Experience of BME staff in higher education

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Promoting equality and diversity in higher education
Equality Challenge Unit

- Established in 2001 to promote equality for staff in higher education in the UK
- Remit extended in 2006 to include students
- Funded by the 4 UK higher education funding Councils, Universities UK and GuildHE
- 16 staff, based in London

Promoting equality and diversity in higher education
• Equality Challenge Unit supports the higher education sector to realise the potential of all staff and students whatever their age, disability, gender identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity status, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation to the benefit of those individuals, higher education institutions and society.

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ECU research project

- Research into the experience of BME staff in HE – both academic and professional support
- Main areas of research:
  - Management practice
  - Support frameworks and relationships
  - Leadership and development
- Literature review commissioned – IPSE
- Main research commissioned – CHERI and CHEER
What we know

- 6.7% of UK-national staff are BME
- Higher the grade, the lower the proportion of BME staff
- BME staff more likely to be on fixed term contracts
- Feelings about being questioned about leadership ability
- Invisibility, isolation and marginalisation
- Heavy workloads, disproportionate scrutiny
- Status of teaching ‘race’ linked to ethnicity of teacher
- Fewer opportunities to develop research capacity and enhance promotion prospects
- Less evidence on experience of professional and support staff

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Progress on ECU research

- 4 phases in the research:
  1. Survey of English HEIs on policies and practices and how they affect BME staff
  2. Interviews with staff and middle managers at 12 HEIs and an additional 4 focus groups
  3. Case studies of 3 HEIs (interviews with senior staff, focus groups with other staff; developing initiative)
  4. Data analysis and further development of initiatives

Outcome: better understanding of experiences and initiatives that the sector can use to improve the experience of BME staff.

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Emergent findings 1

Management practice

- strong sense of equality requirements of national policy at central level
- Focus on equality data/monitoring
- Overall, committed equality & diversity practitioners
- Professional service staff – tended to provide very technical account of provision/procedures
- Academic staff – disconnect between policy and practice (localisation and autonomy); workloads and promotions also localised
Support frameworks and relationships

- Formal efforts with/for BME staff uneven with limited success
- Scepticism about previous efforts
- Problems of ‘labelling’ and ‘identity’
- Support for international staff appeared easier and more focussed
- ‘high stakes’ involved
- Many BME staff as contract researchers and gap in supporting them
Emergent findings 3
Leadership and development

- Opportunities for career development seen as generic (leading to ‘elite’ reproduction)
- Criteria for academic development or promotion fairly universal, notwithstanding differences in social and organisational context
- Possibly more variation and contextualisation for administrative and other staff
- Importance of white patronage
- Formal ‘equal opportunities’ but importance of informal ‘encouragement to apply’
- Formal promotions process—too late
- Key role of heads of units and line managers

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