



## Do universities have a problem with promoting their BAME staff?

There are woefully few people of colour in leadership positions at universities. While steps are being taken, genuine change requires sector-wide commitment

**Coco Khan**

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**I**nterview and promotion panels tend to be all white,” says Professor Kalwant Bhopal, the deputy director at the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Research in Race and Education. “And I’m not going to shy away from saying it, at these panels - within the processes - there are covert, sometimes overt, nuances of racism.”

Bhopal’s new book, *White Privilege: The Myth of Post-racial Society*, documents and analyses the marginalisation of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities. “Much of my research suggests that black minority-ethnic academics feel the goal posts are often moved when they apply for jobs or promotions,” she says. “Fundamentally, if your face doesn’t fit, you won’t get the job.”

The statistics bear this out. Universities are seeing record numbers of BAME students in attendance but this diversity has not translated to staff, particularly at senior level. The Higher Education Statistics Agency has recorded no black staff as “managers, directors and senior

officials” in the last three years. A 2015 report from the Runnymede Trust showed that just 0.5% of professors are black.

At the highest level, there are just three BAME vice-chancellors in the UK’s top 50 universities - University of Surrey (Max Lu), Soas (Baroness Valerie Amos) and the LSE (Dame Minouche Shafik). All of them have taken unconventional routes to the top: Amos is a former Labour cabinet minister; Lu is primarily a product of the Australian academic system and Shafik made her name at the world bank. None of them have worked their way up through the traditional academic pipeline. It begs the question: in UK universities, do we have a problem with promoting BAME staff?

## **The attainment gap**

The problem starts early, explains Nona McDuff, director of equality, diversity and inclusion at Kingston University. Currently the attainment gap between non-white and white students achieving a 2:1 or above sits at 16%.

“If you don’t get a first or a 2:1 you are less likely to go into master’s programmes, less likely to go into PhDs, less likely to get funding from a research council, less likely to get a position as a lecturer and less likely to get promoted,” says McDuff.

Similarly, there are differences in the kind of universities BAME students attend, illustrated by recent criticism of the University of Oxford’s record on admissions to black British students.

Academics who attended Russell Group universities tend to dominate senior roles, yet these universities have a much lower intake of BAME students. So while more BAME students are attending universities, the tiered nature of the education system results in little change in university leadership.

Instead, institutions are growing increasingly distant - representation-wise - from the students they serve. McDuff continues: “If you look at the ratio of white students to professors, it’s 50:1. For black students, it’s 2000:1. Early on, as a BAME student you’re reminded the odds are stacked against you.”

## **Decolonising the curriculum**

There has been much recent debate in the media about how to broaden cultural diversity in the curriculum. While the focus has been on the benefits it brings to BAME students, could this help lecturers too?

“In a piece of research for the ECU (Equality Challenge Unit), the respondents named the US as a favourite destination to work overseas,” says Bhopal. “They gave several reasons but one was that in the US there are historically black colleges and universities, focusing on black studies.” This means there exists a black academic elite to aspire to, that non-white students and educators can visualise being a part of.

But Deborah Gabriel, senior lecturer, Bournemouth University and founder of the Black British Academics network, worries that decolonising the curriculum could foster a challenging environment for black academics, especially in majority-white classrooms: “When you present students with different ideas that don’t sync with their view of the world, it’s going to be less comfortable for you because you’re challenging the very thing which has become their norms.”

Gabriel has been documenting the experience of women in colour in academia for her new book, *Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia*.

“It’s not recognised that as black academics, and as black female academics, that we have to work harder,” she explains. “There is a surface willingness from the institutions to rebalance racial inequality, but ultimately it is non-white professors who have to face the consequences of diversifying the curriculum.”

Part of the challenge for universities in tackling racial inequality lies in the fact that it often manifests covertly. For instance, Bhopal says that research around social justice issues is often dismissed as personal research. There can also be an implied - yet counterproductive - pressure to remain silent on race: “There’s this hesitancy sometimes of talking about race issues because they don’t want to be seen to be only talking about the issue that affects them,” says McDuff.

## **Diversity initiatives**

One of the most important initiatives aimed at addressing racial inequality is the Race Equality Charter. This was launched in 2012 in response to the success of the Athena Swan Charter, which aimed to enhance gender equality in Stem subjects. The charter offers a framework for universities to review barriers to non-white staff members, and gives an award mark for institutions which have developed actions and solutions.

“There were a number of people who sat on the race-charter marker application self-assessment team who have subsequently become far more ambitious,” recalls McDuff. “The BAME people involved have either risen or gone onto better jobs.” She attributes this partly to their increased understanding of how policies can impact them..”

But universities must be careful to ensure that diversity initiatives do not further entrench problems. For instance, leadership courses for BAME professors can send the wrong message by placing the emphasis for change on the BAME staff member, and failing to address the role of whiteness in our understanding of what a leader looks like.

“When we ran our BAME leadership programme, we made sure we weren’t fixing the BAME person,” explains McDuff. “We were fixing the manager and the system and the institution that doesn’t recognise their role in creating a diverse senior leadership to reflect the demands and the diversity of society.”

## **A matter of institutional priority**

Bhopal insists that radical changes - not lip service - are necessary. “I’m getting a bit sick of this. It’s the same story. I’ve been researching this area for 30 years.”

“I think that universities - particularly elite universities - are not really interested in this issue because they want to perpetuate their own image of white privilege and whiteness. That happens by maintaining their own status so therefore it doesn’t benefit them at all. They will only engage in this kind of policy-making when they think that it’s beneficial to them.”

How could universities be incentivised? “Some of the Athena SWAN charter was related to funding. It may well be that the Race Equality charter will go the same way. And I think it probably should.”

In the meantime, some universities are making increasing staff diversity a matter of institutional priority and taking bold steps to achieve it. GSM London, for instance, is taking advantage of its diverse student body by actively recruiting from its graduates.

“We wanted staff that our students - largely black and South Asian - could relate to” says Deborah Hayes, provost at GSM. It created a training and development programme that

allowed its successful students to shadow academics and gradually train themselves. They would eventually get to a point where they could lead a programme.

GSM's programme now takes a cohort of eight each year. Hayes is excited that the programme will act as a training hub for diverse staff, some of whom will eventually move on to other universities.

"It's gone down well with students because they understand life from a student perspective and they can stand there and say, 'Well, I was like you', five, six, seven years ago," she says. "It's inspiring."

At Kingston, participants from the BAME leadership programme have gone on to create cross-disciplinary programmes, such as a diverse reading groups, to raise awareness of race, showcase their creativity as leaders, and elevate the mission for racial equality from box-checking to something more meaningful.

### **Where next?**

"Data only tells half of the story," agrees Gabriel. "If you're always distracted by data, you're never going to see some of the subtle ways in which race does shape outcome."

For Gabriel, the problems are deeply-rooted and structural. She thinks that they will require sector-wide soul-searching about how universities view BAME staff and their place in the institution, rather than the window-dressing of diversity initiatives. "My argument is that we need to look at whiteness, to thoroughly interrogate it. We need to look at white privilege and how it shapes advantage and disadvantage."

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