

Black and Minority Ethnic leaders: support networks and strategies for success in higher education (0018)

Kalwant Bhopal<sup>1</sup>, Hazel Brown<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Southampton, UK,

<sup>2</sup>University of Winchester, UK

## **Background**

In England since the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) and the Equality Act (2010) there have been many significant advances in race equality in higher education institutions; the numbers of students from BME backgrounds attending universities has significantly increased (HESA, 2014) and universities are required to have equality policies in place and demonstrate their commitment to race equality (The Equality Act, 2010). However, despite such advances there is still evidence to suggest that inequalities for BME staff in higher education continue to persist (Bhopal and Jackson, 2013; ECU, 2011). Recent HESA statistics (2015) show that 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 majority, 15,200 were White (85%). The HESA data (2015) 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. Furthermore only 3 Vice Chancellors in the UK are from BME backgrounds. This paper examines the experiences of BME leaders in higher education to explore enablers to their success and examine practical and policy implications for higher education institutions for the inclusion of BME academic leaders. As previous research conducted by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education suggests, HEIs need to consider how they can move forward for greater inclusion of BME groups at senior management levels (Bhopal, 2014). This paper will specifically focus on the responses of male and female BME academics in senior leadership roles working in universities in the UK to examine their routes to successful careers in HEIs. There is limited research available in the UK about the experiences of BME academic staff. In particular, very little is known about the type and nature of support networks they access in pursuit of successful careers. This paper therefore represents a unique perspective on existing and emergent work around BME academic careers in UK HEIs.

## **Methods**

This paper will draw on responses from 127 survey questionnaires and 15 in-depth interviews conducted with BME academics in leadership positions. The survey was distributed to BME academic leaders as identified via Diversity managers and BME academic networks.

The survey questionnaire explored career experiences to date, particular experiences of working in higher education as a BME academic, enablers that have contributed to career progression and promotion and how HEIs can contribute to the inclusion of BME academics. Quantitative data was analysed using appropriate univariate and multivariate statistical methods such as parametric and non-parametric tests for group differences to explore relationships between ethnicity, gender, type of institution and discipline. The survey questionnaire was followed by in-depth interviews with 15 respondents. Respondents who participated in the interview were senior lecturer/associate professor, professor and above. The interviews explored career trajectories to date, how participants defined their success in HEIs, particular enablers that influenced their successful career trajectories and how HEIs can contribute to the successful career progression of BME academics to senior leadership roles. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis (NVIVO) and indexed in relation to particular themes and categorised under topics and headings from which themes were generated.

## **Theory**

In recent years, the concept of intersectionality has become a model with which to engage in how differences and discourses around 'race', gender, class, sexuality, age, disability and religion interweave and intersect upon individual lives in a modern day 'risk' society (Beck 1992). Intersectionality has become a model for understanding, analysing and engaging with forms of difference. Intersectionality can be understood as a dynamic, rather than a static process that is constantly changing and evolving at different times and in different spaces. Intersectionality is based on the notion of identities constantly shifting to reflect the context of specific situations and actors. The pioneering work of Crenshaw (1989) in the US addressed the flawed essentialist model by arguing that a single axis analysis of 'race' or gender did not acknowledge the true experiences of women of colour. Through a legal framework, Crenshaw argued that a one-dimensional approach does not take into consideration the multiple dimensions of an individual's experiences. By drawing on theories of intersectionality, in this paper we explore how the complexity of identity contributes to the formation of leadership roles in HEIs.

## **Policy implications**

Based on the findings of this study, we suggest greater change is needed in HEIs for the support of BME academics as they progress into leadership roles. These include developing supportive cultures for those from BME backgrounds, such as the introduction of a mentoring systems (formal or informal) to assess the type of support needed by BME academics. A specific commitment by HEIs to inclusive practice such as the setting up of BME networks within individual HEIs which address the specific needs of BME academics (such as racism and prejudice). There is also a need (as reported by our respondents) for relevant training to enable BME academics to reach their career potential (this may include specific leadership programmes that HEIs may need to invest in). In order for HEIs to address the lack of BME academics in senior decision making roles, HEIs must think about a formal requirement to ensure BME representation at managerial and senior academic levels (in the form of a quota system). We suggest that this research has led to a better understanding of the strategies that BME academics use for their success in leadership roles. The report and its recommendations will be a useful resource for all those working in higher education institutions, particularly those involved in recruitment to senior posts to ensure that senior managers and leadership programmes are better equipped to understand the particular needs of BME academics who are interested in pursuing a leadership role, and better support to enable them to do this.

## **References**

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