

Race, Culture and Equality Working Group

Comments on the Research Excellence Framework (REF)

In the last three years, research reports by HECFE (Higher Education Council for England), UCU (Universities and Colleges Union) and the Equality Challenge Unit have addressed REF related issues for BME academics. While some BME academics welcome the REF as a 'neutralising ethnicity' (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013), many BME academics have voiced concerns about its negative effects on their careers. All three reports emphasise that BME academics are less exposed to overt racism, but instead to more subtle 'micro-aggressions' (Gurnham Singh in UCU, 2016). These are likely to impact on the REF as they manifest in biases that bear direct relation to REF criteria and include: allocation of higher teaching loads and administrative tasks; non-recognition of academic achievements; exclusion from conversations, collaborations and events; lack of informal mentoring; selection bias for research funding; and disproportionately higher thresholds for promotion. This exclusionary behaviour impacts negatively on BME academics' careers and is also a factor in consideration for the REF. The reports' findings closely mirror the experience of BME RACE Working Group members.

There is quantitative and qualitative evidence that the REF poses problems for BME scholars. According to the 2015 HECFE Report "Selection of staff for inclusion in the REF 2014", "[t]he selection rates were similar for all ethnicity groups, with the exception of Black and Asian UK and non-EU nationals who had statistically significant lower selection rates, even with modelling for other factors taken into account." Just 35 per cent of Black UK staff were included, compared to White (56 per cent), Asian (56 per cent) or Chinese (68 per cent) academics. As the Times Higher Education reports, "Black academics' low selection rate was mirrored in that of scholars from elsewhere in the European Union and the rest of the world. Asian-origin UK academics, although they were selected at the same rate as their white peers, were found to be underrepresented when other factors were controlled for" (Matthews, 2015). Gender (overall) also negatively impacted selection (67 per cent men versus 51 per cent women), which can exacerbate conditions for female BME academics. This disproportionate non-inclusion, in turn, can have negative effects on academics' careers, including redundancy or not being hired in the first place (this especially affects early career researchers).

A further report, "The Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Academics" (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013) found that the under-representation of BME staff at senior levels in UK universities has a negative impact on decision-making, including promotion and REF inclusion (few BME academics were part of REF panels). Figures from the Runnymede Trust (2015) reveal that 92% of UK professors are white, with UK black senior management figures amounting to only 15 individuals. Several respondents in the report felt that "a homogeneous group in senior posts can lead to decisions

about what constitutes a credible academic being based on a narrow viewpoint rather than being familiar with and acknowledging diverse approaches” (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013). Robbie Shilliam puts forward an even stronger critique in the 2015 Runnymede Trust report: “Key, in this respect, is the assumption that Black professionals lack competency. Hence, Black academics often suffer from over-scrutiny by senior colleagues relative to their peers”. Stereotypes of who can be a successful academic can lead to continued marginalisation of BME staff. This was mirrored in other reports, for instance, by Bhopal & Jackson, in which “[m]any respondents felt that the work of White academics, and White male academics in particular, is profiled and celebrated in institutions, rather than that of BME staff” (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013).

This selection bias towards the “white male academic superstar” is even more problematic when combined with the REF’s emphasis on competition and its valuation of particular kinds of academic contributions (Jones, 2013). Strategic decisions balancing the number of impact stories deemed to be good quality against the number of academics entered can mean that only the “white male superstars” are chosen. Further, according to the Equality Challenge Unit report (2015), many BME academics complain that the REF criteria do not give any recognition to activities such as outreach and pastoral care, in which BME academics are disproportionately involved due to their minority status (they are approached to represent BME academia, but are also involved in such activities since their academic work is given lower status).

The effects of the ‘grant gap’ were also criticised. Research at US, UK and European level has shown a variety of research funding allocation biases, including against women (Matthews, 2015; The Guardian, 2014), ethnic minorities (Check Hayden, 2015; Diep, 2011) and non-Russell Group universities (these receive two-thirds of all grant funding). Research into the racial bias is still being undertaken both in the UK and the US (Reardon, 2014), but there is evidence that it is linked to similar factors affecting women in academia, and intersecting with gender in the case of female BME academics. These factors include unconscious bias and not being part of established networks on an individual or institutional basis (Diep, 2011; The Guardian, 2014). RACE group members reported that, often, ‘a number of white academics get grants to research other countries and appoint black research associates to do the fieldwork’. The ESRC call on transnational communities from 1997 was cited as a case in point. Here, almost all the grants went to white academics while many, if not most of the RAs appointed to the grants were BMEs. In addition, associates who work on such projects are on temporary contracts and may not be able to publish from these projects, as their contracts end before all the material from the project is published or they have to let PIs be first authors. They are also not included in the REF as they are on sequential temporary contracts.

Another issue was the Eurocentric bias of subject and publication choices. In many departments, the interpretation of “International”, as in internationally excellent or relevant research, did not include research on the Global South or on racialised diaspora. The ECU report (2015) found that “academics who do pursue non-Eurocentric research interests were at a disadvantage for REF submission and career advancement”. This especially affected the selection of venues for disseminating the research: “[r]espondents who were publishing in journals in Africa and the Indian sub-continent felt that these were less likely to be recognised by REF committees compared with those published in journals in the United States and UK.” Often, publication outside of the US and UK is a combined ethical and intellectual choice, directed at challenging on-going North-South inequalities – the hope of “bringing these [African] journals into the mainstream” (interviewee in Bhopal and Jackson, 2013) and to produce publications that are more “easily available and more useful to academics and particularly to students” in the Global South. The REF rendered such important choices highly problematic. Often, these publications take the form of book chapters or open access materials that are not valued by the REF. Further, whenever such work is cited in publications from the Global South, these, again, do not count towards individual citation indices. As the ECU highlights: “For some BME academics this means a decision as to whether to continue with their wider focus, to their detriment as they may not then be included in the REF exercise, or to move away from where they would really like to be publishing and to publish within the Anglo-American journals” (ECU, 2015). Here, the criteria of significance becomes inherently tricky. Research findings may be significant for the majority world but have to be cloaked in the language of universality, in order to be considered significant. By contrast, publications on the global North and or on white populations are often seen as significant per se. They require much less justification in journals, and this pattern is solidified through the REF. The same bias affected what was made to count as ‘impact’, with collaborations with UK and European institutions being privileged over non-European institutions.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the RACE Working Group assumes a critical stance towards the REF, especially if no further actions are taken to prevent selection bias or a general improvement of conditions of BME academics. It might be helpful to identify gaps in research relating to REF criteria, including racialised and gendered grant capture or citation rates, which both also play a role in the promotion process. We also call for greater transparency regarding REF criteria such as excellence rankings (4* etc), which are currently often determined by individual “REF champions” at departmental level. This process leaves too much room for discrimination and undermines the promise of transparency in the system.

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