
Race equality in academia: We've got a huge way to go

Deborah Gabriel, founder of Black British Academics, speaks to university leaders and examines recent research to determine what approaches should be adopted to ensure greater progress towards race equality

Deborah Gabriel

Monday, 5 August 2013

Racism in academia has been well-documented in a succession of studies that span two decades. An in-depth [report](#) in 2011 by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) on the experience of BME staff in the HE sector acknowledges very little progress has been made despite robust legislation and expressions of commitment to race equality across the sector.

The ECU states that the evidence points to institutionalised racism that will persist until serious efforts are made to challenge the structures, systems and cultural attitudes that feed it.

Professor Mark Cleary, vice chancellor at the University of Bradford and member of the Race Forum that guided the ECU research, recently spoke of his disappointment in the findings.

"If you look across the sector, including here, there isn't a lot of good practice that you can point to that has led to the successful development of more senior BME academics or managers."

At Bradford, more than half of all BME staff (58 per cent) are in manual roles, whilst 22 per cent are in senior roles, 17 per cent have an academic position and 11 per cent have a professional role (as at Dec 2012). However, due to the homogenisation of BME categories it is impossible to know which ethnic groups are most under-represented.

The need to disaggregate BME data is recommended in the ECU report since homogenisation hides marked differential experiences. For example, [disaggregated data](#) supplied by the HESA for the 2011/12 academic year reveals that there is a gross under-representation of Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi professors that mirrors the low student participation and progression rates within HE recently documented in a report by HEFCE.

This clearly points to a need for action targeted at the groups most adversely impacted by race and intersecting dimensions of class and gender. Yet the majority of HE institutions continue to homogenise data and direct policy and practice initiatives accordingly.

Tackling racial inequality through policy and strategic development should, in my view, be a collaborative, collective and consultative process involving full participation by elected BME staff representatives alongside university leaders. However, as noted in the ECU report, their absence in management structures within HEIs results in disempowerment and an inability to influence decision making on race equality practice.

The irony of this situation was acknowledged in a recent interview with Stephen Reid, of University of the Arts London (UAL), and the chair of the Equality and Diversity Leadership

Group:

"I think it's quite disappointing that in a university, in any institution of this size, the race champion is a white, male, middle-class, middle-aged man."

Slow pace of progress

Who leads the race equality agenda is a contributory factor to the slow pace of racial progress according to Melanie Crofts, a senior lecturer in law and member of the Equality and Diversity Research Group at the University of Northampton. She is nearing completion of a PhD thesis based on a case study university that examines race and disability within HE.

Her [findings](#) reveal a limited understanding of the legal obligation under the Public Sector Equality Duty by senior staff.

"The Public Sector Equality Duty requires an understanding of substantive equality of outcomes. If the management's understanding is that it is purely about treating people equally then they won't see the inequalities that relate to institutional racism."

She says that senior staff believed their university to be a beacon of equality, which is at odds with the numerous examples of racism and discrimination revealed during interviews with BME staff and students. However, their leadership of the race equality agenda is a factor that hampers any prospect of change:

"Management is primarily all-white so they're protecting their positions of superiority within higher education. Why would they want anything to change?"

Martin Hall, vice chancellor at the University of Salford has a perspective on race equality strongly influenced by six years spent working in South Africa as Deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Cape Town. He sees racial stereotyping as one of the major facets that drives prejudice and racial discrimination.

"In many respects it would be easy if people were overtly racist because you could deal with it. But it's not about that it's about who gets invited to the drink after work, who doesn't get invited. It's about whose communities are recognised as being legitimate..."

Art and design lecturer Aisha Richards, recently elected to the academic board at UAL, is founder and programme manager of Shades of Noir, a long term project that forms part of the Race Equality and Achievement Programme led by Mark Crawley, Director of Widening Participation and chair of the Equality and Diversity Forum.

During a recent interview he stressed its value to the race equality agenda at UAL: "I think one of the things that's important about Shades of Noir is that it's a predominantly black staff-led movement."

Hierarchy of race

It was informed by a small scoping study undertaken by Richards which explores the transition by BME graduates into employment within the creative sector. The findings reveal a perception by BME alumni of cultural bias.

She explains: "They talked about a hierarchy of race in the curriculum with white at the top followed by Chinese, then Indian, then black. Students from Chinese and Indian backgrounds said that they felt black students were treated differently."

That Richards research informed the first long-term, funded black-led programme within a UK university is a positive sign that the tide may be turning, leading to comparisons with gender equality.

Prof Jeremy Till, head of Central Saint Martins School of Art and Design and pro vice chancellor at UAL, recalls his efforts as head of the School of Architecture at the University of Sheffield where he takes collective credit for increasing the number of female academics from 10 per cent to 50 per cent over a 10-year period through positive action. However, he feels that in terms of race equality: "We're still at the starting blocks."

I take the view that it is time that the same vigour and commitment driving gender

equality was directed towards race equality. Ms Richards agrees: "There were definitely specific actions and orchestrated activity to ensure that there are women in the boardrooms and at senior levels. But until we take similar steps towards race equality then seeing black people in senior posts within academia will not become the norm."