Year 2 Evaluation Report

Evaluating the joint Research England and Office for Students programme to improve access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in postgraduate research study (2021-2026)

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List of abbreviations

- Difference-in-Differences (DiD)
- Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
- Higher Education Provider (HEP)
- Higher Education (HE)
- Higher Education and Research Act (HERA)
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)
- National Student Survey (NSS)
- Office for Students (OfS)
- Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression
- Postgraduate research (PGR)
- Postgraduate teaching (PGT)
- Principal Investigator (PI)
- Research England (RE)
- Research question (RQ)
- Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)
- Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO)
- UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)
- The Evidence Development and Incubation Team (EDIT)
- The Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE)

Executive summary

The programme

- The Office for Students (OfS) and Research England (RE) are working jointly to improve access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic students into postgraduate research (PGR). As part of this approach, they have launched a funding programme that has provided nearly £8 million to 13 projects. Overall, 25 lead and partner higher education providers (HEPs) are using these funds to explore interventions designed to address racial inequalities in PGR.

- The aims of the programme are as follows:

    a. Stimulate innovation in, scale up and distribute effective practice in increasing access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in PGR,

    b. Ambitiously address evidenced issues of inequality across the PGR student lifecycle that create barriers for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, and

    c. Collaborate strategically to embed Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) across the sector to improve access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in PGR.

- This funding was announced in October 2020 and successful projects were announced in November 2021. The Year 1 evaluation report[1] covering the first year of the programme (November 2021 – November 2022) was published in July 2023, and this current report covers the evaluation update for the second year of the evaluation (November 2022 – November 2023).

The evaluation

- The Policy Institute at King's College London has been commissioned as the independent programme evaluator, in partnership with the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO). The approach to this evaluation will incorporate an impact evaluation to estimate the overall effect of the programme, as well as an implementation and process evaluation (IPE) to understand how the programme was delivered and identify any learnings.

- The impact evaluation uses a matched difference-in-differences (DiD) approach to investigate the effect of the programme on progression, retention, completion and post-PGR study rates for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. This involves comparing the trends in identified common outcome measures between the projects

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[1] See https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8d24709c-6f82-49b5-9865-5bde5b2b7c32/pgr-programme-to-improve-ap-of-ethnic-minorities-evaluation.pdf

delivering the interventions and comparator institutions over time. The comparator group was constructed via a matching process based on various institutional characteristics.

- The impact evaluation so far only covers the first year of programme implementation (the 2021-22 academic year) due to the lag in the publication of data by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

- The Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) activities in Year 2 of the evaluation involved six interviews with project leads, three focus groups with students, as well as staff and student surveys, and a synthesis of project interim monitoring reports. The full scope of the IPE will be achieved across the entire evaluation, as such the findings for this year are limited.

Findings from the impact evaluation

- The outcome measures covered in the impact evaluation are progression, retention, completion and post-PGR rates of further study of those from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds.

- Although the programme is currently in Year 2 of implementation, the impact evaluation only reflects Year 1 of the programme, the 2021-22 academic year, due to the lag in the publication of data by HESA.

- Results of the impact evaluation indicate no statistically significant changes between the outcomes of students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in project institutions and those in comparator institutions in the first year of the programme.

- Given the muti-year nature of the programme and the fact that several projects were still completing recruitment of staff and project setup activities in Year 1, it is not surprising that no effect is showing in the data in the analysis reported here.

- Even once project delivery is occurring, it is plausible that bringing about change in student outcomes would take multiple years; this is recognised by the multi-year nature of the programme funding, as well as the multi-year nature of the evaluation.

- To validate the DiD approach, various robustness checks such as excluding partner institutions from the intervention group, modifying the comparator group, using a placebo treatment group and using a placebo outcome have been deployed to test sensitivity of the results to differences in pre-intervention trends. Results are robust to different specifications, yielding confidence in the findings.

Findings from the implementation and process evaluation

As with the impact evaluation, the IPE is in an intermediate stage. All key fieldwork for the IPE will not be complete until the final year of the evaluation. Therefore, the findings presented here are indicative only. We will monitor the themes emerging here and conduct a full analysis for

the programme evaluation final report. Below we provide some high-level key findings from the IPE fieldwork conducted this year.

- The evaluation shows challenges and successes in implementing the projects. While most projects are on track and showing progress in delivery, challenges such as staff recruitment, staffing capacity, increased workload, staff turnover, compressed timelines and lower than anticipated student participation have impacted implementation. As projects expand in the coming years, these issues are likely to persist or be exacerbated by increased demand.

- The research found differences in experiences amongst the project leads who were interviewed this year. All project leads and staff are passionate about their projects and committed to their aims and objectives; however, those from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds reported a lack of support, experiences of marginalisation and microaggressions, and feeling undervalued despite being an integral part of the projects. These difficult experiences led to a sense of exclusion, impacting morale, mental health and staff turnover.

- Despite implementation challenges, most projects have expanded this year and have been largely well-received by the black, Asian and minority ethnic student beneficiaries spoken to as part of Year 2 IPE activities.

- Key facilitators leading to effective project delivery and higher student engagement include diverse representation of staff at all levels, including senior positions, and recruiting staff with relevant expertise and lived experience of the issues being addressed, especially staff from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. This also includes involving black, Asian and minority ethnic students in project co-design. Additionally, adequate funding and resources, including sufficient staff capacity to deliver the projects, was seen as a key enabler for project success.

- Projects have begun shaping university admissions and policies, with some reporting positive shifts towards diversity and inclusion. However, the pace of change is slow due to barriers such as lack of senior leadership buy-in, resistance to changing established practices, and a challenging HE environment marked by funding constraints and industrial action.

- Through surveys and focus groups, students shared that they were primarily motivated to join project activities to learn more about PhD life, learn about career opportunities and access supportive networks. Students have reported that access to activities funded by the programme improved their research skills, confidence and aspirations to pursue PhDs. The majority of students who responded to the survey reported a positive sense of belonging and wellbeing. Focus group participants highlighted the importance of projects focusing on students' sense of belonging and community, emphasising that often students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups tend to feel isolated during their time in academia.

- In the student survey, respondents rated the approaches to improving access for black, Asian and minority ethnic students to PGR studies that they perceived were likely to be

most effective. The top three rated were access to funding such as scholarships, research placements and access to training related to PGR studies and skills. Project leads and students themselves reported that students appreciated activities that focused on network/community building and wellbeing support, which contributed to a sense of belonging.

- Students and staff also shared their perspectives on approaches they found problematic. The funding scope was focused upon home students or UK domiciled students (as defined by HESA)[2], and this was widely criticised as participants felt that international students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds faced similar barriers to black, Asian and minority ethnic home students. Several of the projects also relied on black, Asian and minority ethnic international students to shape and deliver the projects, engage students and provide insights as board members. These students felt they should also benefit from the projects.

- Finally, building a collaborative working relationship with funders was seen as key to solving programme-wide challenges and would facilitate greater knowledge sharing and collaboration across all projects.

Conclusion

The programme's wide range of activities, including skills development, wellbeing support, internships, networking and mentoring, were well-received and, according to students who participated in focus groups and surveys, have improved students' confidence, aspirations and preparedness for PGR studies. However, challenges related to resources, senior leadership buy-in, staff turnover and staff experiencing incidents of bias and marginalisation as well as inconsistent collaboration need to be addressed to maintain progress and ensure wider adoption of these approaches to improve access to PGR studies for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.

In the next twelve months of the programme, the impact evaluation activities will focus on obtaining HESA student data for 2023-24 for each outcome measure and conducting the DiD analysis in order to estimate the impact of the programme in the second year of implementation. Data on project-specific outcomes will also be collected from project HEPs and, after cleaning and analysing, used to estimate the impact of these interventions on project-specific outcomes. The IPE will focus on administering student and staff surveys, as well as student focus groups and project lead interviews for selected projects.

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[2] 'UK-domiciled students' includes those living in the UK or Republic of Ireland, and EU nationals with settled status in the UK; you must be ordinarily resident in the UK (meaning no immigration restriction on the length of your stay).

1.   Introduction

This report provides an overview of the activities carried out in Year 2 of the evaluation of the Office for Students (OfS) and Research England (RE) funding programme to improve access and participation for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups[3] in postgraduate research (PGR) study. This section introduces the funding programme and the evaluation, including the evaluation aims and objectives. Section 2 of this report provides information about the approaches to the impact evaluation, and implementation and process evaluation (IPE), while Sections 3 and 4 present findings from the impact evaluation and IPE, respectively.

About the Office for Students and Research England

The OfS is the independent regulator of higher education in England. It was established by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA), which also sets out its powers and general duties. The OfS is an independent public body that reports to Parliament through the Department for Education (DfE). The OfS also works with the DfE and other government agencies and engages with student and sector organisations, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the devolved administrations and a range of other stakeholders. RE is part of UKRI, along with the seven discipline-focused research councils and Innovate UK, which funds innovation by businesses. RE is responsible for funding and engaging with English higher education providers (HEPs) to create and sustain the conditions for a healthy, dynamic, diverse and inclusive research and knowledge exchange system in the higher education sector.

About the joint Research England and Office for Students programme to improve access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in postgraduate research

This funding programme arose from the commitment of the OfS and RE to work together to promote equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in higher education and onward through to academic and research careers. Initially, the two organisations engaged with the sector and reviewed EDI data, which highlighted compelling evidence of persistent, year-on-year inequalities for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR study. Following this, the OfS and RE co-funded this programme to address these equality gaps and provided up to £8 million to selected partnerships of HEPs, to achieve the following aims:

- Stimulate innovation in, scale up and distribute effective practice in increasing access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in PGR,

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[3] We are conscious of the considerable complexity in the use of this and other terms that group together individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Throughout this report we have followed the terminology used in the funding call, except where interviewees have specifically used other terms.

- Ambitiously address evidenced issues of inequality across the PGR student lifecycle that create barriers for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, and

- Collaborate strategically to embed EDI across the sector to improve access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in PGR.

This funding was announced in October 2020. The original bid deadline of January 2021 was moved in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the final bid deadline was May 2021. Successful projects (HEPs that are delivering the interventions) were announced in November 2021. Projects are up to four years in length and will finish by January 2026. The projects are led by the following thirteen institutions:

1. University of Bradford
2. University of York
3. Sheffield Hallam University
4. University College London
5. Durham University
6. University of Cambridge
7. University of Wolverhampton
8. University of East London
9. University of Surrey
10. University of Sheffield
11. Nottingham Trent University
12. University of Essex
13. University of Leeds

In total, the programme involves 25 lead and partner institutions. The projects are also working in partnership with other external organisations; however, these partnerships are not directly assessed in this evaluation report.

Overview of the programme

The programme primarily targets three stakeholder groups: students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, university staff academics (particularly supervisors of PhD students), and the institutions themselves. Projects have implemented a variety of interventions across the universities. These can be grouped into three main areas.

1. Student-focused interventions

These aim to support students throughout their PGR journey, from pre-application to completion. Examples of these interventions include webinars, workshops, the creation of online resources, mentoring programmes, training in research skills, career development support, studentships, paid internships, mental health support, and opportunities to develop

student communities. These interventions also allow student involvement in co-creating and refining project designs to better meet their needs.

2. Institution-focused interventions

These aim to create lasting change within HEPs, fostering more inclusive and welcoming environments for black, Asian and minority ethnic students. Examples of these interventions include efforts to shape policies such as developing more equitable recruitment practices, training existing staff on racial equity, addressing hidden barriers faced by students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, and developing strategies and policy changes to remove barriers and create a more inclusive environment within the sector.

3. Evaluation and knowledge-sharing activities

These aim to capture and disseminate learnings on project effectiveness through reports, blogs, or events. As a result, such activities contribute to a broader conversation about racial equity in postgraduate research, thus facilitating the wider sector to learn and effect change.

About the evaluation

The OfS and RE wish to understand the effectiveness and impact of the overall funding programme, as well as the "who, what and how" of how that impact has been achieved. The Evidence Development and Incubation Team (EDIT)[4] within the Policy Institute at King's College London was commissioned as the independent evaluator, in partnership with the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO).

As part of the funding programme, individual projects are also conducting their own project-level evaluations. Accordingly, this overarching evaluation has two components, an impact evaluation and an IPE. The impact evaluation focuses on understanding the overall impact of the funding on the key outcomes identified by the OfS and RE. These outcomes have been identified by the OfS and RE as being central to the funding achieving its goals. The IPE focuses on understanding how the funding has been used by projects and in what ways this may have contributed to any impact observed.

The evaluation commenced on 1 March 2021 and final reporting will be completed in June 2026. This is the interim Year 2 report.

Evaluation aims and objectives

The aims of the evaluation were agreed between EDIT, the OfS and RE as part of the scoping phase of the evaluation. They are:

1. To assess the efficacy of the overall programme,
2. To evaluate the efficacy of the individual projects,

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[4] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/about/edit

3. To identify and understand the emerging and long-term impact of the overall programme,

4. To understand the drivers of change (or lack thereof) among the institutions involved in the programme,

5. To understand the drivers of change (or lack thereof) among the individuals involved in the projects,

6. To assess the sustainability of any programme outcomes, and

7. To provide evidence that will inform future strategic decisions of the providers, stakeholders and funders.

2. Methodology

Impact evaluation approach

This section provides an outline of the impact evaluation and describes the difference-in-differences (DiD) analytical strategy used, as well as the results from robustness checks conducted to validate the analytical approach. More details of the DiD implementation and results from the impact evaluation are given in Section 3.

The overarching approach to impact evaluation is a matched DiD estimation. This approach involves identifying a counterfactual group of HEPs whose time trends on the outcomes of interest prior to the intervention are as similar as possible to the HEPs participating in the projects (including lead institutions and partners). This allows comparison between the trends in outcomes between the project group and the comparator group to estimate the effect of the programme on the key outcomes. The DiD approach is classified as Type 3 evidence in the OfS' Standards of Evidence[5] and is endorsed by HM Treasury's Magenta Book[6]. In line with research best practice, the impact evaluation strategy was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework.[7]

Research questions

The primary research questions for the impact evaluation were agreed between EDIT, the OfS and RE during the scoping phase and are as follows:

1. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on progression rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic students into PGR?

2. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on retention rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR?

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[5] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/2922/using-standards-of-evidence-to-evaluate-impact-of-outreach.pdf

[6] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e96cab9d3bf7f412b2264b1/HMT_Magenta_Book.pdf

[7] https://osf.io/2uevr

3. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on completion rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR?

4. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on post-PGR destinations for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR?

5. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on the sense of belonging of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR?

▸ **Outcome measures**

After reviewing the logic models for each project, the evaluation team identified five outcome measures that were common across all projects (shown in Table 1). A comprehensive overview of activities by all 13 projects is detailed on the UKRI website[8]

Table 1: Outcome measures

Outcome measure	Definition	Collection	Timing
Progression rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic students into PGR	The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who have enrolled onto a PGR course set to enter as per the given academic year	Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA)	Baseline Annual
Retention rates of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who have continued with their PGR course in the given academic year	HESA	Baseline Annual
Completion rates of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who have completed a PGR course as per the end of the given academic year	HESA	Baseline Annual
Post-PGR destination of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who after graduating are in continued full or part-time study	HESA – Graduate Outcomes Survey	Baseline Annual

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[8] https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/browse-our-areas-of-investment-and-support/widening-participation-in-postgraduate-research/

Outcome measure	Definition	Collection	Timing
Sense of belonging of black, Asian and minority ethnic undergraduate students	The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who agree to the question "feeling part of a community of staff and students"	National Student Survey (NSS)	Baseline Annual

We investigated multiple options for measures of sense of belonging, which is, despite its importance, unfortunately not directly available through any standardised administrative dataset. Ultimately, it was determined to use the National Student Survey (NSS) question on feeling "part of a community of learners".

While most projects are delivering interventions targeting postgraduate students directly, there are a few delivering interventions that target undergraduate students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. So, given that the NSS sample is undergraduate students, this means that we can measure the extent to which any improvement in the representation and support of black, Asian and minority ethnic postgraduates also flows through to more of a sense of community for black, Asian and minority ethnic undergraduates; for example, through the presence of a more diverse set of teachers on their courses. Unfortunately, this question has been removed from the NSS survey in 2023 and onward. However, given that most project institutions have identified sense of belonging/wellbeing as outcome measures in their logic models, this would be captured in their project-level evaluation/reporting. Therefore, our secondary approach is to use the project internal evaluations and reports to provide a picture of the effect of the programme on wellbeing and sense of belonging, which can be supplemented with any relevant information from the IPE.

The IPE qualitatively explores other measures of belonging with PGR students, and the project-level evaluations are expected to explore this as well. In addition, this evaluation also seeks to understand whether and how any changes as a result of the projects might be perceived by undergraduates, to contextualise any findings on this outcome.

▸ **Matching project HEPs with suitable comparator HEPs**

In order to identify the most appropriate comparator HEPs, we compiled a comprehensive list of HEPs from publicly available HESA data, then we used a one-to-many (up to four) nearest neighbour matching process, with replacement. "Replacement" means that it was possible to identify more than one HEP that could be a suitable match for each project HEP and that the same comparator HEP could be matched with more than one project HEP. This matching process aimed to group each HEP in the intervention group with the most similar comparator HEPs based on the variables listed below:

- Total number of postgraduate students

- Proportion of students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups

- Proportion of female students

- Russell Group membership

- HEP type (seven groups based on a cluster analysis by RE[9] which uses existing knowledge base, knowledge generation, and physical assets to categorise HEPs) as described in Table 2 below.

Table 2: HEP types

	HEP type
1	Large universities generating an average level of funded research, consisting of a large undergraduate population and a small postgraduate population of mainly postgraduate teaching (PGT) students
2	Mid-sized universities generating a small level of funded research
3	Small universities generating a small level of funded research
4	Very large, research-intensive universities with a significant postgraduate population (both PGR and PGT)
5	Large, research-intensive universities with a significant postgraduate population (mainly PGT)
6	Specialist universities focused on STEM disciplines
7	Specialist universities focused on art disciplines

The matching process resulted in 41 comparator HEPs identified as the best matches for the 25 lead and partner intervention group.

▶ **Analytical strategy**

The evaluation uses a matched DiD design to estimate the impact of the programme on identified outcomes. The analysis focuses on the differences in the progression, retention, completion, and post-PGR study rates between students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in project and comparator institutions. The analysis has been conducted in the R software environment, considering four years of pre-intervention periods (2017-18 – 2020-21) and using 2021-22 as the first year of the intervention period.

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[9] Ulrichsen, T. C. (2018). Knowledge exchange framework metrics: A cluster analysis of higher education institutions. Bristol, UK.

The analysis proceeds with an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis using the following specification:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 D_i + \beta_2 T_t + \beta_3 (D_i * T_t) + \beta_{4:n} \boldsymbol{X_i} + \epsilon_{it}$$

Where:

- Y_{it} is the outcome of interest for institution i at time t;

- α is the constant;

- D_i is the binary treatment indicator which is 1 for intervention (project and partner) institutions and 0 for the comparator institutions;

- T_t is set to 1 if time t is after the start of the projects, and 0 if it is before;

- $\boldsymbol{X_i}$ is a vector of time-invariant institutional-level covariates such as institution type, mission group, proportion of female students, and total number of postgraduate students

- ϵ_{it} is a robust standard error

- The β terms are the regression coefficients; β_3 represents the DiD estimate of the impact of the programme i.e., whether there are significant differences in outcomes between the project and comparator institutions in the first year of the programme.

▸ **Robustness checks using pre-intervention data**

Data on all outcome measures for the pre-intervention period (2017-18 – 2020-21) were collected and processed. The preliminary analysis tested whether the parallel trends assumption was met in the pre-intervention period. This is required because for the DiD estimate to be valid, there should be no time-varying differences between the project and comparator groups. That is, in the absence of the programme, the outcomes of the project group should be parallel to the outcomes of the comparator group.

Further discussion of the assumptions underpinning causal estimation using DiD, along with results from this analysis, have been discussed in the Year 1 report[10]. Additionally, to further assess whether the results of the DiD estimate were sensitive to differences in pre-intervention trends, several robustness checks have been carried out.

The results of the robustness checks are shown in Table 3 and explained in more detail below. In this analysis, the DiD estimate which is shown as percentage points (%p) signifies the change in outcomes between the project and comparator institutions in the pre-intervention period i.e., prior to the programme. Therefore, for the DiD to be valid for impact evaluation, no significant differences in outcomes between the two groups in this period should be observed.

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[10] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/improving-access-and-participation-for-minority-ethnic-groups-in-pgr-evaluation/

Table 3: Percentage point differences in outcomes between project and comparator institutions in pre-intervention period (2017-18 – 2020-21)

Measure	(1) Primary Analysis (DiD estimate)	(2) Excluding partner institutions (DiD estimate)	(3) Alternative comparator group (DiD estimate)	(4) Placebo treatment group (DiD estimate)	(5) Placebo outcome (DiD estimate)
Progression rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic students into PGR	-0.59 (1.87)	-1.80 (2.27)	-1.35 (2.36)	0.75 (4.55)	-
Retention rates of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	-0.19 (2.22)	1.27 (2.82)	0.95 (2.99)	-3.00 (3.00)	-
Completion rates of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	-0.94 (1.93)	-0.87 (2.46)	-0.89 (2.55)	-1.52 (2.66)	-
Post-PGR destination (further study) of black, Asian and minority ethnicity students in PGR	0.88 (0.64)	0.72 (0.90)	0.50 (0.88)	0.29 (0.14)	-
Share of students completing a first degree	-	-	-	-	-0.02 (0.33)

*Standard errors in parentheses.

Results are as expected, showing non-significant differences in all outcomes between the intervention and comparator groups. These results are consistent across all model specifications, signifying the validity and reliability of the DiD for the impact evaluation.

As specified in the Evaluation Plan, we conducted the following analyses:

- Excluding partner institutions: The primary analysis (column 1) categorised project institutions as consisting of the 13 lead institutions and their partners, resulting in a total

of 25 project and partner HEPs. This was done to capture any spillover effects to the partner HEPs. For instance, given that both project and partner institutions are involved in the programme, there is a high likelihood that partner institutions will be exposed to the interventions, which may lead to spillover effects, i.e., a change in outcomes in partner institutions as well.

- As a robustness check, a second analysis was run (column 2) which excluded the 12 partner institutions from the analysis. The results were consistent with the primary analysis, showing no significant differences in outcomes between the project and comparator group. For instance, column 2 shows that the progression rate for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in project institutions was 1.80%p lower than the rate for the same group of students in comparator institutions. While this varies slightly from the primary analysis which shows a difference of 0.59%p, in both cases the DiD estimate was not found to be statistically significant which validates the comparator group and the assumption of parallel trends.

- Alternative comparator group: the matching specification was modified slightly to observe whether the estimated effect of the intervention would be sensitive to small changes in the matched comparator group. Results (column 3) were robust to changes in the comparator group, i.e., they were similar to the results from the primary analysis in column 1 which show no significant differences in outcomes between the project and comparator groups. For instance, column 3 shows that the completion rate for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in project institutions was 0.89%p lower than the rate for the same group of students in comparator institutions. Although this is a small variation from the primary analysis which shows a difference of 0.94%p, in both cases the DiD estimate was not found to be statistically significant which further validates the comparator group and the assumption of parallel trends.

- Placebo treatment group: the institutions in the project group are those that were successfully obtained funding under this programme. As a robustness check, we used a placebo (alternative) intervention group (not expected to be affected by the programme) which includes those institutions that form part of the University of London group; 17 independent HEPs delivering education and research across all disciplines. Results (column 4) were robust to changes in the intervention group, showing no significant differences in outcomes between the project and comparator groups, similar to the results from the primary analysis in column 1. For instance, column 4 shows that the post-PGR rate of further study for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in project institutions was 0.29%p higher than the rate for the same group of students in comparator institutions. While this varies from the primary analysis which shows a difference of 0.88%p, in both cases the DiD estimate was not found to be statistically significant which further validates the comparator group and the assumption of parallel trends.

- Placebo outcome: a placebo test was conducted using the share of students completing a first degree as a placebo (alternative) outcome with the assumption that this outcome is not expected to be directly affected by the programme. Since a first degree refers to a

bachelor's degree and given that the programme targets postgraduate students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, this is a valid assumption. Results (column 5) show that the share of students completing a first degree in intervention institutions was 0.02%p lower than the corresponding share of students completing a first degree in comparator institutions prior to the intervention. However, in both cases the DiD estimate was not found to be statistically significant which validates the assumption of parallel trends.

Overall, this analysis gives us confidence that the parallel trends assumption is satisfied in the pre-intervention period.

Implementation and process evaluation approach

This section outlines the research questions for the IPE, describes the methodology adopted and identifies the limitations of the selected approach.

▸ **Research questions**

As outlined in the evaluation plan, the IPE addresses the following research questions (RQs):

1. To what extent was the programme delivered as intended?

2. What are the experiences of students who have participated in the projects and what, if any, benefits did they perceive from them?

3. What are the experiences of staff who have participated in the projects and what, if any, benefits did they perceive from them?

4. What factors have facilitated and/or hindered the implementation of the programme?

5. How acceptable are the various project approaches to key stakeholders and beneficiaries?

6. How attractive are the various approaches likely to be to other HEPs, and why or why not?

▸ **Methodology**

This section outlines the activities undertaken as part of the IPE in Year 2. For the full IPE plan please refer to the Evaluation Plan, which is appended to the Year 1 report.[11]

Interviews with project leads

We conducted six interviews with project leads, representing six of the 13 projects. The IPE design involved selecting 5-6 projects to evaluate during each evaluation period, ensuring all projects were covered by the end of the evaluation. We emphasise that this is therefore interim

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[11] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/improving-access-and-participation-for-minority-ethnic-groups-in-pgr-evaluation/

analysis, and the results remain indicative. The findings may change when all project leads have been interviewed over the course of Years 3 and 4 of the evaluation.

The project leads who took part were diverse in gender, ethnic background and seniority. Their experience was in both academic and non-academic backgrounds, including expertise in project management, and racial and socio-economic inequality.

The interviews explored both programme and project-level topics, such as:

- Project progress and implementation: this topic relates to RQ1 and explores how well the programme was delivered as intended.

- Challenges and facilitators to project implementation: this topic relates to RQ4 and explores the areas that have facilitated or hindered project implementation.

- Perception of project impact on students and staff: this topic relates to RQ2 and RQ3 and explores staff and students' experiences of taking part in the projects and any perceived outcomes.

- Acceptability of approaches to stakeholders: this topic relates to RQ5 and explores whether project approaches are acceptable to key stakeholders (students and staff)

- Perception of project impact on an organisational level: this topic related to RQ6 and explores the extent to which the programme is having an impact on HE culture, collaboration and knowledge sharing across the programme and the efforts towards project sustainability. These factors provide insights into the likelihood of wider adoption of the programme's approaches across the HE sector.

Focus groups with students

For the second year of the evaluation, we conducted three focus groups inviting seven of the 13 projects, although two of the seven invitees did not participate. Students who had participated in these projects were invited to participate in focus groups to discuss their experiences of the projects, as well as share broader perspectives on racial equality in their HEP. Per the Evaluation Plan, focus groups will be conducted with students from all the projects across the course of the evaluation.

In order to access cross-project insights, we structured our focus groups such that each focus group comprised students from both of the following categories:

- Category 1: projects targeting black students.

- Category 2: projects where the lead institution is a Northern university with a low pre-existing proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students.

The focus groups were primarily structured around RQs 2, 3 and 5 to ensure conversations were focused on sector-level insights, rather than delving into the specifics of each project. The focus groups were conducted online between November 2023 and February 2024 and were each 90 minutes long. They explored areas such as experiences of students and perceived project impact on students, acceptability of approaches, and barriers and facilitators to accessing PGR. In total,

14 participants took part in the focus groups. Due to challenges recruiting students for the focus groups, two of the participants were staff members who work directly with student engagement.

Student survey

A survey for all students who participated in project activities was shared at end of the academic year. This was administered via Qualtrics, an online surveying platform, in June 2023 and was open for 1.5 months. In total, 71 students covering 12 projects responded.

In terms of the demographic profile of students, around 86% of them were categorised as belonging to an ethnic minority background including African, Indian, Pakistani, and Arab ethnic groups. Around 4.3% identified as white and the remaining chose not to reveal their ethnicity. In relation to gender distribution, 82% of the respondents were female and 18% male.

The survey explored areas covering perceived impact of the projects on students, feedback on project activities, and barriers and facilitators to accessing PGR.

Staff survey

We also distributed a staff survey to all staff members who have been involved in project activities. Like the student survey, this was administered using Qualtrics, was shared in June 2023 and was open for 1.5 months.

In total 162 staff members participated in the survey covering 11 projects. Nearly 92% of the staff members were part of HEPs, and the remainder included those who worked in the private sector, charity and third sector. In relation to ethnicity, around 64% identified as white including British, and Polish and around 31% identified as belonging to an ethnic minority background including Indian, Pakistani, Arab, Caribbean and African ethnic groups. The remainder chose not to reveal their ethnicity. In relation to gender distribution, around 63% of the staff members were female while around 37% were male.

Through the staff survey, we were able to capture the motivations they had for joining the project and the activities they were involved it. These surveys also provided insight into how well the staff members understood and responded to the challenges and barriers faced by black, Asian and minority ethnic PGR students and fellow staff members in accessing and progressing in academia/research.

Synthesis of internal interim findings

In addition to the above, a synthesis of the interim monitoring reports of the 13 projects was also conducted to provide deeper understanding of project progress outcomes, barriers and facilitators. We conducted a thematic analysis of the qualitative data, identifying common themes, and patterns across the projects. This involved coding the data and grouping it into themes related to project implementation, impact, barriers, and facilitators.

Limitations

The analysis presented here is interim analysis from the mid-point of the evaluation. The Evaluation Plan envisages data collection activities, particularly for the IPE, occurring

holistically across the evaluation lifespan; therefore what is presented here are interim findings based on partial data collection. The findings may be updated when all data collection is complete per the Evaluation Plan.

The impact evaluation relies on lagged data from HESA, and is subject to when that data is made available. The latest data available at time of writing was for the 2021-22 academic year, which was the first year of implementation for most projects. The IPE data collection occurred mainly in the 2022-23 academic year. Therefore, discrepancies between the two strands may be partly due to different timepoints being analysed. In the Final Report this limitation will be addressed as much as is possible.

In addition, the DiD approach relies on the assumption that the parallel trends between project and comparator HEPs, which we observed in the pre-intervention period, would have continued into the post-intervention period in the absence of treatment (the "parallel trends" assumption). This assumption is untestable. We discuss the assumptions and limitations of DiD in more detail in the Evaluation Plan, which is appended to the Year 1 report.[12]

As mentioned above, the IPE interviewed six project leads representing six out of 13 projects; this is because the IPE design calls for interviews with all projects to be completed over time up until the end of the evaluation period. Additionally, the evaluation only secured 14 participants from five projects for the student focus groups, which was lower than the originally planned 18-21 participants representing seven projects. This target was not met due to lack of responsiveness from two projects and capacity constraints within the remaining projects making it difficult to engage students. Furthermore, project leads reported that students were often too busy to participate. This limitation means that it is necessary to be cautious in the interpretation of the findings of the IPE at this stage. As noted elsewhere, this report contains analysis conducted at the mid-point of a multi-year evaluation. The data will become more complete over subsequent years, and the conclusions may change as a result of this.

3.   Findings from the impact evaluation

This section provides results of the impact evaluation of the programme, in which a matched DiD approach is used to compare trends in common outcome measures between project and comparator institutions over time, as specified in the analytical strategy section.

Outcomes analysed

This analysis reports on the impact of the programme on the following outcomes:

- Progression rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic students enrolled onto a PGR course starting in the 2021-22 academic year

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[12] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/improving-access-and-participation-for-minority-ethnic-groups-in-pgr-evaluation/

- Retention of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who have continued with their PGR course in the 2021-22 academic year

- Rates of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who have completed a PGR course at the end of the 2021-22 academic year

- Post-PGR destination (further study) of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who graduated at the end of the 2020-21 academic year

Given that the NSS question on feeling "part of a community of learners" has been removed from the core questions for the NSS survey in 2023 and onward, this outcome has been removed from the analysis.

Findings

Given the satisfactory results from the robustness checks described in Section 2 above, it is reasonably safe to conclude that the DiD estimates are not sensitive to pre-period trends. This validates the use of DiD for the impact evaluation. The primary analysis was conducted with the full intervention group of 25 project and partner institutions and the 41 matched comparator institutions. Table 4 below presents the results from the DiD analysis for all outcome measures.

Table 4: Impact of the programme on common outcome measures in first year

Measure	DiD estimate in percentage points*	Impact in Year 1
Progression rate for black, Asian and minority ethnic students into PGR	-0.41 (1.75)	No statistically significant change
Retention of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	-0.46 (2.10)	No statistically significant change
Completion rate of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	1.07 (2.08)	No statistically significant change
Post-PGR destination (further study) of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	0.66 (0.64)	No statistically significant change

*Standard errors in parentheses.

Overall, we see estimates of the impact of the programme on outcomes ranging between 0.46 percentage points lower and 1.07 percentage points higher. None of these estimates were statistically significant. We therefore find no evidence that the programme impacted on these outcomes in the first year of implementation.

These non-significant effects of the programme are somewhat expected, given the multi-year nature of the programme, as well as the fact that several projects were still in the process of conducting recruitment activities and setting up project teams in the first year. Successful projects were only announced in November 2021 before they launched in January 2022, which meant that projects had a very short timeframe between being notified about the funding award and commencement of activities.

This is supported by the findings from the interviews with project leads, which revealed several challenges with the implementation of the programme in the first year, ranging from issues with recruiting research assistants, interns and administrative staff to changes in management due to high staff turnover which led to a delay in the startup of several projects. Project leads reported project expansion in Year 2, and students reported positive experiences. If these have impacted the outcomes, we would expect to observe this impact in subsequent years of analysis.

4. Findings from the implementation and process evaluation

This section covers the synthesis of findings from interviews with project leads covering six projects, students from three focus groups, student and staff surveys, and 13 interim project monitoring reports. As noted in Section 2, this represents interim analysis based on a limited scope of data collection so the findings should be considered indicative. The full IPE will be presented in the Final Report.

RQ1: To what extent was the programme delivered as intended?

This section evaluates the extent to which the programme was delivered as planned, highlighting key achievements, and challenges across the participating institutions. The second year of the programme primarily focused on enhancing outreach and recruitment to ensure effective project delivery, as well as providing researcher/student support while addressing institutional barriers.

PGR training and research opportunities were a central focus across the programme with nearly all (12 out of 13) projects delivering targeted training sessions and other opportunities for existing and prospective PGR students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. In the previous year, most projects had planned to deliver summer schools, and workshops to equip existing and prospective PGR students with essential skills and knowledge about PhD processes, offer work placements and research opportunities in research projects, and provide internship opportunities for hands-on experience. It is encouraging to find that this year several projects went ahead in organising and delivering these interventions, including summer schools and workshops to providing support to students in obtaining research placements across the programme. Most projects successfully delivered their planned interventions, with a few exceeding expectations, while a smaller cohort missed their targets by a small margin mainly due to challenges in engaging students. Projects responded to recruitment challenges by advertising more frequently, leveraging academic contacts, using the project website or HEP and

faculty websites as well as changing the timing of some of their interventions, and planning to implement a year-round engagement programme for PGR students rather than concentrate project activities in the summer term when students are off campus.

Mentorship offers were prominent across the programme with nine out of 13 projects offering this to students this year. Mentorship activities were identified early in the programme as integral to achieving the aims of many of the projects. Most of the mentorship programmes include cultural sensitivity training or induction for mentors and mentees before they start working together. Mentorships had varying degrees of success, with a minority of the projects experiencing attrition or lower attendance, whilst most met their programme goals, with at least two exceeding their numerical targets of enrolling mentors and mentees.[13] The main reason identified by projects for lower attendance was workload issues for staff members preventing them from taking on additional responsibilities (such as becoming mentors) and also project staffing issues such as staff turnover causing delays in delivering the interventions.

Mental health support was provided by five of the projects to address the specific challenges faced by black, Asian and minority ethnic PGR students through workshops and tailored sessions that addressed issues such as burnout and impostor syndrome, and providing activities that included wellbeing sessions and monthly reflections facilitated by a professional therapist, who was also a person of colour. These activities were largely delivered as intended with no major issues. However, at least two projects shared that wellbeing will be one of the key considerations in the future, particularly as they plan to scale up the programme over time as they wish to create supportive environments for their students.

Staff training was another common intervention, delivered by nine projects out of 13, with the aim of improving staff awareness as well as organisational culture to better support black, Asian and minority ethnic students. The activities in which staff were involved included anti-racism workshops, training on mentoring, and awareness-raising about inclusive practices. Additionally, seven projects are working on addressing systemic biases and barriers through reviewing their admissions system. These projects are embedding a practice of reviewing policies, processes, assessments and selection criteria, developing competency-based or context-based admissions frameworks and conducting consultations with relevant stakeholders at the institutions to inform its implementation. A number of projects have reviewed supervisor practices and are developing culturally responsive supervisor training programmes, improving guidance and building rapport between supervisors and students. Several challenges were encountered during implementation, mainly lack of data in this area and difficulty obtaining and sharing data across participating institutions as well as encountering resistance to changing established practices which has led to slower progress than planned. These challenges are further explored in the RQ4 section.

Most projects (11 out of 13) planned to create supportive environments for students and aimed to facilitate networking opportunities with the aim of fostering a sense of community and belonging, improving the visibility of black, Asian and minority ethnic students and supporting

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[13] Note that not all projects provided data on numerical targets for mentors and mentees.

their professional development. Most of the projects delivered various activities to meet this goal across the programme. These included both in-person and hybrid sessions such as networking bootcamps, online study groups, workshops, events with keynote speakers, virtual networks such as LinkedIn and WhatsApp groups, online study groups and writing retreats. Despite successful delivery of these events and an increase in student engagement, several projects shared difficulties with attracting the planned number of participants due to packed student schedules and lack of resources and capacity to advertise and do outreach within universities effectively. Projects have shared that they aim to broaden partnerships to increase participant engagement and conduct targeted marketing to reach students in the future.

In summary, most projects are on track in terms of executing interventions as planned and are showing positive progress in expanding engagement in the programme activities. However, challenges such as delays due to staffing difficulties, increased workload and staff turnover have impacted implementation. In some instances, projects struggled to obtain the desired number of students to engage with several interventions, but projects are addressing this through frequent advertising, expanding their outreach, recruiting additional team members to work on student engagement and reviewing the timing of their interventions. Finally, most projects plan to expand in the coming years, and thus workload concerns are likely to persist.

RQ2: What are the experiences of students who have participated in the projects and what, if any, benefits did they perceive from them?

This section covers student experiences as participants in the programme, drawing on insights from synthesis of the interim monitoring reports, project lead interviews, focus groups and student survey responses.

Projects used a variety of ways to reach out to participants. The most common referral channel by which participants learned about the projects was university communications and emails (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Referral channels
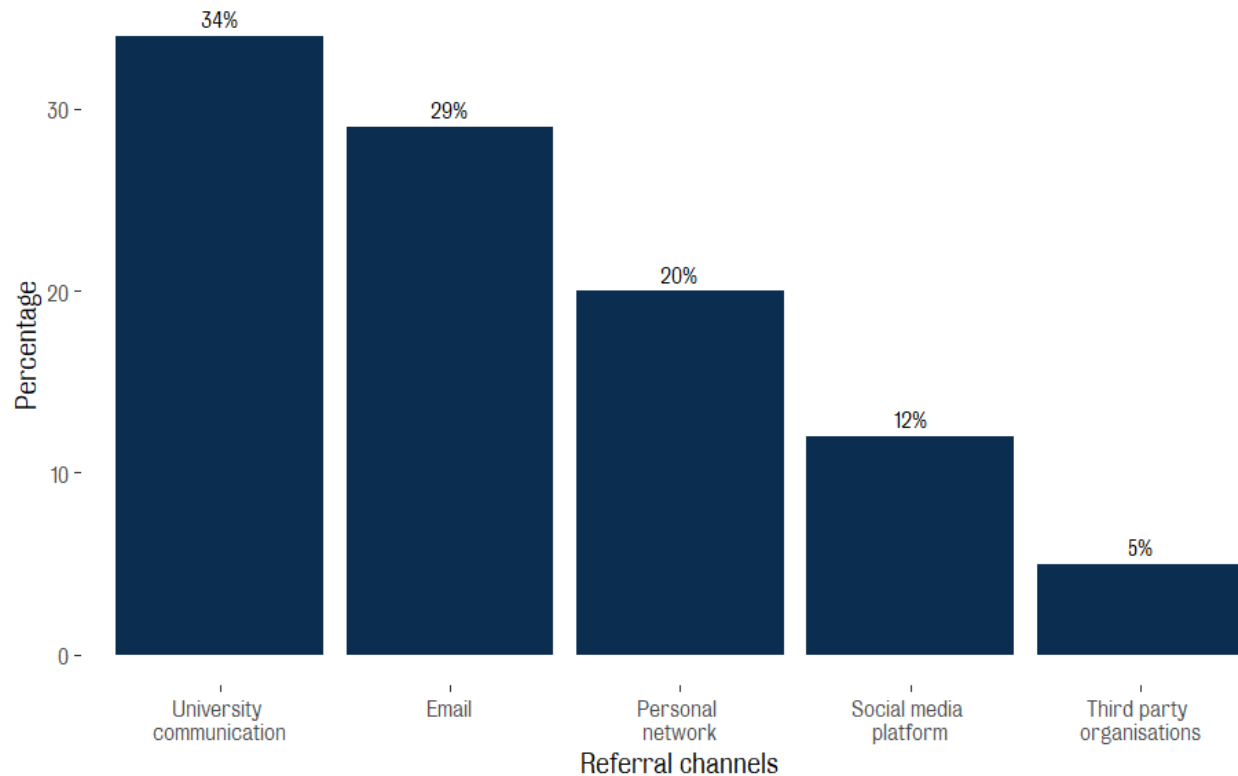
Students participating in the programme reported (via focus groups and surveys) several reasons for engaging. The most common reason to join was to gain better knowledge and experience about research, PhD life and academia in general. The vast majority of students who responded to surveys or took part in focus groups as part of the IPE said they wanted to learn more about what a PhD entails, including the application processes, and the challenges and benefits of pursuing a PhD. Additionally, many also sought to improve career opportunities and develop skills by either accessing paid opportunities such as internships and placements, or building their research skills and CVs. Finally, another common reason was to connect with other black, Asian and minority ethnic students pursuing PGR studies.

Students reported taking part in a wide range of activities, with the vast majority taking part in workshops, online training sessions on areas such as research skills and PhD applications, summer schools and studentship programmes. These focused on skills development and access to guidance or information. Others took part in hands-on research opportunities such as research placements and internships, gaining valuable experiences and networking opportunities. Additionally, some of the students contributed to project promotion by creating content (e.g. writing blogs), while others focused on building the black, Asian and minority ethnic student community by attending events and networking with other black, Asian and minority ethnic researchers and students. A small minority took on leadership roles as, for example, project managers, communication officers and strategy board members helping shape projects, organise events and acting as ambassadors for the programme. Feedback from students mirrored survey results, highlighting that workshops, mentorships, research

placements and project support activities were key areas of engagement and were well received by the students.

All participants in the student focus groups reported positive outcomes from accessing skills development training, such as software skills and research skills, and mentorship programmes. The skills gained through the projects benefited their dissertation, PhD application and their networking opportunities via sharing their research at conferences.

"Looking at the various aspects of the programme, the mentoring, the qualitative skills, the quantitative skills, the academic writing… I decided to give it a go and then to be honest, each block of the programme actually added value to me…. I can say regarding my dissertation I have an amazing result…." (Student)

Students in the focus groups also shared that the project nurtured their academic and career aspirations as a result of attending workshops where they met successful black academics. Exposure to successful people from underrepresented groups inspired them to pursue PhDs and careers in academia.

"It was beyond my imagination… meeting great minds… like this on a normal day. The [funded project] brought them to the classroom and you're like, 'wow', people who are like you are doing great things! And I was so, so thrilled… People you can relate within academia achieving greatness, and it's part of what encouraged me go pick up a career in academia…." (Student)

Most of the students shared the importance of projects focusing on students' sense of belonging and community emphasising that often students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups tend to feel isolated during their time in academia. Some students felt that the projects had successfully increased their sense of belonging.

"As a student you feel isolated, feeling you don't belong in that space. But the mentorship opportunities went beyond the academic space…. I have a very real connection with my mentor…. I can call her at any time. We speak almost every week. It goes beyond the programme. We have a family [type] relationship now… we've become good friends, likely due to our similar ages. This makes the mentorship even more comfortable and rewarding" (Student)

Similarly, the majority of students responding to the survey also reported positive perceptions that engaging with the project had improved both their sense of belonging and wellbeing (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Student perceptions on sense of belonging and wellbeing
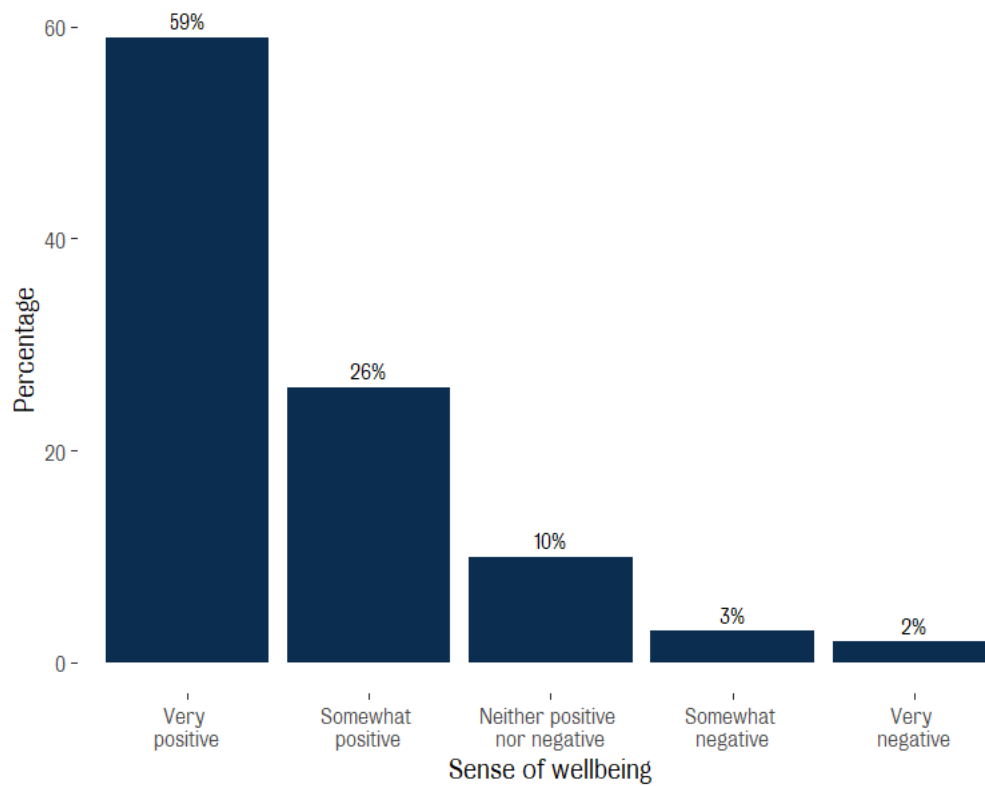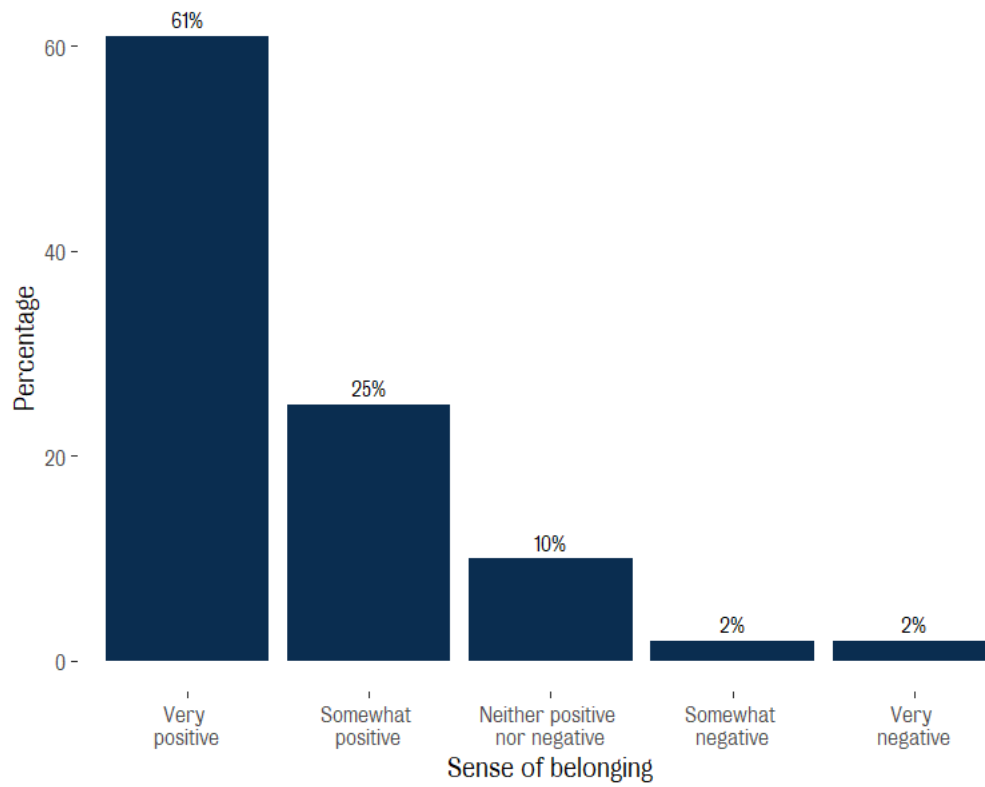
RQ3: What are the experiences of staff who have participated in the projects and what, if any, benefits did they perceive from them?

This section covers the impact of project delivery on staff members, drawing on their perspectives as given in the staff surveys and project lead interviews. Two distinct categories of staff were identified: the project delivery team who directly participate in the day-to-day running of the projects, and the wider staff. This broader group includes staff across universities or partner organisations who are beneficiaries as a result of accessing project interventions.

Each project is run by a project lead who is either the Principal Investigator (PI) or a senior member of the project team leading the project together with the PI. The sizes of the project teams across the programme varied from a very small size of two to three people to up to seven people. However, most were only working part-time on project delivery.

All project leads reported that they had a deep commitment to eliminating barriers, promoting inclusion and increasing access to postgraduate studies for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. It's important to note that interviewees used various terms to refer to black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds including 'racially minoritised groups', reflecting the evolving vocabulary surrounding diversity and inclusion.

Project leads who were also PIs generally reported positive experiences. They shared that they were aware of the systemic barriers that existed prior to joining the projects informed by their professional or personal experience. This awareness drove their commitment to the projects' goals of addressing hidden barriers faced by students from underrepresented groups and they enjoyed working to create opportunities and inclusive environments for them. They expressed gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to positive change.

> *"I have enjoyed working on this project. I have concluded this is what I'm going to devote the rest of my career to... [I] can't complain. It's been a joy and a blessing to work on [this project]." (Project lead)*

These reflections show how those with greater recognition and awareness of the barriers faced by people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are being enabled to commit more fully to this type of work, contributing to broader cultural changes within their institutions.

Some project leads and staff from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds shared experiences of incidents of bias and feelings of marginalisation and lack of support. There was a feeling among some interviewees that senior leaders may lack understanding or commitment to EDI initiatives. Additionally, some described the day-to-day experience of delivering the projects as emotionally draining, with one sharing that they frequently encountered racism in workshops they delivered without any support for dealing with difficult topics.

Additionally, there were reported experiences of microaggression from colleagues and feelings of being excluded or dismissed by senior leaders and partner institutions. They described feeling overlooked and undervalued within the project hierarchy, despite being an integral part of the projects. There was a view that those with higher academic credentials, regardless of their actual

project involvement, received credit while staff from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups who were actively engaged were sidelined and their contributions disregarded.

According to some project leads and staff members interviewed, these experiences might lead to a negative impact, including discouraging people with the relevant expertise and passion in this field from contributing to this area. There were reports of projects experiencing turnover of black, Asian and minority ethnic staff due to the experiences of working on the projects.

> *"So there just seems to be a theme of lack of support for individuals from racially minoritised groups; lack of understanding and then the result of that is you turn people, who are very passionate about this area off and you make them not want to work in this area anymore, which is the opposite effect that these projects should be having on individuals who are passionate about making a change." (Project lead)*

Projects also reached out to the wider university staff community, who participated as beneficiaries. According to project leads these interventions included workshops on anti-racist practices, workshops on understanding the hidden barriers faced by students, and strategies for supervisors to better support their students. Similar to the project delivery teams, the staff members who participated as beneficiaries also shared a desire to contribute towards change. Based on the survey responses, around 74% of staff directly engaged with the projects through research and/or teaching, and the rest were professional services or partner organisations.

Figure 3 highlights the range of motivations that staff had for engaging with the projects.

*Figure 3: Staff: factors motivating participation in project*
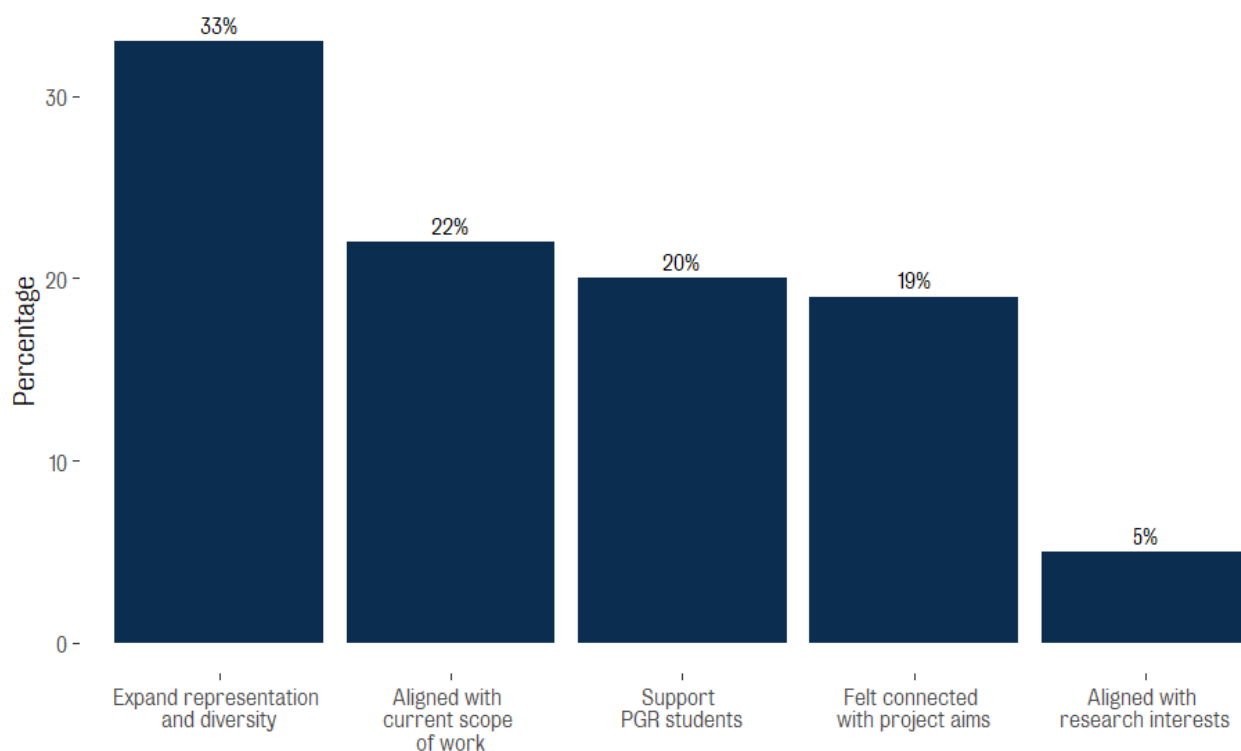
According to the staff survey response, a majority of staff reported a positive experience of participating in the projects. Only a small fraction of staff reported a neutral or negative experience (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Staff: overall experience
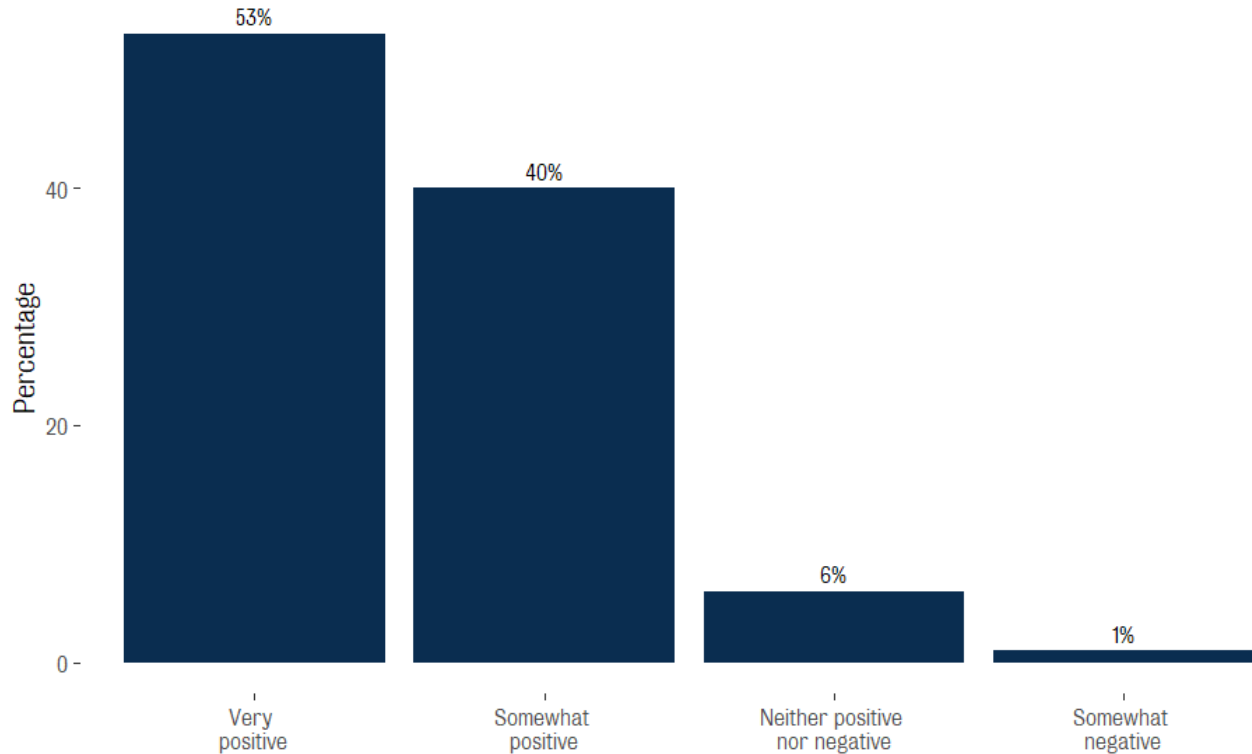
Both the project lead interviews and analysis of the staff survey showed that staff members who participated in the programme as beneficiaries reported improved understanding of the barriers black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals face in accessing PGR studies. According to the staff survey responses, the vast majority of respondents reported having improved their understanding of barriers with around 47% reporting "strongly agree" (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Staff: improved understanding of barriers
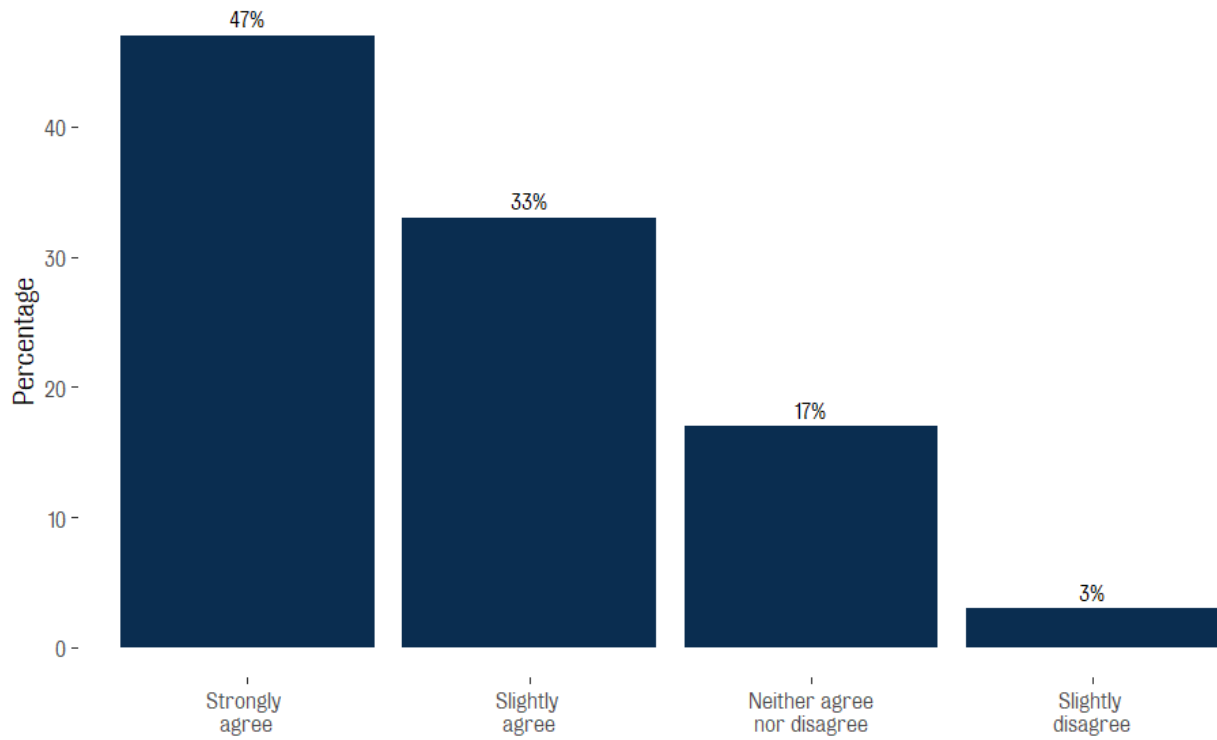
Staff also reported improved responsiveness to the barriers faced by students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Staff: improved responsiveness to barriers
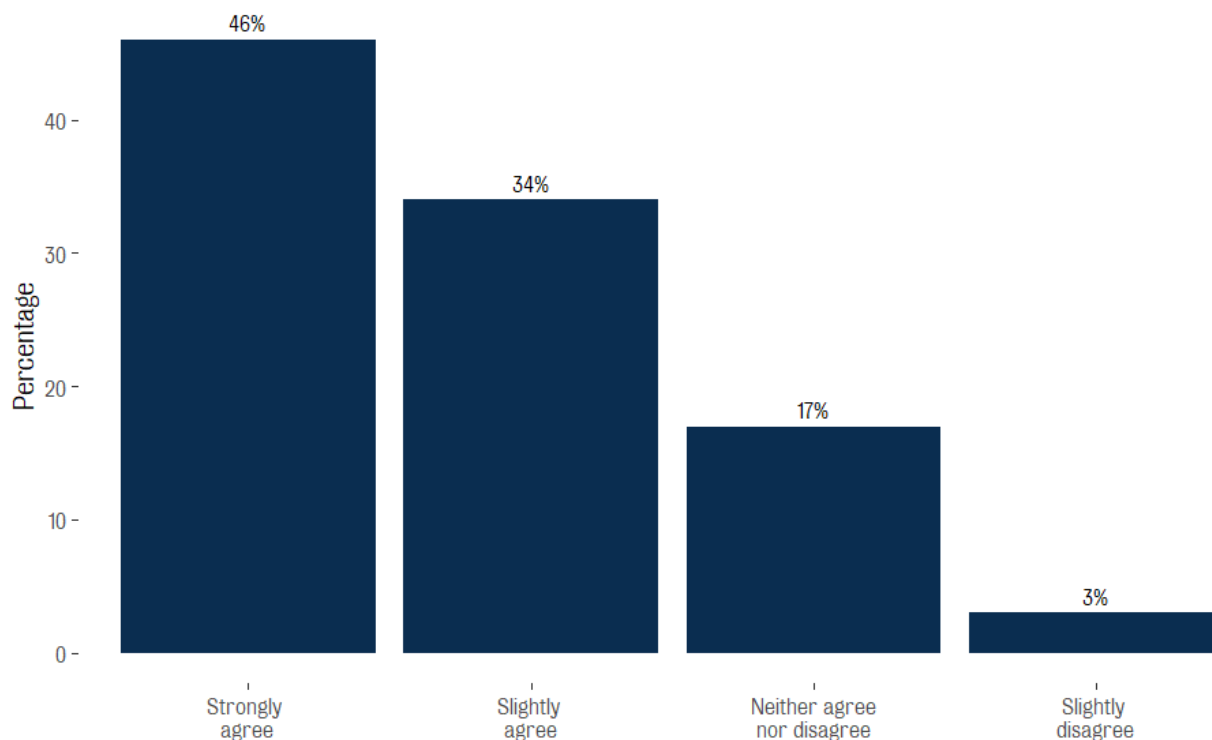
The above positive findings in relation to improved responsiveness are also corroborated by project lead interviews. According to the majority of the project leads interviewed, the wider staff increased their awareness of the barriers and challenges faced by students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. They further improved their skills and responsiveness for supporting students; this included relationship building and offering pastoral care. Staff also mentioned a stronger sense of commitment to the success of students, including those from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, and responsibility leading to increased follow up when they notice students disengaging.

> *"[Following a workshop] a mentor [staff member] said [to me], 'I am now aware of the diversity in my classroom. So when I see students disengaged, I don't just add them to the statistics. I follow up and I ask them, What is going on? Is everything well at home?' They are now following up on students... [academics] are providing more pastoral care than before... tutors are now taking conscious efforts." (Project lead)*

Although there are positive signs in staff reports of changed mindsets and practices, the benefits for students are not yet manifesting through changes in outcomes in the impact evaluation. Such positive perceptions may take time to become embedded in the system and manifest into substantial outcomes, which could eventually appear in the impact evaluation's quantitative findings. Conversely, staff reports of the way the projects have changed approaches in their institution may only be part of the picture. As the experiences reported by some black, Asian and minority ethnic staff highlight, there is still a lot of work to be done.

On this, two project leads shared that compared to the total university population where their projects are based, only a small number of staff are attending workshops and training. Thus, while project leads report significant positive impacts on those who attend, the current reach is still limited to a few members of staff who are attending voluntarily.

> *"But again, that is only a small portion [of staff]. You know, this training is not enforced, it's optional for staff members. We don't have the power or the wherewithal in our organisations to say every staff member who could be a supervisor to a PhD student must attend. And again, it comes back to senior leader buy-in, you know, when we have enough evidence at the end of this project, we may be able to do that." (Project lead)*

RQ4: What factors have facilitated and/or hindered the implementation of the programme?

This section considers factors that have helped or hindered project implementation success. It draws from project lead interviews, student focus groups and the internal interim monitoring reports.

▸ **Facilitators of project success**

Several facilitators were identified as key for effective project implementation. One of the main facilitators, as reported by most project leads interviewed, was a strong buy-in from senior leadership. This included active involvement and leveraging senior leadership networks to promote the projects. According to most project leads interviewed, senior buy-in and commitment to project success often meant the changes are more likely to be embedded into university structures beyond the programme's lifespan.

All project leads interviewed shared that adequate funding and resources, including adequate staff capacity, was a key enabler for project success. Nearly all project leads identified capacity issues and staff shortages as major barriers preventing effective project delivery. Alongside this, recruiting teams with relevant expertise, including those with lived experience of the issues being addressed, was seen by most project leads as another enabler for successful project implementation.

Nearly all project leads interviewed shared that a diverse representation on project teams at all levels matters. In particular, having staff from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups was seen as a key facilitator to project success. Project leads reported that inclusion of team members from these backgrounds provided a deeper understanding of student needs, leading to more tailored interventions. According to most project leads, students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to connect with projects when they see themselves reflected in the leadership and team. Additionally, according to some project leads, diverse representation increased a sense of belonging and trust with the wider student body encouraging student participation.

Collaboration to build supportive networks amongst team members from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups was another facilitator to cope with isolation and difficult experiences.

Interviewees from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds shared they faced unique challenges within academia and found that connecting with others who understand their experiences was valuable. This provided peer support, suggested strategies for delivering interventions, and created a more supportive environment for addressing shared challenges.

Additionally, student participation in co-designing projects, via various formats such as board membership, steering groups and focus groups gathering feedback from the wider student body, was also seen as a facilitator for project success by most project leads. It was also cited by two staff members. This ensured interventions were relevant and met student needs. Alongside this, several project leads shared that creating opportunities for students to network and build communities was another key facilitator to increasing engagement with the projects and improving student outcomes. In some cases this was achieved through regular workshops or monthly coffee meetings, while others used social media groups like WhatsApp or LinkedIn to establish a sense of community among scholars and students.

Furthermore, some project leads highlighted the importance of fostering a flexible, trusting and collaborative relationship with funders to enable them to address programme-wide challenges effectively and co-designing solutions, ensuring projects adapt effectively and progress smoothly.

Finally, a few project leads also added that ensuring interventions target students early on in their academic journey, such as during their undergraduate years, rather than during their masters' or PhD, was also seen as a facilitator to project success. Early intervention, especially through access to mentors, increased student confidence and preparedness for entering PGR studies.

‣ Challenges in project implementation

The evaluation identified several common challenges across the projects that hindered effective implementation of the programme.

A majority of projects reported experiencing delays in relation to some elements of their interventions due to issues such as staff turnover, late recruitment or unrealistic timelines, which either affected student engagement and attendance and/or delayed the implementation of several of the interventions across the programme.

> *"I think part of the reason for the delay in the project was the short timeframe. Ideally, I would have liked more time between the university being awarded the funding and when we were expected to begin…. This tight timeline made it very difficult, I believe, for some of my colleagues to get everything set up in a timely manner." (Project lead)*

Recruitment was also a significant challenge for several of the projects; securing staff members such as administration staff, project managers, delivery staff, engagement officers and EDI trainers proved to be a difficult process due to the lengthy internal university recruitment processes.

A consistent theme across all the project lead interviews was that the time required to deliver the projects was underestimated in the original bids. According to nearly all project leads

interviewed, there is a mismatch between their contracted hours (which is typically a few days a week) and the actual workload required to deliver the project. Furthermore, the sheer size of some of the projects and complexity of managing multiple strands across partner organisations further added to the workload, with projects requiring considerable time for coordination, engagement and delivery across various levels.

> *"Projects seem heavily reliant on the 'goodwill' and passion of staff who were often under-resourced, leading to staff overwork and burnout…. People are passionate about these things they want to get better results and they want more people to feel included in their education. But that involves a lot of goodwill and a lot of hard work, but there is concern that goodwill is finite."*
> *(Project lead)*

According to some of the black, Asian and minority ethnic project leads who took part in various strands of the research, the culture of overwork and burnout seemed to be disproportionately affecting staff from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. They shared their frustration that projects focused on racial equity relied so heavily on the uncompensated work of staff, particularly those from minority groups.

> *"A lot of [these projects…] rely on the goodwill of individuals from racially minoritised groups in order to deliver them. But that in itself is problematic… the most challenging thing about this project has been the way that it's structured and negotiating with senior members of the project …So there's this power dynamic that exists …And that power dynamic can mean that the individual from racially minoritised group ends up by default, just doing a lot more work than they should do". (Project lead)*

As noted in the section on RQ3, a number of staff from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups who took part in the research shared experiences of incidents of bias when delivering the projects, and raised concerns regarding race and representation within their projects. They shared feeling marginalised and/or unsupported in their day-to-day work despite their expertise and lived experiences. These experiences negatively impacted team morale and wellbeing. A few participants suggested funders should play a role in holding universities accountable, requesting projects to align with programme goals of improving access and participation of people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and ensure projects provide care plans for team members as part of project delivery.

Another challenge related to the inclusion of international students. Most project leads and students alike criticised the funding scope, which was focused upon UK domiciled students. Several project leads, and most students, found the distinction between home/UK domiciled students and international student status irrelevant, as both groups face unfair and hidden barriers in academia. According to both project leads and students this criticism is also compounded by the fact that some projects seem to heavily rely on international students from underrepresented groups to deliver the projects, from shaping the programme's strategic direction, to engaging with students, becoming mentors and providing oversight as board members.

"There seems to be a perspective, excuse my language, that [sees] international students as 'cash cows'. They're seen simply as a source of money [for the university].... [The message appears to be:] 'Come here, bring your money, let us improve our rankings, and then you can go and fend for yourselves afterwards.... the question of what the university offers them in return seems irrelevant." (Project lead)

Additionally, staff and students in two of the projects involved in the research pointed out that as international students were not the focus of the programme, this made it harder to identify eligible students to take part in projects, particularly in universities with geographically distant UK home students (who did not reside on campus) who often had less time to participate compared to on-campus international students, hindering project objectives.

Some projects experienced challenges with student engagement. While some projects reported very high participation from students, others faced difficulties. Several project leads shared the difficulty of designing interventions that were engaging and fitted within students' busy schedules. These teams felt they lacked the dedicated time required to cultivate a strong student community that enables meaningful engagement. At times, they lacked the capacity to gain feedback in relation to whether the interventions were relevant to the student body.

Whilst some projects have started sharing learnings via presenting at conferences and panel discussions, several others said they faced challenges in finding the adequate time and format to share the evidence and learnings across the programme and sector. This will be further explored in more detail in RQ6.

RQ5: How acceptable are the various project approaches to key stakeholders and beneficiaries?

This section covers feedback from project leads and students on the acceptability of project approaches and students' perceptions of interventions. This section mainly focuses on students' actual experiences of the interventions and their views on whether they felt they were effective from their personal perspective. Additionally, it includes students' views on the potential effectiveness of interventions, even when students may not have directly experienced them. Note that students' perceptions may not match reality, which is why these perceptions are covered under the research question about acceptability. This section draws on insights from student surveys, project lead interviews and focus groups with students.

Most of the students who completed the survey as well as all of those who participated in the focus groups reported having an overall positive experience from accessing and/or engaging with the programme. Areas that focused on practical research and skills development and opportunities to access paid internships and workshops that focused on employability training were highly valued. They felt these activities provided tangible benefits and improved their confidence and preparedness to access PGR studies and also improved their career options both within and outside academia. Most of the students also appreciated the wider focus on student support, including wellbeing support and community building. Nearly all students were positive about the comprehensive nature of the projects.

"The structure of the programme is so beneficial, and it's really working for me. It works because it has different sections, like quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, and even well-being and employability support. It goes beyond academic and takes care of our well-being…. It provides a safe space to talk about our problems and get mental and overall support. So, I think the structure is really good and a major benefit of the programme." (Student)

Similarly, in the student survey, support in obtaining research placements and PGR/research training via workshops and summer schools was ranked by 23% and 16% participants, respectively, as the most effective interventions, from their perspective, for increasing the number of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR studies, as shown in the table below.

According to the student survey feedback, "access to funding opportunities and scholarships" was perceived to be the most effective intervention to increase access to PGR with nearly 30% having chosen this approach. Although student perceptions may not match reality regarding most effective interventions it is striking that there are gaps between what students felt would work and what projects are offering.

Figure 7: Students' perception of most effective approaches
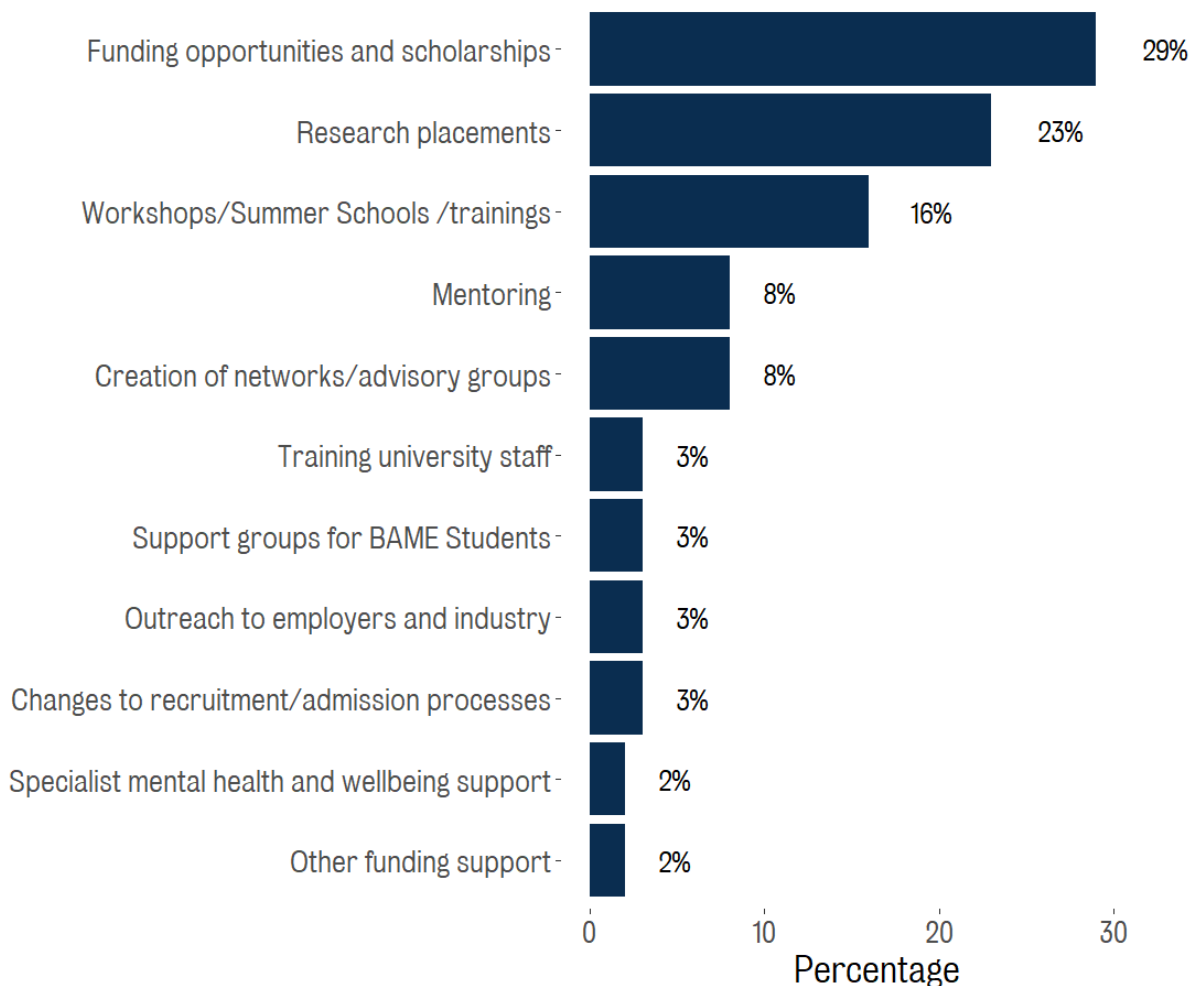
Similarly, when discussing barriers to accessing PGR, lack of funding opportunities such as grants and scholarship were also reported by a few of the students in the focus groups. These students highlighted the importance of including funding opportunities as part of the projects' interventions.

> *"I know people that are ready to come into academia, they want to do a PhD, but [they] have bills to pay… this is a big deterrent… so people that want to come think 'I am going to struggle a lot, when I have these other responsibilities to take care of…. I will just go into industry and look for something else', so providing funding for anyone that wants to get into [PGR] is important." (Student)*

Likewise, research placements were identified by almost a quarter of respondents as an approach they felt would be effective, but few of the projects offer these.

Further down the list are many of the initiatives projects have implemented, including training and workshops, and networking and mentoring, which are common approaches delivered by projects in the programme's second year as outlined in the section on RQ1.

Mentorship with mentors from similar background and interests was seen as a valuable tool for students' progress according to the students from the focus groups. These mentors leveraged their past lived experiences of navigating academia and guided their mentees towards making informed decisions and minimised trial and error experiences they themselves had to go through. According to students and project leads alike, the close relationship developed between mentor and mentee is critical for its success. Mentors provided knowledge and social capital such as networking opportunities, which was seen as key enabler for first-generation students, who often lack these resources when navigating academia.

> *"I really enjoyed my mentorship… having that personalised discussion with someone that you can relate to, that knows your experiences and knows how to guide you was really kind of the highlight [of the funded project]."*
> *(Student)*

RQ6: How attractive are the various approaches likely to be to other HEPs, and why or why not?

This section draws on project lead interviews, student focus groups and the interim monitoring reports.

On the one hand, the programme offers a wide range of interventions that seem to be well received by beneficiaries. Participants in the IPE reported that they felt the interventions improved students' confidence, aspirations and sense of belonging and wellbeing and preparedness for PGR studies.

Additionally, a majority of the projects report that they have started to try and shape university admissions and policies, through assessing existing practices and identifying areas for improvement, and raising awareness of diversity in HEPs. A few project leads interviewed have reported they felt there had been positive shifts at their provider towards greater diversity and inclusion. This included increased awareness of the importance of diversity at all levels, and changes in provider policy, such as the adoption of contextual admissions.

However, challenges remain. Around half of the project leads interviewed reported the slow pace of cultural change and emphasised the crucial role of senior leadership buy-in and additional resources to shift institutional culture in the long term.

> *"I suppose cultural change is happening, but it's not at speed at all. These projects are only four years long. There's no way they could significantly affect [cultural] change in the higher education sector across the country…. The biggest barrier for culture change in all higher education institutions is senior management. If they do not buy in, nothing will change." (Project lead)*

HEPs are facing many challenges including overall funding constraints and strikes taking place across the sector. Project leads identified that these wider factors had affected the projects; for example, academics facing high workload and low morale meant they were less willing to take on additional workload associated with implementing new approaches.

"I think the sector is under siege [at the moment]. We've got a very unsupportive government. The funding situation is bad. We've had poor industrial relations, so there's been all sorts of strikes as well as marking and assessment boycotts, and there is also the legacy of COVID.... Generally the higher education system isn't necessarily a particularly joyous place to be for many people [now]... it's the workload issue, [making] a lot of academics quite weary at the moment." (Project lead)

According to the project lead interviews, the informal and decentralised nature of PGR recruitment poses a significant challenge, complicating the adoption of new and more inclusive practices across the sector. As one project lead shared, the decision of whether a candidate is accepted is down to individual academics.

"Another challenge has been around how devolved PGR recruitment is, and the fact that every institution does it differently, every department does it differently, but ultimately, it's down to the decision of an individual academic, as to whether somebody gets taken on. And that means it's a system that is very resistant to change." (Project lead)

According to the project leads, there is a limited culture of collaboration between universities on matters like race equality. As a result, project leads felt that many projects are missing opportunities to learn from one another and share best practice across the programme and the wider sector.

"We should be able to share experiences, both successes and failures, and work towards embedding these practices, not just within the funded projects, but more broadly across the system. The benefits of these projects and what's happening with them just aren't being shared generally." (Project lead)

All project leads expressed the need for more structured and formalised collaboration facilitated by the funders.

"I thought we would all keep asking for [the funder] to do more in this space, and get us together. I think that's probably the one sort of major criticism I would have. I think they did set up a Teams group, but I don't think any of us have used it. So it would be nice to get us all together on a more frequent basis." (Project lead)

Several project leads are already recognising they are halfway through the project timeline, and are actively working towards consolidating knowledge and ensuring that the project remains sustainable beyond the programme's lifespan and also extending the benefits across the HE sector. Actions include integrating successful intervention elements (e.g. recruitment processes) into the university's regular operations, and developing resources, training materials and clear guidance documents to support and inform long-term institutional changes. However, this is not consistent across the programme. According to several project leads, a programme-level strategy facilitated by the funders, to develop a plan for all projects to ensure long-term sustainability, is required. This would also enable the wider HE sector to have access to a

resource bank of best practice approaches. This crucial element is currently missing from the programme.

> *"I think [the funder] has kicked off something potentially really powerful in terms of changing the research culture in the higher education sector and I think [the funder] needs to think how it pulls that information together and shares it across the sector and uses its power as a funder to really embed a different way of doing things. It would be great if they would have a strong management and leadership oversight of these projects, and that they actually do something with it…." (Project lead)*

5.   Conclusion and next steps

This report summarises the findings of evaluation activities conducted in Year 2 of the joint Research England and Office for Students programme to improve access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in postgraduate research.

The impact evaluation analysis found no impacts of the programme in Year 1 of implementation. Given that this is a multi-year programme and many projects had not fully begun project delivery in this period, this result is not surprising. As of Year 2 of implementation, most projects have reported being on track and feel that they are showing progress. Notwithstanding this, several challenges have affected implementation, including staffing capacity, increased workload, staff turnover, compressed timelines, difficult workplace experiences for staff from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and lower than anticipated student participation. IPE activities conducted in Year 2 suggested that strong leadership buy-in, adequate funding, staffing capacity and wellbeing support for staff are key facilitators for project success.

In the next twelve months of the programme, impact evaluation activities will focus on obtaining HESA student data for 2022-23, and hopefully 2023-24 – pending availability – for each outcome measure, and conducting analysis to estimate the impact of the programme in subsequent years of implementation. We would expect that if projects are succeeding in improving the key outcomes identified by RE and the OfS that this would start to show in the data over the next couple of years, allowing us a fuller picture of the effectiveness of the funding.

Data on project-specific outcomes will also be collected from project institutions and cleaned and analysed to estimate the impact of these interventions on project-specific outcomes. The IPE will continue with annual student and staff surveys, as well as student focus groups and project lead interviews for selected projects.

As projects develop their own evaluation reports, these will be sought and reviewed. Insights will be integrated into the IPE to understand how projects were implemented across their lifespans, the views of stakeholders about the project activities, and the mechanisms that may have facilitated or hindered any impacts observed via the impact evaluation.

The next published report of the evaluation will be the Final Report, which will be completed in June 2026.