Viewpoint

BAME underrepresentation in UK universities: a view from the humanities

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Abstract

Significant divisions have emerged out of the political turmoil of the past three years or so. Yet, out of this unrest has come an increased attention to the virulent racism and racial injustices that still exist in UK society and overseas. In the UK, a number of reports have facilitated more nuanced and evidence-based discussions on BAME underrepresentation, the achievement gap, and the racism experienced by BAME students and staff in universities. This article will summarise the findings of these reports and reflect on their impact for the humanities.

Keywords

racism; equality; history; civil rights; BAME; humanities

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BAME underrepresentation

The past 20 years have seen a marked increase of the teaching and research of topics related to slavery, race and colonialism in UK humanities departments. Unlike in the US, where the number of BAME (black, Asian or minority ethnic) academics after the Civil Rights movement increased in line with a more thorough engagement with the histories of minority groups, this trend has not been aligned with more equal representation of staff or students in UK humanities departments.

This short article will discuss this trend in the UK, but is especially pertinent considering the release of a number of reports in the past 12 months that have provided evidence for the lack of BAME academics and students in UK history departments, and the disturbing experiences of those that do. Most academic staff will at this time be aware of calls to 'decolonise the curriculum', but may be in doubt as to the real meaning of this for their own teaching or institution. The reports listed here add real weight to this call. They discuss incidents of racism on campus, the pitiful lack of research council funding offered to BAME postgraduates, and the academic attainment gap of BAME undergraduates. Taking account of these reports, especially that of the Royal Historical Society's (RHS) (2018) *Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History,* alongside wider reflections made as a historian of race researching from the UK, this article will reflect on and contextualise some of the recommendations cited in these reports.

Universities Studying Slavery consortium

In February 2019, LJMU joined the University of Bristol and the University of Glasgow as the third UK institution to join the Universities Studying Slavery consortium. The USS consortium, based at the University of Virginia (https://slavery.virginia.edu), is a knowledge-sharing network for universities who are committed to researching the multifarious ways that they may have contributed to, and benefitted from the profits of the Atlantic slave economy (defined as such to encompass the buying selling and owning of enslaved people, but also trading in goods produced by enslaved workers in the Americas).

In my previous role as lecturer in the history of slavery at the University of Bristol, I had the benefit of attending a number of their bi-annual meetings in the US in order to gain ideas to share with colleagues in Bristol's Centre for Black Humanities. One of the most surprising aspects of these meetings, from the perspective of a UK academic, was the extent to which universities in the US were willing to make the link between slavery and racism on campus, past and present.

Just one example is of Rutgers University, New Jersey, who plan to produce two publications out of their Scarlet and Black project (https://scarletandblack.rutgers.edu): the first, released in 2016, discussed profits

gained from direct and indirect involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, but the second planned volume is on racialised ideas taught by, and racial ideology perpetuated within, the University since the abolition of slavery through to the present day. Other universities plan to investigate historic curricula in the humanities, but also in the sciences, where the teaching of 'racial science' and eugenic theory was standard for at least the first half of the twentieth century (both in the US and Europe), and have even taken a micro-historical approach in investigating the books contained in the university libraries throughout their history. This second line of investigation conducted by US universities is of particular importance for the purpose of this article. It is clear that UK universities have far to go in understanding the extent that universities shaped and perpetuated racist ideas and ideology, and subsequently became spaces less hospitable to those not racialised as white.

Exodus and reflection

The 1980s and 1990s could be identified as a moment of precise failure by UK universities to provide environments conducive to the retention of BAME academics – many of whom relocated to US universities as they provide better protection for their staff, but also opportunities for movement into positions of seniority. One such academic is Liverpool-born black social scientist, Stephen Small who, after making the move to University of California, Berkeley, where he both conducted his doctoral research and gained permanent employment, described the dwindling population of black Liverpudlians, which he partially attributes to 'people like me [who] left the city for economic reasons and because of racial hostility' (Small, 2009: xxvi). Small's testimony was echoed recently in a conversation that I had with a black Bristolian poet who, in a meeting outside of the university told me that it wasn't until recently that they had entered the area of town where the university was: they had never considered the university to be their 'space'.

These reflections echo the news on the number of reported and unreported racist incidents in UK universities, and the warning that they are failing to address, seemingly, because of a denial about the scale of the problem. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (2019) found that about a quarter of minority ethnic students (including, controversially, non-British students racialised as white) had experienced some form of discrimination or harassment. The report also found that two-thirds of the students and more than half of the staff did not report racial harassment to their university. The lack of faith that their report will be dealt with satisfactorily is evident, but also suggests that these incidents will be discussed if given the right channels to do so. The Royal Historical Society's (RHS) (2018) survey report found that institutional processes to raise issues were often dissatisfactory: 76 per cent of respondents felt their institution had failed them when they reached out to report racism or discrimination.

One reason for the lack of faith is the predominance of white academics in reporting channels. The appointment of Professor Olivette Otele to the position of Professor in the History of Slavery at the University of Bristol has been widely praised: Otele is the first-ever black female professor of history in a UK university (The Guardian, 2019), but it has taken until 2018 for this to be achieved.

The RHS (2018) cited the issue of low BAME admissions to undergraduate history

as the 'image and perception' of the subject as 'white' and 'middle class' (p. 58). Respondents to their survey stressed that a more diverse history profession would encourage more BAME students to continue into and beyond postgraduate study (p. 59). At this point, attention should also be drawn to the call by Baroness Valerie Amos, Director of SOAS, for universities to do more to tackle the disparity between the proportion of 'top degrees' (first or a 2:1) achieved by white and BAME students across both the sciences and humanities (Universities UK and National Union of Students, 2019). Recent evidence has also been provided by Leading Routes, who found that over a three-year period just 1.2 per cent of the 19,868 studentships awarded by all UKRI research councils went to black or 'black mixed' students, and only 30 of those were from a black Caribbean background (Williams et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it does not take much to imagine the discouragement of BAME students to continue to postgraduate study when their teachers are all white or, often, all white male.

The importance of relatable role models in academia is demonstrated in a preface to a book by Daina Ramey Berry (2016), a black American historian of slavery, who wrote:

> *During my undergraduate education…I decided to major in economics. Things changed when I took a class on slavery from a female professor who looked like me. It was my first experience outside the home in which I learned about African American history and my peers did not stare at me. This professor, Brenda Stevenson, supported my curiosity and encouraged me to become a historian* (p. x)

It is sad to reflect, Berry is unlikely to have had the same career trajectory in a British university where chances of a relatable role model was unlikely to be *in situ*.

Moving forward

Nevertheless, in the context of UK universities still having unequal representation of BAME academics, the RHS Working Group has offered some practical advice to tackle this issue, from collaboration with schools on more inclusive curricula, to increasing visibility of BAME academic role models through reading lists and invited speakers, as a temporary measure in a bid to achieve the necessary diversity in the sector. The recommendations are based on the premise that, "the best way of tackling systemic racism within academia is to accept that it exists and that we are all responsible for playing a role in securing racial equality" (p. 73).

For staff, the report recommends taking stock of one's own position, and having the necessary critical awareness of our own position and teaching, and willingness to engage with experts in BAME equality that have different roles: students, community-based historians, museum staff, professional services staff, widening participation and BAME initiatives based outside of the local university space all have valuable contributions to make. The RHS also recommends that departments assess the quality of their own teaching. This might be, in the first instance, a survey of teaching materials and the makeup of reading lists. From my own experience of working across universities, these measures can often be met with defensiveness and more needs to be done on communicating the necessity and value of this for self-reflection.

As a white historian who teaches the history of slavery, I consciously update reading lists and methodology to match the rapidly

changing methodologies, language, and literature of the history of race. We need to be critical of wider university curricula, but also our own race-critical teaching practice and race conscious teaching practice. Recently a debate emerged over the ownership of a set of daguerreotypes (early photographs) produced by Louis Agassiz, a prominent nineteenth century race scientist working at Harvard in order to 'prove' the physical differences between the black enslaved and free whites. The photos feature enslaved black Americans, fully or partially nude, and are commonly used for primary source material in classrooms in the US and the UK. Recently the descendant of two of the enslaved people photographed sued Harvard over their use and continued profiting from photos taken without consent (The Nation, November 2019). To me, these sources are a valuable, if distressing and uncomfortable resource. I was taught using these photographs during my MA, and I have used them for the last twelve years in my classes. Nevertheless, white academics need to critically reflect on the extent to which the white gaze that is reproduced impacts on the students who identify as black.

For heads of department, senior teams and appointment panels, the report recommends ensuring that staff and students are aware of the university's policies, but also the law. These should be actively discussed, not just in induction meetings, but also in handbooks. Heads of department should also be willing to bring invested students on board to help affect change, but also 'evaluate the use of teaching evaluations' in staff progression or probation meetings, as evidence has shown that these are biased against BAME, international and female academics.

Overall, universities should be proactive in the hiring of BAME staff. One need only to review the wording of job adverts on jobs.ac.uk to see which universities are taking note of this measure. If the university does not have BAME academics, then BAME speakers should be included within seminars and research programmes. As the report posits, "the absence of B[A]ME staff in a given department neither obviates the need to introduce students to B[A]ME historians and historical scholarship nor precludes departments from so doing" (p. 81).

Conclusion

The reports all paint a picture of a UK university sector that is in dire need of action. Positive news stories of Olivette Otele, as well as the prominence of black historians in the public gaze, such as David Olusoga, have hinted at a beginning of a step change. Nevertheless, the evidence provided by the reports discussed in this paper overpowers these stories. LJMU's recent commitment to joining the USS consortium signals a level of self-reflection that is necessary for all universities, but this commitment should be accompanied by action. Luckily, we are fortunate to have actionable recommendations from the RHS Report and elsewhere in order to turn personal and institutional self-reflection into a more equitable and diverse environment for the benefit of all our students and staff.

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