

# Exploring black and minority ethnic (BME) doctoral students' perceptions of an academic career

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report explores black and minority ethnic (BME) doctoral research students' perceptions of an academic career. The purpose of the research is to explore the experiences of BME doctoral students and the impact of these on their perceptions of the attractiveness of an academic career. The report provides a qualitative snapshot of the challenges faced by BME postgraduate research students (PGR). The interplay between personal, economic and social factors including ethnicity, overt and covert racism, and marginalisation are explored. A strong appetite for pursuing an academic career was identified. This, alongside a number of themes such as the importance of supervisory and mentoring support; feelings of marginalisation and isolation; the impact of subject choice; and access to teaching and research opportunities were explored.

The report is based on interviews and survey work with 20 BME doctoral students from a range of academic disciplines.

There remains a paucity of empirical, evidence-based knowledge in this area. This report endeavours to add to the growing literature on higher education, equality and diversity and social justice

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## INTRODUCTION

This report explores BME doctoral research students' perceptions of an academic career in the United Kingdom. The purpose of the research is to examine the experiences of BME doctoral students and the impact of these on their perceptions of progressing to an academic career. The term 'black and minority ethnic' is used in a political sense to refer to people who are descended, through one or both parents, from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia (the Middle-East to China), mixed heritage, Latin America and those who define themselves as 'other'.

## BME REPRESENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

There is a mixed pattern of representation of those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds across both the student and staff cohort in the higher education sector. The Equality Challenge Unit has published statistical data that articulates this well.

## UNDERGRADUATE STUDY

BME students are more likely to progress to higher education institutions (HEIs) than their white counterparts. 2013/14 data showed that students from Asian and other ethnic origins were most likely to progress (64% and 63% respectively). This was followed by students from black (61%), mixed (51%), and white (45%) ethnic backgrounds. As a proportion, BME students made up 20.2% of the student population in the same year, compared to their 14% representation at wider population level. After this point however, the story is one of underrepresentation. Retention, attainment and destination statistics are all dramatically poorer for students from BME backgrounds (ECU, 2015).

In 2013/14, 91% of white UK entrants continued or qualified from their degree course compared to 87.9% of BME students. There is significant variation between ethnic groups with an 11.1 percentage point difference between the highest and lowest rates (93.8% for Chinese entrants, and 82.7% for entrants from any other black background) (ECU, 2015).

Amongst qualifiers aged 21 and under, 75.6% of qualifiers from white backgrounds received a first class or upper second degree compared with 60.4% of qualifiers from BME backgrounds. Gendered differences are notable here. 80.3% of white women achieved a first class or upper second class degree, compared to 74.5% of white males. The corresponding figures for BME students were significantly lower overall, but showed less variance between BME women (66.9%) and BME men (62.6%) (ECU, 2015).

Six months after qualifying, 61.5% of white leavers were in full-time work compared with 53.9% of BME leavers (ECU, 2015).

## HIGHER LEVEL STUDY

A higher proportion of BME graduates were in full-time or part-time study (12.0% and 1.3% respectively) than their white counterparts, 10.2% and 0.9% respectively). With regards to progression to further higher level study, BME students are more likely than their white counterparts to transition to taught masters courses but less likely to go on to research or other postgraduate research courses (HEFCE, 2013).

At doctoral level, Shilliam (2014) states that while black (peoples of African heritage) are over-represented at undergraduate and taught masters level, although



still fairly equitable, this trend stops at PhD level where 3.1% of UK domiciled doctoral students are black compared to 3.3% of the general population. Shilliam reveals that 46.2% of black doctoral students are enrolled on doctoral programmes in a part-time capacity within the UK. Significantly, this statistic equates to the largest percentage of part-time students across all ethnic groups (ECU, 2012; ECU, 2015; HESA, 2016).

Attrition rates are fairly high for doctoral students across all ethnicities. HEFCE research indicates that 72.9% of the 11,625 students from the UK or the EU who began full-time doctorates in 2010-11 will obtain a degree within seven years. The same figure for the 2009-10 cohort was 70.1% and 70.5% for the 2008-09 cohort. There is very little research on PhD completion rates by ethnicity. In the USA, however, a recent study revealed completion rates of 47% for African Americans, 10%t lower than for the overall cohort (US, Department for Education, 2013).

### **STAFF, SALARIES AND CAREER PROGRESSION**

BME academics are less likely to occupy professorial positions, are more likely to encounter issues of wage disparity and are significantly less likely to gain employment opportunities in higher education more generally. They are also less likely to benefit from a permanent/open-ended contract of employment (Alexander and Arday, 2015; ECU, 2013; ECU, 2014).

Research examining racial discourse in education (Alexander and Arday, 2015; Gillborn, 2008; Lander, 2011; Mirza, 2008), has highlighted concern about marginalisation and the adequacy of career progression opportunities for BME individuals. Kalwant Bhopal (2014) found that rather than overt

experiences of exclusion and racial discrimination; 'subtle, covert exclusionary processes related to... ethnicity... resulted in differential treatment'.

HESA (2014) data found that amongst all staff working in higher education, 13.9% of staff of known ethnicity are from an ethnic minority. At the 2011 census, 14% of the resident population in England and Wales was non-white. As such, representation at all-staff level can be said to be fairly representative. The figures become more disproportionate at academic staff level and beyond. Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) data published in 2015 found that 8.2% of the UK-national academic staff population were BME. Whilst this represented a 39.3% increase on 2003/4 levels, there is poor representation of BME staff at academic level (ECU, 2015).

ECU found that overall, 11.2% of UK white academic staff were professors. The same figure for UK BME academic staff was 9.8%. However, there was significant variation among the different ethnic groups. Chinese (14.0%), and other ethnicity (13.5%) staff were more likely to hold professorial roles than their Asian (9.8%), mixed (7.8%) or black (7.5%) counterparts. Among non-UK academic staff, 4.3% of BME staff were professors compared to 9.4% of white non-UK academic staff. The latest HESA data recorded no academic staff in managers, directors or senior officials in 2015/16 (HESA, 2016).

Intersectionality is important here. Experiences and perceptions are complex and not homogenous. Ethnicity, class, gender, age and UK/non-UK distinctions as well as other elements of identity also impact upon lived experiences.



Among UK higher education staff, women comprised the majority of all ethnic groups apart from the other category (46.2%). For both white and BME staff, gender imbalances were more pronounced for professors than for non-professors. 70.2% of professors were white men and 20.9% were white women (a difference of 49.3 percentage points). In comparison, the statistics for BME academics were significantly lower but showed less male-female variance. 7.1% of professors were BME men and 1.8% were BME women (a 5.3 percentage point difference) (ECU, 2015).

Last, differential salary rates have been observed between white and BME staff. 31.3% of UK white staff earned over £50,000, compared to 28.9% of UK BME staff (HESA, 2016; ECU, 2015).

### PURPOSE AND NATURE OF RESEARCH

Obtaining a PhD is the first step on the core pathway to an academic career. Gaining insight into the experiences and perceptions of BME students could shed some light on why we see poor representation of BME staff across academic roles and occupa-

tional groups. This research complements the recent work of UCU's Black Members' Standing Committee. *Witness* chronicles the lived experiences and inequalities faced by black members working in further and higher education. The short film production details narratives aligned to experiences of overt and covert racism, discrimination and inequality.

Twenty BME doctoral research students participated in the study. Respondents were studying at 16 different universities across the UK and were predominantly from arts and humanities disciplines. Respondents were majority female and mainly UK national students. Participants completed a semi-structured questionnaire, followed by a semi-structured interview undertaken between January and March 2016. Participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous.

The size of the sample means that the findings are not statistically representative of the BME student cohort. The findings do, however, support current discourse and contribute effectively to the field given the uniqueness of the research.

**Table 1: The sample (20 questionnaires and interviews)**

Gender	Male	4
	Female	16
Ethnic Origin	Asian	2
	Black	8
	Black White and Mixed Heritage	7
	Other	3
Age Group	30 and under	10
	31-40	5
	41-55	5
Nationality	UK	14
	Non-UK	6



## KEY THEMES

### APPETITE FOR AN ACADEMIC CAREER

Overall, there was a strong appetite for pursuing an academic career post-PhD. All but one respondent indicated that they would like to progress to an academic role with respondents highlighting the teaching and research opportunities as attractive features of this career. Some respondents felt that their background could provide additional inspiration to some of the student cohort. In many cases, respondents indicated that they felt that equal access to the Academy did not exist for individuals from a minority ethnic background.

*My enjoyment of research and writing hasn't faded, despite having undergone quite a long and drawn out PhD experience (I've been a part time student, self-financing and working alongside my PhD), and I feel I still have a contribution to make to my field.*  
(Respondent, questionnaire)

*I want to further my understanding of my topic area through rigorous research and share this knowledge with undergraduate students through teaching. Importantly I would also like to pursue [an] academic career in order to use my expertise and knowledge collaboratively.*  
(Respondent, questionnaire)

*The paucity of BME academics in my subject fields means that I bring the voice from the margin to these areas, and in the same way that my black supervisors have inspired me, it would be nice to think that I could do that for others.*  
(Respondent, questionnaire)

*The stats... are definitely against you as a BME academic... especially if you are a woman... If*

*I am honest... as a black person in academia you have to be open to considering opportunities abroad, particularly if your research areas are aligned to race.*

(Respondent, questionnaire)

*I think that as an international student... it would be very hard to get a job with the new government regulations with regards to having to earn over £35,000 a year, so this makes it very difficult... So if even you are the best candidate, it means that you will not be given the opportunity and universities would not risk this...*

(Female, Other, interview)

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT

Whilst the majority of respondents expressed a desire to pursue an academic career, a number of themes in relation to perceptions about the ease and attractiveness of this emerged. One such theme was the importance of mentoring and supervisory support during PhD study, and through progression to an academic role.

Academic careers benefit significantly from formal and informal support structures. In most cases, this becomes the navigation point in relation to understanding the topography of academia. The significance of such structures tends to be pivotal, as the advice provided becomes the compass point through which career progression can be successfully navigated.

*Bespoke mentoring is so important, in helping to minimise challenges faced by aspiring BME academics. It is so important for those structures to be there in place because that mentoring helps in navigating career opportunities and avoiding the difficulties that so many BME academics encounter.*

(Respondent, questionnaire).



*In academia, my experience tells me... that my white counterparts are provided with more informal mentoring experiences which allow them to develop personal and professional relationships that are particularly fruitful over a period of time. This normally results in getting certain types of opportunities which advance career progression in academia. This type of mentoring... in truth is very rarely made available to BME academics...*

(Respondent, questionnaire)

Whilst it was recognised that BME doctoral students do not automatically require a BME mentor, respondents alluded to a sense that the paucity of BME academics in academia means that receiving appropriate support and bespoke mentorship can sometimes be challenging.

*I think that there is a network of a few black academics that do exist in institutions in Britain... and a lot of them know how difficult it is for black PhD students... so I have been fortunate to be able to access the few black academics available for guidance and mentoring.*

(Male, Mixed Heritage, interview)

Some of the respondents acknowledged that they were fortunate to be in a position where they were able to access mentoring and support from a senior BME academic that had traversed the terrain of academia. This support was highlighted as particularly beneficial as similarity in experiences of inequality and how to navigate this terrain were perceived to be valuable and enlightening for BME doctoral students attempting to navigate an academic career.

*I have been fortunate... particularly in a predominantly all white department, to have two senior BME academics in a supervisory capacity who provide me with what I would describe as 'bespoke' support, as they are fully*

*aware of the racism that I will encounter in attempting to pursue a career within academia.*  
(Respondent, questionnaire)

Contrastingly, it was also felt by some respondents that senior BME academics were not always forthcoming in providing pastoral support or informal career mentorship to BME academics.

*I think the idea that BME academics support one another in the Academy is not always true... personally speaking I have reached out to several prominent senior BME academics and in all honesty they have not always been the most supportive and generous with their time. It is very disappointing especially as you always hear this rhetoric which suggests that as people of colour we need to help each other out in the Academy.*

(Female, Mixed Heritage, interview).

The respondents had different expectations of their mentors whether in formal or informal capacities, and recognised the importance of both of these roles.

## FEELINGS OF MARGINALISATION AND ISOLATION

The BME doctoral students that participated in this study spoke about their experiences as a BME individual within higher education, and how these experiences had resulted in micro-aggressions and differential treatment at times that was hard to quantify but resulted in feelings of marginalisation, isolation and exclusion. These experiences were referred to as the subtle undertones associated with institutionalised racism and racial discrimination.

*I have been in several situations where students and staff have mentioned to me... that there is a lecture about to take place, presuming that I am the cleaner, and I have to*





*make it explicitly clear that I am the lecturer not 'the cleaner' as they would see it... a position and challenge you are continuously confronted with as a BME academic.*

(Male, Mixed Heritage, interview)

*I quite often get mistaken for a student. This has resulted in possible situations of conflict in regards to the access of resources such as classrooms and staff-only areas.*

(Respondent, questionnaire)

*Continuous micro-aggressions... affect your confidence over time. You have to have resilience as a BME academic to pull through it because that isolation and marginalisation can happen very quickly in a higher education space.*

(Female, Mixed Heritage, interview)

*As a BME person in academia you do feel isolated and conscious that your experiences are not the kind of thing you can freely articulate... You do worry about making people feel uncomfortable and awkward so you keep it to yourself and this internalisation can really dent your confidence in a big way.*

(Male, Black, interview)

Career progression for BME doctoral students remains problematic. Alexander and Arday (2015) Bhopal and Jackson (2013) and ECU (2013) research indicates that opportunities to pursue a career in academia are not readily available to aspiring BME academics. Such disparity undermines university attempts to address issues of widening participation within the Academy.

### **MEMBERSHIP OF THE 'CLUB', 'THE OUTSIDER' AND 'SPECIALIST IN RACE' TYPECASTING**

Many respondents alluded to the sense of feeling like an outsider, due to informal exclusionary practices.

*I'm constantly faced with the kind of bias that is perhaps more insidious than outright, in-your-face, racial slurs – the effect of the subterranean racism, which in some ways is much harder to brush away, is that it chips away at your confidence slowly but surely. Example: I'm a home student, born and raised in the UK, went through the British school system... arrived at my current institution with a Masters with Distinction from a Russell Group University with a certain amount of prestige in my research field. Despite this, all of which was information my supervisor had, after reading a short piece of my written work a few months into my degree, he expressed with undisguised surprise that my 'English was actually quite good.*

(Respondent, questionnaire)

*I think the biggest barrier, in terms of my own experience, has been a lack of access to the informal networks of influence that do exist in university departments. I don't socialise with my departmental colleagues, simply because aside from the multiple commitments I have on my time as a self-financing student, I'm an observant Muslim, so the pub – the general location of choice – is an environment I'm not entirely at ease in. I realise this doesn't foreclose my social engagement with colleagues, but there is a resistance on their part that is not often factored for. The onus is always placed on me to integrate, yet the academic willing to accommodate in the opposite direction is, I have found, extremely rare. There are, consequently, lots of missed opportunities for networking. This influence of the social element extends, I have observed, to who is and who isn't... allocated teaching experience, or opportunity for collaboration, included in funding bids, etc.*

(Respondent, questionnaire)

Respondents were studying across a wide range of subject disciplines, however, those



who were exploring race within their discipline felt that their subject could lead to them being typecast as the academic specialising in race. It was felt that this could often present as a limiting factor for career progression.

*The challenges are that as a BME academic... it is hard to get published particularly in Britain where race is not taken as seriously... Therefore it makes it more difficult to get published... we tend to be pigeon-holed because we talk about race... and so therefore we are not seen as sociologists... or ethnographers we are just seen as 'the race person'... which can be very limiting and narrowing. I think often we are not connected into the wider network of academics... where by proxy we are not invited into editorial boards or become research assistants... and all these types of things... I think these are the major issues.*

(Male, Mixed Heritage, interview)

A reoccurring theme throughout this study was the challenge presented by often being the only person of colour within their university faculty. Several respondents felt that unconscious bias also facilitates inequalities which disadvantage marginalised groups within the academy:

*You automatically stick out and if you are writing about race... institutions do not want to hear about it... so you are already rubbing people up the wrong way before even opening your mouth... additionally research grants are not funding race research and that is an issue.*

(Female, Asian, interview)

*In terms of pursuing a potential career as a BME person... all you can do is work hard and hope. It's pretty bleak to be honest... which is why I do think we need scholarships for BME students and even then, I think you have to have an awful lot of resilience... I mean I hasten*

*to say this... because the onus should always be on the institution to change, but more pragmatically... the institutions are not looking to change anytime soon. So having resilience and a support network are really the only ways to overcome the challenges ahead as a BME student.*

(Male, Mixed Heritage, interview)

## ACCESS TO TEACHING

For the majority of respondents who were provided with opportunities to teach, this was considered to be pertinent in developing professionally and gaining an academic post. Interactions with undergraduate students and the opportunity to inform their understanding were considered important. Some respondents emphasised a desire to be provided with more teaching opportunities but were mindful of excessive workloads which sometimes conflicted with their desire to want to undertake more teaching and engage with students.

*I found the opportunity of teaching undergraduates aiming to become future teachers amazing and impactful. The chance to discuss and learn about attitudes and values related to anti-racist education among other contents was important. To develop critical thinking in the tutorials is an enriching opportunity for interaction between a BME tutor as myself, and majority White students. This is very rewarding. That being said... the workload is problematic in terms of managing all the admin responsibilities, and managing my PhD stuff with this as well can be a bit much sometimes.*

(Female, Black, interview)

*I taught for two years during my PhD. Students responded well. I loved it after overcoming the imposter syndrome and feelings of inadequacy. I really felt like this motivation to think actually this is what I really want to be doing... Use my*





*research to impact learning experiences. That seemed really powerful to me.*

(Female, Mixed Heritage, interview)

*I have really enjoyed these opportunities and I feel like it's a real honour to be able to shape the curriculum with the way I teach. I have received brilliant feedback from my students, and I think this is in part because of my commitment to being not just a scholar but a scholar-activist. I bring the 'real world' into my lectures and teaching, which I hope brings the curriculum alive for my students. I am also a very enthusiastic lecturer... The only problem is managing the workloads in terms of admin and marking stuff that can be quite time consuming.*

(Female, Black, interview)

Access to teaching for the respondents was regarded as particularly important, and was considered to be an important facet of career professional development. Feelings of tokenism and the idea that teaching opportunities for BME doctoral students were often restricted were put forward. It was noted by one respondent that opportunities to teach for international students within their institution were limited.

*I am very aware that where I studied... international students do not get any opportunities to teach at all, so as the only home BME student, I wondered whether I had been given the opportunity on merit or as a tokenistic gesture?! Because... before... all of the teaching opportunities were given to home White PhD students. So I do wonder if these opportunities are tokenistic or not?! It kind of makes you doubt yourself.*

(Female, Black, interview)

### **SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES: IS THE 'BLACK DOCTORAL' EXPERIENCE UNIFORM?**

Similarity and difference were concepts that were discussed by respondents in relation to their experiences as a BME student undertaking doctoral studies. Some interesting themes that might also apply to the wider PhD cohort included employment prospects, casualisation, and deemed poor quality supervision.

*If your academic discipline is race-related, it becomes hard to gain employment in academia, that is not a subjective reference... that is fact and we all know that. But if truth be told I think that the employment thing in academia is difficult for everyone. It is becoming harder to gain employment in higher education, everything is fixed-term or temporary contracts, and that is difficult for everyone not just BME people. So naturally you begin to question the process of undertaking a PhD, because you lose a lot personally and hope that the sacrifices will pay off, but the current climate does not look promising for academic jobs.*

(Female, Black, interview)

*My doctoral supervision was very weak and lacked direction or understanding. My white counterparts seemed to experience similar issues as my own. I made a direct approach to my current director of studies and [got] additional supervisory support, which is now rigorous and very focused.*

(Respondent, questionnaire).



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As already highlighted, it is important to note that the findings, while pertinent, are not generalisable to the wider BME student population due to the small number of participants. This snapshot does however support the emerging discourse which explores the relationship between BME staff in higher education institutions and feelings of marginalisation, inequity and discrimination. Whilst there has been increasing focus on widening participation and fair access for students from BME backgrounds, this has not been replicated in relation to representation at staff level, or in relation to seniority. This research aims to contribute to the field by including the voice and perspectives of PhD students from BME backgrounds.

This report has identified positive attitudes in relation to motivation for pursuing an academic career. However, respondents also described a sense of disparity regarding access to career enhancing opportunities. Exclusion from informal and formal opportunities to develop professional experience and collaborate with experienced academics were highlighted as examples of where BME doctoral students felt that covert and discriminatory practices can occur. Additionally, respondents outlined how micro-aggressions serve to marginalise respondents leaving them feeling isolated. This research has found that participants identified that strong supervisory and mentoring support can help students to navigate the PhD experience and progress towards an academic career.

### This report puts forward the following recommendations:

- Government should commission research to determine the level and stage of attrition at PhD level, with detailed ethnicity analysis.
- The higher education sector should collaborate to develop a sector-wide charter setting out what good PhD supervisory and mentoring support looks like.
- Higher education institutions should establish a system of mentoring by senior academics to support PhD students.
- Higher education institutions should seek to develop department managers' skills to address conscious and unconscious bias and recognise and address isolation.
- Institutions must ensure that they adequately support BME networks at institution level.
- HEIs must take steps to ensure transparent access to development opportunities across PhD cohorts.
- Government should establish national funding streams for BME PhD students in all disciplines for institutions can demonstrate good practice as outlined above.
- Research councils should explore doctoral funding for BME applicants in areas where there is poor representation specifically targeted at ethnic minority individuals who may wish to pursue an academic career.



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