Race, Ethnicity and Change in Higher Education

Race, ethnicity and higher education in the UK and Ireland: Report from a Royal Irish Academy-British Council in Ireland dialogue event

PREFACE

In January 2020 the Royal Irish Academy and the British Council in Ireland brought together leading thinkers and practitioners for a discussion on ethnicity and race, diversity and inclusion in higher education (HE) in Ireland and the UK.[1] This paper is the product of the voices, perspectives and data presented at the event.

It provides an overview of the key themes and issues raised including ideas for achieving greater equality of outcome for those from Irish Traveller, Black, Asian and other ethnic minority backgrounds in academic leadership posts within the Irish and UK higher education system.

The dialogue recognises the urgency of supporting the inclusion of researchers and academics from all racial and ethnic backgrounds within higher education. National conversations on how to achieve greater equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education are gaining momentum but there are still many gaps in knowledge and understanding of the individual, systemic and institutional barriers that must be overcome. In the absence of systematic data collection by higher education institutions of racial and ethnicity markers for staff from Black, Asian, Irish Traveller and other minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds, the discussion necessarily relied heavily upon UK data for insights. Contributions from the keynote speakers, panellists and from the invited audience of higher education stakeholders – management, staff, students, and funders – provided insights into the lived experiences of staff and students from the above groups. Irish HE institutions' gender equality initiatives provided a useful context for discussions and indeed, the need to be alert to intersectional discrimination[2] emerged as a key theme.

Although Ireland and UK higher education systems are different, there are enough commonalities and shared challenges evident in addressing race and equality to have merited bringing speakers and guests from Ireland and the UK together in this forum. The sustained level of mobility (student and staff) and the extensive collaboration within research and through institutional partnerships between the UK and Ireland[3] are important. Equally, shared learning across jurisdictions is a useful tool to advance understanding.

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[1] Details of the event including agenda, speaker biographies and presentations are available online at www.ria.ie and https://www.britishcouncil.ie/

[2] This refers to discrimination that takes place on the basis of several personal grounds or characteristics/identities, which operate and interact with each other at the same time in such a way as to be inseparable. For example, where an individual may face disadvantages on foot of a combination of some or all of the following: gender, race, ethnicity or class. European Institute of Gender Equality, accessed at: https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1262

[3] See the 2017 Royal Irish Academy report 'Research and Higher Education on the island of Ireland post-Brexit', and the 2016 British Council in Ireland report 'Assessing the implication of the UK's exit from the European Union on education and cultural sectors in Northern Ireland and Ireland'.

A note on terminology: The phrase BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) is commonly used in the UK to refer to persons from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, and guides data collection and reporting across the UK higher education system. In Ireland, while these categories are relevant, the phrase itself is not so widely used in policy discussions and does not, for example, adequately reflect and include the experiences of Irish Travellers as a specifically Irish minority ethnic group, or those from migrant groups. For the purposes of this discussion, the paper will use the terminology 'Irish Traveller, Black, Asian, minority ethnic (BAME) and migrant groups' in an imperfect attempt to reflect the diversity of lived experiences to whom this paper is relevant. The May 2020 statement from the National Athena SWAN Ireland Intersectionality Working Group on the Use of Ethnicity Categories in Irish Higher Education offers a succinct summary of the limitations and ethics of using ethnicity categories.[4]

Policy dialogue structure

The event was chaired by Professor Anita Maguire, MRIA, Chair, RIA Diversity Committee, University College Cork, with keynotes by: Dr Jason Arday, Durham University; Professor Kathleen James Chakraborthy, MRIA, University College Dublin; Dr Gemma Irvine, Maynooth University; and Dr Gary Loke, Advance HE UK. Panellists included Dr Ebun Joseph, RCSI and Equality consultant; Dr Ross Woods, HEA Centre for Gender Equality; Dr Michael Isichei, Queen's University Belfast; Professor Anastasia Crickley, Pavee Point, and Megan Reilly, Union of Students in Ireland.

The agreed starting point was the urgent necessity of improving the experiences and outcomes for staff from Irish Traveller, Black, Asian, minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds in the higher education sector in the UK and Ireland. To inform this discussion, invited keynote speakers discussed:

- **the existing evidence base pointing to the exclusion of Irish Traveller, Black, Asian, migrant ethnic and migrant groups in academia**

- **insight into the lived experiences of staff and students from Irish Traveller, BAME and migrant backgrounds**

- **the policy background and the evolution of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) legislation and initiatives specific to higher education in Ireland and the UK**

- **actions which can be undertaken at both a personal and institutional level within higher education to address racism and exclusion.**

Readers are encouraged to view the keynote recordings and presentations available online as these provide the backdrop for much of the discussion presented in this paper.

Four major themes emerged over the course of the discussion:

1. Addressing under-representation across all groups and learning from gender equality initiatives

Discussion of EDI issues at the workshop frequently referred to the progress made, and activities initiated by Irish and UK higher education institutions (HEIs) through their membership of the Athena Swan Charter. Established in the UK in 2005, the Athena Swan Charter recognises the efforts and achievements of member HEIs to advance gender equality.

There was general agreement that the focus on gender equality arising from national and individual discussion[5] and the subsequent widespread engagement by Irish HEIs with the Athena Swan Charter for Gender Equality has led to dedicated actions to address gender under-representation. It was equally acknowledged that much remains to be done on the issue of gender equality including building in more nuanced responses to support those at the intersection of multiple forms of inequality e.g. disability, exclusion by race or ethnicity, including that experienced by Irish Travellers as well as those from black, Asian, minority ethnic or migrant backgrounds.

While Athena Swan has achieved a significant level of name recognition and a significant degree of institutional buy-in in addressing gender equality issues by HEIs in Ireland, issues of race and ethnicity have yet to figure as prominently in either the Athena Swan Charter or broader EDI initiatives in the HE sector. Similarly, in the UK, despite much greater documenting of the inequalities experienced by staff from BAME backgrounds in academia, HEIs have been slow to engage with initiatives such as the Advance HE Race and Equality Charter.

The Advance HE Race and Equality Charter provides a framework through which institutions work to self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers standing in the way of minority ethnic staff and students.

- **There are 152 Athena Swan Charter HEI members in Ireland and the UK. Institutional access to the Charter is funded through the Higher Education Authority.**

- **There are 62 Race and Equality Charter HEI members in the UK.[6]**

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[5] At a national level, the work of the HEA national expert group proved particularly important in raising awareness of the extent of the challenges, see for example the June 2016 HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions, accessed at: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/HEA-National-Review-of-Gender-Equality-in-Irish-Higher-Education-Institutions.pdf. At an individual level, the determination of academics such as Dr Micheline Sheehy Skeffington in pursuing discrimination cases against their academic employer did much to initiate a national conversation on these issues. Dr Sheehy Skeffington successfully pursued a claim through the Equality Tribunal which found that her employer had discriminated against the academic for promotion because of her gender. See: https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/micheline-sheehy-skeffington-i-m-from-a-family-of-feminists-i-took-this-case-to-honour-them-1.2027451

[6] Data from Advance HE, accessed at: https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/, 20 July 2020.

Dialogue participants were clear on the importance of data – quantitative and qualitative – in informing the implementation of Athena Swan relevant actions and strategies in Irish HEIs. A strong focus on narrative data and the lived experiences of women in academia was seen as particularly useful in helping to identify and understand what happens when institutional-level structural barriers collide with individual life circumstances. The collection of appropriate narrative and qualitative data would equally assist Irish HEIs seeking to better understand the actions needed to address the complex obstacles to entry and progression often faced by students and staff from Irish Traveller, black, Asian, minority ethnic or migrant backgrounds. This approach presents challenges; narrative data often shows how the type of institutional response needed defies easy categorisation – is this a gender issue or one arising from racial or ethnic identity? – and requires the integration of multiple strategies to achieve a meaningful response.

Dialogue participants frequently referenced the importance of integrated EDI conversations and actions to build understanding of shared challenges and those unique to particular groups, and to work towards integrated solutions that also promote good relations across under-represented groups.

2. Building capacity to enable institutional change

Measures to address gender inequalities, particularly those arising from the Athena Swan initiative, were pointed to as a useful reference point to inform institutional approaches to addressing race and ethnicity inequalities. The importance of data to identify the extent of gender under-representation, public commitment, and leadership by higher education senior management to on-the-ground measures and protocols to address unconscious bias were all cited as useful measures. However, the discussion suggested that an over-confidence may hinder the efficiency of human resource systems and processes to address race and ethnicity inequalities. For example, while unconscious bias training is now nearly a given for all those involved in recruitment, promotion and award giving processes within HEIs, such initiatives by themselves do not, and cannot, ensure a wider culture of equality and inclusion. Such processes should be further complemented through the engagement of established academic staff with wider efforts to address inequalities and exclusion at faculty level for example, training on anti-racist measures, or checking the inclusivity of academic conferences and activities in terms of issues covered and diverse representation amongst contributors.

It was frequently observed in the discussion that students and staff in Irish higher education may have little opportunity to discuss or learn about the similarities and differences of their lived experiences to those of their peers from Irish Traveller, black, Asian, minority ethnic or migrant backgrounds. Cultural norms in both Ireland and the UK within higher education are largely based upon traditional white Irish or white UK mainstream values, and there was a perception that very limited accommodation was being made at present to understand and accommodate a wider range of values. While many humanities and social science undergraduate programmes offer modules on equality, identity and discrimination, there is a near total absence of such discussion within the typical science undergraduate curriculum. It is notable that only one Irish university offers Black Studies as a full study module at the time of writing.[7]

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[7] See module at: https://www.ucd.ie/newsandopinion/news/2018/august/01/blackstudiesfocusedmoduleatucd/

A frequent theme was the over-reliance on often junior academics from under-represented groups to lead and drive the institutional EDI initiatives. This further accentuates inequality by, for example, diminishing the time available to these academics to undertake the impactful research that will score highly in their next bid for academic promotion. A strong argument was made for revisiting HEI work allocations and academic progression metrics to ensure these recognise advocacy work around EDI issues in general as a meaningful metric for academic progression.

Finally, a number of participants spoke of feeling uncomfortable or unsure about what to say or how to discuss race and ethnicity issues. Avoidance of such conversations however had the unintentional effect in many instances of increasing the burden on the already small numbers of Irish Traveller, black, Asian, minority ethnic or migrant backgrounds who frequently find themselves the sole voices identifying and speaking to these issues. There was strong encouragement given to the notion that a wider body of HE staff should take a more active role in speaking up and approaching conversations on EDI issues, recognising that at times these conversations may indeed be uncomfortable. HEIs could, for example, support their staff as a whole by providing ongoing career development/training modules to reflect on and build awareness of EDI issues as they relate to teaching, promotion, and HE culture more generally.

3. The role of leadership

The burden of pushing for positive change was considered by those at the forum to fall largely upon staff from Irish Traveller, Black, Asian, minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds with most of these noting instances in which they found themselves the sole voice in committee meetings drawing attention to the need for measures to include and support academic staff and students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Dialogue participants from Irish Traveller, Black, Asian, minority ethnic or migrant backgrounds spoke of feeing an immense personal sense of responsibility to push for greater equality and diversity in their host HEI but also of the additional professional burden placed upon them as they strove to balance this advocacy role with the urgent work needed to progress their academic and scholarly careers. Campaigning for change was seen to detract from the time and energy they have available for their core academic and scholarly work and subsequent career development. Similar experiences were noted by those active in pushing for greater gender equality within higher education.

Some event participants expressed disquiet at a perceived lack of awareness or responsiveness on the part of academic leaders to the issues and complexities faced by students and staff from under-represented groups. It was considered extremely important that higher education leaders be prepared to visibly engage with and lead positive change and to publicly espouse the benefits and necessity of a diverse and inclusive university. Suggested measures included senior leaders becoming familiar with the key lessons and evidence on privilege, the effects of bias and racism and the issues facing staff from under-represented groups, and to use this knowledge to place such issues at the heart of institutional conversations and solutions to promote greater equality, diversity and inclusion.[8] Event participants strongly supported this type of active leadership and participation.

[8] This measure was strongly recommended in the 2019 LERU report, E*quality, Diversity and Inclusion in Universities: the power of a systemic approach.*

4. Data matters

Data is vital to better understand and scope the experience of inequality. An emphasis on statistics and data collection such as that followed by the Athena Swan charter was judged as both appropriate and effective in focusing attention on the issues of gender under-representation. Data provides an impartial snapshot of the situation and can precisely identify where change is necessary, e.g., the under-representation of female professors. While there are well-documented limitations and ethical challenges associated with the collection of ethnicity data, such data can nevertheless play an important role in understanding the experiences of under-represented groups.[9]

The UK has developed an extensive data and monitoring system to better understand the representation of staff from BAME backgrounds staff in academia, as Table 1 shows. It shows significant under-representation of BAME staff within UK academia generally, with very limited representation in senior leadership roles. In 2019, just 16% of UK academic staff identified as black. There are fewer black academic staff than white academic staff at every level,[10] and just 27 female black professors.

Currently, the higher education staff data collection instruments used by Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) do not collect information on race or ethnicity as standard. [11]
At the time of writing, it was possible to identify just one full-time black female academic professorial post-holder in Irish academia, and several post-holders from Asian or other minority ethnic backgrounds but no nationally verified data is available to confirm this. Similarly, data on the representation of Irish Travellers or other minority ethnic groups within academic staff is not available at a national level but such data would be likely to mirror the extremely low participation rate from students identifying as Irish Travellers within higher education.[12]

The paucity of data hinders efforts by higher education institutions and bodies such as the Royal Irish Academy to build better solutions to increase the involvement of under-represented groups and support their participation in academic life. A vital first step then for Ireland is the collection of HEI staff data that allows for a disaggregation by ethnicity. In May 2020, the Athena SWAN Ireland National Intersectionality Working Group produced a statement to provide staff in HEIs with information on the rationale for collecting ethnicity data and the complexities of categorisation, and Ireland's Higher Education Authority has expressed its commitment to addressing the current data deficiencies.

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[9] See the May 2020 Statement by the National Athena SWAN Ireland Intersectionality Working Group on the Use of Ethnicity Categories in Irish Higher Education, accessed at: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2020/07/Intersectionality-WG-Statement-on-Ethnicity-Categories-in-Irish-HE.pdf

[10] UCL, 2016, 'The Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Staff in Further and Higher Education', accessed at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7861/The-experiences-of-black-and-minority-ethnic-staff-in-further-and-higher-education-Feb-16/pdf/BME_survey_report_Feb161.pdf, p. 2, 20 July 2020.

[11] This issue is relevant to many sectors, not merely the higher education sector. A 2019 report by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission found that Ireland does not have sufficient disaggregated data to allow an adequate and regular assessment of the extent to which it is meeting its obligations under international law across a range of sectors, with significant gaps in the national survey and administrative data available on minority ethnic groups, and concerns about its availability, quality, and use.

[12] The Department of Education and Skills' 2019 *Action Plan to Promote Traveller Participation in Higher Education* sets a target to double the participation of Irish Travellers in higher education from 35 in 2015 to 80 in 2019.

Table 1: Academic staff from Irish Traveller, Black, Asian and other Ethnic Minority Groups in the UK and Ireland

UK	IRELAND

• 16% of the total UK academic staff identified as black in 2019.[13]
 	
• A 2015 Equality Challenge Unit report found there were just 20 UK-born black and minority ethnic (BME) deputy or pro vice-chancellors, compared with 530 white ones.[14]
 	
• In 2018-19, none of the 535 staff employed as 'managers, directors or senior officials' across British universities identified as black. Twenty-five identified as Asian, mixed or other ethnicity. 475 identified as white. The ethnicity of the remaining 35 was not known (HESA, 2019)
 	
• In 2018-19, 185 of 11,860 non-academic managerial roles within higher education were held by black staff, compared with 10,510 who identified as White, 410 as Asian and 165 from a mixed background (HESA, 2019).
 	
• There are 27 black female professors in the UK university system.
 	
• 24% of ethnic minority students had experienced racial harassment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019)
 	
    o Of these, 20% had faced physical assaults, while the majority had experienced name-calling and various forms of micro-aggression.
 	
    o More than a quarter of staff said they experienced racist name-calling, insults and jokes. Much of this harassment took place in office environments, frequently in plain sight of their colleagues.
 	
    o International students recorded feeling unwelcome, isolated and vulnerable.
	In the absence of specific data for Irish higher education, a 2018 study[15] by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the ESRI is instructive.
	
	It found:
	
	• People from the black non-Irish group are less than half (0.4 times) as likely to be employed as the White Irish group and five times as likely to experience discrimination when seeking work.
	
	• People from the black Irish group are twice as likely to experience discrimination seeking work, and just under three and a half times (3.4 times) as likely to experience discrimination in the workplace, as white Irish.
	
	• Both the black non-Irish and black Irish groups are much less likely to hold a managerial or professional job.
	
	• The Asian Irish group of people do not differ in terms of employment rates and are more likely to be working in professional/managerial occupations but are almost twice (1.9 times) as likely to experience workplace discrimination.

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[13] Presentation by J. Arday to the RIA-BCI workshop, January 30, 2020.

[14] Report accessed at: http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2015/

[15] Ethnicity and Nationality in the Irish Labour Market looks at Central Statistics Office data from the Quarterly National Household Survey Equality Modules from 2004, 2010 and 2014 to capture how labour market outcomes and the experience of discrimination have changed through the economic boom, recession and early recovery.

As previously stated, quantitative data needs to be supplemented with narrative data. There is, for example, no history of racial climate assessments in either Ireland or the UK compared to the US (albeit these are relatively new there also). Such assessments offer an opportunity to engage directly with BAME staff and students to gather their views on the racial climate within their higher education campus, and provide a useful qualitative element which could be drawn upon to inform campus specific measures to combat racism and drive equality measures.

Discussion

The low numbers of academic staff from Irish Traveller, BAME or migrant backgrounds, particularly in senior positions, represents both a deficit and a challenge to be addressed in both Ireland and the UK. Ireland and the UK's higher education and further education students come from a greater diversity of backgrounds and ethnicities than ever before. The importance of visible role models in positions of authority and leadership is newly appreciated and popularised by the phrase 'you can't be what you can't see'. Students pursuing higher education studies in Ireland and the UK quite reasonably expect to see people like them achieving, teaching, doing research and leading academia. What do the strikingly low numbers of such role models tell today's students about how academia welcomes them now as students and as future academic leaders?

The issue of under-representation extends beyond the staff teaching students to the curriculum they are taught. To what extent has the higher education sector in Ireland and the UK really engaged with the debate on the decolonisation of the undergraduate and post-graduate curriculum? For many at the RIA-British Council in Ireland dialogue, this process should be accelerated as a matter of urgency with a particular focus in the first instance on the resources and reading lists provided to students.

As the lessons from tackling gender equality have shown, the higher education sector needs to consult with under-represented groups to deliver effective initiatives. This includes their involvement in the organisation, design, implementation, and oversight of equality and diversity initiatives. The present-day senior leadership should be seen to visibly lead the delivery of EDI work. Additionally, HEIs should consider their institutional processes and procedures and commit to actions to address process-driven inequalities and promote genuine diversity in, for example, recruitment campaigns and procedures as well as promotional metrics.

Finally, even as higher education institutions begin to address the under-representation of particular groups, there is a danger of increasing the burden on those experiencing the inequality by implicitly or explicitly expecting them to take a leadership role on-the-ground and across the sector in speaking out or actioning new measures. The question arises as to who drives the change? Is it the few or the many? On this point, student unions represent a powerful force for change with the emergence of specific Ethnic Minority Officer appointments within student unions and student union-led initiatives aimed to empower ethnic leaders within student populations. Through their representation in HEI senior management forums within HEIs, student unions can make a significant contribution both in identifying the issues affecting students and staff and by holding senior leaders accountable for their responses to these issues.

Suggested measures

Through the discussion, a range of measures were proposed for consideration with the objective of further embedding an inclusive and welcoming environment for staff from Irish Traveller, BAME, and migrant backgrounds. A common theme throughout was the need for both institutions and the individuals within them to take responsibility for action to combat racism and exclusion. Suggested measures at sectoral and institutional level included:

- Engaging directly with BAME, Irish Traveller and migrant staff and students to gather their views on the racial climate within their higher education campus. Support academic staff to initiate and engage in discussion on their individual school/college engagement with EDI issues.

- Greater attention to ensuring that there is an inclusive curriculum reflective of the lived experiences and histories of all within the higher education environment.

- Ensure that Irish Traveller, BAME, and migrant staff are represented within the organisation, design, implementation and oversight, of institutional EDI initiatives.

- Data on the representation of Irish Travellers, BAME and migrant staff and students within HEIs to be collected, collated and publicly reported using agreed national categories.

- HEIs should carefully consider the composition of Athena Swan and similar such committees to ensure a balanced contribution and representation of higher education staff from all career stages and groups.

- Greater education and higher levels of participation for higher education staff and students on diverse cultural norms and experiences, including the embedding of at least one EDI module in all undergraduate teaching.

- More developed EDI learning and EDI initiatives which empower staff and students to counter racism.

- Access to specific training for academic staff to enhance their skills to teach and supervise learners from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Summary

Ireland's higher education institutions can tackle racism and embed a truly inclusive culture, learning from successful international initiatives to build inclusivity into the higher education system.

Excellence is, and will remain, the key metric of quality in academia. But individual excellence and achieving equality of outcome in the higher education sector is not a simple linear progression.

Academic staff from Black, Asian and other ethnic minority backgrounds are significantly under-represented in UK academic and leadership roles: this is widely understood to hold true for Ireland also, although to date the higher education staff data collection instruments used by Irish HEIs do not collect information on race or ethnicity as standard. This virtual absence of data, either quantitative or qualitative, to identify staff from BAME, Irish Traveller and migrant backgrounds increases the difficulty of ensuring they are adequately consulted with or included in higher education decision-making and equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Lessons from initiatives to achieve greater gender equality point to the need for more active initiatives to recognise challenges and barriers that may arise for particular groups. Collective action at the HEI level, supported and required as a condition of public funding, has proven vital to securing the attention and commitment of HEI management in support of gender equality initiatives and could be further extended to achieve greater race and ethnicity inclusion and diversity within higher education.

Learnings from the implementation of the Athena Swan Charter to achieve greater gender equality in academia point to the need for actions to consider institutional systems and structures such as HR recruitment and diversity training, metrics for academic career progression but also measures to build awareness of the challenges faced by academic staff and students Irish Traveller, Black, Asian and other ethnic minority backgrounds. The active involvement of senior leaders in higher education is crucial: leaders will need to become ever more directly involved in learning about the issues and challenges faced by their academic staff and researchers from Irish Traveller, Black, Asian and other ethnic minority backgrounds, and take an active and visible role in the initiatives to support such academic staff.

Celebrating the success of the exceptional individual who achieves against the odds is joyful and hopeful but as a national strategy leaves much to be desired. The focus must be on a collective moving forward rather than individual exceptionalism.

About the Organisers

RIA — Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
Royal Irish Academy

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