

The Persistence of Racism in Higher Education: Understanding the BME Attainment Gap

**Dr Jason Arday
University College London (UCL)
Keynote Lecture
BME Attainment Conference
Tuesday 10th April 2018**

A Thought...

- Many universities refuse to acknowledge that **Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students** achieve lower degrees on average than their White contemporaries...
- ... Rather than tailor extra support to help such students, **institutions often sought to attribute the gap to other factors...**
- ... Other variables blamed for the gap can include **gender, prior attainment, deprivation, age and subject of study.**

(Aneez Esmali, Professor of General Practice, University of Manchester, Times Higher Education, 2012).

Considerations for Today...

- Understanding the Persistence of Racism within the Academy: Conceptualising the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Attainment Gap phenomenon...
- Understanding the institutional and structural challenges...
- Thinking about Ways Forward... What can be done to optimise change within the Academy regarding BME Attainment...?
- UCL's Commitment to addressing the BME Attainment Gap...

Contextualising the Problem...

- In recent years, **the success rates of Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) Students** have come under considerable scrutiny...
- Ethnicity has now been identified as a **key indicator in predicting differential achievement of 'good degrees'** (Arday, 2017; ECU, 2015; Tate and Bagguley, 2018).
- There is a need for the Academy to look beyond **'the deficit model'** to **explain the attainment gap** through targeted interventions (Cotton et al., 2016).

Understanding the data...

- The attainment gap is defined as the difference between the proportion of White qualifiers who obtained a **First Class Honours or Second Class Honours** and the proportion of **BME** qualifiers who achieved at the same level... (ECU, 2016)...
- **Data from ECU for England from 2015/16** show that there is a gap between the proportion of White students achieving a **1st or 2:1 classification for their degree (78.8%)** compared to **UK-domiciled students from minority ethnic groups (63.2%)** of **15.6%**...
- There has been evidence (Ahmed, 2012; Alexander, 2017; ECU, 2015; Shilliam, 2014; Tate and Bagguley, 2017) to suggest that unconscious biases can **negatively impact aspects of degree attainment which disadvantage BME qualifiers...**

Considerations and challenges in address degree attainment...

- **Structural:** The autonomous nature of higher education means that every institution has unique internal structures which often dictate how inequality is prioritised...
- **Organisational:** The nature of job titles and roles within higher education, particularly in leadership positions has always been problematic with regards to identifying the locus for change or 'ownership' of the BME attainment agenda...
- **Typically, BME attainment has always been situated** between equality and diversity interventions and teaching and learning initiatives... which historically have not been penetrative in cultivating sector-wide and institutional change...

(Equality Challenge Unit, ECU, 2015).

Considerations and challenges in address degree attainment...

- **Cultural:** Resistance and acknowledging that problems existence regarding BME attainment **constitute a significant barrier towards effecting positive change...**
- **Penetrative, institutional sector-wide change and interventions** should include the introduction of **inclusive curricula which is reflective of multi-cultural student populations and cultures...**
- **Institutions must acknowledge the problems situated within this context** whilst recognising their obligation and responsibility towards ensuring that all **students leave university with good degree attainment and outcomes...**

(Andrews, 2016; Arday, 2017; Arday and Mirza, 2018).

Considerations and challenges in address degree attainment...

- **Sensitivity:** Within higher education there is a **resistance and fragility** which occurs when addressing the issues of **BME attainment and racism generally...**
- Universities often engage in rhetoric which attribute blame regarding **BME underachievement to the BME students themselves...**
- **Andrews (2016)** suggests that universities have sometimes espoused this rhetoric to pivot and deflect from poor teaching and pedagogical practices, **dominant Eurocentric curricula and unconscious biases...**
- Subsequently, rejection of inherent problems regarding attainment can often be **masked by separating ethnic groups and by subjects**, therefore making it difficult to design initiatives that **address attainment issues at departmental level...**

(Equality Challenge Unit, ECU, 2015).

Institutional Identity...

- For some institutions the demographic make-up of their student body ensures that the attainment gap is particularly relevant, **particularly where they are large numbers of BME students (ECU, 2015).**
- The importance attributed to developing **university cultures which are inclusive are a significant factor in addressing issues concerning degree attainment...** (Tate and Bagguley, 2017; Rollock, 2016).
- Fundamentally, universities have a duty to **ensure that their core principles are underpinned by social justice and confronting inequality** in all its forms... (Adams, 2017).
- Pertinent to this discourse, higher education institutions **must commit towards working with diverse student populations and diversifying academic staff populations** to positively facilitate and support BME attainment... (Arday and Alexander, 2015; Bhopal, 2014).

Addressing BME Attainment... Diversifying Academic Staff...

- Diversifying academic staff workforces significantly **impacts engagement, attainment and belonging for BME students...**
- Fundamentally, **universities have a responsibility to diversify academic staff cohorts** in reflecting **ever-increasing diverse student populations...**
- Importantly, the **diversification of academic staff cohorts** powerfully disrupts the types of **dominant curricula that have historically marginalised and excluded BME students** within the learning environment...

(Arday, 2017; Bhopal, 2014; Alexander and Arday, 2015).

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Doctoral Students’ perception of a career in Academia: Impacting BME Student Attainment...

- **‘You become very aware that your presence as a BME academic inspires BME students... they are normally the ones that will stay behind after the seminar or lecture and ask, how did you get to this position... it hugely inspires them, whilst breaking the normative view that academics and the literature they were exploring was always White...’**

(Female, Black, PhD English Literature).

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Doctoral Students' perception of a career in Academia: Impacting BME Student Attainment...

- **'During my Doctoral studies one thing that always amazed me... was BME students reaction to having an opportunity to engage in curricula or issues that spoke to their particular lived experiences of inequity... or as they put it... it broke a cycle of feeling excluded from what they perceived to be a dominant Eurocentric curricula...'**

(Male, Black, PhD History).

Optimising Change...

- Understanding the importance of **diversifying academic teaching staff to ensure better representation...**
- Listening to **BME student voice and engaging them collaborative endeavour regarding the curriculum design process** to ensure a more inclusive curricula...
- Understanding the importance attributed to **inherent unconscious biases and how this can unintentionally effect our perceptions of BME students...**
- Recognising some of the **cultural expectations and burdens that are placed on BME students, in particular female BME students....**

A Thought...

- ‘Our Education Strategy (2016-21) **commits us to developing personalised student support**, ensuring that UCL is a place **where all our students thrive...**’
- ‘**The BME Attainment project** is one strand of a broader piece of work that we are undertaking in partnership **with the Students' Union UCL to make our university truly inclusive...**’

(Professor Anthony Smith, Vice Provost for Education and Student Affairs).

A Thought...

- ‘This is a crucial project for UCL... Any discrepancy, however small, between the achievements of our **White and BME students**, is **unacceptable and flies in the face of our core values...**’
- ‘I’m really glad to see that **UCL** is taking this issue **extremely seriously**, and I know that there is great appetite for resources and support in this area among **colleagues who teach or supporting teaching...**’

(**Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu, Professor of Pharmaceutical Nanoscience and Provost’s Envoy for Race Equality**).

References...

- **Adams, R. (2017)** *British universities employ no black academics in top roles, figures show*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jan/19/british-universities-employ-no-black-academics-in-top-roles-figures-show>
- **Ahmed, S. (2012)** *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- **Alexander, C. (2017)** Breaking Black: The death of ethnic and racial studies in Britain, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2018.1409902.
- **Alexander, C. & Arday, J. (2015)** *Aiming Higher Race, Inequality and Diversity in the Academy*. London: AHRC: Runnymede Trust, (Runnymede Perspectives). London, Common Creative: Runnymede Trust, (Runnymede Perspectives).
- **Andrews, K. (2016)** *Black Studies University Course Long Overdue*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/20/black-studies-university-course-long-overdue>
- **Arday, J. & Mirza, H. S. (Eds.) (In Press)** *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. (Publication due in June 2018).
- **Arday, J. (2017)** *University and College Union (UCU): Exploring Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Doctoral Students' perceptions of a career in Academia: Experiences, Perceptions and Career Progression*. London, Creative Commons.
- **Bhopal, K. (2014)** *The Experience of BME Academics in Higher Education: aspirations in the face of inequality*. Stimulus paper, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education: London.
- **Cotton, D R E., Joyner, M., George, R. & Cotton, P. A. (2016)** Understanding the gender and ethnicity attainment gap in UK higher education, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 53 (5), 475-486, DOI: 10.1080/14703297.2015.1013145
- **ECU (Equality Challenge Unit) (2016)** *Equality in Higher Education: Statistical Report Staff*. London: ECU.
- **Equality Challenge Unit (2015)** *Equality in higher education: statistical report, staff and students*, available at: <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2015/>
- **Shilliam, R. (2015)** Black Academia in Britain. The Disorder of Things, Available at: <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2014/07/28/black-academia-in-britain/>
- **Tate, S. A., & Bagguley, P. (2017)** Building the anti-racist university: next steps, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20 (3): 289-299.
- **Rollock, N. (2016)** *How much does your university do for racial equality?* Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2016/jan/19/how-much-does-your-university-do-for-racial-equality/>