Ethnic Minority Experiences of Working in the Faculty of Brain Sciences at UCL: A Qualitative Study

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Faculty of Brain Sciences
Abstract

**Aims:** This study aimed to understand the experiences of ethnic minority employees working within the Faculty of Brain Sciences (FBS) at UCL. Specifically, to understand the experiences in relation to recruitment, employment and retention.

**Method:** Twenty-one ethnic minority employees were recruited by email and invited to participate in one of five focus groups eliciting their experiences. A thematic analysis framework was used to analyse the data.

**Results:** Four dominate themes were identified in the data these included the; experiences of subtle forms of racism; ethnic minority employees having to shoulder the burden of disparity; recommendations for improvement; and little confidence in UCL to effect change.

**Conclusions:** To counteract some of the most distressing experiences that were reported, of feelings of isolation and not being supported in their careers, networking schemes should be set up for ethnic minority employees. Opportunities for mentoring through schemes which already exist at UCL should better communicated to ethnic minority employees.
Acknowledgements

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The Faculty of Brain Sciences would particularly like to thank the staff who participated in this study for sharing their experiences, enabling us to provide evidence-based action to improve the experiences of minoritised staff in FBS.
# Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2

Contents ........................................................................................................................................ 4

A note on Language: .................................................................................................................... 5

Background .................................................................................................................................... 5

Method ........................................................................................................................................ 8

Participants and Recruitment ........................................................................................................ 8

Table 1. Participant characteristics .............................................................................................. 10

Analysis ....................................................................................................................................... 13

Results .......................................................................................................................................... 13

Participants .................................................................................................................................. 13

Themes ......................................................................................................................................... 14

(1) Experiences of Subtle Forms of Racism ............................................................................. 15

(2) Shouldering the Burden ......................................................................................................... 21

(3) Recommendations for improvement ....................................................................................... 22

(4) No confidence in UCL to effect change ................................................................................ 26

Discussion ................................................................................................................................... 27

Recommendations ......................................................................................................................... 29
A note on Language:

In the course of running this study some of the ethnic minority participants who participated in the focus groups expressed strong views about their dislike of terms such as BAME or BME. In the absence of consensus agreement on a more appropriate term the term ‘ethnic minority’ has been used throughout this report. However, it should be noted that this term is also considered far from ideal by some.

Background

In the UK in 2010 the Equality Act was introduced to address discrimination and challenges faced by historically marginalised groups and it brought into law protections for nine characteristics one of which was race. Shortly after in 2014, to try and address the disparity of representation of ethnic minority academics within universities the Race Equality Charter was launched to provide a framework for overcoming barriers faced by ethnic minority academics. However, despite implementation of legislation and race equality initiatives, there has been little progress towards proportionate representation of ethnic minority staff employed by UK universities this is both within the Academic and Professional Services streams. To date there continues to be disparity between proportions of ethnic minority individuals in the population, 14% (ONS, 2011), and ethnic minorities employed at UK universities, 8.6% (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016). This disparity becomes even more apparent at higher grades within the Academic stream with just 4.8% of professors or heads of departments belonging to an ethnic minority group (Equality Challenge Unit, 2009). Many reasons have been proposed for this lack of proportionate representation including that of institutional racism within UK universities. A stark example of this is a study carried out within a university in Central England (Pilkington, 2013). When compared against ten dimensions of institutional racism, as identified in the MacPherson report (1999), this university was found to have made little progress in overcoming institutional failings even though more than ten years had elapsed since the since the MacPherson report. These findings alongside the reported disproportionate numbers of ethnic minority staff suggests that ethnic minority academics are having to work and
navigate a career path in predominantly White spaces in environments which are challenging at an institutional level.

Some of these barriers and challenges which ethnic minority staff face are highlighted in the current research literature on the topic. These challenges include: initial barriers of gaining employment due to biases in the recruitment process, once employed experiencing racism in the workplace, being employed on less conducive employment conditions, challenges and barriers to progression and difficulties with retention.

Studies have found that there are biases in the recruitment process within UK universities. A study using the implicit racial attitudes test at a leading British university found that White participants had a strong pro-White bias and ethnic minority participants also, although weaker, had a pro-White preference for rating applicants as suitable for a job (Beattie et al., 2013). This suggests that both White and ethnic minority interviewers hold racial biases in favour of White candidates. Therefore, there is an initial barrier for ethnic minority Academics and Professional Services applicants at the point of recruitment. To try and address this problem the Equality Challenge Unity (2016) suggest anonymous shortlisting and unconscious bias training to overcome these biases. If ethnic minority candidates are able to overcome this initial challenge of being recruited in the first instance, then they continue to experience difficulties on the basis of their ethnicity during their employment and a prominent theme in the literature is the finding of subtle experiences of racism by ethnic minority university staff.

Ethnic minority employees report feeling their work is subject to a higher level of scrutiny and is afforded less credibility than their White counterparts (Arday, 2018) and these experiences have the effect of simultaneously evoking feelings of being both invisible and hypervisible (Lander and Santoro, 2017; Mahony and Weiner, 2020). Another theme from the literature is the perception that ethnic minority academics lack credibility. Ethnic minority staff are considered, by some, to be employed not on the basis of merit but to meet requisite quotas (Mahony and Weiner, 2020). Within this school of thought female academics from ethnic minority backgrounds are perceived as the least credible (Sian, 2017). Female ethnic minority academics in particular report feeling out of place at White
institutions and are often mistaken for support staff (Mirza, 2017). When ethnic minority employees try and speak about their experiences they report that these disclosures are often not welcomed by senior staff (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020) and allegations of racism when made are often invalidated and dismissed as ‘exaggeration’ or a ‘clash of personalities’ (Bhopal and Jackson, 2013). Experiences of racism often leave staff from ethnic minority backgrounds feeling that they do not belong or that they are ‘outsiders’ and these feelings can have a detrimental impact on mental health (Arday, 2020).

Ethnic minority employees also often report being on less conducive employment conditions. Ethnic minority employees are more likely; to have fewer opportunities to develop research and progress their careers (Equality Challenge Unit, 2009); more likely to be employed on fixed-term or part-time contracts with 26% of ethnic minority staff employed on fixed-term contracts versus 17% of White staff (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016); and more likely to be paid less than their White counterparts with a reported ethnic pay gap of £14,000 (Sandhu, 2019).

As ethnic minority employees progress in their career they are faced with the challenge of not having a ‘blueprint’ or role model to emulate. This lack of representation at more senior grades also serves to perpetuate the notion that leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds are not as capable (Arday, 2018). Academics from ethnic minority backgrounds who have been successful in securing promotion to senior positions report having to be outstanding and harder working than their White colleagues (Bhopal, 2020). Mentoring schemes have been identified as a useful framework to support academics from ethnic minority backgrounds progress in their academic careers (Bhopal, 2014). However, a recent study found that there was little in the way of formal support available (Bhopal, 2020).

As a consequence of these difficulties there is evidence to suggest that ethnic minority employees are more likely to look elsewhere for employment. In particular, ethnic minority employees are reported as more likely to consider and accept employment overseas to further their careers than White counterparts (Bhopal et al., 2016).
The literature on ethnic minority employees within UK universities paints a stark picture of the additional barriers and difficulties ethnic minority employees face. The aim of the current study was to understand if these same difficulties were faced by ethnic minority employees at an Elite London University. Specifically, the aim of the current study was to elicit the experiences of ethnic minority employees working within the faculty of Brain Sciences (FBS) at UCL in relation to their experiences of recruitment, employment and retention.

Method

Data protection registration

UCL data protection registration number: Z6364106/2021/01/03

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were 21 ethnic minority staff either employed within the Academic or Professional Services streams within the FBS at UCL. Participants were invited to attend one of five focus groups facilitated by RD a Clinical Psychologist and Research Fellow working in the FBS. The topic guide for the focus groups was based on a search of the literature highlighting some of the difficult experience ethnic minority staff working at UK Higher Educational Institutes (HEI) are faced with. This was further refined through discussion in meetings with the project organisers to make it relevant to the current study and context. See Appendix 1 for the final list of the topic guide/questions for the focus groups.

Recruitment was carried out via email. The FBS at UCL is comprised of nine divisions or institutes. An email was sent via the project coordinator to the head of each division or institute requesting they email all the staff in their division inviting ethnic minority staff to participate in the current study. Participants were invited to email their expression of interest to the project coordinator at which point they were sent information sheets and information on data protection (Appendices 2 & 3). Participants were then invited to one of five focus groups which were allocated on whichever group the participant was able to attend. Each focus group ran for an hour and half and was conducted remotely using the video conferencing software Zoom. The focus groups were audio recorded and transcripts
were auto generated and later checked against the audio recordings for accuracy.
Participants were offered a £50 voucher on attendance of a focus group.
Table 1. Participant characteristics

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<th>Job</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Contract</th>
<th>Length of service/yrs.</th>
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*the exact nature of any disability has not been reported to ensure anonymity of participants; NR = not reported*
Analysis

The data were analysed using a thematic analyses framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allows for identifying patterns in the data and thereby enables organisation of the data into themes. A theme can be understood as a grouping label that pulls together an important element of the information with respect to the research questions asked. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) the analysis was undertaken in a six-step process, outlined below:

1. Data Familiarisation: the transcripts were read and checked for accuracy in order to become familiar with the content of the focus groups. Initial annotations and notes were made that were later used in coding the data.
2. Generating Codes: interesting features of the data were coded systematically across the entire data set.
3. Searching for Themes: once the data was coded, themes were generated that captured an overarching theme relevant to the codes.
4. Reviewing Themes: themes were checked against the whole data set to make sure that they worked in relation to the whole data.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: themes were reviewed and names were generated for each theme.
6. Producing the Report: examples of each theme were extracted for use in the report and the report was produced.

The data analysis was conducted using NVivo software (Version 12, for Mac).

Results

Participants

Twenty-one ethnic minority employees participated in the current study. Seven of the participants came from Asian backgrounds (5 Indian and 2 Pakistani), three identified as Black (2 Caribbean and 1 African), two identified as White and Black Caribbean mixed, two other mixed, one Chinese, one Arab and one other Asian. Seventeen (80%) of the participants were female. Eleven participants were employed as Academics, eight employed
in the Professional Services and two were employed as Technical staff. Those employed as Academics ranged from grades 6 to 8a and those employed in the Professional Services were employed in grade 6 and 7. The two employees from the Technical band were employed at grade 7 and 8. Only four of the participants were employed on a permanent basis with the majority (82%) reporting being employed on a fixed-term contract. Thirteen participants were employed as full-time staff. Two participants reported having a disability. The full characteristics of the participants are reported in Table 1.

Themes

Four dominant themes were identified from the analysis which included:

- Experiences of subtle forms of racism. This theme was comprised of several subordinate themes including: (i) being held to higher standards than white peers; (ii) not valued; (iii) isolated and not belonging to the UCL community; (iv) excluded from informal networks; (v) difficulties with progression; (vi) having no ethnic minority role models in senior positions.
- Ethnic minority staff having to shoulder the burden of disparity. This theme was comprised of two subordinate themes of: (i) shouldering the emotional burden and; (ii) lack of White acknowledgement;
- Recommendations for improvement. This theme comprised of several suggestions for improvements including: (i) making career progression transparent and clear for all staff; (ii) Training on how to manage diverse teams for managers; (iii) Working together to share the burden; (iv) Networks for ethnic minority employees; (v) Mentoring schemes for ethnic minority employees and (vi) More training for interview panellists.
- No confidence in UCL to effect change.
(1) Experiences of Subtle Forms of Racism

Staff members from both Professional Services and Academic streams reported a broad range of various difficulties as ethnic minority employees which they felt were probably not part of the White experience at UCL.

(i) Held to higher standards

Ethnic minority staff members reported a feeling of being held to higher standards than other employees are in terms of their work and performance.

PS1 ...yeah, maybe I was held to too much of a high standard and which didn’t match the role...

This feeling of being held to higher standards was vocalised as both an internal felt sense as a result of being brought up in an equal society, with several participants reporting being told as children that they would have to work harder to succeed in a White world.

A10 .... I’ve always been told...[when]... I was very much younger. Trying to decide which career path I wanted to choose [...] an A&E consultant who happened to be Indian sat me down and said, you know you’re going to have to work 10 times harder because you’re a woman and you’re brown....

Participants reported that this idea of having to work harder as well as being an internal sense as a result of their upbringing was further reinforced externally by line managers some of whom were reported to hold ethnic minority staff to higher standards.

A1 ...I always feel.... like someone’s always keeping... an eye on me. Type thing, whereas maybe there’s other colleagues and you know I don’t know, maybe they’ve only marked five things and I’ve marked ten but that’s never really questioned, or so I always feel like I’m always having to [...] do lots and lots and consistently be doing that because I feel like... if I start to maybe underperform that would be picked up a lot quicker.
(ii) Not valued

A related point to being held to higher standards was the feeling that some participants had of not being valued or recognised for their input or the work they had done.

A2.... I landed this interview at MIT and thought well, if I can manage one of the top institutes in the world, then.... maybe I just need to switch that and go towards some an institute that appreciates what I’ve got to offer and clearly there are institutes like that, if it’s not happening within UCL. And so that that’s where I’m putting all of my effort now because I feel a little bit like I’m just banging my head against a brick wall. And in someone saying yeah your CV’s glowing or this is great that’s great and all you need to do is just go bring a grant in and it's still not happening, then I don’t think that it’s ever going to change.

A11:... when I sort of looked around and seeing other people getting promoted and [...] I’m sort of getting left behind, even though I’m performing as well as they are....

(iii) Feeling Isolated and Not Belonging to the UCL Community

Participants gave many examples of the ways in which they felt they were excluded from the UCL community which further served to heighten feelings of isolation within them. Participants spoke about not being able to attend work social events, due to other commitments, they also reported feeling excluded from departmental activities and difficulties with making connections with people who were not like them.

PS3:...all of the social events [...] are like in the evening in the pub and you’re like I have to get home. Because I have family commitments and everything is late, or everything is not in a way, where it makes it easy for you to become part of a group or to socialize with other people.
T2:...because of the colour you also don’t feel included in what’s going on in the department...

PS7...yeah I mean it’s just difficult...you know [...] when people are not like you, [it] is difficult to connect...so much easier just having people of your own background [...] so straight away you have something in common and the connection is a lot easier...

A8....I find that [...] very difficult [...] the vast majority of professors in the department are white men. And you know, even if it’s just casual conversations about stuff that’s come up in the news that might be relatively topical. It’s very difficult to have a conversation with them about that, because they just don’t...they’ve got no insight into your perspective and [...] I find that really, really difficult.

(iv) Informal Networks

Additionally, many participants spoke about being aware of informal networks which they felt they were excluded from based on their ethnic minority backgrounds. Participants reported that based on these informal networks White colleagues had an advantage as they were potentially privy to information on jobs and promotion routes which otherwise may be harder to seek out and navigate unaided. Participants also reported that these networks were predominately comprised of white men fostering a culture which was more conducive to including and benefitting other white man leaving ethnic minority employees feeling excluded and on the back foot.

A8:... I think there’s [...] a lot of informal networks that exist and [...] on the basis of those informal networks, I think that sometimes information is not transmitted necessarily equally so it depends on who you do know [and] what they tell you [...] if a job advert goes out, for example, [...] I think a lot of it depends on your personal relationships...and yeah it would be nice if that [...] was taken out of it and the information that everybody needs to find the jobs and the progression [...] could be in a single place and it doesn’t matter who you know you can you can access all of that.
PS7:... So if [...] there were more of us in the in the positions that we want to go to. Or we want to get to it would be a lot easier for us to then tap... it’s a network thing I think you’re absolutely right, there is a network and there’s a secret network, and if you...[are]... in the network, I think you’re driven and you're highlighted to the right people very quickly. And it’s amazing you progress that way, a lot better [...] It is, I guess, about knowing the right people, and I think that’s where we sometimes feel we don’t have the network that we should have or it’s just not there for us that’s my personal opinion.

T1:...for example, if you’re white male [...] it is a culture that already suits you so, by default, you can already have more confidence, because everyone already looks and speaks like you. You already have an advantage... you’re not isolated you don’t have to think about any of these things.

(v) Difficulties with progression

Participants spoke about facing structural barriers and challenges of being an ethnic minority staff member at UCL. Participants reported that progressing at UCL was particularly difficult for them as an ethnic minority because the information required to understand the process for promotion or progression was often opaque and without support from invested managers or being members of informal networks, the system was very hard to navigate alone.

A1:...I know there are senior clinical tutor positions. I just don’t know how one becomes one. So I know there are two people who are in that position...one started after me...so I mean it’s not do with experience because I’ve got more in lecturing. I’m just not too sure how to get there...I just would have no clue how to even get on to that or if you have apply or what...I don’t know.

A3:...I don’t feel any local support in...in progression either because like in my case. I would, if I wanted to progress to a more lecture sort of level, I would have to complete a PhD or
something so I had to source it myself and I’m doing a PhD at another institution...most of the PhDs as most of you know it can just come from a conversation with a supervisor right and it feels like that would never happen to me...

As a result of some of these systemic barriers being based on informal networks that are mostly unseen and not openly spoken about there was a feeling that it was difficult to name or call out this unseen systemic barrier. As such minority ethnic staff said that then the responsibility for not progressing was placed squarely on them.

PS7:...and then is that comment of well why don’t you trail blaze?...why don’t you be the example, but then that’s added pressure on you.

T1:...[‘m] always[...]] aware of those kind of conversations because it puts the emphasis on the individual again...What other [...] systemic barriers [...] are stopping people from moving forward because it makes you think that you have choice about moving forward and actually you don’t because there’s so much barriers in place that you think [it] is your fault. They’ll make you think it’s your fault, but actually it’s the structures and how do you articulate that in a way that resonates? It makes it sounds if I have choice about that, and you internalise it so then when you fail, because whose fault is it? It’s yours.

Another bar to progression was the feeling that White employees had a sense of confidence and entitlement that was lacking in ethnic minority employees. This dual confidence and lack of confidence in White and ethnic minority employees further served to reinforce the boundaries and hold minority ethnic employees back.

A4: ... in general in my career what I’ve noticed is I’m usually surrounded by White [...] male people...who....over time, [have] convinced me that they’re better than me simply by bravado and confidence and a sense of entitlement and this [is] probably more culture than race, [...] I’ve not really ever had that’s that sense of entitlement and so it’s easy for me to resign...
An additional barrier to progression was the intersection of sex and ethnicity. Participants reported that it was hard enough as an ethnic minority to progress through the grades at UCL and being female was an additional barrier.

A5:... I would like to progress, but like realistically, I feel that maybe [it] is not 100% possible [...] partly because, like maybe in the department I’m in.... I really don’t see [...] a lot of females, who are already in the top positions and then like considering that I’m a minority and, like the females in high positions are not even minority makes it feel that the ceiling feels even higher...

(vi) Nobody looks like us at the top

Participants reported that the only people who looked like them from the UCL community were the cleaning staff and the security guards. Based on this disparity participants reported questioning where they belonged within the UCL community. This was further reinforced because when they looked up at the higher ranks within the UCL community they could not see themselves represented. Leaving them feeling further isolated and uneasy.

A9:...there’s something I find slightly disturbing...I’ve noticed this at UCL that you know...the security staff, the cleaning staff...they tend to be black or from various different...I think...minority backgrounds....

T1:...I’ve been coming in around eight and then you see all the black people are the cleaners right. And then, later at the end of the day you see you see other black people and it’s just like a clear segregation...

A8: ...well yeah I mean I guess at its most uncomfortable it’s you know...where do you belong in this institution? Where are the people like you and what are they doing? And what is it that you want to do, and you know it raises those questions...yeah I imagine you know your non-minority colleagues do not necessarily ask themselves that question[...]but when you
know...when you realise that at the top there’s no one who looks like you you...I know it sounds like a silly thing to say but you know it’s just what are you trying to to...what are you trying to do?

(2) Shouldering the Burden

(i) Ethnic minority staff having to shoulder the burden for disparity

Many of the participants spoke passionately about the emotional toll that being an ethnic minority member employee at UCL had had on them and having to think about disparity, inequality and facing systemic barriers caused them emotional distress. Participants felt unsupported and isolated with their experiences.

T1:...it’s really isolating being here, so what is the support? You know to kind of offload and make sense of it, because, you know, [you] can feel [...] you’re going bonkers but actually you’re not... Because it seems, you know, it is quite exhausting emotional doing this kind of stuff and so then that’s another emotional burden...

PS2:... you’re giving up your time to do them and, like this, this is an hour and a half [of] our time which should be spent writing papers, we could be doing something else that’s advancing our career but we’re here doing this...

(ii) Lack of White acknowledgement

As well as shouldering the burden for the disparity many participants voiced frustration at the lack of White acknowledgment on this topic and they saw it very much like the emotional toll rested completely with them. Firstly, by having to face additional difficulties by virtue of belonging to an ethnic minority group and secondly, they felt the responsibility to do something about it and effect change was also left in their hands. Where White employees could easily look away and not think about these issues ethnic minority
employees reported not having that option. Furthermore, they expressed that they felt additional distress because the burden was not even acknowledged.

PS4:... I know it's common amongst academics and researchers that they don't necessarily have the time or cannot make the time to sort of educate themselves on how discrimination, racism works at UCL and I think it's mainly because they don't feel like they have to because it doesn't directly affect them and it's kind of like they're sort of privilege[d], in that sense it doesn't affect them they don't find it necessary to do it...

PS3: ... I always feel like whenever we do things like this, and whenever we have trainings about like cultural awareness or racial bias[...] I feel like it needs to be something that's mandatory for group leaders or managers or anyone who's in a high like in a position where they're managing other people or recruiting people because. Until it's made something that they have to do, they are not going to do it and they won’t engage with it, because to them it's not important, or just something that they don’t think is an issue or they think that it's somebody else's issue, but not a problem for them, and I feel like that needs to be something that is like compulsory for everyone.

T1...the emphasis is on us isn’t it?...the emphasis [has] been on ethnic minorities like how much use is it to kind of shift attention onto those in power...how useful is that to kind of see what white people think...? you know, like what do they [White staff members] think? ... how can we shift[...] the responsibility to the non BAME...?

(3) Recommendations for improvement

The participants voiced that they were keen to see improvements and changes that would make their experiences at UCL easier and help them feel more part of the wider UCL community. Many participants came up with useful suggestions for improvements. These included:
(i) Making career progression transparent and clear for all

Participants voiced frustration that information on career progression was not easy to locate and suggested that this should be made more transparent and easier to find. Linked to the theme of transparency some participants thought it would be useful if stats could be produced on the number of ethnic minorities applying for and gaining particular positions.

A1... I think for me just knowing what the career progression would be. Like what I'd be expected to do, how I could work towards that, because at the moment I'm just doing the job, but I don't know if I'm actually doing anything that's going to help me progress if I know what that is I could start doing it. So I think for me it's just knowing you know the knowledge part about.

A7: ...I think it would be quite good if there was maybe... stats showing how many people[...] applied for this job out of how many, you know, from that how many BAME members who [were] actually offered the job or... How many people are [...] at senior level, just so you can...then you can actually really know [...] there's a trend here...

(ii) Training on how to manage diverse teams for managers

There was a suggestion that there should be more training for managers to manage diverse teams.

PS1... I would say, you know, first of all, people who recruit managers, they need to make sure that they know how to manage diverse teams...

(iii) Working together to share the burden
Sharing the burden of race inequality between all staff members at UCL by working collaboratively for example by introducing reverse mentoring schemes whereby minority ethnic staff mentor senior managers.

PS2:... my sister work[s] from the University of Birmingham, and they have [...] reverse mentoring, so as a scheme [...] to work with senior managers and so on and so forth...You know something like that would be great, but you [...] have to make sure that the people at the top, are committed to doing it....

A6:... I was in a meeting at UCL where you know, one of the White males were actually you know [...] listening to what issues we’re having and he was saying what he is going to do to help tackle racism. So, I think we should get platforms, where we could help these people to use their white privileges, as it were. So, we have an allyship with them and they use their power and privileges to support us, so I think UCL needs to create those opportunities to use them to pick us up.

(iv) Networks for ethnic minorities

To lessen the emotional toll and isolation of being an ethnic minority employee many participants stated that they would like to see networks or spaces for ethnic minorities for them to regularly meet and discuss common experiences.

PS5:... I think, for me, I think if we know what groups are out there that can represent us [...] I think that, for me, will be better to know that there is a group, so I can join and have conversations with. That for me to know to know what’s out there, and not just once a year and when black history month comes up or whatever, a bit more regular.

(v) Dedicated career pathways

Dedicated career pathways specifically for ethnic minority staff members to address the problem of under representation of minority staff across academia in the UK.
A2: there needs to be something more actionable, but I would like to see some of our own across academia, not just UCL we know we categorically know that there is under representation from BAME in academia... I don't understand why then there isn't a dedicated pathway specifically for this minority to give them the extra tools and recognize what's missing and what they're not being given in terms of opportunities what extra help can be needed to nourish that particular group of people...

(vi) Mentoring schemes for ethnic minority employees

Raising awareness mentoring schemes for ethnic minority staff for all grades in order to support with progression at UCL. Both participants working in the Academic and Professional Services streams voiced wanting appropriate mentors.

PS8: I would love... coaching mentoring, you know, training, as well as much as being mentored or being coached but, again, like coaching training, I think, [it] is only available at certain grades and tends to be the highest ones and that's not usually for for me.

In addition to the mentoring scheme for ethnic minority employees many participants expressed that they would like to be mentors even if they themselves were not in particular senior positions.

A8: Personally I would like to help [...] I'm not particularly senior I don't know very much, but [...] even if mentoring, at my level for people who are [...] less experienced than I am I would be very happy to do that...I've just been kind of informally doing this with, where it's not any formal mentorship but already the issues are the same issues that they don't feel they can discuss with you know their regular supervisors and no I don't feel I'm doing very much, but even just to say yeah I've experienced that too this is how I dealt with it... I think you know peer mentorship I think can you know can also make a difference.
More training for interview panellists

Participants reported being aware that there was some form of unconscious bias playing out in the recruitment process at UCL and suggested tackling unconscious bias on interview panels by having more training.

A10:... I think [...] the fundamental way of trying to target more fair interviewing is really making sure people are aware of their unconscious bias and [...] doing much more teaching on that, I think you can’t do enough teaching on it...it’s not enough recognizing It is then doing something about it, the next step. Because there’s only so much... as soon as a person, walks through the door you’ve already decided what you think about that person, regardless of what kind of process you go through after that...

No confidence in UCL to effect change

Despite the participants engaging in the focus groups and actively contributing to the discussions around what they would like to see in terms of change and improvements at UCL there was a cynical feeling of resignation. Many voiced that they thought UCL was good at making suggestions for improvement and change and conducting studies like the current one but there was very little follow through on this.

A3:... I would like the words to become actions and like what you’ve asked just now, if I’ve been offered mentorship yeah I’ve had emails about it, even had conversations about it but it never happened...

A4:...it probably is a bit of resignation I just don’t feel at the stage of life I’m at now with having small [...] children and working part time is a time where I can really grab that and tackle that head on...and things won’t change...
Discussion

This study set out to elicit the experiences of ethnic minority employees working within the FBS at UCL with a particular focus on experiences of recruitment and retention. A thematic analysis highlighted four dominant themes which included: the subtle forms of racism that ethnic minority employees experience; having to shoulder the burden of disparity in terms of the emotional toll as well as the responsibility to effect change; the ways in which the participants thought improvements could be made; and lastly there was a feeling expressed by many of the participants that they did not have any confidence in UCL to bring about change or to improve their working conditions.

One of the initial questions the current study aimed to ask was in relation to whether the recruitment process was experienced as fair. Most participants reported that they thought their recruitment process had been fair and experiences of being disadvantaged did not emerge as a theme from the data. One reason for this is due to selection bias. The true picture of whether ethnic minority applicants are disadvantaged at the point of recruitment cannot be evidenced from the experiences of the ethnic minorities employees who are successful at gaining employment. A more robust method of gathering such data would be better utilised to answer this question, for example sending out questionnaires for all applicants to complete after a job interview.

The experience of subtle forms of racism emerged as a dominate theme in the data with all the participants reporting at least one, if not multiple, forms of discrimination or disadvantage they had experienced whilst employed at UCL. Some of the concerns raised by the participants are mirrored in the research literature on the topic and well documented as problems endemic in many British universities. The UCL participants reported a sense of being held to higher standards in terms of the amount and quality of the work they produced this finding is not unique to UCL and has been found at other HEI in the UK (Arday, 2020). In addition, the study participants and ethnic minority employees academics from various HEIs in the UK reported being allocated more work which is subject to more scrutiny and being given less time to develop their own research ideas (Equality Challenge Unit, 2009) which has the effect of hindering subsequent career paths. The work that is produced by ethnic minority employees is often considered to be lower quality than work produced by White employees which is a finding that was reported by the study participants as well as
more widely in UK HEIs (Bhopal et al., 2016). On the whole, the participants reported these experiences of discrimination relatively dispassionately. However, the one topic that evoked the most distress was that of being isolated and not belonging to the UCL community. There was a sense of segregation and displacement that some of the participants reported was for them a daily struggle. From the moment they entered the UCL building in the morning, when they are confronted with the fact that the only people who look like them are the security staff, to the end of the day when the cleaners arrive who are also more likely to be of a similar ethnic background as them. This is potentially distressing on many levels as it serves to leave ethnic minority staff feeling more isolated, less able to progress at UCL as they do not see themselves reflected in senior roles and therefore, they are more likely to question where they belong within the UCL community. These dynamics may be even more pronounced at elite British institutions such as UCL which may have an unspoken culture of wanting to perpetuate the image of White privilege (Bhopal, 2018). Another emotive topic that was raised by some of the participants was that the emotional toll of disparity fell completely on their shoulders and whilst White employees could choose to look away, they could not. This was felt as a double injury. Firstly, through the emotional toll of experiencing discrimination in the first place and secondly by the feeling that this problem was theirs alone to solve.

Another question the current study aimed to answer was that of how well UCL were at retaining ethnic minority employees. Although it is reported in the research literature that ethnic minority employees, in particular those working as academics, are more likely to seek employment overseas as a result of experiences of being marginalised (Bhopal et al., 2016) this was not a finding in the current study. A minority of participants, from both the Academic and Professional streams, stated that were actively looking for positions at other HEIs but this did not emerge as a major theme from the data. However, it is of note that the reasons the participants gave for wanting to remain at UCL was that they thought the difficulties they had faced due to their ethnicity were not unique to UCL and moving would not resolve their problems. Participants also stated that they would choose to remain at UCL, despite their experiences of discrimination, because of the location and reputation of UCL.
The focus group discussions generated a great deal in terms of ideas and recommendations that the participants were keen to put forward.

1. **Create networking opportunities for ethnic minority employees:** One idea that should be taken on board and implemented as a matter of priority is that of networking schemes for ethnic minority employees. One of the most distressing experiences that was reported was that of being isolated and not belonging to the UCL community. Isolation, lack of connections, feelings of alienation are well defined constructs known to have detrimental impacts on mental health (Wang et al., 2017). To alleviate some of the negative impact of this networking groups should be set up for ethnic minority employees giving them the opportunity to form connections and create a space for them to talk about their shared experiences. These networks will also provide them, to some degree, the opportunities that are already available to White employees who may be part of and benefiting from informal networks.

2. **Increase engagement in existing equity schemes:** Ethnic minority employees should be made aware of and supported in accessing schemes which already exist at UCL such as the B-MEntor Academic Mentoring Scheme, B-MEntor Professional Mentoring Scheme, and the Inclusive Advocacy scheme. The two B-MEntor Mentoring Schemes are available to all ethnic minority employees who are working at post-doc to lecturer level (for the Academic scheme) and grades 5-7 (for the Professional Services scheme). The Inclusive Advocacy scheme is available to ethnic minority employees both within the Academic and Professional Services streams and matches them to a senior member of UCL staff. This scheme aims to support ethnic minority employees in developing their leadership potential with the aim of helping to redress the disparity of ethnic minority representation in senior positions at UCL.

3. **Improve communication of available opportunities:** It was apparent from running the focus groups that the participants were not aware of the schemes already existing at UCL. To enable ethnic minority employees wider access to these
opportunities there should be better communication of these schemes. Networking schemes would provide a useful forum to inform ethnic minority employees about these mentoring schemes.

4. **Create channels for ongoing feedback from ethnic minority employees:**

Understanding the experiences of ethnic minority employees is essential to guide future actions and strategies. However, this feedback should be elicited on an ongoing basis rather than as a one-off activity. There should be regular opportunities for dialogue where ethnic minority employees can share their experiences. By doing so further barriers can be identified early and the implementation of recommendations can be monitored over time to ascertain impact.
Conclusions

There were many forms of disadvantage that ethnic minority employees in the FBS at UCL reported experiencing. It is important to highlight that in conducting the focus groups and in the process of eliciting some of these experiences there was considerable distress expressed by some of the participants. There was also a strong cynical feeling of resignation and the feeling that there was little will or appetite for change at UCL. These feelings of distress in relation to experiences of subtle forms of racism, perceived lack of acknowledgment from the HEI and resignation to the status quo have been found to have detrimental impacts on the mental health of ethnic minority employees (Arday, 2020). The concluding quote below from one of the focus group participants captures a common experience of distress and sense of frustrated resignation that several of the participants voiced.

T1:... it is quite emotionally exhausting talking about experiences and [...] then after this it’s kind of like...then what? We’re being extrapolated for data and then what?

References

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Bhopal, K., Jackson, J., 2013. The experiences of Black and ethnic minority academics: multiple identities and career progression. Southampton.


Equality Challenge Unit, 2009. The experience of black and minority ethnic staff working in higher education Literature review 2009.


Appendices

Appendix 1.

What are the experiences of recruitment and retention for BME staff working at UCL in the Faculty of Brain Sciences?

Information: We are conducting these focus groups across the Faculty of Brain Sciences to elicit the experiences of recruitment and retention for BME staff working at UCL.

Participation in the focus group today is voluntary and the session will run for about 90mins with a 10 min break in the middle. The information gathered today will be recorded and transcribed for data analysis. The data will be anonymised and stored confidentially.

Guidelines:

- Please don’t feel under any pressure to answer the questions - ok to abstain from discussing specific topics if you’re not comfortable sharing the information
- Speak as openly as you feel comfortable to
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Please respect others’ opinions even if you don’t agree with them
- Try and stay on topic
- Please don’t discuss any of the other participants’ views outside of this group
- At times I may need to interrupt you to bring the discussion back on topic or to keep within the time frame – this is not in any means an indication that what you are saying is not important
- Are there any questions?

Participants introduce themselves

Topics:

- Why did you choose to work for UCL and what was the recruitment process like?
  - (Why did you choose to work in academia)
  - Did you think the recruitment process was fair?
  - Was the panel diverse?
Do you feel it was harder for you than white colleagues to secure employment at UCL?

Why do you think that was?

How could the process be improved?

Are you satisfied with your employment conditions? e.g. work-load, type of contract, length of contract? If you are satisfied yes -why? If no -why?

possible follow up questions:

If you are not satisfied - why?

If you are satisfied -why?

If you don’t think the employment conditions are fair, have you or would you be able to raise this with supervisor/HR?

If you do consider employment conditions to be fair and equitable, what are the employment conditions that best support and retain you at UCL?

Do you see yourself progressing in your career at UCL?

possible follow up questions:

Are there are any barriers to this?

Do you have BME role models in senior positions that you can aspire to/represent you?

Is there a mentoring scheme you can take part in if you want?

What support is in place to help you progress in your career?

What could be improved to better support BME staff throughout their career?

Would you consider leaving UCL to work elsewhere either in the UK or overseas?

possible follow up questions:

What would make you leave? (Better employment conditions, better chances of promotion, better working culture? Etc.)
• What would make you stay?
  • Is there anything else that is important or relevant to your employment experience that hasn’t been mentioned?

Appendix 2.

FBS Focus Groups – Your personal information and data protection

Your personal information
You will be asked to provide some personal data about yourself, such as your ethnicity, gender, whether you have a disability, your religion and/or belief and your sexual orientation.

Some of this information we are asking for may seem excessive to you, but we are asking these questions as we are aware that different groups in our community have different experiences working in the Faculty, and we need to be able to make decisions on how and when to provide targeted support to staff groups who are in most need. We have appointed 5 Equity Leads for ethnicity, disability, gender, religion and belief and LGBT+ and they will be using the data from these focus groups to plan equity actions in the Faculty.

Data protection
Who is running the focus groups?
The focus groups are being run by the Faculty of Brain Sciences Race Equity team.

Will the data be identifiable?
The data will not be identifiable, the qualitative researcher facilitating the sessions will ensure all respondents are anonymous in the report produced.

Who will have access to the data?
The raw data will only be accessible to the qualitative researcher and be stored securely on UCL servers. An anonymised report summarising main findings of the focus groups will be shared with the Faculty.
You will not be identifiable from reports.

What will you do with the data?
We’ll analyse the data to look for trends and patterns in people’s current experiences. This analysis will be passed to departments to understand the issues members of our community are facing and help to inform action.
Appendix 3.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR (DISABLED/ BAME/LGBTQ+) STAFF AND STUDENT FOCUS GROUP - FACULTY OF BRAIN SCIENCES

UCL Research Ethics Committee Approval ID Number: _______

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Study: Faculty of Brain Sciences Equity Focus Groups Project
Department: Faculty of Brain Sciences (FBS)
Name and Contact Details of the Researcher(s): Manjula Patrick (Disability) or Lasana Harris (Race) fbs.edi@ucl.ac.uk

The Faculty of Brain Sciences Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team want to collect data on experiences of (Disabled/BAME/LGBTQ+) staff and students. You have expressed interest in being part of this research and before you decide whether or not you would like to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve.

This is a qualitative investigation into the experiences of (Disabled/BAME/LGBTQ+) staff and students in FBS, and participation is purely voluntary. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish before consenting to take part.

Ask us (fbs.edi@ucl.ac.uk) if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this document.

1. What is the project’s purpose?
Data collected from the Focus Groups will inform FBS’ EDI action planning and will allow us to improve our understanding of the experiences of (Disabled/BAME/LGBTQ+) staff and students, so we can begin to address the disparities.

We are aware that within UCL and our Faculty, (Disabled/BAME/LGBTQ+) staff have different experiences (both positive and negative) in terms of access to opportunities to develop and progress their careers or prosper and achieve as students.

Although there is data from surveys, a limited amount of research has been undertaken directly with (Disabled/BAME/LGBTQ+) staff and students in FBS or UCL. This project plans to collect in depth information about the experiences of (Disabled/BAME/LGBTQ+) staff and students, the findings of which will inform FBS’s EDI action planning of future initiatives that are more equitable.

Specifically, the research project aims to:
1. Explore positive and negative aspects of experience for (Disabled/BAME/LGBTQ+) staff and students.
2. Explore perceptions and motivations of success, as well as any barriers in achieving them.
3. Explore perceptions of belonging and the degree to which this is felt within departments, as well as the wider institution and Students' Union UCL
4. Explore whether there have been experiences or discrimination on campus, and if so, how these have been addressed.
5. Put forward recommendations/suggestions to improve the experiences of (Disabled/BAME/LGBTQ+) staff and students at UCL

2. Am I eligible to take part?
In order to participate in this research you must meet inclusion criteria; self-identify as a (Disabled, BAME (Black Asian or Minority Ethnic), LGBTQ+) member of staff or student in the Faculty of Brain Sciences.

The project aims to recruit 10 participants per Focus Group. Focus Groups for staff and students will take place separately. If you identify as Disabled, we will arrange access to the Focus group session. Note: Focus Groups may be conducted in person or remotely

3. Do I have to take part?
It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form to participate. You can withdraw from the project at any time without penalties and without giving a reason, until the data is transcribed and anonymised. If you decide to withdraw, you will be asked what you wish to happen to the data you have provided up to that point and still be entitled to the benefits of participating.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?
Focus groups will be:
- Be a single, 90 minute focus group
- Follow a structured format using a set of predetermined questions
- Take place on the following dates (insert dates – TBC).
- Take place on UCL campus or remotely.
- Be facilitated by an independent researcher (from UCL but external to FBS)
- Travel expenses will not be reimbursed, however, you will receive a £50.00 voucher via email within four weeks of the focus group to thank you for your participation (this will be an e-voucher).
- Focus groups will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes. All transcriptions will be anonymised and you will not be identified in any ensuing reports or publications.
- You will be asked to provide your consent to being audio recorded for the focus group. A consent form will be sent to you to sign prior to the focus group session.
- Focus groups will include sensitive questions regarding disability and race and ethnicity. You can leave the focus group at any time and/or decline to answer questions without penalty.

5. Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?
Focus groups will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. Audio recordings will be submitted for transcription online using a third party transcription service. No other use of
these recordings will be made without your written permission, and no one outside of the project team will have access to the recordings. All transcriptions will be anonymised, and you will not be identified in any ensuing reports or publications. Your permission to be audio recorded will be obtained prior to the start of the focus group. Audio recordings will be deleted within two weeks following receipt of transcriptions after checking for accuracy and robust anonymisation.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
The project is centred on understanding your experiences at UCL and the research involves sensitive discussions around the topic of disability or race/ethnicity. You will be asked to draw on your own personal experiences in focus groups when answering or discussing questions. Drawing on your personal experiences may trigger negative emotions. If you show signs of upset at any point, the focus group will be stopped and you will be asked whether you wish to proceed or not. You can decline to answer any question and/or stop or withdraw entirely from the focus group at any time.

7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?
The following benefits have been identified for taking part in the project:
- Financial incentives: £50.00 voucher for participation in a focus group
- By sharing your experiences, you will inform the delivery of initiatives to improve (Disabled/BAME/LGBTQ+) staff and student experiences in FBS and improve inclusion.

8. What if something goes wrong?
If you wish to raise a complaint at any point during the project, these should be directed to Anna Cox (FBS Vice Dean for Equality Diversity and Inclusion), anna.cox@ucl.ac.uk. If you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you can escalate your complaint to the Chair of the UCL Research Ethics Committee, ethics@ucl.ac.uk.

9. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?
All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Audio recordings of interviews/focus groups will only be used for transcription purposes. The audio recordings will be transferred (online) to a third party transcription service, who will anonymise the data. The transcription service used will be UCL approved supplier, and transfer of data will be secure and meet UCL and GDPR/data protection requirements. You will not be identified in any ensuing reports or publications resulting from the research.

10. Limits to confidentiality
1. Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. The researcher has a duty of care to report to the relevant authorities possible harm/danger to the participant or others.
   - Confidentiality will be respected subject to legal constraints and professional guidelines.
   - Confidentiality will be respected unless there are compelling and legitimate reasons for this to be breached. If this was the case we would inform you of any decisions that might limit your confidentiality.
- Participants will be informed that focus group discussions should remain confidential, but there is some risk that confidentiality may not be honoured by all participants.

11. What will happen to the results of the research project?
The findings of the research will be presented in a report. The project team aims to make this report available to University stakeholders and participants by April 2021. You will not be identifiable in any report or publication ensuing from the research. Data collected during the course of the research will be used to inform the delivery of initiatives to redress Disability and Race inequities in FBS.

12. Data Protection Privacy Notice
Notice:
The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk

This ‘local’ privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our ‘general’ privacy notice:

For participants in health and care research studies, click here

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the ‘local’ and ‘general’ privacy notices.

The lawful basis that will be used to process your personal data are: ‘Public task’ for personal data and ‘Research purposes’ for special category data. Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website.

16. Contact for further information
For further information regarding the research project, please contact the Faculty of Brain Sciences Lead (Manjula Patrick – Disability Equity, Lasana Harris - Race Equity) by emailing fbs.edi@ucl.ac.uk
If you agree to participate in the project, you will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep for your records. Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering to take part in this research study.