Understanding and exploring the experiences of Black and Asian Postgraduate Research (PGR) students

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report details research undertaken within the University of Southampton's Doctoral College which sought to explore the experiences of our current UK-domiciled Black and Asian PGR students.

This is situated against the University's current PGR student population which shows an underrepresentation of these students in comparison to HESA[1] median levels. This is also contextualised within UK Higher Education sector policy directives which are placing increased weighting on PGR access and participation for racially minoritised students. The aim of the research was to understand the recruitment and wider experience of current UK-domiciled Black and Asian students undertaking a PGR degree at the University of Southampton, in order to identify any "pinch points" which could explain barriers to diversifying our PGR recruitment. This research uses a qualitative orientation but employed the use of mixed methods to explore our aims. This included using preliminary surveys and focus group discussions (split by racialised identity to explore nuances between Black and Asian PGR student experiences) which explored various points in the PGR lifecycle. We adopted socially-just methodologies including Critical Race Theory (CRT), Participatory Action Research (PAR) and a decolonial approach to ensure an ethics of care was central in how we collected data and our overall research approach.

Whilst survey responses and themes from the focus group discussions are reported separately, they are largely complementary of one another. Focus group themes and findings revealed complexities apparent in the journeys of Black and Asian PGR students. For example, where doctoral admissions processes are broadly understood as complicated, students largely did not report this to be the case at Southampton. However, this contrasts against how some students perceived themselves to be "tokenistic recruits" once accepted onto their doctoral programme. Further discrepancies include the juxtaposition of having supportive supervisors yet caught in insensitive discussions related to race within and outside of teaching and learning spaces.. Acknowledging that different students have different lived experiences based on their intersectional identities, the report also highlights comparative nuances which came across between Asian and Black PGR students' experiences. This included Black students being more forthcoming and displaying a greater awareness of how their race and intersectional identity had impacted their experiences in a more critical manner, whereas Asian students were more likely to describe instances of racialised microaggressions in a rationalised /'matter of fact' manner.

The authors of the report also bring to the fore the concepts of 'satisfied settling' (Islam et al, 2019), and 'cultural in-betweenity' (Bulhan, 1980), which may explain, from a theoretical perspective, some of the participant responses. The report provides recommendations for enhancing PGR access and participation emerging from students' voices, whilst detailing existing and proposed future action undertaken by the Doctoral College towards building a holistic, inclusive, collaborative, and supportive research culture.

Recommendations are summarised and broadly split into the two overarching themes below:

Facilitating inter- and cross-peer networking

→ Inclusive and accessible social events for PGR students (at Research Group/department/faculty level).

→ Peer shadowing or mentoring scheme for undergraduate (UG)/postgraduate taught (PGT) students from racially minoritised backgrounds to encourage participation at PGR level.

Enhancing racial representation

→ Creating a racially minoritised PGR student network (with caution and care exercised in the development of this).

→ Providing culturally competent and racially diverse mental health and wellbeing services/practitioners.

→ Embedding content related to race and intersectionality within core modules and curriculum at UG, PGT and PGR (where possible) to ensure all students are able to develop consciousness and awareness of racial injustice.

1. Higher Education Statistics Agency

INTRODUCTION

Inequalities at PGR level have been longstanding yet largely neglected within UK Higher Education (HE) – particularly for students of colour (Wakeling & Kyriacou, 2010).

Nevertheless, in the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, sector bodies, policy rhetoric and institutional practice have recently turned attention to the sharp under-representation of racially minoritised students pursuing doctoral education. This includes the recent Office for Students and Research England funding programme, which invested ~£8m to projects seeking to improve access and participation of UK-domiciled Black, Asian and minority ethnic PGR students (UKRI, 2023). Whilst there is limited research which explores the experience of these students at PGR level (Hancock et al., 2019), what is understood paints a concerning picture. This includes:

→ Lack of funded studentships awarded to Black students (Williams et al., 2019)

→ PhD criteria which is biased against and disproportionately affects access for marginalised groups (Inge, 2020)

→ Increased feelings of physical and cultural isolation, experiences of racism and intersectional oppression leading to complex feelings of belonging (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Institute for Community Studies, 2022)

→ Issues related to finding supervisors with expertise related to specific areas of research (Fazackerley, 2019)

→ Lower levels of supervisory and peer support related to lacking material, cultural and social capital to navigate the PGR landscape (University of Leeds PhD student, 2019)

→ Lack of opportunities to pursue an academic career following completion of a doctoral degree, despite a strong appetite/desire to progress within HE (Arday, 2017).

Such experiences limit our ability to ensure that all students experience HE equitably, including our efforts to diversify the academic and professional staff population (Arday, 2020; Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016) – a consistent recommendation when looking at measures to eliminate racialised degree-awarding gaps (Dhanda, 2010; Universities UK & National Union of Students, 2019). This in turn leads to a vicious cycle of inequality. As universities prepare to grapple with the latest iteration of the Research Excellence Framework 2029, which places increased weighting on People, Culture and Environment, it is imperative to break the cyclical inequality that persists across academia. Whilst many of these issues at PGR level represent systemic inequalities which impact racially minoritised students well before they reach PGR, it is our duty to take a holistic approach to these inequalities to ensure that all students can access, succeed in, and benefit from all that HE can offer.

Universities are beginning to tackle some of these issues at PGR level. This includes the presence of ringfenced scholarships for racially minoritised students (Coventry Race XChange, 2023; Sheffield Hallam University, 2023; University of Glasgow, 2023; University of Southampton, 2023), the development of frameworks to holistically support PGRs from diverse backgrounds (Quality Assurance Agency, 2023), measures to tackle barriers in PGR admissions for racially minoritised students (UK Council for Graduate Education, 2023), promoting culturally responsive supervision practice (Vekaria et al., 2023) and partnering with NHS trusts to reach and widen the pool of doctoral candidates from racially minoritised backgrounds (Nottingham Trent University, 2022). This signals the development of strategic and innovative work within UK HE to ensure our approach to access and success at PGR level is more thoughtful, well-resourced, and intentional.

University of Southampton's PGR landscape

The University of Southampton is committed to addressing some of these national issues, in line with our equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategic goals. These not only place ambitions to increase the number of UK-domicile[2] Black and Asian PGR students but also to attract, develop and retain confident staff and students. An EDI analysis (including a five-year trends analysis) of our PGR student cohort revealed that, of our UK-domiciled students:

→ 14% belong to a Black, Asian, or racially minoritised background.

→ Students making up less than 1% of this population included: Romani or Irish Traveller (0.07%), Bangladeshi (0.3%), Caribbean (0.4%), and Pakistani (0.9%) students.

→ Intersectional analysis showed an underrepresentation of Asian female and Black male students.

→ A five-year trends analysis (2017/18 – 2021/22) demonstrated a stagnant and plateauing proportion of Black, Asian, and racially minoritised PGR students. Of these students, Indian students are the most represented, whereas Bangladeshi, Caribbean, and Pakistani students are the least.

Although we use the terms Black and Asian here (and throughout the report), we recognise the limitations these labels place on the students who are categorised under them which do not take into account the lived realities and intersectional characteristics students from different ethnicities experience (Islam, 2021b). As a Race Equality Charter Bronze award holder, we are committed to minimising structural inequalities where possible. Consistently using the terms Black and Asian here and in our analysis of data allows us to compare our institutional data, which revealed specific equality gaps related to each of our five Faculties, reinforcing the importance of recognising how and where inequality is differentially experienced.

2. This term adheres to regulatory definition which denotes students who are ordinarily a resident in the UK and are eligible for UK tuition fees.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This research specifically focuses on the under-representation of UK-domiciled Black and Asian PGR students. Our decision to focus solely on UK-domiciled students is two-fold:

→ Access and participation plans (APPs)[3], mandated by the Office for Students, cover undergraduate UK and EU students. Where the findings and recommendations of this research would implicate undergraduate students (i.e., in terms of progression onto PGR), we prioritised these students.

→ We acknowledge that the experiences of race and intersectionality will be distinctly different between UK students (49% of our PGR population) and International students (51%). Conflating these two experiences (i.e., UK and international student experience) would likely do a disservice to students involved whose needs may be more specific (Gao, 2021).

The Doctoral College therefore sought to explore the experiences of current PGR students from these racialised backgrounds in order to investigate any particular "pinch points" contributing to a national and local trend of underrepresentation and leaky pipeline into academia (Williams et al., 2019). Aims and objectives of the research are detailed below:

Aim and objectives

Aim: To understand the recruitment and wider experience of current UK-domiciled Black and Asian students undertaking a PGR degree at the University of Southampton.

→ To explore the motivations and factors influencing UK-domiciled Black and Asian students to study a doctoral degree at University of Southampton.

→ To understand the lived experience of UK-domiciled Black and Asian students undertaking a doctoral degree at the University of Southampton (i.e., exploring any concerns, issues, and benefits).

→ To investigate any factors which may affect the recruitment of UK-domiciled Black and Asian students to the University of Southampton.

PGR Student Partners Scheme

The use of student voice and student-staff partnership within HE has long been established as best practice and sector standard for universities seeking to improve and enhance student experience. At the University of Southampton, we promote avenues for doing this across all levels of work (University of Southampton and University of Southampton Students' Union, 2023). In May 2023, the Doctoral College specifically recruited for current PGR students to work in partnership to deliver these aims and objectives.

Two PGR Student Partners (Nandini Das and Lilian Odaro) were appointed to work with the Doctoral College on our EDI-focussed research projects where they were remunerated for their time. Both PGR Student Partners were recruited at the start of the project; inputting and co-designing elements related to the research proposal and ethics submission, to supporting and facilitating focus group discussions. Their input was integral to the success of the research and wider projects currently being undertaken within the Doctoral College.

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3. APPs set out how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education

♡ Ethics

The project received ethical clearance from the University of Southampton's Ethics and Research Governance Online (ERGO) process in June 2023 (ERGO number: 82143). Prior to our own research taking place, the University's Faculty of Environmental and Life Sciences undertook similar research in September 2022, exploring the experiences of Black students within the Faculty. Whilst this research was inclusive of UG, PGT and PGR students, the project team met with the academic staff and student lead of this project to share best practice around safeguarding the experiences of racially minoritised students who would be recruited to take part. This included:

→ Expanding out self-selection ethnicity categories used for Black students (as standard ethnicity categories are limited to Black African, Black Caribbean, and Black Mixed)

→ Removing reference to and use of audio recording in focus group discussions to ensure participants felt psychological safety in disclosing their experiences and having their anonymity protected

→ Including additional signposting support outside of the university's Report and Support system for those who may be sceptical using the service

Furthermore, where the first author (Maisha Islam) is currently exploring the experiences of British-Bangladeshi female PGR students as part of her doctoral thesis, many of the learnings from researching a minoritised PGR student group were translated into this research project. As a result, the research team were well placed to address and make explicit an ethics of care and regard for all participants. Given that our sample of students represent a hyper-minoritised student group (collectively making up 6% of UK-domiciled PGR students at the University of Southampton), their PhD programmes have not been reported to protect anonymity.

⚙ Methodology

Our research adopted and made clear the influence of three socially-just methodologies. This included Critical Race Theory (CRT); Participatory Action Research (PAR) and a decolonial approach.

Critical Race Theory

CRT is a theoretical and methodological approach which centres race in its academic inquiry (Rodricks & McCoy, 2015). It's use within the field of education has been widespread, both nationally and internationally (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Rollock & Gillborn, 2011), whereby it critiques the way in which race and racism are managed within the educational sphere (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT ultimately aims to challenge dominant structures (across racial lines and other sites of oppression) and seeks transformational change. The influence of CRT is apparent across our project – from research design to analysis. For example, questions directly centred upon race and intersectional identity and signature themes within CRT were used as a reference point to understand/analyse the findings.

Participatory Action Research and Decolonial Methodology

PAR is an approach to research which directly involves and collaborates with marginalised communities when seeking to do research with/for them (MacDonald, 2012). Similar to CRT, it has been commonly adopted within education and adds ethical assurance to research projects by legitimating and actively utilising the knowledge and voices of those historically marginalised (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). These aims are complementary of a decolonial approach to research. Decolonial approaches recognise how dominant forms of research and knowledge are often extractive of historically marginalised groups, and largely from a Western perspective (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). In recognising the deep, historical legacies of research and its impact upon minoritised communities, this research made sure that student voice, co-creation and partnership were central to our endeavours which focussed on social justice aims (Islam et al., 2021). This was also ensured through a continuous process of reflexivity, research team debriefing. This was also ensured through a continuous process of reflexivity and research team debriefing.

⚙ Method

The research used a mixed-method approach for data collection. Eligible students (i.e., students from UK-domiciled Black or Asian backgrounds) were asked to complete a short online preliminary survey and attend a follow-up focus group discussion. The online preliminary survey served a dual purpose in not only gathering demographic and logistical information from participants (i.e., asking students to self-select their year of study, sex, ethnicity etc.) but also in priming and prepping students' mindsets for actively reflecting upon their experiences as racialised PGR students. In keeping with our methodological approach, we acknowledged that it might be difficult to reflect on such experiences in real time within a focus group discussion setting, therefore, students were presented with a series of Likert scale questions which asked about different stages within their PGR lifecycle thus far and how/if they believed their race and intersectional identity impacted these experiences'.

Two online focus group discussions took place in July 2023 where these were split by racialised identity (i.e., one dedicated focus group for Black PGR students and one dedicated focus group for Asian PGR students). This was consciously employed to recognise the limitations of grouping all racially minoritised students and their lived experiences together, allowing the research to provide nuance and explore any similarities and differences felt across these two groups. In order to fully capture students' thoughts, focus groups also included online Jamboards[4] for students to submit anonymous responses both during and one week after focus group discussions. Nandini was the primary note taker for each focus group discussion, where Maisha and Lilian acted as Chair/Co-Chair. Each focus group had a 'racially matched' Chair from the research team (e.g., Lilian is a Nigerian PGR student and chaired the Black students' focus group). Racial and ethnic peer matching has been regarded as an effective tool for researching with/for minoritised communities as reported benefits include: facilitating rapport by fostering a sense of mutual experience and trust; minimised power imbalances; and a willingness to share intimate experiences (Grewal & Ritchie, 2006; Gunaratnam, 2003; Rhodes, 1994).

Each focus group lasted between 1 hour 30 minutes – 2 hours. Completion of the preliminary survey and attendance at one focus group enabled students to claim either a £25 Amazon voucher or receive the equivalent amount as payment via Payroll.

4. An online interactive whiteboard developed by Google.

Recruitment and participant overview

Both targeted and general communications methods were used to advertise the research and recruit participants. General communications included posts via the Doctoral College's Twitter/X account and the Doctoral College Digest (a fortnightly newsletter sent to all PGR students). Emails were also sent via Faculty Doctoral College team mailing lists, and targeted emails were sent to all UK-domiciled Black and Asian PGR students. We also approached Doctoral Programme Directors and the University's Race, Ethnicity and Cultural Heritage (REACH) Network to advertise within their own remits.

In total, we recruited 15 eligible Black and Asian PGR student participants, 13 of which attend a focus group discussion. Their demographics are reported below, with information related to doctoral degrees omitted to protect student anonymity.

	Mode of study	Year of study	Sex	Ethnicity
Black PGR student participants (n=4)	All students were full-time	1st year (n=1) 3rd year (n=3)	Female (n=1) Male (n=2) Prefer not to say (n=1)	African or African British (n=3) Caribbean mixed (n=1)
Asian PGR student participants (n=11)	Full-time (n=7) Part-time (n=4)	1st year (n=3) 2nd year (n=3) 3rd year (n=1) 4th year (n=2) 'Final year' (n=2)	Female (n=7) Male (n=4)	Bangladeshi or Bangladeshi British (n=1) Chinese or Chinese British (n=2) Indian or Indian British (n=1) 'Other' Asian or Asian British background (n=7)

Analysis

Braun & Clarke's (2022) approach to reflective thematic analysis was used to analyse the data i.e., the written notes from each focus group and comments left on the Jamboard. Coding was undertaken independently and then collaboratively by Nandini and Lilian, using NVivo to read and familiarise themselves with the comprehensive notes taken from each of the focus group discussions. At this stage, initial codes and categories were established which were then grouped into themes using the four sections of the focus group discussion protocol. Later, Maisha further reviewed, refined, and labelled themes to ensure that core meanings were captured. Whilst our approach to analysis was mainly driven by an inductive orientation, and therefore coding was done at the semantic level, research group debriefs allowed for exercising of deductive and latent coding too.

Post-focus group student feedback sessions

Participants were encouraged to attend a voluntary feedback session where the research team could present indicative findings and recommendations. The sessions were designed to not only close the feedback loop (Watson, 2003), but allow participants to corroborate, amend or further add to the research findings, and confirm recommendations. This was again in keeping with our PAR and decolonial approach to the research. Two student feedback sessions were held in August 2023, collectively bringing five participants. No student from the Black students' focus group were able to attend, and one participant unable to complete the preliminary survey or attend the Asian students' focus group joined one of the student feedback sessions.

Preliminary survey responses

As part of the recruitment process for this research, students were asked to complete a series of Likert-scale questions. An analysis of these responses found that:

→ A significant proportion of students (46.7%) indicated they were encouraged by lecturers and/or university staff to pursue a PGR degree, and a majority agreed in some form that they felt supported in the process of applying (66.7%).

→ Whilst 40% of survey respondents believed race did not impact their decisions to pursue PGR, the rest were either unsure (26.7%) or believed that it did have bearing (33.4%).

→ The top three motivations for pursuing a doctoral degree were: 'My interest in the subject' (23%), 'Improving my career prospects for an academic/research career' (15%), and 'I wanted to make a difference to academia and/or society' (12%).

→ When asked if they had experienced racism, racial microaggressions or discrimination during their admissions process, 66.7% of students disagreed.

→ 100% of survey respondents had agreed in some way that they had felt supported by their supervisory teams.

→ 40% of survey respondents expressed an ambivalence related to feeling a sense of belonging at the University of Southampton (i.e., neither agreeing nor disagreeing).

→ 60% of survey respondents agreed that it was important for them to be connected to other racially minoritised PGR students.

→ Over half of survey respondents (53.3%) believed that the University of Southampton could do more to support the experiences of Black and Asian PGR students.

→ The majority of survey respondents (73.3%) felt confident in completing their doctorates within their expected timeframe

There were no discernible differences between Black and Asian students' survey responses, and we are cautious of making claims due to the sizeable difference in Black and Asian student participants (i.e., Asian students were almost quadruple the number of Black students taking part in this research). However, as this is a primarily qualitative orientated project, the proceeding sections of the report provide a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of these survey responses.

In the following sections, themes from across both the focus group discussions will be reported on, with a separate section reporting differences noted between the Black students' and Asian students' focus group[5].

5. Teal textboxes denote a response from Black students' focus group; purple textboxes denote a response from Asian students' focus group.

FOCUS GROUP THEMES AND FINDINGS

Access, recruitment, and admissions process

Firstly, it was found that the biggest gateway into pursuing PGR was through academic supervisors signposting and supporting PhD applications. The majority of participants were those that completed a UG or PGT degree at Southampton and whose supervisors had directed them toward these opportunities:

> **I received help from my undergraduate dissertation tutor and one of the Directors of my studentship funder with my application proposal. It was a big help as I was able to create a strong proposal…"**

Nevertheless, most students mentioned that they were only aware of PhDs and research-related careers (both in and outside of academia) at later points within their undergraduate journeys. As a result, PhDs were seen to be rather elusive, with many students correlating this to their intersectional identity. For example, one Black student noted not being encouraged to pursue a university education and how he was perceived to be *"just a poor working-class kid"*. Another Asian student remarked about *"knowing something called PhD and academia"* but not knowing what it entailed. This highlights how lacking social and cultural capital, and relevant information, advice and guidance intersects with racialised identities in blocking access into PGR (Badrie et al., 2023).

When asked about encountering any issues during their admissions process, the majority of the students reported little-to-no issues, which was in line with the survey responses. In fact, many described the process as transparent, smooth, and straightforward.

> **It was quite straightforward. Began with convo with academic."**

> **It was very transparent, and they clearly mentioned the things that were required – it was a very straightforward process."**

However, national findings and trends describe issues related to PGR recruitment and admissions that particularly impact racially minoritised students (Boliver, 2016; UK Council for Graduate Education, 2023), and disciplinary discrepancies are impacting certain research councils and their ability to fund PhD studentships (Inge, 2023). Furthermore, other complexities were mentioned within focus group discussions. For example, three Asian students had mentioned being mistaken as international PhD students, which led to minor administrative delays experienced at the point of enrolment. Whilst students excused these as errors, it is unclear if there were racialised assumptions to these occurrences and why an internal background check (without alarming students) was not deemed sufficient. Additionally, there was some evidence to suggest that those on clinical/practice-based doctorates found the admissions process to be more complex. Whilst reasons for this may point towards factors irrespective of race (e.g., staff shortages within health and social care sectors), it illustrates a further compounded inequality affecting racially minoritised students accessing PGR.

> **I think that the main challenge was actually getting my Deanery to let me out of the training programme. They're not always keen on doctors like leaving…because they've lost a person in their clinical workforce."**

> **There was some difficulty in that you need to get approval from the Training Programme to do the PhD. You want to be doing a job as well and not become a full-time student."**

There was also a sense amongst some students that, due to lacking racial diversity on their programme, they had been a 'tokenistic recruit':

> **Once I secured the funding, the funders wanted to put up my picture and research interest on their website. When I visited the website, it was just my picture, no one else's! Since the Research Group is all White, I wondered if I got my place just because I'm an ethnic minority and that's why they wanted me?"**

> **I don't know what drove the existence of the Black Futures [PhD] scholarship. Maybe it was a compliance response or token diversity scheme? Whilst I am grateful that it is there, it does leave something to think about."**

Another student also wondered if *"being Filipino was my only edge"*. This student recognised that racially minoritised students are often made to feel like they do not belong in these ways because academia is *"so elitist, White and male dominated"* (Arday, 2020). This is demonstrative of how lacking representation bears psychosocial harm on those students that do cross the PhD threshold.

PERCEPTION AND MOTIVATIONS TOWARDS PHDS

When asked about motivations to pursue PhDs, there were several extrinsic, professional drivers and intrinsic, altruistic drivers mentioned. For example, some students noted how familial influence and desires to pursue research careers (within and outside of academia) played a part in their decisions:

> **Perceived as something necessary – typical tiger Asian parents."**

> **Research careers (even in private sector companies) often require PhDs, UoSoton good in research area I was interested in."**

However, for many students personal desire and ambition for their research (which were closely related to intersectional identity) were core motivating factors. For example, one Black student noted that she had been conditioned to believe that she would need to work *"10x harder as a Black woman"* but where her research focussed on inclusion within schools, she was driven by her own lived experience and wanted to ensure future generations of racially minoritised students were not experiencing cyclical disadvantage:

> **I lived and worked in [town in West London]. It was quite diverse but when I changed local authority, which was predominantly White, it made me realise that there was something to investigate here, and I was really curious to share my voice."**

> **I have been reading on the climate crisis and it is really scary. I have children, with some going into university now, and so I need to do this work for them – and for the Black community who know a lot about the environment but are affected more by structural racism."**

Decisions to stay or pursue a doctorate at the University of Southampton were largely due to: the University's world-renowned research expertise and facilities; having established a sense of belonging and awareness of support services; and practical factors (e.g., Black Futures Scholarship funding[6]) which pushed them toward the institution:

> It's been really easy to access the mental health services here, so I know the support I'd expect to receive."

> I applied to Southampton because of the Doctoral Training Programme linked to it. It's a really exciting time for this particular research area."

LIVED EXPERIENCES AS RACIALISED PGR STUDENTS

There was a complex interplay of positive and challenging experiences (related to race and intersectional identity) which participants had mentioned when asked about their experiences as a racialised PGR student – mirroring much of the available literature looking into racially minoritised student experience at undergraduate level (Miller, 2016; National Union of Students, 2011; Smith, 2017). Positively, many had spoken about supportive supervisory relationships, particularly where supervisors displayed cultural competence and pastoral care:

> I was allocated a personal academic tutor from the start who is really supportive, listens and has helped me become my authentic self. I suggested my own topic that I was passionate about; my supervisors agreeing to the project was such a huge thing for me. They are already taking some of the learnings to start changing practice, and have worked with me to help me figure out where my own values lie. They have helped me feel like a valued part of the course team and that I was making a difference as no one else was working on a topic like mine."

> I also enjoy the fact that it's really easy to get along with both of my supervisors who value my background and value my culture and are genuinely interested."

Similarly, it was evident that participants appreciated seeing or being in the presence of racial representation that they could identify with. One Black student was part of the *Black in FELS*[7] Network and spoke at length about the professional development events that were organised in a safe space, and the academic cohort tutors that supported the Network. For Asian students, there was a sense that the more racial and ethnic diversity they had within their Research Groups or departments, the less likely they were to feel 'unbelonging' (Healy, 2020):

> There a quite a lot of people from different multi-ethnic backgrounds in my research group…they are a lot more interested to ask about your culture."

> I have felt a sense of belonging because of the diverse team at [department]"

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6 . This is a scholarship scheme specifically for Black or Black-mixed heritage students who have secured doctoral candidature at the University of Southampton, covering tuition fees, and providing a programme of support.

7. A student network for Black students within the Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences.

When asking participants about any challenges they faced, there were multiple examples of race and intersectional inequities being experienced. For example, one Asian student recalled an incident where she overheard her housemate (a fellow PhD student) making xenophobic remarks towards a maintenance worker of South Asian origin. In a period of *"post-rationalising"* she realised that this housemate had a history of *"microaggressions and misogynistic comments"*. Another Asian student remarked that her supervisors were not often supportive and empathetic towards the multiple responsibilities she juggled as *"a career woman, women of colour, and care giver"*. Black students had similarly experienced negative situations concerning race as topics of discussion within and outside of teaching and learning spaces:

> **One thing sticks out. We had this session discussing the term 'BAME' and it was really uncomfortable and horrible. I was in a room of 15 White people, and they were just looking at me, waiting for me to contribute as the only Black person... I wish it hadn't happened."**

> **I attended a university EDI session. The room was full, with a sprinkling of Black students and staff which was nice to see but the discussion very quickly got hijacked by the topic of staff recruitment. I asked a question about decolonising work and didn't get a decent answer. The event left a bad taste in my mouth."**

Due to these complex experiences, some students displayed feelings of 'cultural in-betweenity', either in reference to their status of being *"in the intermediate zone between students and employees"* (e.g., for those who taught or demonstrated alongside their doctorate) but also in reference to how they present as racialised PGR students – caught between the cultural and dominant spheres impacting their life (Bulhan, 1980):

> **Socialising is hard. Being British-Chinese, people are less willing to start conversations with me – maybe they assume I'm an international student, who tend to stick with other international students. International Chinese students speak Mandarin to me. When I tell them I don't speak Mandarin, they don't speak to me again!"**

In addition to these challenges, participants also mentioned practical difficulties encountered as part of being a 'COVID-cohort' (Kyne & Thompson, 2020). This included having research schedules and plans disrupted, and difficulty in forming peer relationships online.

Satisfied settling as racialised PGR students

The concept of 'satisfied settling' posits that minoritised students often justify (unconsciously) not having access to an equitable and fulfilling university experience in relation to their needs (Islam et al., 2019). This is due to a staged process of marginalisation that they have experienced throughout their educational journey (Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). Essentially, 'satisfied settling' explains how minoritised students tend to become indifferent to, or normalise, covert and overt exclusion, rather than realise the effects of this exclusion due to becoming somewhat numb to its impact. For example, when multiple Asian students described being mistaken for international students, their response was often quite blasé, rather than seeing these as racialised assumptions being made.

Participants displayed these mindsets in some of their responses, The below quotes show an indifference, sense of acceptance and assimilative attitude when faced with covert marginalisation:

> "I'm the only person of colour [in my Research Group], but it hasn't perturbed me in any way because it's a niche field so you kind of expect that."

> "My peers and supervisors are really good. They've asked about my culture, but they keep assuming that I am Indian, even though I've made it clear to them that I am not."

> "You often learn about opportunities 'over a pint' which I've had to learn because my father never took me out for a pint, it's not common in our culture."

> "Of course, you naturally gravitate towards your own kind, but I've lived here [in Britain] for over 20 years, so I've had lots of experience of this [being racially minoritised] over the years... it's normal."

Such responses support assertions made about the covert enforcement of acculturation in predominantly White universities, whose cultures work to exclude racially minoritised students' identities which impact and alter a sense of social identity, self-esteem and self-concept (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, in light of the experiences mentioned, participants were asked to suggest any ideas to support future generations of racially minoritised students accessing PGR, as well as any enhancements for our current PGR students. Recommendations have been broadly split into two areas:

Inter- and cross-peer networking

Students were particularly keen to see more social events occurring at local, departmental and Faculty level to facilitate networking and relationship building between peers. When asked whether events solely for racially minoritised PGR students should occur, Asian students displayed hesitancy and caution over the optics of such events. The quotes below suggest that doing so would drive further a perception of difference. Instead, students seemed to prefer social events that were open to all PGR students – for example, potlucks (i.e., communal gatherings where different dishes are brought to be shared). These would enable students to bring dishes of cultural significance which would naturally open conversation about ethnicity and culture.

Importantly, students believed that these would operate more successfully at Faculty level, rather than University-wide, due to already established familiarity. Furthermore, these responses do not seek to delegitimise networks which specifically serve racialised students (and those with other protected characteristics), as their efficacy has been well-documented in supporting professional development as well as mental health and wellbeing of these students (Guiffrida et al., 2018; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Song, 2012).

> **When you do things that only Black or Asian students can attend, it puts a weird 'us and them' barrier up.''**

> **I want to socialise, but you don't want to create more of a barrier.''**

> **Leaning too much into identity division can be counterproductive.''**

The accessibility of current social events was also called into question, with students stating that small group sizes; alcohol-free events; and online options could cater toward be able to cater towards a diverse range of students with differing pressures on their time (e.g., mature students, part-time students, commuting students, and students with caring responsibilities).

In order to ensure that there was a supported pipeline for other Black, Asian and racially minoritised students to pursue PGR, participants noted that more opportunities for UG and PGT students to be mentored or shadow current PGR students should be made available. Peer-to-peer interaction was noted to be a powerful mechanism to facilitate this, due to perceived power imbalances being minimised. As remarked by one Black student; *"The African and Caribbean Society has around 200 members. These students are out there but it is question of how we can better reach that pool."*

> **Instruct all UG/PGT students about what PGR study entails (e.g., progression, expectations of research output) at a relatively early stage. This could help them decide whether to do a PhD, which would influence their module selections and career decisions. Students from less advantaged backgrounds (incl. BAME) often aren't even aware of the option of PGR study, this could be beneficial for bringing more talented candidates into PGR from less represented backgrounds.''**

> **There should be more options for prospective students to shadow current PhD students…like summer internships to give them a flavour of what doing a PhD is like.''**

Racial representation

Whilst some students expressed hesitancy around events and support specifically for racially minoritised PGR students, others were open to this possibility. For example, when asked about the idea of a Network for racially minoritised PGR students, participants did describe a strong desire to connect with similar others who could empathise with their experiences. As one student was already part of a similar Network (Black in FELS), they noted how *"the success of the Network comes down to the leadership. We have the right people co-ordinating it and we're fortunate to have that."*

> "When I met the only other Black PhD student from the newer cohort, I wish I'd known that they had been around. They found it difficult to get the right supervisors as there was no one looking at what they were exploring. We were both seeking to be understood; we had similar difficulties. It would have been nice to speak to someone and say, 'I'm struggling' and 'do you know where I'm coming from?' because sometimes that was to do with my cohort and just navigating being different."

> "It sounds like it could be both good and bad? I don't want people to think I'm being favoured because of the colour of my skin. If it were to happen, there should definitely be person of colour leading it."

A similar sentiment was apparent with Asian students who, although appearing to be more hesitant around the idea of a racially minoritised PGR Student Network, were keen on culturally competent mental health and wellbeing services:

> "UK universities are very much open to talking about mental wellbeing but in Asian cultures, it's not the same. As an Asian, my issues may be to do with my family. I have had counselling which has been helpful, but the cultural context is not often understood by counsellors who are White and so there is a disconnect. They may feel that I am exaggerating, and I would feel judged bringing these problems too."

Whilst the University of Southampton has recently appointed a Racial Harassment Advisor, further dedicated wellbeing services tailored to different racially minoritised students should be implemented (for example, London South Bank University's Black Students Mental Health Project). Otherwise, the perception of tokenism will pollute such efforts. These points are illustrative of the importance of appropriate racial representation and disrupting everyday, micro-aggressive actions which make students question their legitimacy in these spaces.

Much of this work can occur throughout the UG-PGT-PGR lifecycle. For example, one Black student noted how content, theory and practice related to race should be embedded into core modules. From the responses gained in this research, this would not only educate those students with more privileged identity markers, but also those from historically marginalised groups. In having the space to develop a language around racial harm and oppression, racially minoritised students may be able to combat feelings of 'cultural in-betweenity' and 'satisfied settling' more proactively, leading to self-empowerment and not feeling the need to 'cover' parts of their identity which are different from the dominant group. Existing literature also details how integrating culturally sensitive content and pedagogy actively empowers all students to engage in anti-racist and anti-oppressive discussions, which can actively support social justice and equity aims (Guiffrida et al., 2018; Housee, 2012; Toraif et al., 2023).

DIFFERENCES IN RACIALISED EXPERIENCES

Whilst there were broadly similar responses across both focus group discussions between Asian students and Black students, some differences were noted.

For example, it was found that Black students were more forthcoming and displayed greater awareness of how their race and intersectional identity had impacted their experiences, doing so in a more critical manner. Alternatively, Asian students were more likely to describe instances of racialised microaggressions in a rationalised/'matter of fact' way. This echoes similar findings when looking at undergraduate Asian students' experiences (Islam, 2021a). We believe that this difference may explain why Black students were more open to the idea of identity-based student networks and events. However, it was Asian students who had mentioned the need of tailored services which provided culturally competent support and had requested racially diverse mental health and wellbeing practitioners – this was something which was not mentioned in the Black students focus group (though there is nothing indicating that this was not similarly desired).

The research team believe these findings correlate to students' self-actualisation of how racism and intersectional oppression operate, and whether students had opportunities to fully explore this. For example, some students across both focus groups remarked that they did not believe their race and intersectional identity had a role to play in their decisions to pursue PhDs or their experience as a PGR student. For others, particularly those whose research areas correlated to some aspect of their own racialised identity and experience, were able to reflect on these questions more critically.

This may explain why concepts of 'cultural in-betweenity' and 'satisfied settling' felt more prominent amongst Asian students, whose PhD research were more varied. We are cautious, however, of applying these as generalisations due to the difference in participant numbers, where Asian students were almost quadruple the number of Black students represented in this study. Additionally, apart from racial and ethnic identities, aspects such as class, disabilities, gender, and other social, economic, and cultural identities work at the intersections to determine people's lived experiences. For example, female participants across both groups spoke to specific inequalities they faced.

It is also important to understand here that often, communities whose historical experience has been of marginalisation, may not always have a clear sense of their marginalisation, nor of an agenda for change. 'This may require the creation of spaces of their own, within which to begin a process of becoming aware of their specific circumstances as a group and articulating an agenda for action to address the specific inequities that they face' (Rosalind et al., 2008). Others have also noted how marginalised individuals may experience a disconnect between their perceptions of oppression and their own lived experience of it, sometimes to serve as a safety mechanism to protect themselves from emotional discomfort from actualising their marginalisation (Crosby, 1984; Dancy et al., 2020) (see also: system justification theory (Jost & Hunyady, 2003)). Such claims may also be apparent in the responses from across both focus group discussions.

CONCLUSION

This research has investigated the experiences of our Black and Asian PGR students at the University of Southampton – an experience which is relatively underexplored both locally and nationally in the UK.

Our aim was to understand how students perceived their access into and experience of PGR, centring our inquiry on their race and intersectional identity. These findings provide implications for widening access into PGR for racially minoritised students and how the University of Southampton can review its approach to PGR recruitment and admissions. Whilst some participants' responses around their admissions process bucked national trends, it was clear that lacking information, advice, and guidance reinforced a perception of doctoral study that is largely gatekept from underrepresented student groups, and reserved only for small pockets of our student body. However, for the students in the research, intrinsic and altruistic motivators enabled them to cross this threshold, along with the support of key academic actors.

It was evident from these findings that many students had a complex relationship of belonging/unbelonging as racially minoritised bodies in the predominantly White space of their Research Group, department, and wider university. Some students had wondered if they were a 'tokenistic recruit' or if they had achieved their place on merit alone. Additionally, some of our Asian students displayed contradictory responses related to support mechanisms they would like to see put in place (i.e., wanting to see racial representation within mental health and wellbeing services rather than within social events/ networks). Such perceptions nod towards a feeling of 'cultural in-betweenity' and 'satisfied settling'. Where Black students were more critical and forthcoming about their experiences related to race and intersectional identity, we believe that this points towards the importance of being exposed to racial representation (both academically and socially) in supporting students' self-actualisation, self-perception, and self-esteem.

There are several limitations here that should also be acknowledged. For example, our participant numbers, especially the lower proportion of Black students, adds some caution to the representativeness of our findings. Furthermore, there was a severe under-representation of Black female voices and a disproportionate weighting against Asian male voices, which adds further concern as to whether intersectional differences were appropriately captured. We were also slightly impacted in that the research took place over the summer period, where it may have been likely that PGR students would take annual leave, leaving our participant pool even narrower.

Nonetheless, this research represents the beginning of the Doctoral College's journey of building an inclusive, collaborative, and supportive research culture, as we have ambitions and strategic aims to further grow and support our PGR student cohort.

We are already taking steps to:

→ Develop an equitable approach to PGR recruitment and admissions, including a review of our current offer of PhD Scholarship Schemes and establishing a more comprehensive support package for these Scholars once enrolled.

→ Embed our PGR Student Partners Scheme as a permanent opportunity for students to engage and partner on work within the Doctoral College.

→ Implement EDI recommendations from work undertaken by the NERC INSPIRE Doctoral Training Partnership, and where possible, scale these across Faculties.

→ Scale practice within the Black in FELS Network to ensure students across our five Faculties can benefit from these tailored support mechanisms.

→ Further embed topics related to race and intersectional equity in our new teacher training programme for PGRs who teach/demonstrate.

→ Ensure that the professional development provision we offer to PGRs has been designed and delivered with EDI principles in mind (i.e., that it is deliberately sensitive to, and representative of, the backgrounds, experiences and needs of all PGRs).

→ Develop plans for a Safe Space specifically for racially minoritised PGR students as a means of facilitating career and professional development, with the intention of setting up and co-creating this with PGR students.

→ Provide a comprehensive package of support for PGR supervisors to ensure supervision practices are inclusive.

→ Develop and launch a PGR Peer Mentoring Scheme.

→ Host training for supervisors and PGR students seeking to transform their behaviours to consider equity and inclusion in their practice.

→ Work collaboratively with the Widening Participation and Social Mobility, and Careers departments to further support under-represented students and their decisions to pursue PGR. This includes discussions related to a PhD Mentoring programme, de-mystifying PhD information sessions and providing other outlets for UG and PGT taught students to engage with the PhD research happening at the University.

→ Work collaboratively with our Office for Development and Alumni Relations to further secure funding/donors for PhD students.

→ Continue working with our Student Union (SUSU) to better understand the concerns of our students via quarterly PGR student surveys.

REFLECTIONS FROM PGR STUDENT PARTNERS

Nandini's reflections:

This research has been an experience full of learnings and reflections. Having worked previously on issues around equality, diversity and inclusion in education and livelihood in the South Asian context, it was my first time working in the context of Higher Education institutions in the UK. Having been in the UK for only under a year as an international student, experiences shared by the UK-domiciled Black and Asian student experiences provided a lot of space for learning and unlearning. This includes checking in on my own conscious biases, reading and revisiting literature relevant to the research, thinking of methods that allow for sharing of experiences in a comfortable, safe as well as anonymous way (if a student felt the need to) and enabling safe spaces for the students during facilitation of the focus group discussions.

Throughout the process, we took a collaborative approach as a research team, frequently checking in on each other, taking time to debrief and to reflect on our own experiences as racially minoritised female PGR students ourselves. This was a necessary step for us given the sensitive nature of the research topic and as newer researchers accommodating to and within academia.

Lilian's reflections:

Embarking on this role as a Student Partner, I have been able to reflect on the growth I have experienced in different aspects of my life since starting my PGR journey. Prior to this role, I have always been passionate about projects with an EDI focus, and so having the opportunity to work on this project has been a privilege. Personally, I now feel to have deeper insights on race, intersectionality and the experiences of underrepresented students. Additionally, being a current PGR from an underrepresented background, connecting with the experiences of other PGR students (and prospective PGRs) from the same group allowed me to see myself in some of their experiences. Most importantly, I understand how unique our PGR journeys and challenges are as students. This has made me more conscious of my own biases and aware of areas that I can improve on as an individual.

Being able to work collaboratively on this project with Nandini (Co-Student Partner) and Maisha (Co-Staff Partner), provided a nourishing and safe professional environment for me to develop both my interpersonal and research skills, without any pressure, fear or judgment. I was able to be my authentic self, where the differences amongst the Research Team were acknowledged and encouraged. It was a refreshing experience to work on a different project to my own thesis and seeing it come to completion. This has inadvertently been a great motivator for completing my own thesis, which I was able to work on alongside this project without feeling its progress was compromised. As a Student Partner, I am grateful to have been able contribute my expertise and knowledge, while having many opportunities for my own personal and professional development.

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