Gender, ethnicity and career progression in UK higher education

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Gender, ethnicity and career progression in UK higher education: a case study analysis

Abstract

This article uses case study interviews to examine women's experiences in higher education. It focuses on career progression, support available for promotion and particular initiatives for staff retention. The findings suggest that whilst some progress has been made to support White and Black and minority ethnic women in their career trajectories, greater change is needed in order that inclusion is embedded within institutional frameworks and strategic plans. Furthermore, clearer evidence is needed by universities to demonstrate how they are meeting their legal equality requirements as specified by the Equality Act (2010). The mere presence of diversity and equality policies does not necessarily demonstrate that gender and ethnic inequalities are being addressed. Such policies may simply result in a 'tick box' exercise. In order to address such inequalities, issues of diversity and equality must be embedded within the cultural organisation of institutions which are identified in key objectives resulting in real outcomes and practice. Additionally, there is a need to consider intersectional identities and the impact of ethnicity on women's experiences in higher education.

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Introduction

The numbers of BME[1] students entering higher education has seen a significant increase in the last ten years. Recent evidence from the ECU[2] (2017) suggests that the proportion of students who were BME has increased from 14.9% in 2003/4 to 20.2% a decade later (an increase of 5.3 percentage points), and it is the proportion of students who are defined as Black who have seen the most significant increase. However, whilst there has been a significant increase in the numbers of BME young people entering higher education, this is not necessarily translated into the academic labour market. BME academics continue to be under-represented in professorial and senior decision making roles (Bhopal and Henderson 2019; Bhopal and Pitkin 2018; ECU 2017) and face discrimination in gaining access to the labour market and in securing permanent employment (Castilla 2008). They are also more likely to experience discrimination during recruitment and promotion processes (Riach and Riach 2002). Research also suggests that wage and unemployment gaps are related to ethnicity (Longhi and Platt 2008), gender (Blau and Khan 2007) and the intersection of these on graduate wages and unemployment gaps (Rafferty 2012). Ethnic and racial stereotyping in the workplace has a significant impact on accessing jobs, career progression and changing careers (Stainback et al. 2010). Rafferty argues that despite BME groups gaining high levels of education this does not necessarily result in greater equity in the labour market. 'Patterns of educational attainment are partly shaped by social advantage and disadvantage, related to not only ethnicity, but other important dimensions such as social class and gender' (2012, 1002). This article uses case study interviews to examine women's experiences in higher education. It focuses on career progression, support available for promotion and particular

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[1] The term BME is used in this paper to refer to individuals who identify as Black (Caribbean and African), Asian (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi), Chinese and those from non-White backgrounds as used in the 2011 Census. I recognise the complexity of the term and do not attempt to generalise BME experiences.

[2] The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) (now Advance HE) works to advance and support issues of equality and diversity for staff and students in UK higher education.

initiatives for staff retention. I argue that whilst some progress has been made to support White and BME women in their career trajectories, greater change is needed in order that inclusion is embedded within institutional strategies and frameworks. Furthermore, universities must consider clear evidence and outcomes which demonstrate how they are meeting their legal requirements as specified by the Equality Act (2010). This article suggests that the mere presence of diversity and equality policies does not necessarily demonstrate that gender and ethnic inequalities are being addressed. Such policies may simply result in a 'tick box' exercise. In order to address such inequalities, issues of diversity and equality must be embedded within the cultural organisation of institutions which are identified in key objectives resulting in real outcomes and practice. Furthermore, there is a need to consider intersectional identities and the impact of ethnicity on women's experiences in higher education.

Inequalities in the labour market

Occupational sex segregation continues to exist in the labour market (Perales 2013) in which women are more likely to incur a wage penalty (Charles and Grusky 2004), occupy lower prestige occupations (Petersen and Saporta 2004) and experience slower career progression then men (Magnusson 2009). Higher value is placed on occupations that require traditional male skills (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007), compared to those which require emotional and caring labour which are more likely to be performed by women (Bolton and Muzio 2008). Triventi suggests that, 'Given the existence of gendered societal expectations, it is likely that women meet with difficulties in reconciling family activities and occupational tasks' (2013, 566). Furthermore, men attribute greater importance and value to their own careers compared to childcare or family responsibilities (Halaby 2003).

Ethnic inequalities in the labour market suggest a significant pay gap between White and minority ethnic groups (Brynin and Guveli 2012). Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Black Africans experience higher rates of unemployment, are in lower occupational status jobs and earn less compared to other ethnic groups (Heath and Cheung 2006). Brynin and Guveli suggest that, '…the more the proportion of people in an occupation who are from ethnic minorities the lower the wage gap' consequently ethnic minorities earn consistently less than their White counterparts' (2012, 585). Even when BME employees have high levels of education, they continue to experience an ethnic penalty in the labour market (Rafferty 2012). Studies suggest that a disproportionate number of BME men and women are employed in jobs in which they are overqualified (Nielsen 2011). Furthermore, the intersections of inequalities such as ethnicity, social class and gender play a significant role in influencing patterns of educational and occupational segregation (Bradley and Healy 2008). Whilst there is evidence to suggest that higher education has helped to improve the positon of some BME groups in gaining access to the labour market (Platt 2009), this has not necessarily resulted in greater social mobility (Rafferty 2012).

Equality in UK higher education

With the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010, universities have been legally required to demonstrate their commitment to equality. Lewis et al. (2012) suggest that the implementation of the Equality Act (2010) has been transformed into a 'tick box' exercise leading to a preoccupation with figures and audit sheets rather than addressing the broader values of inequality and diversity, particularly in relation to widening participation. They suggest that, 'the opportunity is to create a more inclusive culture by engaging with the Equality Act (2010) to question and challenge the traditional hegemonic practices in higher

education institutions' (2012, 20), but in reality this has not happened. Others (Ahmed 2007; Jones 2006) have argued that organisations only adopt equality policies as they are compelled to do so and have little or no understanding of how to use such policies to address inequalities. There have been suggestions that the Equality Act (2010) in combining different types of equality legislation has masked specific inequalities based on race and ethnicity that continue to persist in higher education (Pilkington 2013). Consequently, the rhetoric in higher education is one that has shifted its focus from addressing specific racial and ethnic inequalities (Crofts and Pilkington (2012). Two important initiatives introduced in the UK by the ECU have sought to challenge issues of equity and diversity in higher education; the Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charters. The Athena SWAN Charter was established in 2005 to increase the numbers of women represented in STEMM subjects (science, technology, engineering, medicine and maths). Universities are awarded a bronze, silver or gold award based on the representation of women in these subjects, career milestones, academic environment and the progression of students into academia (see http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/about-athena-swan/).

In 2016 the ECU introduced the Race Equality Charter. 'The race equality charter aims to inspire a strategic approach to making cultural and systemic changes that will make a real difference to minority ethnic staff and students'(http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charter-marks/race-equality-charter-mark/). It focuses on academic, professional and support staff and analyses student attainment as well as the diversity of the curriculum. Whilst the Race Equality Charter mark is a positive initiative to address ethnic inequalities, in order for it to be effective it must result in real change rather than a simple 'tick box' exercise (Bhopal, 2018; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018). It is too early to predict the effects the Race Equality Charter mark will have on inclusion and equity for minority ethnic groups in higher education, but it

will demonstrate the public commitment universities are making to address such inequalities. Furthermore, if it is tied to funding it may increase the numbers of universities who invest in the charter (as evidenced by Athena SWAN see Ovesiko et al. 2017) (see also Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018).

Gender and higher education

Whilst women represent more than 50% of the workforce, they are less likely than men to occupy senior decision making roles (only 20% of vice-chancellors are women and 19% of university board chairs are occupied by women) (ECU 2017). There has been a significant increase in the numbers of female students who participate in higher education (HESA 2015/16) but the same could not be said for the participation and representation of female staff in in senior decision making roles in higher education (ECU 2017). Women are less likely than men to contribute to decision making roles (David 2014; Morely 2013). There is also evidence to suggest that women face significant barriers to promotion to senior roles in higher education (Deem 2014; Manfredi et al. 2014; Morley 2013; Savigny 2014; Shepherd 2017). Researchers have outlined the importance of the gendered 'prestige economy' to describe desirable male attributes required to reach senior roles in higher education (Blackmore and Kandiko 2011; Coate and Kandiko-Howson 2014). Familiarity (appointing candidates who have shared characteristics) has a significant influence over appointments and promotions (Blackmore et al. 2006) in which outsiders who do not conform to the leadership ideal are excluded (Coleman 2012). Furthermore, the space of the academy is often defined as male and exclusive (Lynch 2010). Consequently, women continue to be disadvantaged, particularly when they have childcare and other caring responsibilities in which women have to constantly re-negotiate the boundaries between family and work (O'Brien 2007). Once

women enter the academy their achievements are often not recognised in comparison to their male colleagues (Rees 2011), and when they occupy leadership roles, women are often 'misplaced' by their colleagues as leadership is defined as a male characteristic (Fitzgerald 2011). In order to understand women's marginalised position in higher education, Ropers-Huilman (2011) suggests that scholars must engage in critical feminist theories, espistemologies and methods to inform policy, research and practice.

Gender and ethnicity in higher education

Intersectional identities play a key role in the positioning of BME female academics in higher education. An intersectional approach enables an understanding of discourses of inequality by exploring how competing factors operate to exclude individuals from certain positions of power (Crenshaw 1991; Jones 2009). Yuval-Davis (2006) outlines the importance of researchers to draw on an intersectional methodological analysis to understand competing forms of oppression, whilst Brah (1996) emphasies the significance of 'diaspora space'. Others (Preston and Bhopal 2011) have used 'mash up' conceptions of race and intersectionality to examine how White patriarchal structures exist in educational systems. BME academics continue to experience disadvantages in higher education and Black female academics face a 'triple burden' of oppression resulting from their classed, gendered and ethnic identities (Bhopal, 2016). Manfredi et al argue note the, 'presence of an 'ivory ceiling' with Black academics maintaining that they experience 'passive racism', need to work twice as hard as their White peers and are passed over for promotion is evident' (2014, 17). Much of the literature which addresses inequalities in higher education fails to examine how different competing identities impact on individual career trajectories and there is recent evidence to suggest that BME academics are leaving UK higher education to seek

employment overseas as a result of their experiences of racism, exclusion and marginalisation (Bhopal, Brown and Jackson, 2015).

Recent data demonstrates that in 2015/16, 53.8% of staff working in UK higher education institutions were women. They made up 78.5% of part-time professional and support staff and 54.9% of part-time academic staff. The majority of women worked in non-SET (science, engineering and technology) subjects (51.4%) and men were more likely to be on higher salary grades compared to women. There was a significant increase in the proportion of BME staff who worked in professional and support grades showing a 2.0% rise since 2003/04. In 2015/16, 6.8% of professional and support staff were from UK BME backgrounds compared to 5.8% of academic staff. BME staff were less likely to be on permanent contracts compared to White staff (81.4%). The proportion of Black academic professors was lower than for any other ethnic group, with 4.1% of UK Black academic staff and 2.4% of non-UK Black academic staff holding professorial posts. Black professors were more likely to be in non-SET subjects (55.1%) though there are only 60 UK Black professors in total. Only 2.8% of BME female academics are professors and 15.9% of White academics are professors. White academic and non-UK staff were more likely to earn more than UK BME staff. For both academic and professorial and support staff, the ethnic pay gap between White and BME staff was larger between non-UK staff than UK staff (ECU 2017).

BME academics continue to face disadvantages in higher education. Whist there has been an increase in the numbers of BME students attending higher education institutions; this is not reflected in BME staff demographics (Bhopal and Pitkin 2018). BME staff experience overt racism, exclusion and marginalisation in higher education (Ahmed 2007; Bhopal 2018; Mirza

2006); they are underrepresented in the highest contract level, over represented in the lowest contract levels and are more likely to be on fixed term contracts compared to their White colleagues (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019; Bhopal and Pitkin 2018). Furthermore, competition in higher education such as funding cuts, pressure on student recruitment and pressures of the REF[3] have created greater competition and less collegiality between colleagues in which BME academics (particularly women) feel disadvantaged (Bhopal 2014). Some have suggested that radical moves to increase the presence of BME women in higher education and in senior leadership roles may be needed (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018). The ECU (2013) suggests a process of anonymous shortlisting that could help to reduce issues of inequality in which clear and transparent monitoring is needed for the inclusion of BME female academics at all stages of recruitment, promotion and progression.

Study aims and objectives

The aim of the study was to use case study data to explore how gender and ethnicity had an impact on the career experiences of women (academic and professional staff) working in one university. The objectives of the study were:

1. To examine the impact of the 'glass ceiling' effect for women;

2. To explore the effects of specific support for women for promotion to senior levels and

3. To determine whether specific gender initiatives affected staff retention.

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[3] The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system of assessing the quality of research in higher education institutions in the UK. It is based on an assessment of research outputs, case studies and research income. The last REF took place in 2014 and the next one is due in 2021 (see http://www.ref.ac.uk/).

<u>Methodology</u>

Case study research enables the researcher to examine a single case to provide a unique example of a situation to understand ideas rather than simply presenting abstract theories or principles, 'a case study can enable readers to understand how ideas and abstract principles can fit together' (Nisbet and Watt1984, 72-3). The main purpose of case studies is to, 'develop a theory which can help researchers to understand other similar cases, phenomena or situations' (Robson 2002, 183). One of the strengths of case study research is that it enables the researcher to observe effects in real life situations and contexts. In this sense, Cohen et al. state, 'contexts are unique and dynamic, hence case studies investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance' (2007, 253). Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) argue that case study research focuses on individual actors or groups which seek to understand their perceptions of events, as well as highlighting specific events that are relevant to the case in question. 'Case studies are set in temporal, geographical, organisational, institutional and other contexts that enable boundaries to be drawn around the case; they can be defined with reference to characteristics defined by individuals and groups involved; and they can be defined by participants' roles and functions in the case' (1995, 319). Case studies examine a particular situation and observe the reality to enable a 'thick description' of specific events and processes (Geertz 1973). Yin (1984) has identified exploratory (used as a pilot to other studies or other research questions) and descriptive case studies (narrative accounts which test theories). This article is based on findings from one case study university. Thirty-two interviews were conducted with female staff at Higher[4] university; 19 academic staff (lecturer to professor) and 13 administrative staff (level 3 and 4) (see Table 1). All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

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[4] This is a pseudonym.

Participants were accessed via the Equality and Diversity department. Equality and Diversity managers sent emails to all staff informing them of the study and providing contact details of the researchers if they wanted to participate in the study. Once initial contact was made with the researchers, the aims and objectives of the study were discussed with participants. Participants signed a consent form and were told they could withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. Ethical clearance was obtained from the researcher's university.

Hartley (2004) argues that data analysis in case studies is developed through an iterative process. A careful description of the data and a development of particular themes was used from which to begin data analysis. The data was organised around key topics and themes based on the research questions and the data was carefully examined to explore how it fitted within the expected categories for analysis. As Yin argues, data analysis consists of 'examining, categorising, tabulating, testing…evidence to address the initial propositions of a study' (2003, 109). In relation to this, I endorsed Neuman's (1997) approach which suggests a search for patterns in the data and the case so that once a pattern is identified it is interpreted in terms of a perspective or the setting in which it occurred. As Patton and Applebaum state, 'the ultimate goal of the case study is to uncover patterns, determine meanings, construct conclusions and build theory' (2003, 67). Data was analysed by examining the interview transcripts in relation to the overall case. The interviews were coded and indexed in relation to particular themes and outcomes. The links between concepts were developed which worked to generate particular themes. A process of thematic analysis followed and was used to understand the meanings and experiences of respondents, this data was then analysed in relation to the case study.

<u>Higher University</u>

Higher university is located on the outskirts of a large city. It is a campus university with approximately 3000 staff and 16,000 students. It has regularly scored highly in student satisfaction surveys and in university rankings and performed well in the last Research Excellence Framework. It was established in the 1960s university after the Robbins Report (1963). The university has a diverse representation of staff and students from different ethnic backgrounds, including high numbers of international students. There are high numbers of women and BME staff concentrated in administrative and academic roles.

Higher university describes itself as a diverse university and has a greater ethnic mix of staff and students compared to other similar universities. This could be in part due to its location. It is located just outside of a major city, which has a diverse BME population. Equality and diversity underpin the university's core values around teaching, learning and research, which are outlined in its strategic plan. In all its publications, the university emphasises that it will work to create an environment that is free from unlawful discrimination which encourages staff and students to contribute fully to its work in this area. It will do so by ensuring that it, 'eliminates discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act (2010); advances equality of opportunity and fosters good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it by; removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by staff and students and taking steps to meet their needs'. It also states that it will encourage, 'staff and students to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation is disproportionality low and tackling prejudice and promoting understanding within the university' (public documents published by the university). Key strategic aims of the university which are

implemented by Equality and Diversity Officers include embedding diversity and equality within the university's policies, practices and procedures and ensuring that university committees are representative of the staff body. The university has also introduced key initiatives in its strategic plan, which focus on increasing the representation of BME staff and women at all senior levels. These key aims are also reflected in the university's commitment to equality and diversity evidenced by its recent bronze Athena SWAN reward.

Higher university has shown an increase in its representation of the numbers of BME and female staff. It employs approximately 3000 members of staff. Data from 2017-2018 indicate that a total of 24.43% of staff (both academic and non-academic, 17.11% were in academic posts and all others were in non-academic posts) defined themselves from a BME background (which includes Black, Asian and mixed heritage). The university employs slightly more females (from all minority backgrounds) than males, with women making up 51.32% of the staff population compared to 48.67% men. The majority of women (from highest to lowest) are concentrated in the faculties of Health and Social Care, Social Sciences, Engineering, Education, Computer Science and Maths, Business, Arts with the fewest in Law. BME groups are concentrated in (from highest to lowest) Engineering, Business, Computer Science and Maths, Social Sciences, Education, Health and Social Care, Arts and Law having the lowest numbers of BME academics. BME groups make up a total of 17.11% of academic staff (from a total of 485 members of staff). Women make up 53.40% and men 46.59% of academic staff. At Higher university in 2017-2018, approximately twice as many men as women entered the promotion process and of these, men were twice as successful as women in gaining promotion. A glass ceiling at levels 5 (lecturer), 6 (senior lecturer/reader) and 7 (professor) remains at Higher university.

Countering the glass ceiling effect

Higher university has used several mechanisms to address the glass ceiling effect. It has developed a co-ordinated mentoring scheme available throughout the university for those applying for promotion. The university is proactive in actively encouraging women and BME groups to apply for promotion if they meet the criteria. This includes key messages being communicated effectively to staff to enable them to be supported in this process. One example includes workshop training for potential applicants which provides guidelines on how to complete promotion applications, understanding the promotion process and preparing candidates for presentation and interview skills. Higher university has also recently introduced a mentoring scheme for women who are intending to apply for promotion to be partnered with an experienced colleague who has knowledge of the promotion process. Julie[5] a White senior lecturer was intending to apply for promotion to Reader (Associate Professor) for the second time.

> *There are many initiatives that the university has introduced to help colleagues who are interested in getting senior posts. There has always been a traditional glass ceiling effect and that is the case wherever you are, but here initiatives have been introduced that can support you.*

She went on to describe how the mentoring she received was beneficial in providing support to complete her promotion application and produce a portfolio, which was not present the first time she applied for promotion.

> *I didn't have a very good experience the first time that I went for my promotion and that was about three years ago. But since then, they* [the university] *have developed a new mentoring scheme, which has been working well. I have a mentor who is a senior member of staff and who has been through the promotion process herself and knows the process really well. She has also sat on external promotion panels and so knows what I need to do. The scheme is very useful because there are certain things that have been pointed out to me that I did not think about and there are always certain ways of writing your narrative that has to fit in exactly with the criteria.*

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[5] All names are pseudonyms.

Sheila (Black, African Caribbean) was also keen to apply for promotion. She had also attended the promotion workshops, which had been organised by the Diversity Officers. Sheila had been working at the university for five years and joined just after she had completed her PhD.

> *There are issues everywhere about gender and ethnicity and how you progress and how you are seen. But I think this university is doing a lot of things right. For example, there are senior people who are from Black or Asian backgrounds and you are always encouraged to do well. I am being encouraged to apply for promotion and I have the support of my department. I know colleagues in other universities, which tend to be mainly White who haven't had the support that I have had.*

Beatrice a Black African Caribbean lecturer also supported this.

> *Of course, you will have some prejudice, that's just the way it goes anywhere but you have to rise above it and try to do well. I am aware of some kind of prejudice that exists, but that's a kind of prejudice that exists everywhere against Black people, it's not necessarily to do with this university. I have always had support for my work and because I am a scientist, you are judged on what you are able to discover and argue, not so much by other factors, but at the same time I can see it's not equal because the sciences are dominated by White men.*

Both Sheila and Beatrice worked in the Human Sciences. Sheila was a Biologist and Beatrice was a Physicist, they both felt however despite experiencing racism they continued to do well. Nisha a British Asian female worked in the Engineering department as a lecturer. For her, it was the issue of gender that contributed to how academics were placed in her department, rather than the issue of ethnicity.

> *Engineering is a male profession. There are very few females in my department; it does seem to be dominated by men. That is changing somewhat now I think, because we have younger women getting into the profession. I think in ten years' time the demographic profile of Engineering departments will have changed dramatically. But at the same time, Engineering is more mixed ethnically than other departments. There is a big representation of Asian men and there seem to be more Black males joining the department. I think the shortfall is still women at the moment. Athena SWAN will change a lot of that and we are working hard for women to be represented at the senior levels and to make that progress. In that respect, Athena SWAN is a great initiative and it does make a difference to how departments see the role of women. It also means the department is held accountable for what it does, in terms of allocation of roles and promotions.*

Those working in administrative roles also echoed this. Janice a White senior administrator felt that whilst professional services in universities were predominantly female, it was men who tended to hold the most senior roles.

> *There are lots of women who work in administrative posts in universities, it is predominantly female I think but the top senior posts are held by men. It is very hard to get promoted beyond a certain level if you are in professional services so what happens is you get stuck at one grade, and because women are at those grades they find it hard to move up. Men also come in at higher grades than women, so are less likely to be stuck at a lower grade.*

Brenda a Black British administrator felt that it was not just gender which contributed to professional staff being 'stuck' in lower grades.

> *I do accept that professional services is predominantly female, but there is also an ethnic element in relation to that. If you look at how many women there are in professional services, in this university they tend to be Black or Asian. But they are all at the lower grades.*

The practices at Higher University indicate that some progress regarding the inclusion and promotion of women has been made. However, women continued to feel and experience discrimination at all levels. Much of what respondents suggested was based on gender expectations and stereotypes, as well as processes of racism.

Training sessions: diversity and equality

Many of the respondents spoke about the importance of training for diversity and equality, particularly in relation to recruitment and promotion processes. At Higher University, panel members involved in promotion interviews were invited to attend Equality and Diversity sessions to examine the promotion process in relation to this. Judy, a White professor had been invited to attend these training sessions.

> *The training sessions have been running for about a year now and I think they work well. Even though we have criteria we have to adhere to, there are other factors that*

we may have to take into consideration. It is important to be mindful of the fact that the numbers of Black staff being promoted to senior positions has not always been that high, but we are improving on this aspect and we are better than some other universities.

Balwinder an Asian professor spoke about a 'double edged sword'.

We are open about promotions, but we don't want to get into positive discrimination because on the one hand, you want more women from Black and Asian backgrounds in senior positions, but on the other hand, you have to stick to the criteria that are presented to you. It is a 'double edged sword' and can sometimes be difficult because you may want an individual to be promoted but they may not meet the criteria.

Changes in university strategies and practices suggest that at Higher university there has been a slight increase in the numbers of women who have achieved promotion to level 6 (senior lecturer/Associate Professor or level 7 (Professor). Respondents suggested that this was due to greater support for the promotion process in which the university has provided clear guidelines and expectations to support women through this process. Shauna, a Black administrative officer for Human Resources felt that there were various mechanisms in place which were supportive for women, but few women took these opportunities.

We do have various different mechanisms of support for professional staff, for all staff in fact but for the professional staff they are less likely to take these up and I don't know why that is. It could be that they think those support systems are not going to make much difference.

The university had recently introduced a support network for BME staff and Marcia a Black British administrator felt that this was a positive step forward.

There are various different support mechanisms that have been useful. The most recent is the setting up of a network for non-White colleagues so that they have a space where they can talk about issues that they feel safe to talk about. That has worked well, if anything it gives us the opportunity to share good practice and support with each other.

Career breaks

One aspect of support that many respondents referred to was the opportunity of taking career breaks at Higher university and support offered for those with childcare or other caring responsibilities. Jade a Black African Caribbean senior lecturer, had taken a career break for a year after she had given birth to her second child. When she returned, she felt that the support she received from her department (Humanities) and human resources was very good.

> *I had decided to take a year out after my second child and it worked well for me. When I returned, there were different types of support I got from my department and from HR [Human Resources]. There were 'taster days' and introductory sessions to ease me back into working life and I think this helped a great deal. I also had a contact in HR who could answer any questions for me. I did not feel disadvantaged because of my career break.*

Betty, a White lecturer on the other hand had taken a two year career break and found the transition back to work harder, she felt disadvantaged in terms of her publications and keeping up with current research and networks in her discipline of History.

> *I knew in some respects that I would be disadvantaged when taking a career break. When I came back, I immediately felt the pressure to publish and to keep up with conferences and networking. I felt immensely disadvantaged because I had been out of the game for two years, so the pressure I felt was double that of what everyone else was feeling. In hindsight taking a career break works against you, you have a big gap in your CV [curriculum vitae] and you are behind your colleagues.*

Kitty, an Asian Indian senior lecturer in Geography also felt these pressures after returning from maternity leave.

> *When I came back after maternity leave, I found it very difficult to get back into the swing of things. I certainly felt that I was at a disadvantage compared to my female colleagues who had not taken any maternity leave. I have had support since I have come back, but I do feel that I am slightly disadvantaged.*

Whilst many of the respondents who had taken maternity leave and career breaks were aware of the support that was available to them when they returned, they also felt taking such breaks would disadvantage them in the long term. For some women, the mere existence of equality policies for women who took career breaks did not necessarily mean they would be effective in practice. However, Martha a White lecturer in Mathematics who had taken maternity leave twice did not think it had affected her career.

> *I have taken two lots of different maternity leave in the last six years and I have come back to the same job. I don't think it has affected me as I am now applying for promotion to senior lecturer. If you meet the criteria for promotion, they have to follow those guidelines and ensure that they are adhering to them. That is something that must happen in practice.*

Martha felt that having the opportunity and being encouraged to apply for promotion was an indication that she was valued and that her contribution to her department was noted as part of her loyalty to the university.

> *The senior managers want me to apply for promotion, but for me part of that is that they know I am loyal. Yes, I have taken two sets of maternity leave at different times but I have always come back and continued with the roles that have been allocated to me.*

Many of the respondents who had taken a career break felt that it had been a disadvantage to them in terms of their career progression. Consequently, when they returned they felt under greater pressure to 'keep up' with their colleagues who were publishing, attending conferences and bidding for large grants. Taking career breaks was available for all staff, but the majority of those who took them felt disadvantaged. Furthermore, career breaks tended to be taken by women rather than men. When they returned, women felt disadvantaged and under greater pressure to perform compared to those who had not taken a career break. None of the professional staff who were interviewed had taken a career break and none had

intended to take one in the future, all were however aware that career breaks were available to all staff.

Representation of women in senior managerial positions

Respondents were asked about their views on how women were represented in senior managerial positions in the university. Many said that the university was positive in its representation of women in senior roles. Jane a White lecturer who worked in the Engineering department said that although White men mainly dominated her department there were some women who were at senior levels which was a direct result of the Athena SWAN charter.

> *Engineering is traditionally a male dominated subject and we do have a big representation of men – and we have men from different ethnic backgrounds – but in the last few years, we have seen an increase in the numbers of women who are in senior positions. The university has been very proactive in recruiting more women in Science and Engineering and that is mainly a result of the Athena SWAN charter.*

When asked what difference this representation made to the department, Jane said,

> *I think it has had a big impact on the junior colleagues more than on the senior colleagues. The junior female colleagues feel as though they have role models they can turn to, they see women in these senior roles, and so this sends out an important message to them. They are able to think that they too can be successful and achieve a role in which they make decisions, which contribute to the shaping of future Engineers.*

However, respondents felt the university still needed to do more.

> *There needs to be more representation of women at senior levels mainly at the university senate level, which continues to be dominated by White middle class men. Even though universities are trying hard to be more inclusive, they want to ensure that they have a good mix of different types of employees and that has to include ethnicity, class and age.*

All respondents agreed that universities had to be more proactive to include women in senior roles. Annie, a White Geography professor who played a key role in the university Equality and Diversity committee said,

> *We are a university who will attract a diverse range of staff and students from different backgrounds because of where we are located, so we have the representation but it's about where that representation is and what we do with it.*

Conclusions

The findings from this study suggest that whilst there have been some improvements to encourage women and BME academic staff to progress to senior levels in Higher university, greater change is needed in which women and BME staff are represented at senior levels. The issue of equality must be embedded in decision making throughout the university to create a culture in which such issues are integrated in key policies, strategies and decisions. Whilst universities have an obligation to meet the requirements of the Equality Act (2010), equality issues should be considered and integrated in annual strategic planning processes to ensure better mainstreaming of equity is embedded in *all* aspects of the organisation. This article suggests that there are various mechanisms universities can implement to demonstrate their commitment to equality, particularly in relation to the inclusion of women academics in the university. However, BME academics have additional factors that need to be considered. BME women continue to experience overt and covert processes of racism, exclusion and marginalisation which fail to be addressed. One key issue that was raised by respondents was the importance of Equality and Diversity committees, which aimed to provide a coordinated approach to examining diversity and equality issues in the university, particularly in relation to reviewing, updating and revising current legislation and practice. However, in order for

such committees to be effective they must ensure they continue to provide a 'voice' for BME groups to address issues of equality and diversity, and to assist the university in developing policies which result in key changes and effective outcomes. In order to ensure that an inclusive agenda is being addressed, universities must aim to ensure that they are working to meet their key legal requirements under the Equality Act (2010), rather than simply adhering to a 'tick box' exercise. However, simply having equality policies in place does not necessarily ensure progress is being made. The mere existence of policies may suggest a 'tick box' exercise in the requirements of universities to portray themselves as liberal and inclusive. If universities are committed to an equality agenda, they must consider strategies which address inequalities to address the lack of BME staff (particularly women) in senior roles. For example, developing formal support structures for BME groups and women would ensure that adequate training for promotion (such as assisting with applications and interviews) is in place in order that such groups can reach their potential. This should also include a process in which universities regularly monitor their promotion and recruitment practises in order that gaps in applications can be addressed. Greater proactive change is needed in which issues of equality and diversity are addressed with real, measurable outcomes, it is only then can we move towards addressing issues of social justice and inclusion in higher education.

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