**Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) student and staff in contemporary British Geography**

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**Abstract:** This commentary examines the profile of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) student and staff in contemporary UK Geography. National data from HESA and other studies on ethnicity in academia are used to provide an overview of diversity and equality issues affecting UK-based Geography Departments. The findings from the data analysis highlight the predominant ‘whiteness’ of the discipline when compared to the number of BME student and staff, in turn raising troubling equality and diversity issues.

**Key Words**: Ethnicity, Race, Student, Staff, Inequality, Geography, U.K.

**Introduction:**

The discipline of Geography received a publicity boost when Theresa May an Oxford University Geography graduate became UK Prime Minister in June 2016. In England and Wales, for example, student numbers for geography rose in schools in the five years to 2014, with 225,000 sitting a GCSE in the subject and 55,600 taking an A-level in 2014 and have continued to rise since (Hart 2015, RGS 2016). Between 2006–2011, geography received around £3.8million from public monies and used to fund school ambassadors and develop teacher networks (Hart 2015). Each year, the programme reached 30,000 school students.

In 2015, geography was chosen as a core subject for pupils and included in the English Baccalaureate. Rita Gardner, Director of the Royal Geographical Society reported ‘For the first time, schools had targets that included geography. A revised curriculum across those subjects will begin this year, with a new A-level curriculum from 2017’ (cited in Hart 2015). While popular, it is unable to attract ethnically diverse students and BME statistical data of students and staff reinforces this assessment.

**Students of BME ethnicity in Higher Education in Geography**

**TABLE 1: Percentage of UK national students of BME ethnicity, Geography, 2014/15**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **All** | **Region** | **Russell Group** |
| **London** | **Rest of England** | **Scotland, Wales, N Ireland** | **Member** | **Not member** |
| **All students** | 6.6 | 22.2 | 5.3 | 2.4 | 7.3 | 6.2 |
| *Base (FPE)* | *6613.4* | *658.0* | *5135.3* | *820.1* | *2792.2* | *3821.2* |
| **First degree** | 6.3 | 26.4 | 5.0 | 2.2 | 7.0 | 5.8 |
| *Base (FPE)* | *5532.8* | *429.7* | *4452.9* | *650.2* | *2262.2* | *3270.6* |
| **Doctoral** | 4.4 | 2.8 | 4.9 | 4.0 | 3.3 | 6.3 |
| *Base (FPE)* | *183.3* | *35.5* | *122.8* | *25.0* | *119.5* | *63.8* |

**Source:** (HESA Student Qualifiers Full-Person Equivalent 2014/15, UK Nationality, JACS Principal Subject: "Physical Geographical Sciences" and "Human and Social Geography").

For all UK domiciled higher education students in the UK, 20.2 percent are BME (This and other comparative statistics in this paragraph are from ECU 2015, Part 2, p.114). The proportion who are BME among UK nationals studying Geography is about 7%. As for other subjects, there is a concentration of BME students in London but whereas almost half (46.2 per cent) of all UK domiciled students in London are BME less than a quarter (22.2 per cent) of UK national Geography students are. Proportions of BME in Geography are also lower in the rest of England (5.3 per cent compared to 18.4 percent) and Scotland, Wales and Ireland (2.4 per cent compared to 7.0 per cent). Alex Singleton’s geodemographic analysis (2012) highlights that students domiciled within more affluent and less ethnically diverse areas record the highest rates of participation and attainment in GCSE Geography, and that stratified pattern seems to flow into Geography department in Universities (see Table 1). The proportion of BME UK students in Geography is slightly higher in Russell Group universities than outside.

**BME Student Attainment in Higher Education in Geography**

The disparity is also there at different degree levels. Nationally 21.3 per cent of all UK domiciled first degree undergraduate students are BME (ECU 2015, Part 2, p.120) whereas among UK national first degree students in Geography only 6.3 per cent are. The difference amongst research students is startling. The fraction of UK domiciled research postgraduate students who are BME is 16.4 per cent (ECU 2015, Part 2, p.120) whereas the comparable number for UK national doctoral students in Geography is only 4.4 per cent. Geography not only has a low proportion of undergraduate BME students but fails to encourage them to go on to postgraduate qualifications.

**Table 2: Undergraduate degree performance by ethnicity, Geography (percentage of classified degrees, 2015)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **All** | **Region** | **Russell Group** |
| **London** | **Rest of England** | **Scotland, Wales, N Ireland** | **Member** | **Not member** |
| **BME** | **1st** | 11.2 | 8.9 | 12.3 | 13.8 | 13.5 | 9.3 |
| **1st or II.1** | 69.5 | 66.2 | 70.6 | 77.6 | 79.3 | 61.3 |
| *Base (FPE)* | *1146.1* | *390.4* | *702.1* | *53.6* | *518.2* | *627.9* |
| **White** | **1st** | 16.9 | 16.8 | 17.5 | 14.2 | 20.1 | 14.7 |
| **1st or II.1** | 80.0 | 80.1 | 80.6 | 77.3 | 89.8 | 73.2 |
| *Base (FPE)* | *17417.4* | *1110.9* | *13685.1* | *2621.4* | *7216.2* | *10201.2* |
| **Degree attainment gap** | 11.5 | 13.9 | 10.0 | -0.3 | 10.5 | 11.9 |

Source: (Classification of first degree from HESA Student Qualifiers FPE, “Physical Geographical Sciences” and “Human and Social Geography” only)

**Table 3: Undergraduate degree performance by ethnicity (percentage of degrees, 2013/14)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **All** | **Region** |
| **England** | **Scotland, Wales, N Ireland** |
| **BME** | **1st** | 13.7 | 13.7 | 14.3 |
| **1st or II.1** | 60.4 | 60.3 | 62.7 |
| *Base* | *63450* | *60755* | *2695* |
| **White** | **1st** | 22.4 | 23.0 | 19.5 |
| **1st or II.1** | 75.6 | 76.3 | 72.4 |
| *Base* | *260930* | *216345* | *44495* |
| **Degree attainment gap** | 15.2 | 16.0 | 9.7 |

Source: (Classification of first degree from HESA Student Qualifiers, UK domiciled, all subjects, ECU 2015, Part 2, pp.138,142)

According to Tables 2 and 3 UK BME students’ degree results are below those of white UK students in Geography as they are in other subjects. 11.2 per cent of BME students attain a first and 69.5 per cent attain an upper second or better (across the three years 2013-15) as compared to 16.9 percent and 80.0 per cent for white students. The difference between percentages attaining at least a II.1, referred to as the degree attainment gap, is lower in Geography at 11.5 per cent than in all subjects together at 15.2 per cent and a greater percentage of BME students achieve a II.1 or better. It is impossible to say from this study whether that is because BME students are less disadvantaged in teaching or because the lower numbers of BME students is associated with selection of more able BME students. The attainment gap in Geography is highest in London and absent outside England and is slightly lower in Russell Group universities than others. Geography departments and universities are aware of government policies of widening participation and disparity in achievements of BME students.

**Higher Education Staff of BME Ethnicity in Geography**

**Table 4 Percentage of staff of BME ethnicity, Geography 2014/15**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **All** | **Region** | **Russell Group** |
| **London** | **Rest of England** | **Scotland, Wales, N Ireland** | **Member** | **Not member** |
| **All staff** | 4.3 | 8.2 | 4.2 | 2.1 | 4.6 | 4.1 |
| *Base (FTE)* | *2032.5* | *224.3* | *1463.7* | *339.5* | *1021.9* | *1010.6* |
| **Professors** | 1.4 | 0.0 | 2.1 | 0.0 | 1.9 | 0.6 |
| *Base (FTE)* | *260.2* | *39.3* | *177.1* | *43.8* | *154.9* | *105.3* |

Source: (HESA Staff FTE 2014/15, UK Nationality, Cost Centre: "Geography and environmental studies")

Among all UK national staff in the UK 8.2 per cent are BME (ECU, Part 1, p.128) which is almost twice the 4.3 per cent of UK national geography staff[[1]](#footnote-1) who are BME. In England, 9.2 percent and in Scotland, Wales and Ireland 3.2 per cent of all UK national staff are BME whereas in Geography the numbers are only 4.2 per cent and 2.1 per cent.

BME staff find it even more difficult to reach professorial status. In the UK as a whole 7.3 per cent of UK national professors are BME (ECU 2015, Part 1, p.176) so Geography at 1.4 per cent is very low. Nationally 9.8 per cent of UK national BME staff are professors compared to 11.2 per cent of UK national white staff (ECU 2015, Part 1, p.176). In Geography, therefore, the disparity is much higher. Whereas 13.2 per cent of white UK national staff are professors only 4.2 per cent of UK national BME staff are. Geography fails to attract a diverse BME student population, which then fails to support a pipeline of BME staff for the discipline. The casualization of the academic labour market and higher university fees were noted by BME early career researchers and postdoctoral students in the RACE working group as contributory factors to under-representation.

A lack of professorial promotions echoes BME staff experiences elsewhere of invisibility, isolation, marginalisation and racial discrimination in higher education (Carter *et al.*, 1999; Deem *et al.*, 2005; Jones, 2006; Mirza, 2006, 2009; Wright *et al.*, 2007; Maylor, 2009). More widely, BME staff report negative assumptions made about their abilities (e.g. Wright *et al.*, 2007). BME staff also experience heavy workloads, disproportionate levels of scrutiny compared with their white counterparts, a lack of mentoring and support for career development, and difficulties in gaining promotion in a hyper-competitive assessment culture (e.g. Deem *et al.*, 2005; Wright *et al.*, 2007). The consequences of unfavourable and unsupportive environments for BME staff in geography make themselves manifest in lower levels of progression in the discipline (see Table 3).

**Conclusions:**

Undergraduate and postgraduate recruitment and attainment is profoundly differentiated according to race and ethnicity. Within departments, assessing progression alongside monitoring student attainment in relation to their backgrounds will enable departments to be more reflexive about recruitment strategies, student attainment, and progression to postgraduate studies. Best practice guidelines need embedding in department working cultures. Targeted support for BME students needs to be part of the conversation about how departments create inclusive learning and teaching environments.

BME staff are chronically under-represented (see ECU 2009, 2011). According to the Race Equality Survey undertaken by the group Black British Academics in 2013, 56 percent of black and ethnic minority staff reported discrimination in higher education, while almost three quarters (73 percent) said they would rate their institutions performance on race equality as “poor” or “very poor” endorsing claims of numerous encounters with racism and contemptuous treatment in academia (Parr 2014). Equality and diversity initiatives such as Athena Swan and the Race Charter Mark while welcome cannot disguise this depressing picture.

Is Geography ready to create space for a potentially honest, frank discussion on the experiences of BME staff and students in the current economic climate?

**Acknowledgement:** I am grateful to Jonathan Pymm of RHUL for acquiring the data, Ian Preston for supporting with data analysis and to Richard Baxter, Klaus Dodds, Catherine Souch and Stephanie Wyse for comments on an earlier draft.

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1. Staff here includes academic and professional/support staff. In subject-specific data, academics are likely to be a higher proportion since staff in central academic services and administration will not have a subject affiliation. Different types of staff are distinguished in national all-subject data and their proportions of BME are very similar – 8.3 per cent for academics and 8.1 per cent for professional/support staff (ECU 2015, Part 1, pp.140,142). Note also that these statistics relate only to UK nationals and proportions exclude individuals whose ethnicity is unknown in the data. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)