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## **Exploring the participation and lived experience of Black African, Black Caribbean and Other Black (BACOB) doctoral candidates in English universities**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

Global Ethnic Majorities (GEMs) are highly represented as students in English universities but are less likely to participate in doctoral education (Arday, 2021). Those who do participate in doctoral education are also highly likely to experience structural inequality and racism (Arday, Branchu and Boliver, 2021). However, studies on the participation and experiences of GEMs tend to homogenise their experiences without taking intra-ethnic differences into consideration. Drawing on the CRT concept of the permanence of structural inequality and racism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017), this pilot study explores the participation and experience of Black doctoral candidates in English universities. Data derives from an online focus group with six candidates and semi-structured interviews with four candidates in two universities in the Midlands. Data is analysed through quantitative content and thematic analyses (Bryman, 2016). The aim of the paper is to receive feedback on this pilot study which will inform my PhD project.

### **Full paper**

Recently, universities in England have received social and political pressure from decolonisation movements to reconsider their implicit (if not explicit) contribution to structural inequality and racism

against GEMs (i.e., people of colour) ( Osbourne, Barnett, and Blackwood, 2021; Arday and Mirza, 2018). Despite the increasing racial diversification of English universities, students from global ethnic backgrounds participate and experience higher education unequally (Millward, 2021; Arday and Alexander, 2015). Whilst these students are highly represented in universities, they are less likely to participate in doctoral education (Arday, 2021; Arday, Branchu and Boliver, 2021; Cramer, 2021; Pikton, 2020; Arday, 2017). Given the importance of doctoral education for upward social mobility (Gandara, 2019; Pásztor, 2014; Wakeling, 2009), it is imperative to investigate the participation and lived experience of GEMs because they are usually more socio-economically and politically disadvantaged than global White ethnic minorities due to the negative legacy of racial eugenics, slavery, colonialism, and Western imperialism (Shain, 2020).

Studies that investigate the participation and lived experience of non-White racialised groups tend to use umbrella terms such as 'Black Asian and Minority Ethnic' groups (BAME), 'Black and Minority Ethnic' groups (BME) or 'People of Colour' (PoC) to analyse issues related to the participation and experience of Black candidates in doctoral education (e.g., GuildHE ICS, 2022; Arday, 2021; Pitkin, 2020; Jackson-Cole, 2019; Arday, 2017). Despite the relevance of such studies to socio-racial justice, they tend to homogenise the participation and experience of all non-White groups without giving due attention to intra-ethnic dynamics within the non-White community of doctoral candidates or students. For example, on one hand, Indian and Chinese students are more likely to attend highly selective institutions such as Russell Group universities (Wakeling 2009). On the other hand, although a small proportion of Black African, Black Caribbean and Other Black (BACOB - hereafter) students attend highly selective Russell Group universities, a large proportion tend to attend less selective non-Russell Group universities (Stentiford et al., 2021; Arday and Alexander, 2015).

Ethnic variations in university participation and experience have been linked to meritocracy based more on individual characteristics (e.g., intelligence) than group characteristics (Mountford, 2017; Warikoo and Fuhr, 2014). Yet, such linking trivialises the effects of White-led social group labelling and stereotyping (both forms of

unequal treatment and racial discrimination) associated with various sub-groups of GEMs. For example, whilst Indian and Chinese groups are categorised as model minorities (Bradbury, 2013), BACOB groups continue to be racially profiled and categorised under deficit models in the English education system (Gillborn, 2010). Deficit models of BACOB groups have long term negative effects on the academic participation and experience of group members. The continued presence of deficit labelling is racially discriminatory and supports the Critical Race Theor(y/ical) (CRT) concept of the permanence of structural inequality and racism in largely White spaces and places (including education) (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998) and must be permanently challenged (Crenshaw et al. 1995). According to David Gillborn (2006a), structural inequality and racism have ever-changing faces and so should social justice activism and anti-racism in education. Drawing on this CRT concept, this pilot study examines the participation and experience of BACOB doctoral candidates. It explores how BACOB candidates (un)successfully navigate structural inequality and racism during their doctoral education.

In the current study, the literature is being reviewed and data collection is expected to take place shortly after ethical approval from Nottingham Trent University. Data collection is to be undertaken through an online focus group discussion with six candidates and semi-structured interviews with four candidates in two English universities. Using quantitative content analysis and thematic analysis (Bryman, 2016) data is expected to explore the following two research questions:

1. What are Black African, Black Caribbean and Other Black (BACOB) candidates' lived experience of admission to and participation in doctoral education?
2. How do BACOB candidates use agency to be (un)successfully admitted to and to (un)successfully participate in doctoral education?

A preliminary review of the literature indicates that BACOB candidates suffer more acutely from structural inequality and racism which undermines their agency. Therefore, understanding their lived experience is important to challenge the ever-changing faces of structural inequality and racism (Gillborn, 2006a; Arday and Mirza,

2018).

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