

Is careers work white? A collaborative research project with minority ethnic students of career development practice

Gill Frigerio, Lassie Chen, Marni McArthur & Nishi Mehta

The diversity of the career development profession plays a critical part in the sector's ability to challenge inequality. At the same time, the awarding gap between the proportions of white students and UK minority ethnic students being awarded a higher degree classification in UK universities (where many career development practitioners train) is well documented. This article reports on a study devised to explore the experiences of UKME students on one institution's career development courses and at work, in relation to their race and culture. It outlines the challenges and findings of the study that relate to the curriculum for trainee career development professionals, as well as pedagogic practices in professional development programmes. The article concludes with considerations for further decolonial practices for career development work.



Introduction

Career development professionals focus on equality of outcome for all and support clients who experience structural disadvantages in their working lives. Whilst such disadvantages are complex and multifaceted, relating to characteristics reflected in current UK legislation and beyond, race and ethnicity are a particular key contemporary concern. Race as a powerful and enduring social construct is under scrutiny as we consider whether the diversity of our profession sees us fit to work with all clients in varied multicultural contexts. Whilst we do not have an accurate picture of the demographics of our profession, research published in 2017 reported on a

sample in which 94% were white (Neary et al., 2017). At the same time, practitioners who have been racially minoritized through social processes of power and domination, speak about the way their ethnicity is relevant to their professional practice (Oputa, 2021; Ranavaya, 2022).

Growing awareness of racial injustice in the education sector has led to analysis of outcomes by ethnicity and reveals, amongst other indicators, serious awarding gaps in higher education (NUS/UUK, 2019; Sotiropolou, 2021).

As universities seek to respond to these gaps, staff are encouraged to pay attention to their own pedagogic practices. For staff working on professional career development programmes, these issues intersect for our minoritized students. These students study in a context where awarding gaps prevail as well as practising in predominantly white spaces and working with diverse clients. This article focuses on one small scale study which began to map out these issues and explore their implications in one particular institutional context.

A note on language

Challenges of speaking and writing on issues of race and racism emerge immediately, presenting difficulties of language. Terms which categorises individuals who are not white and defines them by otherness to a white hegemonic majority, ignore differences between ethnic and cultural groups. Clarity, awareness and consensus has evolved considerably over recent years and particularly during the timelines for this project, although the term BAME as an abbreviation for 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' people was the term many participants in research used themselves. However, as

a result of the learning emerging from this project, we endeavour to be more specific and speak appropriately about the range of experiences under discussion.

Potential terms that are less problematic would be 'Global Majority Heritages' (GMH), a term that refers to people who are Black, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and/or have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities'; or 'UK Minority Ethnic' (UKME) which covers all ethnic groups except White British. Even then, care needs to be taken to represent distinctions between citizenship and residence and the experiences of students with home or international fee status.

Shaping a research project

This project was designed and funding secured by the University of Warwick Centre for Lifelong Learning, where a number of career development and coaching programmes are run, in partnership with Warwick Medical School and the Centre for Teacher Education. The project design was based on deploying a shared methodology across all three departmental strands combining data analysis, literature review and semi-structured interviews (group and one-to-one) with the aim of informing a consultative round table event. Project plans were derailed in March 2020 by the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic, causing the round table event to be cancelled. This article reports on particular aspects of the career development programmes strand.

The majority of students on the career development courses covered by this strand are part-time and combine their blended learning with some form of professional practice. As such, the experiences and issues for our students on programmes intersect considerably with their experiences of their professional practice and their own career development in the workplace. Whilst these experiences at work will vary considerably according to sector, employer and location, there is a lack of overall data about diversity and progression to draw on. The staff team currently lacks diversity, something that it is hoped to address through upcoming recruitment.

Mindful of the power dynamics inherent to white staff researching students and race, the first stage of the project was to recruit a team of student researchers from UKME backgrounds to work on the

project. Approval for fieldwork was secured from the appropriate university research ethics committee. A steering group was also established, chaired by the University's Director of Social Inclusion, ensuring the project plugged into ongoing workstreams on the themes of racial equality. Student researchers across all strands were paid an hourly rate in common use across the institution for projects involving students in co-creation.

Methodologically, the research is framed as practitioner enquiry, following an exploratory and participatory approach consistent with the transformative and generative nature of action research (McNiff, 2013). We stepped into previously unresearched territory unsure what we would learn. We sought not to prove a particular hypothesis or generate findings that could be viewed as fixed across the sector: the numbers of students are too small, categories of ethnicity too troubling and datasets too partial to draw definitive conclusions. Rather we focus on insights found and themes that emerged as well as what we have all learned through the process. To foreground the experiences of students who participated in the study, we devote most space here to the interviews, following a brief consideration of literature and data.

Literature review

A literature review was conducted by one of the student researchers during May 2020 from which some useful literature was identified and can be clustered as follows, with exemplars shown in brackets:

- Anti-racism, including critical race theory and its relevance to educational contexts (e.g. Kishimoto, 2018; Warmington, 2020)
- Race in higher education for students and staff, as a stream of access and equality work (e.g. Dale-Rivas, 2019)
- Attainment and experience gaps in higher education in general (e.g. Stevenson, 2012)
- UKME students experiences in higher education (e.g. Mahony & Weiner, 2019)

Within the scope of the study, literature on race and careers was limited (e.g. Hooley et al., 2019) with

few based on research in the UK context. None was identified that specifically addressed the training of UKME career professionals in a UK context; Ranavaya's significant study (2022) being published beyond the project timeframes. Some career theories consider ethnicity as a relevant influence and equity and social justice in general is a clear theme (e.g. Hooley et al., 2021). Labour market studies also explore the influence of ethnicity on individual's working lives and chart further gaps such as in graduate outcomes and employment rates; as well as significant horizontal and vertical segregation. Lessons for working with ethnically diverse clients can also be gleaned from literature looking at any group traditionally marginalised within labour markets and support services (e.g. Pope, 2011). However, as the study took place prior to the publication of a small scale study on the experiences of female UKME practitioners by Ranavaya (2022), no literature was found specifically looking at the UKME practitioner. Indeed, in some of the multicultural counselling literature, the whiteness of the practitioner seems to be a normative assumption.

Student Award Data

An analysis of award data was conducted for the programmes managed by the curriculum area. With small numbers, no tests for statistical significance were possible but analysis is consistent with other data, for wider consideration of the issues present for black, Asian and diverse heritage students on our programme and possible responses.

Sector wide awarding gap data has focused on degree classification from undergraduate programmes, focusing on proportions awarded a 'good' degree (typically defined as first class or upper second class) (UUK/NUS, 2019). In contrast, to explore the experiences of UKME students on one institution's career development courses, a bespoke strategy for data analysis was generated to provide the most useful insights given the flexible and distinctive nature of these programmes. For example, for our postgraduate programmes, we looked at awards for core modules which all students would complete rather than exit awards at PGCert/PGDip/MA level, as this gave us larger numbers to consider. However, this tailored

approach makes detailed comparison with other programmes difficult.

An initial analysis concluded that participation rates by UKME students were variable across the programmes, although consistently lower than the UK population. This seems the best level of comparison as although the UK population data hides large geographical variations, course recruitment does tend to be national rather than local. Initial analysis revealed that there was an awarding gap for UKME students. This was consistent with the University sector as a whole (Sotiropoulou, 2021; Wong et al., 2021). As Advance HE report in their detailed analysis:

'The white-Black, Asian and minority ethnic awarding gap still exists, calculated at 9.9 percentage points for the academic year 2019/20. Most concerningly the gap remained significantly unexplained even after accounting for a series of individual, course-specific and institutional characteristics.'

(Sotiropoulou, 2021)

As level 7 programmes, we focused on achievement of Distinction and Merit grades for UKME and for white students, looking at both course and module data.

Overall, we can conclude that awarding gaps persist, despite staff commitment to equality and robust assessment and moderation mechanisms in place. This is an important consideration for staff working at programme level in higher education where it can be easy to feel sensitive to implications that awarding gaps result exclusively from one's own practice. In fact, such inequalities are endemic and systemic. Students join HE with different prior experiences and so gaps persist despite individual commitments to anti-racist practice at programme level.

Breaking down the UKME category and looking at the data for particular ethnic backgrounds tells a story consistent with the wider HE sector: that the gap is greatest for black students. For example, a data breakdown for core modules shows that Asian students' awards are closer to those for white students.

The data shows a mixed picture of awards ratings for different ethnic groups, with small numbers in some categories making it even harder to draw conclusions. For staff committed to fair and transparent marking

with robust systems of anonymity and moderation, it reminds us that staff and students are operating within the same higher education systems and institutional contexts which give rise to troubling gaps at undergraduate level, and there is value in researching the particular experiences of UKME students on specific programmes to consider how anti-racist strategies could be further developed. Indeed it is also worth nesting these considerations within wider studies of social inclusion which look at intersections of gender, class, ethnicity and other factors which impact on equality of outcome.

Student feedback

The interviews were conducted by the three student researchers with no course staff present. During June and July 2020, participants were invited and online meetings arranged but course staff had no access to participant information or data. Interviews with students and alumni of the programmes who identified as from global majority heritages involved 10 participants in total. These broke down further as:

- 1 man and 9 women,
- 7 current students and 3 graduates,
- 3 Black African, 3 British Asian, 3 South East Asian students and 1 mixed race student.

Based on their own experiences and the literature reviewed, the student researchers across all strands had agreed a series of statements to be used as prompts for discussion, as follows:

- Prior to attending the first attendance component of my course, I was worried about my ethnic background being an issue
- Prior to attending the first attendance component of my course I wondered if I might be the only non-white participant
- I felt the learning materials contain a diverse range of authors and sources
- I felt the experiences of BAME learners were adequately explored in the class discussion
- I did not feel able or willing to reference my race or ethnicity as a personal perspective in my assessments

- I feel my ethnic background has been a barrier within my continuing professional development as a student
- I feel my ethnic background has been a barrier within my continuing professional development within the context of my professional practice
- I see the campus environment as multicultural
- I feel my experience differed from that of the white participants on my course
- I felt able to give feedback on my course
- I feel my ethnic background affects the scope I have to integrate my learning from the course into my practice

The student researchers asked participants to consider their respective responses to these statements, if they were to place themselves as 'I' in the sentence. Reasons for responses were drawn out and discussed to understand why participants answered as they did and thus differences of perspective and personal insights were captured.

Following the interviews, student researchers produced anonymised transcripts which were then shared with the staff member leading the Career Development Programme strand in an online space. In keeping with the transformative and generative nature of action research (McNiff, 2013) all researchers coded transcripts separately and then met online to compare codes, amending analysing and agreeing a series of themes emerging from the data.

Findings and Discussion

From the analysis the emerging themes were:

- Distinct and personal views and attitudes to issues of race and culture as they intersect with other identities and shape course orientation
- A positive, asset based approach to race and culture as learners and as practitioners
- Perspectives on the experience of being a minority in the classroom and the workplace
- Reflections on the white dominance of career development work as reflected in curriculum

Distinct and personal views and attitudes to issues of race and culture as they intersect with other identities and shape course orientation

Whilst all the students shared an identity covered by the umbrella term 'BAME', the unique experience and perspective of each was evident. As well as the diverse ethnic backgrounds they represented, they also spoke of how characteristics such as gender, age, sexual orientation, class, culture or nationality intersect with their ethnic background. Differences of perspective were revealed in terms of intra-personal factors: different personal characteristics, values and levels of experience and comfort with advocacy on race issues emerged during the discussions and were acknowledged by participants.

The complexity of race, culture and nationality was particularly expressed in the group interview where students compared their own cultural backgrounds, especially when those with personal experiences of migration to the UK compared themselves with third or more generation UKME students.

'Sometimes there is a bit of confusion between nationalities and ethnicity. Because for me, I'm (nationality), but yet I'm (ethnicity), you know, in relation to, you know, the UK. It's not just simply about white or non-white. It's so much more complicated than that.'

The significance and impact of ethnicity and culture on participants approach to study were noted. For example, being from an ethnic minority was cited as a motivator for entering careers work and gaining a qualification:

'For some BAME individuals this is more than just getting a qualification. For me this was really a personal journey I wanted to learn more about because I wanted to help black people progress in their careers...it's just I guess about acknowledging that as a BAME student we are going into this course with a lot more on our minds than just professional development.'

Ethnicity and culture were also cited as providing a distinct perspective on course content in relation to some key concepts. This points towards a collective rather than individualised perspective on professional

development, that progressing in careers work as a UKME practitioner has knock-on impacts on others who may be encouraged or attracted to careers work as a result.

A positive, asset-based approach to race and culture

A further theme emerging was examples of participants taking a positive, asset-based approach to race, framing their ethnicity and cultural background as advantages, rather than a focus on the barriers and deficits that can bedevil careers provision. This was referenced in terms of the perspective it gives on practice and rapport with clients from similar backgrounds as well as carving a distinctive niche in practice:

'I think my ethnic background has given me a different perspective. And that actually brought to light a lot of my learning as a student, and of course, continuing as a professional in the careers community.'

Participants spoke extensively about the impact on their client work of their ethnicity and how this contributes positively to client engagement from similar ethnic groups as well as rapport and empathy in one-to-one career coaching practice.

Employers were seen to have an opportunity to better engage diverse service users if they recruit diverse staff. For one student, this positive leverage was a new idea, underlining the benefits of the group discussion and the ongoing sense-making underway:

'[I] could use it as an advantage for us, but I've never thought of doing that in the past. I've always thought of hiding, you know, or trying to fit in. So maybe that's a problem for me that I need to explore.'

Experiences of being a minority in the classroom and the workplace

Most of the students had thought about the racial diversity they might find on the course in advance of their enrolment and described how positive it was to find they were not the only ethnic minority student in the room. This extended to finding someone of the same ethnicity:

‘So when I met xxx, I was just like, oh my god, you know, Chinese, and Asian. I was, I was so happy.’

Expectations for students who were already in practice were informed by a lack of diversity in those contents. A black male participant noted that his place of work was predominantly white middle-class women.

The homogeneity of the course team was not explicitly raised, but the implications of this were alluded to, seen as inevitably leading to differing experiences and perspectives that may result in a lack of empathy with cultural difference:

‘I felt like I always had stuff on that was beyond work beyond my own personal life, that kind of people would never understand really...with an Indian family, our extended family is so large, so many things are like people passing away... Because they don’t experience that level of family commitment sometimes and the pressures that brings...I didn’t really get to discuss a lot of the things that might be relevant to an Asian person that is studying.’

Another student referenced family, financial and caring commitments that might be more common for UKME students as making time for study (alongside full-time work) a challenge. It was not clear whether this dissonance is noticed in relation to individual interactions or institutional policies and procedures. It also reveals the potential for cultural and class-based assumptions to be made on both sides.

Similar dynamics were at play in the workplace. A number of students commented that even though their professional development had been supported through the course, they felt there were barriers to career development, exemplified by the lack of diversity in management positions. Students were aware that in applying for jobs they were often entering predominantly white spaces:

‘When I applied to XXX, I was very conscious that in the team photo there was not a single person of colour featured that I saw when I was doing my research.’

This was particularly noticed for more senior positions and related to their own potential for career development:

‘Looking at my progress within careers advice...I don’t see people who are black or Asian, mixed or any other variations of non-White, who are in managerial positions.’

Where diversity is visible at senior levels, its positive impact is noted. One participant who does now have a minority ethnic woman manager commented on how inspiring she found this.

Reflections on the white dominance of career development work as reflected in curriculum

Participants had nuanced and considered views about the sense and scale of the problem that resulted from the white, western, middle class dominance of the career development field. As one wondered aloud, ‘How do you, you know, teach careers work from a perspective that is not mostly white?’ Frustration was expressed with the wider field of study for not addressing race and racism explicitly, making it challenging for students to introduce that perspective.

Two responses to this dominance emerged. One is to seek out other perspectives, diversify reading lists and change the canon, as represented by this comment:

‘I think we should start thinking about how to incorporate studies from those who are non-whites, not just white, outside the scope of the UK and America because that’s where we’re all predominantly based.’

The other response proposed is to explicitly critique the canonical work from white authors from an anti-racist perspective. Participants went on to acknowledge that as students the intellectual process of taking generic theories and using them to consider their own racialised context was appropriate to the postgraduate level of study and the reflective practice associated with a career development qualification.

Some students wished there had been more explicit coverage of issues of race in the course materials. The group interview discussed whether this should be a specific module, but in the end advocated for a section on race and culture in each core module. Others felt that the course materials were wide enough for a student to explore a particular dimension from the

point of view of race if they chose to, and that this freedom was consistent with level 7 study.

Beyond the reading of selected published work, students engage with particular resources developed by the course team. Some reported that they did not feel the learning materials always represented the diversity of the student population. Where case studies, speakers and resources have been developed which reflect diversity it was noted and welcomed. However, students felt there was scope for more. This is something course staff have been endeavouring to address over recent years and improvements are already in place.

Moving to the classroom experience and discussion of issues of race and culture, students were very positive about their ability to raise racial diversity issues in workshops, tutorials and assessments and found staff supportive. It was noted that they were encouraged in tutorials to reflect on their own situation and identity. The facilitative approach to workshops was valued as creating an appropriate and supportive environment and a place that race could be raised. Examples were offered where participants had offered their own experiences and were met with empathetic response from tutors who welcomed the contribution and used it to enrich teaching. However, the preference was that issues of race and potential racism would be raised by staff, so students themselves did not need to be the initiators of the discussion.

However, this leaves the challenge of maintaining a balance between inviting students to share their lived experience consensually as opposed to requiring a level of disclosure that an individual UKME student may find uncomfortable.

‘Sometimes I might want to have conversations that are about culture or about other things and...they don’t flow naturally when you’re around white participants.’

The challenge for staff is whether this ‘making space’ approach is sufficient. If teaching staff rely on diverse heritage students to raise issues of race and culture when offered the opportunity, we are student-led but leaving responsibility for this with those already minoritized. However, if staff raise it themselves, there is a risk that a burden of representation is

placed on minoritized students who may not wish to discuss their own experiences or have them seen as generalisable in any way.

On balance, participants wanted staff to explicitly create the space, and the research concludes that relying on UKME students to raise issues of race reflects a more passive position, associated with non-racism rather than anti-racism (Kishimoto, 2018). It passes responsibility to UKME students, further emphasizing their difference and normalizing whiteness (Eddo-Lodge, 2017).

Conclusions

The place of race in course design and delivery and thus in students’ experiences has implication not just for UKME students. It also impacts all students, including non-UKME, in their professional development and practice (Dale-Rivas, 2019). This in turn affects all students’ abilities to work against structural racism in the labour market, to consider the impact of their own ethnicity on their practice and its relevance when working with clients of differing ethnic backgrounds (Oputa, 2021). It is key to both critical reflective practice and an anti-racist, emancipatory understanding of careers work (Hooley et al; 2019).

This research is a small step in a much-needed process for the sector at large: to consider the question posed earlier by one participant: ‘How do you teach careers work from a perspective that is not mostly white?’ We believe it is beholden on leaders, teachers and managers to initiate this discussion, listening to our minoritized colleagues, students and clients without delegating responsibility to them (Seckinelgin, 2022). Having considered these findings, the wider course team have continued diversification of teaching resources and engage in ongoing discussion of the decolonising processes appropriate to the development of an anti-racist pedagogy of career development. This research also highlights the need for greater anti-racist action across the professional space as a whole, for example with partner and professional organisations, and to collaborate with them to progress this agenda. This should focus both on career progression for UKME practitioners and anti-racist approaches to career development and coaching work by all practitioners.



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For correspondence

Gill Frigerio,
Associate Professor,
University of Warwick

G.frigerio@warwick.ac.uk