

280 Inequalities in HE during Covid-19: experiences of ethnic minority PhD students at an English pre-1992 University

Reka Plugor, Chandrima Roy

University of Leicester, Leicester, United Kingdom

Research Domains

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Abstract

This article explores findings from a project conducted with ethnic minority PhD students at an English pre-1992 University from arts, humanities and social sciences disciplines. In the UK higher education there are different inequalities present, impacting various aspects such as access, attainment, and representation. In the context of post graduate research students, considerations of equality, diversity and inclusion remains an underexplored area. The article offers insight into the experiences of inequality among ethnic minority PhD students and highlights some of the impact of Covid-19 on this group. The paper is based on thematic analysis of thirteen individual semi-structured interviews to explore their lived experiences of navigating the pandemic. Our findings highlight that the inequalities experienced by ethnic minority students have been exacerbated due to Covid-19 and there is a need for making targeted support systems available for this group of students.

Full paper

Inequalities are observed in the overall student experience in Higher Education (HE) and that applies to PhD students too (Bhopal and Henderson 2019; Wong et al. 2020) with the literature often emphasizing PhD students feeling isolated, having limited access to support services and financial difficulties (see Atkins and Ebdon, 2014; Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer 2016). These experiences can impact their sense of belonging, well-being, and academic success. Previous studies with ethnic minority students document that their differences are either dismissed or avoided (Hammond et al. 2019). PhD students from ethnic minority backgrounds often are portrayed as lacking confidence and self-esteem, experiencing isolation, exclusion and disadvantage and they see a lack of representation in the curriculum and faculty (see Gardner and Holley 2011; Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer 2016; Anjum 2020; Arday and Jones 2022). While the impact of COVID-19 has been far-reaching, evidence points to specific groups being at greater risk of its effects. Arday and Jones (2022) for example have emphasised that 'Black communities experienced COVID-19 as a pandemic within a pandemic'.

Participants for this study were drawn from a combination of departments within arts, humanities and social sciences disciplines in a pre-1992 university. Participants were contacted through purposeful and voluntary participation sampling. The final sample comprised of thirteen PhD students, nine female and 4 male; three British nationals and ten non-British nationals. The interviews were done in May-July 2022 through a mixture of in-person and online interviews. The interviews were conducted by two interviewees, both female, from non-British backgrounds and lasted around 45-90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, before being coded in NVivo and thematic data analysis applied. The interview guide explored the lived experiences of applying and doing a PhD with a special focus on the barriers and enabling factors that students experienced throughout their journeys. There wasn't a specific question on Covid-19 but all students reflected on the pandemic in their answers which shows how far-reaching the impact of the pandemic has been.

The participants we interviewed shared the opportunities and barriers they faced due to Covid-19 in their PhD journeys. First and foremost, the main impact of Covid-19 was felt in events being moved online. Students, in particular those starting their PhD journeys in 2020, felt that they needed to rely on themselves more and have the initiative to do things, to find things out by themselves, information which possibly they could have picked up via informal conversations on campus. These students (often being the first from their families to go to university) were unfamiliar with the habitus of a university and they didn't have anyone in their social networks to help them navigate the system either. On top of this, the challenges due to Covid and lockdowns felt like an extra burden and as a result they emphasised the sense of isolation and loneliness they experienced, relying only on themselves, which was overwhelming at times. The impostor syndrome, which is often mentioned in the literature, became apparent in our

students' narratives too as they highlighted how they found it problematic to relate to the events and locations of events advertised. On top of this, due to Covid and the restrictions these socialising opportunities felt again extra difficult to manage. On the other hand, other students highlighted that there were some benefits too as there were more events and activities during Covid and that gave them more opportunities than it would have been in a 'normal' year. And finally, the career paths of students have been disrupted as they didn't have access to the 'normal' activities that PhD students would have experienced, like conducting fieldwork, attending conferences, amount and type of teaching opportunities, so they felt that these will have a negative effect on their career prospects. The participants acknowledged that there was an increase in online conferences, which also provided them unique opportunities, but they felt that the benefits of in-person opportunities would have been far greater.

The Doreen Lawrence review has highlighted that "Covid-19 has thrived on inequalities that have long scarred British society" (2020, p. 24). This seems to hold true in the context of ethnic minority PhD students' experiences too. The inequalities and struggles have been exacerbated due to Covid-19 and often felt as 'traumatising' in the words of one of our participants. This highlights the need for further research and discussions about the experiences, barriers and opportunities of ethnic minority PhD students in UK higher education if the aim is to stop the 'leaky pipeline'.

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