

# How to tackle racism in UK universities

Social scientist Kalwant Bhopal discusses why black and minority ethnic academics are considering leaving the United Kingdom.

**Elizabeth Gibney**

02 April 2015

Black and minority ethnic (BME) academics in the United Kingdom are significantly more likely than their white colleagues to consider moving overseas to progress their careers, according to a [survey](#) of 1,201 academics published on 23 March by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), a charity based in London.

The researchers interviewed 41 BME academics, and found that a raft of negative experiences underpins the desire to leave the United Kingdom. Lead author Kalwant Bhopal, a social scientist at the University of Southampton, UK, talks to *Nature* about her studies of racism in academia and what could be done to prevent an exodus of talent.

## Would you say that race is still a major problem in UK academia?

Absolutely. I think it has been a problem in UK higher education for a long time. But only in the past two to five years have we really started to investigate why that is. I think the problem will continue to exist until we take it seriously.

## Would you call it racism?

I would — not only because of the research I have done, but also because that is what our respondents specifically call it. That's not to say it is overt racism. It's very covert and about subtleties and nuances.

## How does the racism manifest?

Some of our respondents spoke about ways in which they were treated differently from their colleagues. For instance, often they were not given eye contact in meetings, or their opinions were not valued as much [as those of white colleagues]. Many of our respondents talked about being subject to higher standards. These are things such as being expected to publish a greater number of articles or books before being considered seriously for promotion, or being required to generate more grant income. In the report, we call these micro-aggressions.

## Can you give some specific examples?

We quote an Asian-Chinese male who says that, on an occasion when students referred to him very positively, his colleagues bowed to him in an oriental-style bow. Another female from a mixed-ethnic group was asked by a colleague if she could get a picture of a black guy standing on a street corner for a book about crime and deviance. So the problem is lack of awareness, but also, in some sense, ignorance that these kinds of remarks would be seen as offensive. Many respondents felt that these day-to-day micro-aggressions are often dismissed, and, as a result, it is difficult to challenge the behaviour and report it.

## How else are BME staff being held back?

We heard about BME staff taking on disproportionate amounts of mentoring and pastoral care. On the one hand, it's positive because students are seeing BME academics as role models, and many academics want to give back to their communities. At the same time, this was often time-consuming and tiring, and took away time from other activities such as research, which is prioritized by exercises such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) [a [UK-wide audit of research](#) that decides universities' core-research funding]. Some respondents also felt that REF panels would prioritize publishing in certain Anglo-American journals, and thought that academics who pursued non-Eurocentric research, publishing journals in Africa and the Indian sub-continent, were disadvantaged in their REF assessments.

**Some of the interviewees felt that the United States does better than Britain on race equality. But race is a problem**



Martin Myers

Kalwant Bhopal.

**there, too. Is the United States any better for ethnic minorities?**

For a piece of research that will be published later this year, I interviewed both US and UK academics. American respondents felt the United States was better on this issue because, among other things, it has historically black universities, as well as affirmative action and, some felt, greater transparency in hiring and promotion. The United States is also considered to be better because of the credibility given to courses such as African American studies. There's a recognition of a black academic elite that we don't have here in the United Kingdom, and that gives credibility to the discourse of race.

**What can UK universities do to improve the situation?**

Universities need to act because the number of individuals from BME backgrounds is very low, especially at the elite universities. According to the latest census, black and minority ethnic individuals make up 14% of the UK population, but in 2013–14, fewer than 9% of professors of known ethnicity came from this group. We also have just two vice-chancellors from a BME background, so, at senior levels or in decision-making roles, it is not at all representative. We need clear recruitment, selection and promotion processes in order to have greater transparency. We need to continuously monitor the data to see who has progressed and why. Another recommendation in the report is that institutions should consider creating BME staff networks, which would be useful to provide support and help individuals to move up the career trajectory.

**The ECU is introducing a Race Equality Charter Mark. What is that and do you think it will help?**

The Race Equality Charter Mark is an award scheme being piloted that I am really excited about. Institutions that sign up commit to recognizing the issue of racial inequality, including many of the issues we've discussed, and developing a strategic and cultural approach to tackling it, earning awards based on their progress. A similar scheme for women in science — the [Athena Scientific Women's Academic Network Charter](#) (Athena SWAN) — was introduced ten years ago, but it is only now that research is [telling us it's having a huge impact](#). It's now also linked to eligibility for some types of funding. If the Race Equality Charter Mark goes the same way, it will enable us to look at issues such as transparency, promotion and progress, and see what universities are doing on a practical level to enable BME academics to pursue their career trajectories. It is so important for us to think about ways to ensure we are not losing this wonderful talent that we have here in the United Kingdom.

*The interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.*

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2015.17239