked with dismantling inequality and discrimination often fall short of their desired remit, with regards to increasing diversification and reducing marginalisation of minority groups (Ahmed, 2012). Infrastructures for implementing equality initiatives by university institutions are often weak as this issue has historically retained low priority status (Bhopal, 2014). Universities in particular have been accused of prioritising this agenda only when tangible rewards and positive external exposure are to be gained (Tate & Bagguley, 2017). Within HE, initiatives such as Athena SWAN have primarily targeted inequity situated around gender inequality, with a particular focus towards encouraging and recognising commitment to advancing the careers of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine (STEMM) within HE and research. This became the catalyst for the potential advances that could be made with regards to dismantling racial inequality within the sector.

Recent commentaries concerning this discourse claim that cynically, commitment by universities to address inequality are advanced by the potential for increased external funding streams and improved university league table placings (Ahmed, 2012; Arday & Mirza, 2018). Such endeavour often undermines the authenticity of initiatives which have a specific remit to address and target inequality (Shilliam, 2015). Importantly, most equality initiatives have historically concentrated predominately on gender inequality, resulting in gradual but positive institutional advancements concerning this particular agenda, particularly in relation to the installation of women in senior leadership positions within the Academy with modest advancements also made towards reducing the gender pay gap (AdvanceHE, 2018). However, there still remains a paucity of initiatives which specifically target racial inequality. Within UK HE, the development and initiation of the AdvanceHE Race Equality Charter Mark provides a framework for university institutions to examine, identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers which disadvantage minority ethnic staff and students. This initiative attempts to remove the long-held complacency entrenched within university cultures which have previously disregarded or neglected issues of equity, diversity and equality. Historically, the importance of this issue has regularly received secondary status within university institutions, as race continues to remain an

uncomfortable narrative to unpack in the predominately White terrain of academia (Ahmed, 2012; Arday, 2019).

Tate and Bagguley (2017) state that resistant attitudes towards challenging racial inequality within HE often promote cultures which view developing awareness of discrimination and diversification as laborious and arduous resulting in racial inequality remaining interwoven within our institutions. The contexts provided resonate with Ahmed's (2007) notion of the politics of diversity, which aligns itself with image management rather than challenging, disrupting and decentering normative Whiteness within academia. Essentially, the normativity of Whiteness in its various operant guises ensures that diligent examinations of racism often succumb to nominal and non-committed endeavour within HE institutions (Leonardo, 2009).

### **Micro-aggressions and Whiteness within the Academy**

The entrenchment of these racist cultures for BAME academics that already reside within the Academy are maintained through micro-aggressions, which sort to undermine and demean the presence of ethnic minorities within HE spaces (Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Rollock, 2012). Micro-aggressions for many BAME academics become indicative of the insidious racism that transpires fluidly through daily overt and covert mechanisms. This becomes a significant contributing factor to many BAME academics made to question and examine their own academic and professional capabilities (Arday, 2019). Du Bois' notion of double consciousness encapsulates this lived reality within academia for many BAME individuals. The racial micro-aggressions is carefully articulated through subtle persistent daily reoccurrences which attempt to position faculty of colour as incapable or inferior to their White counterparts (Rollock, 2012). The identification of a more subtle type of racism, conflicts with a political and legal commitment to address overt racism and race equality within education (Law, 2017). Within this context, confusions of racism are underestimated and situated within a narrow and unsophisticated version of racism which is considered only to exist in overt forms (Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Arday (2019) contends that the viewing of racism through such a constrained lens reduces 'racism' to merely the recording of racist incidents which only transpire outside of the 'egalitarian' Academy.

Importantly, for BAME Doctoral students the dearth of academics of colour within the Academy, only serves to remind that entry into the Academy for ethnic minorities remains problematic with regards to access and opportunities, as targeted diversification and representation of BAME academic staff continues to remain an after-thought (Leading Routes, 2019).

Academia has been a vehicle for the symptomatic ways in which Whiteness is constructed as normative, and illustrates how differing discursive techniques of White privilege operate together to racialize, marginalise and exclude ethnic minorities from academic spaces (Modood, 2012). As power becomes the operative, it is essential to observe institutional occurrences and the impact on representation and experiences of faculty and students of colour (Arday, 2019). These occurrences operate within a reluctance to diagnose and prioritise institutional racism. For BAME Doctoral students many of their experiences draw parallels with ethnic minority academics that have already traversed the invidious terrain of academia (Leonardo, 2009).

Such proclamations situated in colourblindness only illustrate the continual devaluation of race as a trivial issue which has become over-sensationalised, with people of colour now being perceived as hyper-sensitive or forever 'playing the race card'. Such assertions remain a definitive 'tool of whiteness' that sorts to distract from the continuous victimisation of BAME individuals within the Academy and society more generally (Leonardo, 2016). Unfortunately, the centrality of Whiteness, allows for the normativity of racism to fluently pervade as many individuals within the Academy continue to consciously and unconsciously benefit from institutional racism, discrimination and inequality at the long-suffering expense of academics of colour (Dei et al., 2004; Leonardo, 2016). Picower (2009) comments on the wide range of ideological, emotional and

performative tools utilised to maintain hegemonic understandings of race in accordance with normativity. Hence, the manifestation of Whiteness within academia aligns itself with a symbolically violent legacy which continually and residually affects the mental health and wellbeing of BAME academic staff (Arday, 2018). Ominously, while this is a significant factor in attempting to understand the racialized experiences of BAME individuals within the Academy, Gillborn (2008) asserts that 'Whiteness' and 'White privilege' does not sufficiently reveal the multi-faceted power and domination of this phenomena. In essence, it becomes impossible to determine the effect of such dominant cycles of power and privilege and the effect they have upon ethnic minority groups within the Academy, due to the fluid normativity of these hegemonic behaviours.

Within the Academy there is an overwhelming disconnect between actions and words espoused by HE institutions regarding race equality (Ahmed, 2012). The rhetoric surrounding commitment by HE institutions to develop their equality and diversity practices around recruitment, promotion and student attainment remains questionable, with the continual inequitable landscape. Comprehensive initiatives implemented by universities lack the targeted and penetrative action required to systematically dismantle and fragment racial inequality within HE, with monitoring protocols rarely evaluated for impact and effectiveness by senior university administrators within institutions (Mirza, 2018). The introduction of the AdvanceHE Race Equality Charter in January 2015 provided a seminal moment for universities throughout the UK to prioritise and advance this agenda by developing targeted interventions against a set of equality benchmarks that have attempted to penetrate the perniciousness of structural, cultural and systemic racism within the sector (Arday, 2019). The relatively recent implementation of this initiative means that the long-term potency of this scheme remains under continuous evaluation particularly in the ever-changing face of existing racial inequalities (Andrews, 2019; Arday & Mirza, 2018).

### ***Concluding thoughts***

As custodians of the Academy we must continue to challenge and hold universities to account with regards to recognising and acknowledging the importance of having culturally, diverse HE institutions which are reflective of an ever-increasing multi-cultural society. If HE continues to remain the province of the White middle-class, this will continue to compromise and contradict all the ideals we associate with the university being a reflection of egalitarianism and inclusivity. Greater urgency is required by the sector and senior stakeholders within university institutions to address disproportionate levels of under-representation concerning BAME academics in HE (Arday, 2017; Arday & Mirza, 2018). Universities must aim to develop targeted initiatives which actively identify potential BAME students at undergraduate and postgraduate level and support their trajectory towards pursuing an academic career. Future scholars must be supported with applications for studentships at Masters and Doctoral level, in addition to being provided with reciprocal and equitable mentorship opportunities (Leading Routes, 2019).

A tectonic shift within HE is required to address the discriminatory and exclusionary topography of the sector. Targeted strategies should encourage the development of communities of practice and peer-mentoring initiatives with a specific remit towards developing bespoke support and targeted interventions such as career progression support and access to extensive networks (Leading Routes, 2019). Research awarding bodies must also reflect on their distribution of funded PhD Studentship awards to Black and ethnic minorities as the number receiving such awards are appallingly nominal, in comparison to White applicants (Leading Routes, 2019). Comprehensive and funded approaches towards mentoring BAME individuals with an ambition to pursue a career in academia must be developed in conjunction with academics of colour traversing this process to ensure agency and equity within the process (Arday, 2017). Presently, these types of formal support mechanisms are non-existent for ethnic minorities within UK HE institutions (Law, 2017). There is also a need for universities to engage and work more

collaboratively with policy and public-facing equality organisations such as AdvanceHE; The Runnymede Trust and the newly formed Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) in HE in a bid to procure pertinent counsel on suitable and effective equality intervention. University institutions also have a responsibility to recognise the impact of cultural, structural and organisational spaces within the Academy and their continued influence in perpetuating and sustaining discriminatory cultures.

Developing an appetite to engage in difficult conversations concerning race and racism and the dynamics that impact this such as power and privilege are essential in sustaining anti-racist momentum. This is imperative if we are to prioritise racial discrimination and inequality as a persistent problem within HE. The acknowledgment of this is paramount in attempting to eliminate racism and create a truly inclusive Academy.

## Note

1. Commentators suggest the use of precise descriptions regarding the ethnic background when describing research findings (Bradby, 2003; McKenzie & Crowcroft, 1996). For the purposes of this paper, the term Black and Minority Ethnic and the abbreviation BAME will be used to refer to people who are from ethnic backgrounds other than white British (including Black African, African Caribbean, Asian, Latin-American and other minority ethnic communities) with more precise descriptions used where appropriate. There is a recognition, however, that the term BAME is not universally accepted in spite of its use within the British vernacular. It is important to acknowledge that the term BAME, despite its widespread use, has severe limitations and usually follows non-specific quantifiers such as 'most' or 'some' (Glover & Evison, 2009). Typically, there has been an accepted use of the term BAME, which has been illustrated in research and Government papers. Given the purpose of this paper, this term is applied purely as a descriptive term having been the preferred term for most of the participants throughout this study.

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Jason's research focuses on Race, Education, Intersectionality and Social Justice. He sits on the following trade union equality committees; Trade Union Congress (TUC) Race Relations Committee; University and College Union (UCU) Black Members' Standing Committee and the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) Working Group on BME Participation in Postgraduate Research. Jason is also part of the Universities UK Advisory Group on tackling racial harassment of students. He is a Graduate of the Operation Black Vote (OBV) MP Parliamentary Scheme, a scheme focused on unearthing the next generation of ethnic minority Parliamentarians.

Jason is the author of the following titles: *Considering Racialized Contexts in Education: Using Reflective Practice and Peer-Mentoring to support Black and Ethnic Minority educators* (Routledge); *Being Young, Black and Male: Challenging the dominant discourse* (Palgrave); and *Exploring Cool Britannia and Multi-Ethnic Britain: Uncorking the Champagne Supernova* (Routledge). He is the Co-Editor of the highly acclaimed *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy* (Palgrave) with Professor Heidi Mirza (Goldsmiths, University of London).

Jason also serves on the *Editorial Boards of Educational Philosophy and Theory*; and the British Sociological Association (BSA) journal *Sociology*.

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