

Success against the odds

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Success against the odds: the effect of mentoring on the careers of senior Black and Minority Ethnic academics in the UK

Abstract

This article explores the effect of mentoring on the career progression of Black and minority ethnic (BME) academics in senior roles in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). It draws on 37 interviews with BME academics working in HEIs in the UK and argues that whilst universities present a strong rhetoric of equality and diversity; this is not necessarily followed by specific policies and procedures which ensure a serious commitment to an equality agenda.

Keywords: Black and minority ethnic, mentoring, support networks, higher education

Success against the odds: the effect of mentoring on the careers of Black and minority ethnic academics

Introduction

Data from the last census suggests that the UK population is becoming more diverse with Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups¹ making up 14% of the population (Census, 2011). However, BME groups continue to be under represented in professorial and senior decision making roles in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (ECU, 2017). Whilst there are similar proportions of White and BME staff who are professors (10.9% and 9.7%), there are differences within the BME category; Chinese groups are more likely to be professors (14.3%) and Black groups are less likely (4.5%). BME staff are also less likely to be in senior management positions compared to White groups (ECU, 2017).

Despite significant advances in policy making in UK higher education such as the Equality Act (2010) which requires universities to have equality policies in place to demonstrate their commitment to race inequality, BME staff continue to face discrimination in higher education (ECU, 2015). There is evidence to suggest that institutional racism is prevalent in UK HEIs (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal, 2016; 2018; Bhopal *et al*, 2015; ECU, 2015; Pilkington, 2018).

Research has outlined how BME academics continue to be positioned as ‘outsiders’ in the White space of higher education reserved for an elite middle class (Alexander and Arday, 2015; Bhopal, 2018; ECU, 2015). Furthermore, as a result of such exclusion BME academics are more likely to consider a move overseas compared to their White colleagues due to negative experiences of racism, exclusion and marginalisation (Bhopal *et al*, 2015; ECU, 2015). Recent research conducted by the University and College Union (UCU) (2016) which

¹ In this article, I use the term BME to refer to individuals who identify as Black, Asian and other minority backgrounds as identified in the census (2011). However, I am aware of the complexities of the term such as the differences *within* and *between* different BME groups, and that BME groups are not homogenous.

focussed specifically on Black academics, found that the majority of Black academics working in HEIs had experienced some form of bullying and harassment from managers. Black academics were also more likely to be excluded from decision making roles and subject to cultural insensitivity. Such research is also supported by a recent report published by the Trade Unions Congress (TUC, 2017) which found that racism in the workplace is commonplace for BME workers, with one in three workers reporting they have been racially bullied or harassed at work.

Recent changes in the workplace such as greater responsibility placed on employers to increase the diversity of their workforce have resulted in the development of formal mentoring programmes to support the career development of BME staff (ECU, 2012; 2015). Consequently, organisations are required to provide employees with appropriate tools to manage their careers and mentoring has been identified as a successful practice in relation to advancing the career progression of BME academics (ECU, 2012). Recent research has found significant benefits when organisations invest in formal mentoring schemes which result in positive outcomes for staff development and career progression (Peters and Ryan, 2015). This includes the existence of positive role models, support and advice on career progression such as professional development and sharing best practice to support mentees in their career trajectories (Tysome, 2014). In this article, I explore the effects of mentoring on the career progression of BME academics in senior roles. Whilst there has been a great deal of research which has explored the effects and success of mentoring for career progression, there has been little research which has focussed on the role and benefits of mentoring that BME academics in senior roles access, in pursuit of successful careers in HEIs. Mentoring is often used as a popular strategy by HEIs to address the lack of BME staff in senior roles. However, this approach suggests a deficit view which assumes that the institution itself is blameless and

it is the fault of BME groups themselves for failing to progress to senior roles. In view of this, the research is especially important as it explores whether mentoring works to progress BME careers in HEIs. There is evidence to suggest that there is little or no formal mentoring schemes in place in HEIs (ECU, 2012), and where it does exist it may work differently for BME groups (Bhopal, 2016). This article therefore represents a unique and vitally important perspective on existing and emergent research focussing on BME academic careers in HEIs by focussing on whether mentoring can actually contribute to addressing racial inequalities in HEIs.

Equity and Diversity: Policy making in higher education

There have been significant advances in policy making in higher education which have focussed on equity and diversity. The Athena SWAN charter was introduced in 2005 by the Equality Challenge Unit². The Athena SWAN charter focuses on advancing and progressing the position of women in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine) subjects (<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/about-athena-swan/>).

Universities are awarded a gold, silver or bronze charter mark if they can demonstrate the progress of women in these areas.

More recently, policy making has at least in terms of its rhetoric and public initiatives, appeared to view race equality somewhat more urgently. The Race Equality Charter was introduced by the Equality Challenge Unit in 2012 and was officially launched in 2016

² The Equality Challenge Unit is a registered charity which works to advance equality and diversity for staff and students in universities and colleges in the UK, and to challenge unfair practices (see <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/about-us/who-we-are/>). From April 2018, the ECU became part of AdvanceHE to include the Higher Education Academy and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

(<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter/>). Whilst the introduction of the Race Equality Charter is a move instigating change in HEIs suggesting a genuine commitment to equity, HEIs may indeed be pressurised and influenced by a desire to appeal to an international student market and increase their efforts to appear ‘diverse’ so that they are highly positioned in league tables (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018). Furthermore, recent suggestions of directly linking the Race Equality Charter mark to funding (as is the case with Athena SWAN) (Caffrey *et al*, 2016), may well increase the numbers of HEIs incentivised to apply for the charter (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018).³

Mentoring in higher education

There are many different definitions of what constitutes a mentor. It can range from being a friend, career guide and information source to being an intellectual guide, a role model or teacher (Colvin and Ashman, 2010). Hezlett and Gibson (2007, 385-386) define mentoring as ‘an intense, dyadic relationship in which a more senior experienced person called a mentor, provides support and assistance to a more junior, less experienced colleague, referred to as a protégé or mentee’. Darwin (2006) suggests that mentors should be nurturing, approachable and inspirational. Reis (2012) categorises mentoring into four different skills; interpersonal and human resource skills; organisational and project management skills; technical competence; and status and prestige skills, whereas Kram (1985) has identified two key functions of mentoring; career mentoring which is based on coaching and supporting individual career progression and psychosocial mentoring based on enhancing the mentees’ self-confidence.

³ In 2011, the NIHR (National Institute for Health Institute) announced that institutions could not expect to be eligible for funding unless they had achieved a silver award for Athena SWAN. This announcement followed a 400% increase in the number of applications for Athena SWAN (Ovseiko *et al*, 2017).

Types of mentoring

The most common types of mentoring are formal and informal. Formal mentoring is based on a structured scheme offered by an organisation to provide advice and support to colleagues who wish to take up the scheme. Formal mentoring can vary from organisation to organisation, but its main focus is on the long term career development of the mentee (Jones, 2012). Informal mentoring is based on an unstructured voluntary relationship which usually occurs between individuals who have common interests. The relationship is often built on trust and an emotional commitment. Some disadvantages include the breakdown of trust and unrealistic expectations on the part of the mentee (Enstrom 2004). Some research suggests that collaborative models of mentoring such as mentoring circles which involve more than one mentor working with a group of mentees are more beneficial than one to one mentoring (Darwin and Palmer 2009). Whereas, Bolden *et al*, (2012) propose that mentoring should include a sense of 'colleagueship' so that employees can feel and benefit from being part of a community.

Benefits of mentoring

Mentoring relationships in higher education have been shown to be beneficial for different reasons. The benefits of mentoring include support in the planning and achievement of specific career goals, focus and clarity of career goals, increased confidence for the mentor and mentee and an understanding of organisational politics (Kram, 1983). Other research suggests that mentoring has a significant impact on increased career mobility, and a higher promotion rate resulting in increased job satisfaction (Hezlett and Gibson, 2007). Mentoring has also been found to foster ethical values (Gardiner, 2001), enhance self-esteem, enable mentors to be part of a social network (Enstrom, 2004) and provide role modelling functions

(Hansman, 2002). It has also been suggested that mentoring can be used to promote cross faculty collaboration and encourage a collegiate culture and community (Tysome, 2014).

One of the key factors of the mentor and mentee relationship is based on mutual trust and respect as well as high levels of commitment from both parties in order for the relationship to be successful (Darwin, 2006). Having more than one mentor can increase job satisfaction (Higgins, 2000), but can also lead to role conflict (Baugh and Scandura, 1999). Furthermore, individuals are more likely to be attracted to an employer if they have formal mentoring schemes in place (Allen and O'Brien, 2006). The research on mentoring presents a diverse range of findings, with some suggesting the positive benefits of mentoring and others suggesting the negative benefits. Some studies claim the major benefits include career progression (Peters and Ryan, 2015), whilst others have questioned the evidence and pointed to a range of negative aspects including the effectiveness of mentoring (Allen and O'Brien, 2006).

The importance of mentoring for BME academics

Mentoring has been shown to be effective for BME academics to progress to senior decision making roles and seen as critical in the making of academic careers (Bhopal, 2016). There is a suggestion by Mertz (2012) that mentoring can be seen as an example of tokenism and, 'The academic community should see diversity as opposed to tokenism, in high visibility positions of influence in the ranks of administrators and in the pipeline leading to such positions. Diversity should be the norm in administration rather than the exception, and the model for changing faculty demographics' (Mertz 2012, 63). However, in order to develop

positive and effective leaders, the higher education sector must tackle equality and diversity to create a more inclusive workforce; this can include specific support structures such as mentoring to advance the careers of BME academics. ‘A more proactive campaign to support and encourage staff in under-represented groups is needed to overcome self-perpetuating, non-diverse management profiles’ (Tysome, 2014: 6). There is also evidence to suggest that formal mentoring schemes in HEIs would benefit BME academics in relation to career progression, increased confidence and job satisfaction (Bhopal, 2014; Peters and Ryan, 2015).

However, critiques of mentoring have argued that access to mentoring and support networks resides in the hands of a privileged few. Bass and Faircloth (2012) suggest that being a member of certain networks is based on having access to academic power which resides in the hands of White males, who often mentor those who are like them, ‘whether by coincidence or on purpose, they often choose to mentor protégés with whom they can readily identify, thereby creating a cycle of reproduction’ (2012, 223). Bass and Faircloth (2012, 235) recommend that institutions should engage in ‘strategic mentoring’ which does not simply replicate traditional models of mentoring, rather ‘involves a purposeful process of relationship building, collaboration and ongoing consultation’ and this should also include external mentoring from a diverse range of departments and universities. As Mertz (2012, 45) states, ‘long standing norms and values rooted in White, male western ideology are privileged in the academy and sanctioned by long use. They dominate the culture and ways of thinking and are perpetuated through their institutionalisation in the structure and the way in which individuals are selected and socialised into the academy’ (see also Aguirre, 2000; Bhopal and Brown, 2016).

Much of the literature as discussed views mentoring as providing the same outcomes for all groups (regardless of their ethnic background) (see also Colvin and Ashman, 2010). The research fails to explore why and which HEIs choose mentoring and it fails to address the structural disadvantages which place individuals in different positions of power, which may affect knowledge and participation in mentoring schemes. As a result, the UK perspective fails to address the experiences of BME academics and mentoring. Research in the USA however, has to some extent, attempted to address these issues.

Race and mentoring in the USA

There is little research in the UK which has explored how the race/ethnic background of the mentor and mentee affect the relationship, much of the research which exists focuses on the USA experience. There is recent evidence in the USA to suggest that Black African American academics who enter academia are better served by Black or minority ethnic mentors who understand their racial positioning (Bertrand Jones *et al*, 2015) who, ‘can facilitate their development of careers, learn the ‘rules of the game’ and transform the normalised construction of academic environments’ (Jean-Marie and Brooks 2012, 91). However, such mentoring relationships often fail to address the intersectionality of identities and issues of power within the mentor/mentee relationship (Meschitti and Lawton Smith, 2017). Bertrand Jones *et al* (2015) suggest that careful consideration must be given to the matching of mentor/mentee relationships in order that the possible inequity that may arise from such relationships is acknowledged.

Formal and informal mentoring schemes have shown to have a significant impact on the career developments of Black African American academics in HEIs, particularly in relation to publications and promotions (Diggs *et al*, 2009). Networking has also been found to be useful in relation to mentoring. It can be described as, ‘the building and nurturing of personal and professional relationships to create a system of information, contact and support’ (Van Emmerick *et al* 2006, 55). Bass and Faircloth (2012) suggest that Black African American academics in the USA are less likely to have access to networks as they tend to be exclusive (Gregory, 2001) and they are more likely to experience problems in finding a mentor who can understand and support their needs (Jones, 2012). Furthermore, Black African American academics are more likely to be excluded from formal networks and relationships that can offer support and guidance on the ‘unwritten rules’ in higher education required to be successful (Mertz, 2012) and experience difficulties in finding a mentor of the same race which has shown to be beneficial for support (Williams and Williams, 2006).

Much of the literature has examined the role of mentoring and its outcomes, yet little research has explored how mentoring relationships may reflect power and the interests of the organisations themselves, rather than addressing the outcomes for individuals – particularly for BME groups. The research on mentoring does not address how a broader, more flexible model of mentoring, **such as informal mentoring** may be more beneficial for BME groups – particularly in relation to interacting with those from similar backgrounds with similar experiences, for example how can BME academics navigate HEIs which are non-supportive, hostile and unwelcoming for them? Whilst there has been a great deal of research which has explored the experiences of mentoring for Black African American academics in the USA, there is little research which has focussed on the role of mentoring for BME academics in the UK; for example what are the experiences of mentoring for Black academics in UK HEIs?

Does it have an impact on career progression? Is it beneficial, if so how can it support career development for BME academics? The following section will outline the methodology followed by the study findings.

Methodology

The main aim of the study was to explore the successful career trajectories⁴ of BME academics working in HEIs in England, specifically on the role of mentoring. The focus on successful BME academics breaks with the continual depiction of BME staff in deficit terms of disadvantage and identifies insights from BME academics that have ‘bucked the trend’. The key objectives of the study were:

- To provide original data on the experiences of successful BME academics working in HEIs;
- To analyse how BME academics use sources of support such as mentoring and networking in their career trajectories; and,
- To influence HEIs in terms of better support provision for the career progression of BME academics into senior roles (through policy and practice).

The study was based on 37 interviews with respondents who defined themselves from a BME background in a senior role; that is those who were in a management role (who were managing a programme of study or department) and who identified as a senior lecturer/associate professor (or equivalent) or above. The term BME is used to refer to individuals from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. In this study I acknowledge the limitations of the term but use it to define respondents who participated in the study. I

⁴ Successful career trajectories was defined as individuals who had reached level 6 (Reader/Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor) or above and who were in a senior management role.

recognise there are differences within and between the different ethnic groups and that BME groups are not homogenous.

A total of 37 respondents participated in the study, all of the respondents were born in the UK; 21 were female and 16 were male, 17 identified as Black British, 3 as Black African, 3 as mixed heritage (Black British and White), 12 as British Indian and 2 as British Pakistani (see table 1). Respondents were aged between 35-60. A total of 13 respondents were aged between 35-45; 22 were aged between 46-55 and 2 were aged between 56-60. A total of 15 respondents were working in post-1992 universities, 12 in Russell Group and 10 in plate glass universities⁵. The universities were located in London, the Midlands, the North East and North West of England, Wales and Scotland.

Table 1 – Ethnicity and gender of respondents

Ethnicity (self-defined)	Male	Female
Black British	7	10
Black African	3	0
Mixed heritage (Black/White)	0	3
British Indian	6	6
British Pakistani	0	2
Total	16	21

Participant recruitment, data collection and analysis

A total of 18 respondents participated in face to face interviews, and all other interviews were conducted via Skype. Each interview lasted between one to one and a half hours. All of the

⁵ Post-1992 universities are former polytechnics that were given university status after the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). The Russell Group universities consist of 24 UK leading universities which demonstrate excellence in research teaching and regularly score highly in league tables. Plate glass universities were given university status in the 1960s prior to the Robbins Report (1963).

interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Bryman, 2008). The text was broken up into individual segments (such as paragraphs and lines of analysis). Each unit was represented as a category to be analysed. The categories were used to develop the themes so that the themes were organised in relation to the data. A process of thematic analysis was then used to develop an understanding of what was common amongst the data set so that themes and categories could be analysed (Roulston, 2001). This process involved initial and analytical coding of themes. In order to ensure rigour, the data analysis was cross checked by the author and research assistant who was working on the project.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of XXX ethics committee. Email invitations to participate were accompanied by a participant information sheet, and informed consent was obtained prior to all data collection. A participant information sheet and consent form were provided for respondents. Consent was obtained from participants via signed copies of consent forms. The research was conducted in compliance with university research policies and the Data Protection Act. All data was treated as confidential and respondents remained anonymous. Care was taken to ensure that each of the respondents and their institutions remained anonymous. Each HEI was given an identifier (this included the location and type of HEI), followed by a key identifier for each respondent (gender, ethnicity, type and location of HEI and number of years in higher education). Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

Successful career trajectories

The majority of respondents (30) spoke about their successful career trajectories as being related to their own hard work and perseverance in higher education, and reported that if they had received greater support, they would have been promoted earlier and their value recognised. These respondents said they were promoted due their own performance which included ‘ticking boxes’ such as research outputs, delivering high quality teaching and ensuring that they performed their job well to the best of their ability. All stressed that they felt they had to be outstanding compared to their White colleagues, and many saw this as a form of discrimination based on inequality and a system that was unfair.

I think you just have to work harder to succeed. I think academia in general, is hard and getting harder and harder. The bar is being raised all the time, and it is raised higher for us [BME academics]. You can never publish enough and never bring enough grant income in. There will always be that bar that goes higher if you are BME. So what you’ve got to be thoroughly convinced of is that you are doing it for the right reasons. If you are trying to do it to prove your worth, you’ll just burn out. The system itself is unfair and goes against BME staff (Julie, Black British, post-1992, London, 12 years in higher education).

I know there are criteria that you have to meet to be promoted, but I think the goalposts keep being moved. So for promotion, your future is in the hands of a few – and they are the ones who can decide if you’re good enough. To be frank, I think there are criteria, but they move the goalposts depending on the individual to justify their decisions (Marcus, Black British, plate glass university, Midlands, 10 years in higher education).

Whilst all respondents recognised that it was their own hard work that enabled them to succeed, Asian respondents spoke more about having the confidence to apply for senior posts in the first place, whilst Black respondents were more likely to emphasise the system of discrimination that was unfair.

I just thought about it and thought well, I think I am good enough to get a senior job so I’m going for it! And I got it, and it was because I thought I’m just as good as the next person and I’m going to show them that. If I didn’t have that confidence, then I know I would not have applied in the first place. I knew there were a couple of things

I didn't have but I thought I'm going to see if I get an interview and I did (Priya, British Indian, Russell Group, Wales, 8 years in higher education).

Whereas for Janet applying for a senior role was based on the need to be outstanding and in some respects having much more than the criteria specified.

I knew I had to have lots of different things; like specific amounts of funding and articles in excellent journals so I thought I'm going to have to be even better than that – so there are no holes and no gaps – so they can't turn to me and say, you haven't got this or you haven't got that – so they can't have any excuses to turn me down. And that's the way I think you have to be (Janet, mixed heritage, Russell Group, North East England, 9 years in higher education).

John also felt the same and referred to his own situation where he was determined not to be turned down for promotion (as experienced by some of his Black colleagues) and so felt he needed to excel in quantity on his CV.

It's kind of like fighting against the system – you know what you need to have to get promoted – but because we don't throw race into the mix – we think we need the same as everyone else to get there – but that's simply not sure. We need more, much more. So my approach was, when I apply for the promotion they simply have to give it to me – because I have what they want – and I have more than what they want. It's an unfair system (John, Black British, post-1992, South West England, 14 years in higher education).

The existence of mentoring schemes

The majority of respondents said they did not have any formal system of mentoring or support for promotion. The lack of formal support was something that respondents felt had held them back.

I've never had any kind of formal support. I have seen my colleagues sitting and chatting to senior colleagues in their offices all the time and I know they are making connections and getting advice from them about what to do to get promoted, what conferences to go to. I have never had that and that is something that is only available for my White colleagues (Patricia, Black British, plate glass, North East, 15 years in higher education).

Whilst the majority of respondents felt that there was little formal support for them for promotion and for entrance into senior leadership roles, those who did mention support said it was invaluable and helped them to progress in their careers. However, they were more likely to have to seek it out themselves. Black academics were more likely to use informal support.

I have had some support but it's not been formalised or anything and it has come from colleagues in other universities. It has enabled me to know which conferences I should be attending and which journals I should be publishing in and has helped me immensely (Richard, Black British, post-1992, London, 9 years in higher education).

I have support from all sorts of people and they tend to be in other places, even other countries. It's not formalised or anything, but we are there for each other. We read and discuss our work when we can – and sometimes if we can't meet in person we can meet over skype and that support network for me is very useful. I use it for all sorts of things – even for my promotion application (Vera, Black British, Russell Group, London, 12 years in higher education).

Both Richard and Vera emphasised that external support from colleagues was especially beneficial as it enabled them to consult individuals who were outside of their own institution but those who were working on similar research areas to themselves. This enabled seeking objective advice from colleagues at the same time as sharing knowledge about particular disciplines and research areas (such as which journals to publish in and which conferences to attend).

Asian respondents however were far more proactive in seeking support. Nisha said she herself asked for a mentor and it had been a positive experience for her.

I actually asked for a mentor when I started working here. I have a background in leadership and management and a lot of studies on career progression say that the first thing you should do is to get a mentor. And I wasn't shy about asking for a mentor and I'm not shy about asking for support. My mentor has been very useful and helpful and has given me access and information to schemes in the university that I would not know about. Like applying for university wide funding schemes (Nisha, British Indian, post-1992, Midlands, 15 years in higher education).

Similarly, Raj was determined to ensure he received adequate support to enable him to get promoted.

I knew that there were certain things I had to have on my CV to get me promoted, so I just went and spoke to my manager and said I want to go on this course, I want to speak to this person and I need to apply for this funding. I knew I had to do it myself, I didn't hold out much hope for someone to come to me and tell me – so I did it all myself (Raj, British Indian, post-1992, London, 12 years in higher education).

All of the respondents felt that there needed to be more formal, transparent processes in place for the support of BME academics which included formal mentoring schemes and an understanding of the key issues that affected BME academics.

There have to be some significant changes in universities to ensure that Black academics are being seen as part of the organisation. This has to start with the kind of support offered to Black and other non-White minority groups. If we have systems in place like formal mentoring and formal training, that would make a difference. It would also show that the university is investing in their staff and value them (Ann, mixed heritage, plate glass, London, 8 years in higher education).

The lack of formal mentoring schemes in some HEIs may contribute to possible reasons why BME academics do not occupy senior roles, as they are less likely to receive advice or be encouraged and supported to apply for promotion or other activities which may advance their academic careers. There is little quantitative data on exact numbers of how many HEIs have formal mentoring schemes. However, research conducted by the ECU (2012) found that HEIs are more likely to have informal practices and schemes in place to support staff on their career trajectories, rather than structured formal mentoring programs. A clearer picture may emerge if mentoring schemes increase both in number and in breadth across UK universities. It is possible that assigning mentors to BME academic staff can help them to increase their visibility and provide them with opportunities to advance their careers. It is also important that BME staff have access to such programmes and are made aware of such opportunities, which could also include the development of supportive networks.

Qualities of a mentor

All of the respondents reported that a key trait for mentors was being able to maintain effective communication with their mentees. Many suggested that mentors only contacted them on several occasions and the relationship would have been more beneficial if effective continuity of regular communication existed.

I think I saw my mentor once only and then she just emailed me a couple of times. The first time I saw her it was great and I really enjoyed having the face to face contact. It was good because I could ask her questions and we had a direct conversation and discussion. Then I think she was either too busy or didn't want to meet me, so I had to rely on emails and that didn't work for me at all (Hazel, Black British, Russell Group, Midlands, 9 years in higher education).

Similarly, Jas felt a key issue for her was maintaining regular communication with her mentor, but also emphasised that some mentors were not fully committed to their role.

I did feel that my mentor was very good, but I think he was probably told to mentor me and was too busy. So he kind of, met me twice and then the relationship trialled off somewhat. I think the burden was then on me to make sure I had to keep contacting him and sending him emails and then it was just a waste of time. He was probably told he had to do it, I doubt if he volunteered to do it (Jas, British Indian, post-1992, North East, 9 years in higher education).

All Black respondents emphasised the need for their mentors to be from the same ethnic group as themselves (or to be a person of colour). All of them emphasised the importance of their mentor to be able to understand the difficulties BME academics faced in HEIs in relation to processes of overt and covert racism. They suggested that if this understanding and empathy was not present, then the mentor/mentee relationship would simply not work.

It's extremely important that your mentor understands how racism works, that racism is there. It has to be acknowledged and seen as a barrier that prevents people of colour from succeeding in universities. I would not want a mentor who did not understand these processes. I think I would not want my mentor to be a White person; they would have to be a person of colour – someone who knows what you're going through, someone who can empathise with you (Gerard, Black British, Russell Group, North East, 15 years in higher education).

In addition, Emma suggested she would also want her mentor to be a woman of colour – and she specifically asked her managers for this.

I think for me, it has to be a woman of colour. Because of course racism is a thing for all of us if we are Black – but it is different for women. We have the additional burden of being BME and a woman – so we are disadvantaged in different ways; and all of these disadvantages have to be recognised and addressed (Emma, Black British, post-1992, North West, 12 years in higher education).

Asian respondents (10 out of 14) on the other hand did not feel that their mentors had to be from a BME background, they were more likely to emphasise the qualities needed to be an effective mentor, such as experience and seniority. This included their mentor having knowledge of which high impact journals to publish in, which funding bodies to apply for and knowledge of specific activities which would advance their careers.

I don't think they [mentors] have to be from the same or similar ethnic group as you because the most important thing is their knowledge – they have to have the experience to know which activities you need to pursue to be successful – and if you do those then you can tick all the boxes (Meera, Pakistani, post-1992, London, 12 years in higher education).

Vijay on the other hand felt that whilst mentors did not need to be of the same ethnic background, they needed an understanding of racism and how it worked to marginalise BME academics.

It's important to understand how racism works, but you don't have to be of the same ethnic group to provide support. Mentors can be different from you, they don't have to be from the same ethnic group as you – then you would need to say they have to be from the same class and gender – and that wouldn't work. But if they have some understanding of how racism works, that would be enough (Vijay, British Indian, post-1992, Midlands, 11 years in higher education).

Discussion

The findings suggest a mixed picture of mentoring practices and experiences; with differences in the availability, type and value of mentoring. Black academics were more

likely to use informal mentoring and were also more likely to emphasise the importance of their mentee being from the same ethnic group as themselves. Asian respondents however were more proactive in seeking mentoring opportunities and emphasised the importance of the qualities of their mentor. The majority of respondents (32 out of 37) suggested that if they had received support early on in their careers, they would have reached their senior roles far quicker. All respondents said it took them at least 3-5 years longer to gain promotion compared to their White colleagues. The majority of respondents (28 out of 37) did not have access to formal mentoring schemes or indeed any support for promotion. Those who did mention formal support were pushed forward to apply for promotion specifically because they had attended training programmes which prepared them for promotion. This finding supports previous research which has found formal mentoring schemes can be successful for career progression (Hezlett and Gibson, 2007) as well as attracting employees to work in an organisation which offers formal mentoring (Allen and O'Brien, 2006). All respondents also said that formalised mentoring schemes should be offered as part of the support HEIs offered to BME staff, as well as the opportunity for targeting specific development programmes that BME academics could attend.

If BME academics are to reach their potential to reach senior academic decision making roles, they would benefit from formal mentoring schemes that would enable them to do so. A key trait that was mentioned for an effective mentor was maintaining communication and respondents did not feel that their mentors were able to address issues of equity and diversity or at promoting the professional development of their mentees. This research supports previous findings which argue that mentoring relationships must include an understanding of the processes of unacknowledged racism that BME academics face in HEIs (Jones, 2012). This is especially important given that mentoring is one of the first mechanisms used to

address under-representation in HEIs (ECU, 2012). Consequently, if HEIs are serious about addressing racial inequalities, the findings from this research suggest that they must consider radical improvements to existing practice. In order for mentoring to be effective HEIs must invest in appropriate mentor training, mentor-mentee matching and the investment of academic departments and faculty (be it financial or otherwise) for it to be successful. Many respondents (34 out of 37) said they found networking very hard and some suggested it was harder for them than their White colleagues as they lacked the skills needed to do so effectively. Consequently, they were less likely to be pro-active in their career trajectories. This finding supports previous research which has argued that BME academics are less likely to have access to networks which can facilitate career progress compared to their White colleagues (Bass and Faircloth, 2012). Hence, there is a need for further support for BME academics to self-identify as potential future leaders in HEIs.

Conclusions

This research suggests that universities communicate a positive rhetoric in their approach to addressing racial inequalities (through advances in policy making), but this rhetoric is not translated in how BME academics are supported in their career trajectories. Whilst the commitment from HEIs in supporting BME academics demonstrates an acknowledgement of the inequalities that BME academics face in HEIs, there is a need for HEIs to commit to diversity and equality schemes to demonstrate how change can be manifested in policies to make a difference. Mentoring programmes for BME academics have the potential to address racial inequality, but may be undermined by wider institutional practices and societal norms and expectations of BME groups.

In order to address the lack of staff diversity in HEIs, institutions must invest in formal mentoring schemes. I argue that mentoring schemes aimed at BME academics should be mindful of the specific and unique experiences of marginalisation and exclusion that BME academics face in reaching their career potential which is often based on having access to specific types of support. What is primarily needed is a significant cultural and attitudinal shift in HEIs regarding the positive contribution and benefits BME academics make to higher education – part of this shift must include a significant change in practices in HEIs for the inclusion of BME academics. Recent policy developments such as the Race Equality Charter will affect how HEIs address issues of equity, diversity and inequality in their organisations. In line with the findings from this study and the implementation of the Race Equality Charter, HEIs must consider investing in formal mentoring schemes (at both departmental and institutional levels) for BME academics. Specific networks which are aimed at BME staff in individual departments (and at the institutional level) would provide targeted support to address issues that affect BME academics (such as racism and prejudice). This would enable BME staff to find mutual support from like-minded colleagues in advancing their careers. In addition to such mentoring and support networks access to relevant training and events (at departmental, institutional and sector levels) would enable career progression for BME academics. An investment in such schemes would enable HEIs to demonstrate their commitment to a social justice agenda which values equity and diversity and addresses career progression for the many, rather than the few.

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