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A PhD at LSE: the BME student diaries

This research project seeks to understand the experiences of UK-domiciled Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) PhD students at the LSE.

Introduction

The difference in academic achievement within the BME demographic in the U.K., known as the 'BME (or BAME) attainment gap' is receiving more attention by academia and management at all stages of education and increasingly at the higher education level. Numerous research projects have been conducted on the BME attainment gap in higher educational institutions in the U.K. Qualitative studies exploring this have revealed that BME undergraduate and postgraduate taught students feel underrepresented within their course content and cohorts and are hesitant to consult faculty for teaching guidance (Smith 2017; Phillips et al, 2017; Felix, 2019). Sara Felix, formerly of the LSE Teaching and Learning Centre (2018) contends that interventions must be situated within the context of the BME student experience at LSE. Recognising that existing research on this topic at the LSE has not included the experiences of BME students at the doctoral level, and in keeping with BME attainment gap research on UK-domiciled students, we sought to understand the experiences of UK-domiciled BME PhD students at LSE. Given that PhD students, as researchers, encounter a different application and academic experience from students at all other levels, we thought it important to explore how various social factors such as race and class may interact in this unique academic stage.

Methodology

We conducted four semi-structured interviews, averaging at one hour each, with four BME students, 2 male and 2 female, across different departments at the LSE, asking participants about their social and academic backgrounds and experiences accessing and within their doctoral students, elaborating on relationships with supervisors, peers and role models. The interview transcripts were then interpreted using thematic analysis. We originally set out to conduct focus groups, which proved difficult to organise given the varied schedule of doctoral students and the very narrow population of interest. However, we recommend that future research be conducted on the same group through this method as the collective conception of experiences would have been insightful in responding to our enquiry.

Findings

All participants shared that crucial to mitigating barriers to and within the PhD were social networks, whether family or neighbourhood, or minority peers within and outside their programmes, who continued to inspire and motivate them along their journeys. Nonetheless, most UK-domiciled BME students lack the economic and social wherewithal necessary for matriculation to postgraduate study. These factors become more crucial at the doctoral level, where they face a more subjective admissions process. Acceptance by PhD supervisors was seen as the ultimate determinant of acceptance into a doctoral programme; without a shared sense of belonging between supervisor and supervisee, inevitably implying social factors such as race and class, it was unlikely for the supervisor to agree to supervise the applicant and therefore unlikely for these students to be accepted into a doctoral programme. These notions of exclusion were also experienced after successful admission into doctoral programmes, where the absence of BME faculty and peers created tensions around the validity of the contribution of these students to the diversity of approaches in academic research. In the context of commitments made by the LSE in its Inclusive Education Action Plan, such as to

decolonise course curricula, it is crucial that the institution focuses on measures to improve the BME experience at the doctoral level, as these are the students most likely to enter academia and diversify course content and ways of understanding social problems.

Recommendations

1. **Supervision Relationship**
    a. Allocate funding and administration for preliminary meetings between doctoral supervisors and supervisees to develop a more informal rapport before adopting the formal academic relationship to foster common perspective going forward
    b. Train academic staff, especially PhD supervisors in soft skills: how to develop a co-researcher (rather than vertical) rapport with their (BME) supervisees, including workshops on fostering mentorship attributes such as open-mindedness, encouragement and constructive criticism.
    c. Establish an accountability framework for supervisees to evaluate supervisors, that is available for School Management to see, rewarding supervisors with particularly high mention and consulting those that may have poor rapports with their supervisees.
2. **Avenues to address the concerns of BME (doctoral) students**
    a. Facilitate a formal association between the EmbRace staff network and BME (doctoral) students at the LSE, providing a forum where LSE Management is held accountable to mutually agreed recommended affirmative actions.
    b. Facilitate formation of BME students forum within each department which gathers concerns of BME students at all levels, approved formally by the LSE
    c. Provide an official forum within and across departments for the foregoing BME forum to voice concerns and recommendations
    d. Beyond student representation meetings, offer formal opportunities specifically for BME students to be consulted about concrete inclusive strategies that can be adopted by their departments, for which there are concrete timelines for action and persons responsible, who can be held accountable to LSE Management
3. **Further positive discrimination**
    a. Increase, or provide a greater allotment of full scholarships to BME UK-domiciled students who demonstrate inability to fund themselves
    b. Consult BME students forum for persons or organisations that these students may want to get in touch with for future prospects and facilitate such networking as best possible
    c. LSE's various student services (LSE Life, CV advisors etc) could reach out to specific neighbourhoods or schools with minority students, offering one-on-one or group mentorship to help guide and motivate students through university application process, job preparedness etc., in consultation and cooperation with BME and other students

Data analysis

Barriers *to* the PhD

Undertaking a Masters degree at a Russell Group university is important for doctoral candidates' job prospects in Academia because most sought after PhD supervisors - reputable academics - tend to work at high status U.K. universities. However, without a sense of camaraderie between supervisor and applicant, the supervisee relationship is not feasible and admission to a doctoral programme therefore unlikely. The discretionary nature of the PhD application process has sociocultural implications for BME applicants:

> You have to email a professor and tell them you like their work and then they agree to meet you and you talk like this [different accent[and then they say hmm... I don't know if I want to spend four years working with this black guy. Language, colour, how you present, how you look, what your background is, all of this comes into play....but people don't understand that you can't just apply for a Phd. Phd is [about] making a friend. [I3]

Since Russell Group universities tend to be more expensive, the incline is steeper for most BME people who often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Most participants took a few years off to work, in order to save for postgraduate study:

> The year I took out was precisely because I didn't have enough money to do a Masters... It's very rare to have a spare twenty thousand pounds sitting around...You still need to live for a year in London with no income. It's something very difficult to do unless someone's funding you. I think that's the major barrier. [I4]

Despite savings, postgraduate study was still found difficult to fund for several reasons: 1) Government loan facilities were considered inadequate to cover tuition fees, exacerbated by expenses of living in London and 2) most participants acknowledged that without these combined sources of funding given to them in recognition of their poorer backgrounds, they would not be able to pursue postgraduate study.

Barriers *within* the PhD

There was common tension around a meaningful sense of belonging within doctoral studies and most participants felt marginalised through what was perceived as an epistemological hierarchy, in which the research methods they chose, closely related to the minority communities they researched and identified with, were not seen as valid as more quantitative methods. One interviewee shared that this palpable exclusion at the postgraduate level actually motivated them to pursue a PhD:

> There's something about places like LSE which are so elitist and so unequal in terms of who is able to be in this place and occupy this space...if I'm not here, who will be?...Can working class people be here and do a PhD?...I am trying to take up space rather than be excluded. [I3]

Balancing the barriers: social factors

Social factors played an important role in moderating the barriers to and within doctoral studies. Whereas one participant acknowledged their parent, having undertaken a PhD, as a role model and support throughout their academic process, most interviewees reflected on coming from homes where their parents could offer little to no support in their academic journeys:

> ...What's a Russell group university to [my mom]? My mom is a first generation immigrant - Windrush... So she has no clue, she can't advise me. [I3]

Where parental guidance was lacking, positive effects on motivating further academic pursuits were attributed to neighbourhoods and schools:

> I grew up in a very middle-class place so there was always this implication that we would go to university…. and it not necessarily came from our parents, rather...the place where we grew up. [I1]

Despite feelings of exclusion within doctoral study, participants reflected positively on fellow minority members, whether peers within their departments or their own research participants, as sources of continued motivation and inspiration behind their studies:

> I have some amazing peers... the two friends I'm close to, one is mixed race and another one is an African-American...why am I only close friends with women of colour?...Because we...have the same anxieties...we are here because we want to make a change in our community. [I2]

Bibliography

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Change Makers: The Final Page

Data from LSE

We asked the PhD Academy to provide us with a departmental breakdown on the BME doctoral students within each department and we were told that such information does not exist. We did not seek any further data from the LSE other than the information disclosed by our interviewees.

Dissemination

In addition to Changemakers' list, we recommend that our report be shared specifically with the following:

Dr. Sara Camacho Felix

 LSE Decolonising Collective

LSE EmbRACE

LSE Teaching and Learning Centre

The PhD Academy

Looking back

Collectively, we spent about 100 hours on the project. As researchers on a very small community at the LSE, we had to be thorough and strategic in reaching out to and recruiting participants. We learnt to adopt both central and individual approaches, liaising with the administrators of each department, as well as the PhD Academy, to get the message out to interested participants, as well as went through the PhD webpages of each department and individually emailed each person we thought met our population criteria. This was a rigorous process that made us appreciate the processes necessary to conduct a thorough research project. The busy and varied schedule of PhD students, combined with the small target population, made it difficult for us to gather more than 4 interviewees. We would recommend that future researchers on PhD students advertise and recruit at least one month in advance of data collection.

Looking forward

- Interest, updates and opportunities directly related to your project   **YES**
- Future opportunities related to Change Makers in general   **NO**