

Experiences of British Bangladeshi Muslims in Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This chapter reports on the experiences of higher education among British Bangladeshis in the UK with a focus on identities of race and gender in particular. It is based on research conducted with a sample of British Bangladeshis studying at or recently graduated from universities around the UK, whose parental home is in London or Birmingham. In each location, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in the form of same-sex parent and child dyads, alongside narrative interviews and interviews with civil society. The analysis points to inconsistencies at the heart of the UK education system in that while British Bangladeshis are being encouraged to aim high, to be ambitious and optimistic, they are also tasked with accepting responsibility for the structural and racialised disadvantage that prevents them from translating educational success into labour market advantage.

Keywords

British Bangladeshis – higher education – racism – discrimination – Islamophobia – anti-Muslim racism

9.1 Introduction

If Western civilisation and culture are responsible for colonial racism, and Europe itself has a racist structure, then we should not be too surprised to find this racism reflected in the discourses of knowledge that emanate from this civilisation and that they work to ensure that structural dominance is maintained.

SARDAR, 2008, pp. vi–xx cited in Arday et al., 2021

Institutions of higher education (HE) in the UK have been under mounting pressure to be clear about their racial inequalities as well as to construct attainable goals and initiatives to overcome these inequalities. They have often been viewed as ‘hallowed halls’ of progressive thinking and ‘cultural inclusivity’ (Guest, 2020). However, this has been repeatedly challenged, most recently by the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement demanding that HE is held to account and asking universities to consider their part in the reproduction of systemic racism (Halpin Report, 2020). Muslims too have been subjected to significant hostility. The ways in which Islam is perceived on campuses, and how those perceptions are reinforced or challenged, depict the capacity of universities as promoters of cultural inclusion or exclusion and racial justice or injustice (Halpin Report, 2020). Universities may pride themselves on nurturing progressive attitudes towards religious and cultural diversity, however, as part of the colonial matrix? of power (Quijano, 2000), and as Sardar explains above, they produce and are produced by the institutional racism that is observed in other parts of society.

In the last decade, the number of ethnic minority students entering higher education in the UK has seen a substantial increase. Evidence from the Equality Change Unit¹ (ECU) (2017) reveals that the proportion of ethnic minority students has increased from 14.9% in 2003/4 to 20.2% a decade later (an increase of 5.3 percent). Both Coalition and Conservative governments persevered with ‘widening participation’ schemes, frequently within neo-liberal ideological narratives conflating increased marketisation and ‘choice’ with the possibility for refining identifiable problems of diversity and equity within higher education institutions (HEIs) (Ball et al., 2002; Furedi, 2010). Universities have presented measures to address such inequalities, incorporating monitoring institutions in their drive to improve access for disadvantaged students (Bhopal, 2018). However, notwithstanding significant increases in numbers of students entering higher education, structural inequalities resolute by social class and ethnicity affecting university entrance persist (Bhopal, 2018). There are also unambiguous differences in degree attainment by ethnicity, and in particular by differences in ‘good degrees’² (Richardson, 2018). The variance in the percentage of ethnic minority students who receive a ‘good’ degree classification compared to their white counterparts is known as the ‘attainment gap’ or ‘awarding gap’, which exists across ethnic minority groups (Bhattacharyya et al., 2003).

1 Equality Change Unit works to support equality and diversity for both students and staff in higher education across the UK and in colleges in Scotland.

2 That is first or upper second classifications.

Students of Bangladeshi heritage are over-represented in usually less prestigious post-92 institutions, incline to have lower retention levels, as well as lower degree grades compared to their white middle-class counterparts, and lower employment forecasts and wages controlling for qualifications and socio-economic origins (Lymperopoulou and Parameshwaran, 2014). For Bangladeshi women, low rates of participation in higher education as well as in economic activity have contributed to mark them as ‘problematic’ in both public and policy discourse, as they are often credited to the constraining influence of patriarchal religious and cultural ‘norms’ (Miller, 2016). However, the number of those attending university has improved significantly over the last decades (CoDE,³ 2014). According to Census statistics, the proportion of people of Bangladeshi background aged 16+ holding degree level qualifications rose from 5% to 20% between 1991 and 2011, with women accounting for around half of this latter percentage (ONS,⁴ 2011a, 2011b; Lymperopoulou and Parameshwaran, 2014). Statistics also show that young people from Bangladeshi backgrounds are more likely than ever to accomplish a good education and go on to university than other groups – particularly British Bangladeshi women (Stevenson et al., 2017).

In this chapter, we focus particularly on the experience of Muslim students of Bangladeshi origin. Policy and research reports have referred to the ‘broken promise of social mobility’ for young Muslims in the UK (Stevenson et al., 2017). Because despite increasing rates of access to Higher Education – particularly among British Bangladeshi women they continue to experience poorer labour market outcomes than non-Muslims and endure substantial disadvantages across several areas, incorporating housing and health (Joseph Rowntree Foundation [JRF], 2017). Against this contextual background, the chapter sets out to investigate how British Bangladeshi individuals in London and Birmingham circumnavigate the unequal education space in contemplating their futures. This underwrites an emerging body of work that explores how the high aspirations for the educational success of British Bangladeshi young people can be comprehended and theorised (Bagguley and Hussain, 2016; Khattab and Modood, 2018; Shah et al., 2010). It also discovers intersectional identities and the influence of ethnicity and religion on women’s experiences in higher education. In doing so, the chapter draws on the voices of Bangladeshi young people, in a context in which the voices of students themselves often remain on the periphery of debates, to strengthen our understanding of the lived experience of UK higher education.

3 Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity.

4 Office for National Statistics.

The first section provides contextual information on the varying picture of educational attainment for British Bangladeshis in the framework of recent policies that encourage social mobility. The second section discovers theories of choice and aspiration in order to place the article within current debates about how British Bangladeshis circumnavigate capitals of constraint and possibility. The analysis offered reveals contradictions at the heart of the education system in that while British Bangladeshis are being encouraged to aim high, be aspirational, and successful, they are tasked with accepting responsibility for the structural and racialised disadvantage that prevents many from translating educational success into labour market advantage. It then dovetails to the spectrum in which Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism⁵ is being perpetuated and experienced in Higher Education.

9.2 Methodology

The research was conducted as part of two overlapping projects which sought to examine the relationship between experiences of citizenship and transnational practice. As formal citizenship by itself seldom guarantees that an individual will be able to participate in political life (Redclift, 2013), the project examined citizenship through what might be regarded as ‘substantive’ dimensions of socio-political engagement – the social, cultural, political, or symbolic ‘acts’ that legal status may or may not make possible (Isin and Nielsen, 2013). This includes the examination of the degree to which access to education, employment, housing, and healthcare, as well as local political processes and civil society, reflect not only ‘formal statuses’ but ‘effective citizenship’. Here the role of higher education in reproducing ineffective citizenship emerged from discussions regarding access to education, as well as experiences of anti-South Asian and anti-Muslim racism.

In total, 120 Bangladesh-origin Muslims were interviewed in 75 interviews which took the form of semi-structured dyadic interviews with parents and children (45 interviews), narrative interviews with participants over 60 years of age (14 interviews), and semi-structured interviews with members of civil

5 Islamophobia has different ‘etymological’ iterations and interpretations (the Runnymede Trust, 1997, p. 36; Elahi and Khan, 2017). The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims defines Islamophobia as a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness (APPG, 2018, p. 11 <https://www.camden.gov.uk/documents/20142/4794543/APPG+Definition+of+Islamophobia.pdf/f747d5e0-b4e2-5ba6-b4c7-499bd102d5aa>). We have chosen to use the term anti-Muslim racism because it more clearly denotes the role of race and racism in anti-Muslim sentiment.

society (16 interviews). Each of these different interview types was used to capture a different dimension of the projects aims and research questions. This chapter draws on the dyadic interviews with parents and children as well as interviews with members of civil society. The parent-child dyads reflected a mix of mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons, to capture how citizenship is mediated not only by 'race' and ethnicity but also by gender and generation. A generational approach has been much less usual in Britain than in America in understandings of citizenship but the impact of generational change has been of growing interest (Heath and Li, 2014), partly in response to a history of homogenising ethnic groups in research and policy. The dyad interviews sought to examine socio-political in/exclusion in relation to experiences of citizenship; and to consider these local experiences of citizenship alongside transnational social, political and religious engagement. The Civil Society interviews were conducted with activists and volunteers from a range of Governmental and Non-Governmental backgrounds, all engaged with providing services to the Bangladesh-origin community at the local level. More of these interviews were conducted with men than women, although wherever possible a representative gender balance was sought. These interviews investigated the role of civil society in relation particularly to access to education, employment, housing and healthcare. They assessed how Government agencies and civil society organisations worked with participants to support or constrain transnational activity – and the positive/negative impact of this work in terms of local experiences of citizenship. Interviews were complemented by ethnographic observation with the Bangladeshi community in both field sites.

The research drawn on for this chapter focussed on the experience of Bangladesh-origin Muslims in two urban settings – Tower Hamlets in London and Aston/Smethwick in Birmingham. The Bangladeshi community is well established in the UK. The earliest settlers arrived in the nineteenth century and by the time of the last census, there were 447,200 Bangladeshi-origin men, women, and children (ONS, 2011a). The vast majority originated from the region of Sylhet, and much of the migration flow has resulted from family sponsorship (Kibria, 2012). These two factors have produced significant geographic concentration in 'Inner London' and the borough of Tower Hamlets in particular, where almost half of the Bangladeshi population is located (222,127). The region with the second-highest concentration of Bangladesh-origin Muslims in the UK in the West Midlands with a population of 52,477 (ONS, 2011a). The majority live in the city of Birmingham (32,532) where one of the largest concentrations is in the ward of Aston. The city has played a vital role in shaping the politics of race in British society (Solomos and Back, 1995). As religion has

increasingly become a key theme in contemporary political debates, the city has continued to feature in public commentary as a site of concern (Miah, 2017) notably in relation to education i.e. the Trojan Horse affair⁶ (Holmwood and O'Toole, 2018) and the 'No Outsiders' controversy. Birmingham is, therefore, also a key site of contestation for some of the issues around education and citizenship which this article explores.

In Tower Hamlets initial access to interviewees was gained with the help of the Swadhinata Trust,⁷ and in Aston/Smethwick (Birmingham) access to interviewees was gained with the help of the Community Connect Foundation.⁸ In both field sites, a sample was drawn using purposive sampling methods and the criteria for the inclusion of cases was a spread of socio-economic backgrounds and an even spread of mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons. After the initial interviews were conducted, snowball sampling began. Alongside the snowball sample, the researchers contacted a broader range of relevant organisations and drew on personal networks to try to ensure sample selectivity was minimised, but it was not completely eradicated. Interviews were conducted in English or Sylheti⁹ depending on the preferences of interviewees. Interviews in Bengali were translated at the point of transcription. The majority took place in interviewees' homes, as well as in local community centres, to ensure participants were as relaxed and comfortable as possible, and to minimise any power asymmetry between researchers and participants. The majority of interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes, and some of the narrative and civil society interviews were as long as three hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and names have been replaced with pseudonyms in all cases. We used NVivo to organize and analyse the data and thematic analysis was applied. Once we had familiarized ourselves with the data, codes were generated inductively as patterns emerged. From here we were able to group codes into broader themes which we cross-checked with the dataset as a whole. For this chapter we are drawing on the codes entitled education-gender, education-school or university diversity which came under the theme education-discrimination.

6 The Trojan House affair alludes to an outrage including cases of an alleged conspiracy that there was a coordinated endeavour to bring an Islamist ethos into schools in Birmingham.

7 The Swadhinata Trust is a Bengali community group based in London which works to promote Bengali history and heritage.

8 Community Connect Foundation is a non-profit organisation working to improve the social and economic wellbeing of disadvantaged communities in Smethwick.

9 An Eastern Indo-Aryan language spoken by people in Sylhet Division of Bangladesh, the Barak Valley, the Hojai district of Assam and northern parts of Tripura in India.

9.3 The Intersection of Race, Class, Gender and Religion in Education

Within the educational literature, arguments connecting educational choice and the reproduction of gendered and racialised inequalities are now well-established (Archer and Francis, 2006; Ball et al., 2001; Crozier and Davis, 2006; Reay et al., 2001). Much of this educational literature has been reinforced by the hypothetical tools presented by Bourdieu, particularly his concepts of social and cultural capital. Research on transitions to higher education has consistently shown that choices are formed by the availability of resources (material and cultural), which can improve or constrain aspiration, achievement, and ambition (Wright et al., 2009), leading to the reproduction of existing classed, gendered and racialised inequalities. Ball (2003, p. 261), for instance, argues that the White middle classes are “adept at taking up and making the most of opportunities of advantage that [marketised] policies present to them.” These White middle-class families can support competitive advantage due to their possession of embodied forms of social capital (the links and networks that support what might be possible or what can be done) and cultural capital (the possession of understandings, knowledge, ways of behaving, and attitudes which can either help or impede a person to progress) (Hodkinson, 2004).

While policymakers continue to champion social mobility as the solution to growing inequalities, research on educational consequences (Mirza, 1992; Gillborn, 2006) has shown that class and ethnicity (not individual merit) endure as the principal predictors of educational success and failure. Gillborn (2008, pp. 59–60) upholds nevertheless, that statistics on ethnicity and achievement endorse a multifaceted picture with girls performing better than boys across the board.

Researchers examining the unexpected success, relative to their peers, of British working-class Chinese and South Asian students, have stressed concepts of ‘family capital’ (Archer and Francis, 2006, p. 7) or ‘ethnic capital’ (Modood, 2006). This refers to the cross-class value that parents of ethnic minorities place on higher education and high career aspirations for their children. Shah et al (2010) contend that the transmission of ‘values’ and ‘aspirations’ related to education within and between families and the enforcement of norms is crucial in explaining why working-class Pakistani students access higher education. Nonetheless, differences in the outcomes for siblings within the same family unit point to the requirement for a distinction to be made between ‘potential’ and ‘actualised’ ethnic capital (Shain, 2021). Gender (hierarchies, ideologies, and identities) and religion (identities and practices) matter too, so do structural disadvantages in terms of influencing the level of ethnic capital that is ‘actualised’ (Shain, 2021).

In addition, within colleges and universities, Muslim students are progressively being viewed through the lens of counterterrorism as a threat to the social order (Shain, 2017; Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2017; Miah, 2017). Anti-Muslim racism in education is encountered differently by different groups; a female Muslim may experience anti-Muslim racism relating to their dress and appearance (Stevenson, 2018; Perry, 2014; Zempi, 2016); males, for their choice to grow beards and wear prayer caps (Poynting and Mason, 2007); and Muslims of colour for their ethnic backgrounds (Moosavi, 2015). The research conducted by Stevenson (2018) and Chaudry (2021) described the harsh realities that Muslims face on an everyday basis. The report identified how the majority of incidents relating to religious prejudice included students having racist tropes hurled at them. For female Muslims, this also means that at the same time as being encouraged to be aspirational, to work hard and achieve academically, they are also presented as Muslim girls, to be possibly dangerous and unsafe and in need of regulation and surveillance (Shain, 2017; Mirza and Meeto, 2018). The next section will highlight the experiences of the young people we interviewed in this respect.

9.3.1 *British Bangladeshi Students in HE: Participation and Attainment*

Since 1992, the educational attainment of Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people in the UK has improved significantly (Gillborn, 2008, p. 60). Research suggests that Muslim Pakistani and Bangladeshi students, frequently the poorest and most marginalised of British students, are nonetheless more likely than White working-class young people to submit applications to university. This is also the case for Muslim women whose participation in education is becoming routine (Bagguley and Hussain, 2016). Much of the previous research on higher education decision-making (Mirza, 2009; Reay et al., 2001) pointed to a 'troubling racial divide' in students' choices, between 'old' (pre-1992 established universities) and 'new universities'. Evidence shows that British Bangladeshis are less likely to gain access to the more prestigious 'old' universities and are more likely to withdraw from the university before completion of their degree (Modood, 2006).

9.3.2 *Anti-Muslim and Anti-Asian Racism*

The existence of racism within family histories and schooling experiences is sedimented within daily racisms at university as a standard practice. It becomes a familiar routine to be worked through (Cohen and Tufail, 2017). There is compelling evidence to show that Muslim university students are facing increasing levels of anti-Muslim racism on campus (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020). Our participants reveal that they also frequently encountered subtle

and inconspicuous forms of racism, known as microaggressions (Chaudry, 2020; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019), particularly in relation to their dress or appearance. The following paragraphs focus on the ways in which anti-Muslim racism operates within a university environment and how it impacts the everyday experiences of a sample of British Muslim students from Tower Hamlets and Birmingham.

What emerged for one research participant was how she felt that her Muslimness impacted her prospects of feeling engaged with her peers at university, she stated that:

I didn't know that when people asking stupid things and people ask if you shower with your hijab, that kind of stuff. I didn't realise that was othering and racism and all of those things.

HUMA AND JEBA, Birmingham

Reports of visibly Muslim women being targeted, for example, through having their hijabs forcibly pulled off, have been growing. Research by Nadal et al (2012) identified these encounters as behaviours that convey judgement and maltreatment based on the understanding that there is something 'wrong' and 'abnormal' with wearing the hijab. Haque et al (2019) also found that Muslim women wearing the hijab had to endure uncomfortable exchanges.

Reports of microaggressions were common among our sample and not always in reference to specifically Muslim identities or practices. As one participant explained:

... you go to (London Russell Group University) and it's almost all white, or European white. I didn't know how to react to that and there was very everyday racism, but I didn't have the words to explain it to people so I would brush it off and I was known as a good brown person because I'd get along with everyone really well. I remember loads of white people telling me I am their favourite brown girl, which is really problematic now when I think about it but it's because they could be openly racist to me, get away with saying whatever, asking me really stupid questions and I would just answer those and give them the time, when I shouldn't have. But that is what drew me towards the ISOC [Islamic Society]. Slowly through the ISOC I found the words and then through the BME Network, I properly found the words and then I just stopped sitting with white people.

AMERAH AND HASINA, Tower Hamlets

The participant explained that she was being treated differently by other students because of her ethnicity, religion and appearance. Her experience highlights a subtle and complicated overlap between anti-Muslim racism and anti-Asian racism. According to Stevenson (2018), student-student power relations can shape the belonging of Muslim students on campus. These everyday nuanced behaviours can have profound implications for the students' identity, self-esteem, and their (in)equitable student experience. We would argue that much of what our participants shared here is not unique to the British Bangladeshi experience but relevant to the experiences of other South Asian Muslims in the UK. The experience of Bangladesh-origin Muslims builds on longer characterisations of South Asians in the UK (Brah, 1993; Parmar, 2004; Rashid, 2016). However, it is also important to be clear that British Bangladeshis are racialized in specific ways in relation to other South Asian groups, that stem from both colonial policies and histories as well as from present day socio-economic disparities and differences of ethnic concentration. As our sample was among British Bangladeshis we do not attempt to generalize beyond this case to other South Asian groups. However, for British Bangladeshis it is clear that anti-Muslim racism and anti-Asian racism intersect.

9.3.3 *Colonised Curriculum and Teaching Spaces*

The centrality of a Eurocentric epistemology dictates the landscape of knowledge in Higher Education institutions (Arday et al., 2021). The continuation of such an exclusionary curriculum, in numerous traditions, remains a vehicle for the expansion of discriminatory spaces and the propagation of racial inequalities. The 'monopoly' and proliferation of White European canons comprises much of the existing curriculum and subsequently impacts negatively on minoritised learners' engagement and sense of belonging (Arday et al., 2021). Within the UK there has been a continuing critical mass of students and academics who have sustained calls to decolonise the curriculum. Campaigns such as Decolonising the Curriculum Movement and Why is my Curriculum White have sought to challenge and dismantle the existing orthodoxies by advocating a curriculum that reflects the multiple histories of ethnic minority and indigenous populations globally but particularly within the UK. The movement to 'decolonise' university curricula has been pushed into the political and educational mainstream in the wake of the widely publicised killing of George Floyd in the US in 2020. Nonetheless, the curriculum and pedagogies that pervade within UK institutions continue to remain a site for the systemic reproduction of racism (Pilkington, 2013). Students in our study also expressed concerns about the narrowness of their curricula. Many argued that most readings lists

consisted of an overwhelming majority of white male authors. As evidence has shown, ethnic minority students need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum as legitimate creators of knowledge (Muldoon, 2020). However, there remains a general reluctance among educators and universities to engage in meaningful and open discussions about whiteness and Eurocentrism as the dominant canon of knowledge (Arday and Mirza, 2018).

In terms of the 'BME' awarding gap (previously known as the 'attainment gap') and curriculum, a university officer participant from Tower Hamlets explained,

Within university, definitely there is a BME attainment gap ... because when they neutralised it against gender, class, everything ... the only factor is people's race and I think it could both be the students themselves having to deal with whatever they're dealing with and struggling to cope with the course, or the course itself being really white and the students not being able to relate to it. For example, when I was an Officer, loads of students, BME students, complained to me that they had done an essay or whatever which was more BME and their white teachers had marked them down for it because they couldn't relate to the work.

AMERAH AND HASINA, Tower Hamlets

Upon further probing the participant, she explained:

... So, most of these are more humanity subjects, if they for an essay or whatever, if they talked about a person of colour or whatever or talked about a topic which they understood and the professor themselves didn't understand it as well or didn't have much knowledge in it, and they would get marked down as opposed to the professor looking for external help to understand it or try and engage with it. That is quite a common thing within universities ... they were saying that they were getting complaints about that too

AMERAH AND HASINA, Tower Hamlets

The existing canon 'oppresses' and 'sterilises' other histories and knowledge resulting in a non-inclusive pedagogical environment for students (Law, 2017; Arday et al., 2021). There was a feeling among a number of participants that lecturers were not taking different knowledge seriously and more generally a feeling of being discriminated against in terms of systems of marking.

In another dyad interview, a participant from Birmingham explained,

... at uni [university], because I wear a head scarf and stuff I feel like there is a difference between the way they ... it depends; just some of the teachers. For example, some groups, they get more help than us guys.

HUMA AND JEBA, Birmingham

We probed her to explain 'us guys' and she said,

We are brown and wear a head scarf and stuff. I feel like it is just a bit different there. Some of the teachers are okay. You can just tell for example, last semester, there was quite a few English and I feel like they got a lot of help ... I feel like some groups get a bit more help than other groups.

HUMA AND JEBA, Birmingham

Again, the intersection of anti-Muslim and anti-Asian racism is apparent, and the student reveals the everyday impact of white spaces and staff on grades, as well as more general experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Another participant discussed how they tried to resolve these matters related to marking by submitting appeals. She said:

All you could do is you could do appeals and that is it, there's literally nothing on it ... it's up to the professor's discretion to mark in a certain way and you're basically bringing their whole professionalism to question, and you can't do that. Especially, at universities, you can't do that, because that is what the universities are.

AMERAH AND HASINA, Tower Hamlets

This quote speaks to the persistent underrepresentation of ethnic minorities among academic staff. As this participant explained, if the vast majority of staff are white, and those in senior management positions are virtually all white, there is no-one to hold staff to account when they fail ethnic minority students. Arday (2018) explains that the poor levels of representation of ethnic minorities in higher education are an outcome of recruitment practices, but there are also wider perceptions around universities as 'white' spaces (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). It is important that while the numbers of ethnic minority students have increased over time, the amount of ethnic minority academics has not increased at a similar rate. Essentially, the presence or absence of ethnic minority staff members can affect the experience and participation of ethnic minority students in myriad ways (Arday, 2018; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019).

This particular participant considered dropping out due to the lack of inclusivity she experienced. She said:

... that (racist microaggressions) was an everyday experience, and it grounded down and I used to come home and cry and tell my mom I didn't want to go to uni [sic] anymore. My mom was like no, you have to go. It did really affect. I went to university with amazing grades, and I came out with a 2.1 and looking back at it now, it's because I had to deal with that and not wanting to stay in the library to work and wanting to come home straight away. That must have fit into it. It's not great, but it is what it is.

AMERAH AND HASINA, *Tower Hamlets*

The participant felt that she did not represent the 'racial somatic norm' within the white institution (Puwar, 2004). As such, she began to engage in what is understood by Reay et al (2005, p. 161) as affective self-exclusion, whereby they ask themselves "what is a person like me doing in a place like this." At this juncture, she expressed her fears of remaining in HE through apprehensions that she would never feel a sense of belonging there.

These participants' experiences echo the findings of the report commissioned by Goldsmiths University on racism on campus in 2019 in collaboration with the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission. According to the report, there were 559 complaints of racial harassment in UK universities over three and a half years (Equality Human Rights, 2019). It also states that there is a lot of racist behaviour that is simply not coming to the attention of universities. Without hard data to back up their anti-racist statements, universities' claims that they are becoming more inclusive spaces invite scepticism (Equality Human Rights, 2019). This would lead to what Li and Health (2020) describe as greater scarring effects among British Bangladeshi students after finishing their degrees at higher education institutions. In recent years in the UK, a body of literature has shed light on how unemployment affects (re-) integration in the labour market and has investigated under what conditions the so-called scarring effects of unemployment may occur. The scarring effects of unemployment vary from occupation to occupation (Shi et al., 2018). They also depend on factors such as cyclical changes in the economic condition and institutional school-work linkages (Wolbers, 2007). The experiences of unemployment can have longer-term consequences for the labour market outcomes of workers as it leads to a loss of human capital or can act as a negative signal to future employers (Li and Heath, 2020, p. 136).

Most importantly, the chapter argues that we need to re-visit the widening participation (WP) agenda, in the light of the real, lived experiences of young people from ethnic minority backgrounds. This is because racism performed throughout the lives of British Bangladeshi students reveals precise segregations

of potential and lost potential (Bhopal et al., 2020). Overall, in this research, participants explained that throughout university their ability to compete was compromised and their efforts disadvantaged by anti-Muslim and anti-Asian racism combined. Against a background of competitive labour markets and increasing university participation, for many students securing a degree remains the only game in town. However, we need to ensure that students' experience of that degree provides them with the same opportunities to succeed.

9.4 Conclusion

The confrontation with racism inspired by the renewal of the Black Lives Matter movement is to be welcomed. In this chapter we seek to better understand how students themselves experience the social structures through which racism is enabled, reinforced, and legitimated in higher education in the UK. Widening participation initiatives frequently undertake that initial access to a university place will considerably influence students' ability to overcome disadvantages related to their social and ethnic background. Nevertheless, there is a rising recognition that disadvantage is present throughout university and is reproduced in outcomes for graduates entering the labour market (Bhopal, 2018).

The UK higher education system in several ways 'remains a colonial outpost' and its curricula reproduces 'hegemonic identities' instead of eradicating hegemony (Heleta, 2016; Freire, 1970; Arday et al., 2021). Our findings revealed that participants in higher education most frequently encountered subtle forms of anti-Muslim and anti-Asian racism together. Sometimes this was from peers but often this was the effect of the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities among academic staff and the impact this has on teaching. Much has been said about the importance of decolonising or liberating the curriculum initiatives but not enough of this has drawn upon the voices of ethnic minority students.

Taking into account the need to acknowledge the diversity among Muslim students and their agency, the findings from our research nonetheless also point to the centrality of institutional factors in shaping their experiences of higher education. These institutionalised factors influence not only experiences in university but also underwrite how the graduate labour market is racially gendered (Bhopal et al., 2020). The current discourse in relation to Bangladeshi women and university is a story of success about increasing student numbers. And while this is to be celebrated, we cannot let it obscure the difficulties that those students often experience while at university and the

impact this has on a persistent awarding gap that diminishes their chances of achieving their potential. The analysis points to inconsistencies at the heart of the UK education system in that while British Bangladeshis are being encouraged to aim high, to be ambitious and optimistic, they are also tasked with accepting responsibility for the structural and racialised discrimination that prevents them from translating educational success into labour market advantage.

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