



**GuildHE**

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**Research**

# Understanding the lived experience of ethnic minority students in postgraduate research

**A GuildHE Report by the Institute for Community Studies  
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**Institute for  
Community Studies**

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We actively involve people in research and innovation, and strengthen the relationships between communities and the organisations who influence their wellbeing

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The Institute for Community Studies is a new kind of research institute, with people at its heart. Powered by the not-for-profit organisation, The Young Foundation, the Institute works to influence change, bridging the gap between communities, evidence, and policymaking.

## About GuildHE

GuildHE is an officially recognised representative body for UK higher education. Our members include universities, university colleges, further education colleges and specialist institutions from both the traditional and private ('not-for-profit' and 'for profit') sectors. GuildHE Research, a sub-association of GuildHE, is the research consortium for smaller and specialist higher education institutions.

We engage the full diversity of our institutions, people, and places in research and innovation, and advocate for the recognition and support of excellent research wherever it is found. We help our members to embed a positive and constructive research culture, develop robust research and innovation strategies, and establish appropriate infrastructure through which they can drive forward their ambitions.



# Foreword

By Susanna, Uchenna, Faith, and Jean Paul

This research project was initiated by GuildHE in partnership with the Institute for Community Studies to capture and amplify the voices of postgraduate research (PGR) students from ethnic minority backgrounds. Following training sessions, and with support from the Institute for Community Studies, we as a team of eight postgraduate research students from GuildHE member institutions designed individual interviews to conduct with peers at our institutions, who came from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Over a three-month period, this team of research students worked collaboratively to provide an evidence base for GuildHE's anti-racism work, aimed at influencing sector-wide interventions, and leading to enhanced outcomes for students from ethnic minority backgrounds in PGR studies.

The interviews explored respondents' lived experiences on issues relating to access and participation at their institutions, representation and support received, and whether they felt a genuine sense of belonging. We sought their views on themes including discrimination and career prospects. Data generated through the interviews were later co-analysed, forming the basis for the recommendations in this report.

There is growing evidence that diversity and inclusivity within higher education institutions increases innovation and creativity, as well as productivity. Our experience while interacting with participants was that students want to feel a sense of belonging in their institution, and that belongingness increases confidence and the ability to do more while learning, contributing to the success of PGR students in higher education.



# The peer research team



**Emmanuel Boateng** graduated from Winchester School of Art with an MA in art and design. His research interests involve ideas around racial justice and equality, marginalisation, Black cultural and ethnic minority studies, art as social practice, and art as activism. His PhD research explores whether museum practices are equitable, inclusive and empathetic to different social, cultural and community groups.



**Faith Kirigha** is a journalist who worked in communications for the USAID Kenya and East Africa, and taught at the Kenya Institute of Mass Communication, which trains many of Kenya's top journalists. She is in the second year of her PhD at Falmouth University. Her research project aims to investigate the impact and implications of the regulation of digital media content on freedom of speech in Kenya. Faith is a Research Student Teaching Associate (RSTA) at Falmouth University.



**Emem Misodi** is an award-winning filmmaker who practices in Nollywood, Nigeria. She is the founder of Royal Arts Academy, a film/television training school in Lagos, Nigeria. She is currently a second year PhD student at the University of the Creative Arts (UCA), Farnham. Her research project investigates the portrayal of cultural hybridity in Nollywood narratives and the cultural influences of other cultures on Nollywood. Emem has produced over 30 movies, television series and documentaries. She is married with three children.



**Jean Paul Ndindamahina** is a PhD student in the School of Business, Law and Digital technology at Solent University. His research interests are in new and emerging technology and cultural diversity as part of human resources management and organisational behaviour. His dissertation focuses on the impact of Technology, Adoption and Use (TAU) on cultural diversity management in UK retail using exploratory sequential mixed methods.



**Muhammad Sahabi Aliyu** is a pharmacist currently undertaking a PhD programme in health studies at St Marys' University, Twickenham. His research focuses on exploring the experience of weight cycling in South Asians with Type 2 Diabetes. Muhammad's research interests are health inequalities, prevention and management of chronic diseases, adverse drug reactions, and herbal medicines.



**Susanna Mariam Matthan** is an experienced specialist teacher and currently doing an MA in Education at Bishop Grosseteste University in Lincoln. She is of Finnish and Indian heritage, appreciates silence, doodling, wandering in the woods and standing in the sea. She has been married to Chris, a violinist, for 29 years and they have one adult daughter and a couple of elderly dogs.



**Nadine Cheridee Elisée Deller** is a PhD researcher, visiting lecturer, writer and podcast creator, undertaking a collaborative doctorate with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and the National Theatre. Nadine's research concerns the different positions and work of Black women playwrights in the Black Plays Archive, using Black feminist and Black radical thought, along with spatial theory to analyse performance and archiving. Nadine created and co-hosts *That Black Theatre Podcast*, writes for the international film magazine, *Sight & Sound*, and has appeared on BBC Radio 3's *New Thinking* programme.



**Uchenna Nweke** is currently undertaking a PhD programme in business and management at Buckinghamshire New University. His primary research interest is in the area of legitimacy, accountability, and organisational performance of the UK independent church sector. Uchenna has lecturing experience and serves as the postgraduate research students' representative on the Buckinghamshire New University Research and Enterprise Committee.

# Executive summary

This report sets out the findings from the first qualitative research on the experiences of ethnic minority postgraduate research students accessing and studying at higher education institutions represented by GuildHE. It captures, through interviews, their perceptions and experiences of studying a postgraduate research degree at smaller and specialist higher education institutions.

The research represents the most expansive attempt to date to explore these issues. However, there are some limitations so we cannot claim this research is representative of *all* ethnic minority PGR students. From the data available through the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), it is a challenge to determine precise numbers of ethnic minority PGR students at GuildHE research-active institutions, or to define their exact profile in terms of demographic, socioeconomic or educational background.

That notwithstanding, what we have learned contributes important and otherwise largely unreported perspectives on experiences of higher education and research.

## Key findings:

1. Despite a lack of funding, ethnic minority PGRs chose to attend GuildHE institutions so they could have access to a community of specialists. However, this lack of financial support contributed to financial pressures for some students and negatively impacted career development activities such as conference attendance.
2. A feeling of belonging influences the education experiences of ethnic minority PGRs. The feeling of belonging is associated with the level of support received from institutions. Academic support relates to the degree they are studying for, personal support relates to individual circumstances such as having a disability. International students also needed specific support, particularly in relation to Home Office guidelines.

3. Other factors that negatively impact on 'belongingness' include lack of representation in staff and in the curriculum, as well as experiences of microaggressions, discrimination, and racism.
4. Given the lack of ethnic minority academics in higher education, it was deemed crucial to facilitate access to networks that understand the specific experiences of ethnic minorities in the labour market.

## Action for change:

It is time for both reflection and action across the higher education sector. We can develop strategies that will facilitate a sense of belonging; intersectional strategies and interventions, which seek to challenge discrimination and institutional racism. We set out at the end of this report a series of recommendations from the lessons learned in this research and suggest action that can be taken in response.

# Introduction

The tragic death of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign highlighted the work that is yet required to address racial inequalities. In response, GuildHE developed an Anti-Racism Programme, a series of speakers, briefings, interventions, and symposia underpinned by allyship training and coaching, launched in 2020. This programme acknowledges that a simple statement of support for BLM is too passive; in the face of ongoing racism and seemingly intractable inequalities, an active stance which promotes anti-racism has more chance of effecting change.

As part of this focus on anti-racism, GuildHE began working more intensively with members to consider the issues of access and participation in postgraduate research faced by students of ethnic minority backgrounds. When considering the data available, GuildHE and its member institutions identified significant gaps in the higher education sector's evidence base with regards to how PGR study is experienced specifically at smaller and specialist institutions.

Such institutions tend to have smaller cohorts of postgraduate students than other institutions, particularly research-intensive institutions (typically total PGR cohorts number between 10 and 205 students per institution, with a median cohort of 45 (HESA 2018/2019)). They typically have a slightly lower proportion of students from ethnic minority backgrounds, 8% compared to 10% in the overall HE sector. The cohorts of students tend to be different in profile to the rest of the sector, with higher proportions of mature students, female students and those studying part-time. Given this different profile, drawing on sector-wide data to understand the specific context experienced by ethnic minority students at GuildHE institutions might provide an inaccurate picture.

So why does that matter? Smaller and specialist institutions offer research pathways in specialist and applied research, such as creative and performing arts, education, or health and exercise science, in contexts which are in a close relationship with professions and industries. They

exist in locations often not well served by HE, in rural settings, or in parallel to larger institutions in metropolitan areas, providing students with a choice of the culture and environment in which they do their research. As these institutions tend not to have large external sources of funding for postgraduate scholarships, and many students self-fund, they can often also be more flexible in their admissions, considering a wider range of skills and experience and giving a broad range of potential students access to research degrees. If there is to be a shift in the experience of students from ethnic minorities in higher education, understanding what the experience is like in all contexts, not just the 'typical' or research-intensive settings, is important.

GuildHE therefore commissioned this research study into the lived experience of students from ethnic minority<sup>1</sup> backgrounds at smaller and specialist institutions, with a focus on access, participation and progression through, and the value to them of, postgraduate research study. The aim of this report is to create a qualitative and context-specific evidence base to contribute to GuildHE's work on anti-racism and associated activities. It consciously uses a peer research methodology to keep the student voice at its core. This work will support GuildHE to engage more effectively with sector-wide interventions for ethnic minority students by better understanding the experience at smaller institutions.

Eight ethnic minority PGRs were trained as peer researchers and spoke to 39 PGRs across 12 institutions. The peer researchers were involved in the design of the interview guides, the co-analysis of the data, and in putting forward the recommendations contained in this report. The first section in this report presents a desk-based review of the experiences of ethnic minority PGRs in the higher education sector. The methodology for the research is then presented. Following the discussion of the methodology, the findings from the research are discussed using the themes: access, representation, support, and discrimination. The report concludes with recommendations on how to improve the experiences of PGRs within smaller and specialist institutions.

<sup>1</sup>The term 'ethnic minorities' is used here following recent research by British Future (<https://www.britishfuture.org/beyond-bame-what-does-the-public-think/>) as the term the majority of individuals from minority groups in the UK were most comfortable with. However, GuildHE recognises that this is one term to reflect a diversity of identities and hyphenated identities (such as Black British or British Asian) and that the choice of terminology should be that the individual would use to talk about themselves.





## The wider context

Ethnic minority students' experiences can be categorised into three dimensions: their experiences in accessing PGR education; their experience of participating in PGR education; and their experiences in planning for careers post-PGR education. This literature review provides an overview of existing research to set the scene for the interview data discussed in this report.

In the higher education sector, ethnic minority students make up more than a quarter (26%) of all UK-domiciled students in the 2019/20 academic year, (HESA, 2021a). Compared to the UK population, they are over-represented at undergraduate study level but are concentrated in post-1992 and 'new' universities because they are less likely to gain entrance into Russell Group universities (Alexander and Arday, 2015; Boliver, 2016). However, this level of over-representation does not extend to postgraduate study (18%). For PGR qualifications, some ethnic minority groups are even less likely to access education. For example, 8% of all undergraduate students were Black, but this group represented 4% of postgraduate research students.

One explanation for this drop in numbers is the lack of access to finance to fund PGR degrees. Leading Routes released a report in 2019, which identified from a Freedom of Information request to UKRI that over three academic years (2016/2017 – 2018/2019), of the total 19,868 PhD-funded studentships awarded by UKRI research councils collectively, 245 (1.2%) were awarded to Black or Black Mixed students. In addition, there is a lack of congruence between the topics ethnic minority PGRs are interested in researching, such as inequality and race, and the funding opportunities available to research such topics (Fazackerley, 2019).

The recently-introduced doctoral loan in 2018/19 could be an alternative source of funding that may encourage participation, but it is too early to tell the impact of the loan for ethnic minority students. A recent survey of prospective PhD applicants did not view the doctoral loan as sufficient to cover the cost of completing a PhD, but it was still viewed as a useful source of funding (FindAUniversity, 2020). However, we do know from the introduction of the master's loan that ethnic minority students benefited from this policy intervention (Adams et al., 2019). Ethnic

minority students were more likely to use the loan (66%) and without access to finance, ethnic minority students were more likely to agree (36%) that they would have had to change their career plans or aspirations without the loan compared with white students (28%) (Adams et al., 2019).

Ethnic minority students experience further barriers once they start their postgraduate research study. An exploratory study of ethnic minority PGRs' experiences by Lynam et al. (2019) found that their experiences were intersectional with gender, age and sexuality. PGRs reported the use of stereotypes, discrimination, a lack of representation and feeling like a minority in social events (eg, if they don't drink alcohol) (Lynam et al., 2019). A lack of support and isolation from friends and family, financial issues, discrimination, language barriers are some of the issues experienced by ethnic minority PGRs (Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer, 2016; Fazackerley, 2019; Lynam et al., 2019). Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer's (2016) study aptly summarises the experiences of ethnic minorities as not always solely the experience of ethnic minority PGRs but that such experiences are more frequent and borne more deeply by them. For example, issues of financial pressures were the experiences of all PGRs but isolation, lack of institutional support and perceptions of disadvantage were more pronounced for minority groups, particularly through an intersectional lens of ethnicity, gender and disability.

Ethnic minority PGRs often experience subtle undertones of institutionalised racism and racial discrimination, micro-aggressions and differential treatment at times that were hard to quantify but resulted in feelings of marginalisation, isolation and exclusion (Arday, 2017, p.6). Bangert (2018, p.49) refers to microaggressions as the 'commonplace verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative slights or insults'. Put simply, it is the 'dripping tap effect' of repeated differential treatment, leading to feelings of isolation and being othered (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 47). By themselves, racial microaggressions can be difficult to identify, and even more difficult to challenge – but, when placed in the wider systemic context of the racial hierarchy that exists in society, microaggressions take on a racial significance (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018).

A study of racism in the UK speaks of the demeaning environment in the higher education system that ethnic minority students and staff experience; assaults, monkey chants, the N-word and other verbal abuse were some of the experiences of ethnic minority students (Weale et al., 2019). In episodes of the Black Future Dr podcast, Black doctoral students discuss their experiences of accessing and participating in PGR education - from non-traditional routes to starting a PhD, to challenges in supervision, being othered, and conforming to western standards as international students.

Although Barker's (2011) study is based in the US, it is also pertinent to the UK context and draws attention to how race is a crucial factor in supervisory relationships. Due to racism existing in UK society, notions and stereotypes can be brought into the supervisory relationship and have the potential to negatively impact on the relationship. Barker's study points out the importance of two things: having same-race connections within students' networks; and supervisors being sensitive to ethnic minority doctoral students' needs and experiences. These are additional requirements to having good supervision throughout the PGR process. Some characteristics of good supervision include giving academic advice, including constructive feedback to encourage research ideas; providing access to resources, networking opportunities and professional support; and being concerned with the students' success (Welton et al., 2014).

Differential treatment, feelings of isolation and being 'othered' can contribute to ethnic minority PGRs feeling like they do not belong in the higher education sector. Belonging is "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow in Cureton and Gravestock, 2019, p.2). Bearing in mind that belonging is linked to retention and success, under-represented and non-traditional student groups - such as ethnic minority students, mature students and international students - are more likely to experience a lack of belonging (Cureton and Gravestock, 2019). Cureton and Gravestock's (2019) study on undergraduate students show a distinct difference between the belongingness reported by ethnic minority students and that of their white counterparts. Their study highlights that although a sense of belonging can fluctuate because of the affective nature of belonging, there are ways in which higher

education institutions can contribute to a sense of belonging, particularly around interactions between students and members of staff (Cureton and Gravestock, 2019).

Access to and participation in PGR education are two dimensions of the process. Furthermore, experiences of ethnic minority students once they have completed their PGR education is important to consider.

In terms of thinking about careers on completion of PGR education, Arday (2017) found that while there was a strong appetite for pursuing an academic career post-PhD, opportunities are not readily available. Ethnic minority academics are significantly less likely to gain employment opportunities in higher education, are more likely to earn less, and are less likely to be professors (Arday, 2017). Just 18% of academic staff are ethnic minorities in the 2019/20 academic year (HESA, 2021b). Consequently, some students are discouraged from becoming academics as they feel like there are not enough positive role models (Fazackerley, 2019). In Arday's (2017) research, ethnic minority PGRs highlight exclusionary practices that may hamper their progression to an academic role post-PhD.

Some of the barriers ethnic minority PGRs face when seeking to prepare for academic careers are exclusionary practices in mentoring and supervisory support, offering of teaching opportunities, and the way informal and formal opportunities are provided to develop professional experience and collaborate with experienced academics. The limited opportunities could be attributed to ethnic minority PGRs being less likely than their white counterparts to have access to powerful 'insider' networks, because people tend to support and network with people who are 'like' them. (Bhopal, 2014; Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer, 2016).

To summarise, experiences of ethnic minority students when accessing PGR education is particularly constrained by access to finance. During their study, their experiences are influenced by a lack of institutional support and perceptions of disadvantage stemming from discrimination and racism. Once their PGR education is complete, their likelihood of a successful transition into an academic career is constrained by the lack of insider networks and suitable opportunities to transition into. The 2019 postgraduate research experience survey found that overall, ethnic minority PGR students are less likely to be satisfied with their postgraduate research experience than their white counterparts (Williams, 2019).





## The research

Eight ethnic minority PGRs were recruited and trained as peer researchers to conduct in-depth interviews with ethnic minority PGRs across GuildHE member institutions. The peer researchers conducted 39 interviews with ethnic minority PGRs across 12 institutions. These institutions represent 37% of the research active members of GuildHE and are mostly located in London and south-east England. The interviews took place between August and October 2021. The peer researchers co-designed the interview guide to gain an understanding of the experiences of ethnic minority PGRs. The peer researchers co-analysed the findings from the interview data to make recommendations on how to improve the experiences of ethnic minority PGRs.

One strength of using peer researchers was that participants were more open about their experiences with those conducting the research because they were also ethnic minority PGR students. Ethnic minority students' voices have therefore been amplified through this methodology. However, as some aspects of institutional life are invisible to students, the insight into their experiences is one aspect of the multi-faceted factors that influence students' experiences.

### The PGR interviewees

There was an almost equal split between male (53%) and female (47%) students. The sample was roughly split between international (46%) and home (54%) students. 5% of the sample are aged between 18 – 24, about half (51%) of the sample were aged between 25 – 34, and 44% aged between 35 - 64 (35 – 44, 27%; 45 – 54, 14%; 55 – 64, 3%). This is a relatively mature profile of participants, which aligns with the profile of students at GuildHE institutions.

Figure 1 provides the ethnicity of participants. Nonetheless, throughout this project, peer researchers and participants recognised that having an intersectional lens to understanding the experiences of ethnic minority PGRs was important. It was not deemed useful to simply categorise participants into groups based on a reductive set of characteristics such as gender or ethnicity. Consequently, in understanding experiences, peer researchers were cognisant of how the intersections of multiple characteristics shape participants' lived experience of PGR education. Another strength of the co-analysis of the data was that the findings were not solely based on what students said, but also through in-depth discussions of how race and difference shape the experiences of what they said.

While the findings discuss experiences based on race, many participants feel that other marginalised characteristics have shaped their experiences of PGR education too. Participants often struggle to know whether an experience is as a direct result of one aspect of their identity or another, or a combination. The analytical approach to the interview data is therefore based on the principle of intersectionality, reflecting the view that some people as a result of multiple aspects of their identity have a different and more challenging experience of PGR education than those who have none, or fewer. They are more likely to be marginalised, subject to discrimination or feel disadvantaged (Arday, 2017).



Figure 1: Word Cloud showing participant responses to 'How do you describe your ethnicity?'



## Findings: the lived experience of ethnic minority PGR students

The experiences of ethnic minority PGRs were mixed, with the interviewees reporting both negative and positive experiences. Although these experiences were personal to individuals, common themes emerged, and these form the basis of this report. They echo findings from previous research in this area. Overall, it is clear that institutions can do more to foster a sense of belonging in predominantly white spaces through the provision of adequate support, to champion diversity and challenge microaggressions and incidents of discrimination.

Verbatim, anonymised quotes from individual interviews are used throughout to ground each theme in the real experiences which were reported to the peer researchers.

### **Access to postgraduate study**

Various factors influenced ethnic minority PGRs' decision to attend GuildHE institutions. Some of the commonly cited reasons include funded opportunities and familiarity with the institution, for example, having previously completed an undergraduate or master's degree, or prior contact with academic staff. The ranking of the institution and tuition fees also influenced their decisions to study at a GuildHE institution. Access to a community of specialist expertise combined with availability of supervisors in areas of interest are distinct selling points for GuildHE institutions. This finding is supported by the 2019 PGR experience survey which found that PGR students are overwhelmingly motivated by their interest in their subject rather than available funding.

## Financial support

There is an awareness by PGR students that in comparison to larger institutions, their institutions did not have access to large pots of funding which might impact on the scholarships available and access to grants to support career development such as conference attendance.

*“So, I recently did a poll amongst black PhD students at my institution, just to try and find out who’s funded, was self-funded, etc. And I think it was the stats were like, 98%, were self-funded. So, in terms of funding opportunities, they’re just nonexistent.”*

*“The only place which had no funding, which is ... the one that accorded me the chance for an interview. That’s the one I got. [...] Luckily, the UK government, for the first time in 2018, had decided to give student loans for a PhD.”*

*“They’re not associated with the Economic and Social Research Council that can provide funding for students. So, I have not had adequate access to funding. But if it is funding for the[...] general studies, my school is too small to provide funding.”*

For students who were self-funding, using the postgraduate loan, or partially funded, there was a need to find a balance between work and study.

*“I realised the money is not enough, even [though] I’ve got that loan from [the] government. I’ve told myself, I’m doing part-time to manage in my head. But I’ve got this rigid attendance, which is 12 hours, Wednesday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday. [...] My supervisor said it’s not possible. I am still doing it as I’m talking to you.[...] But for us, it’s possible. It’s either that or you don’t study.”*

While the lack of financial support did not prevent ethnic minority students from applying to GuildHE institutions, the quote above illustrates how financial pressures can negatively impact their experiences of PGR education.

## Support for PGRs

It is generally felt that individuals have a responsibility to make the most of their experience while studying. However, PGR students feel that institutions also have a role to play in enhancing their experiences, especially in addressing systemic barriers arising as a result of their membership of marginalised group(s). There was a focus on appropriate members of staff providing various kinds of support, and experiences of this differ depending on the context. For example, participants generally felt confident seeking academic support from their supervisors. However, for non-academic support, there was a reluctance to discuss issues with supervisors due to a fear that it might negatively impact on the professionalism of the relationship and on their perceived academic ability.

## Academic support

Students who felt supported academically reported a sense of belonging. The types of academic support included access to equipment, research guidance including journal publications, letters of reference for opportunities, and conference funding. Importantly, it was primarily based on the quality of the relationship between the students and staff at their institutions (from administrative departments to supervisors). The ability to access support mediated by interactions between PGR students and members of staff contributes to a sense of belonging for the participants in this research.

*“[At] my university, although it is small, but the lecturers and the staff who are working here, they are very friendly and they are very helpful... I found the offer and everything is what I need.”*

*“Well, I’ve really received a lot of support. And I feel like my academic supervisors, my academic advisors, are very helpful.”*

*“I feel really connected with the university purely because I’m always in touch with my supervisors. They are very supportive. I’m very, very happy with the support that they’re giving me. And I feel that they have gone above and beyond to support me with this course.”*

## Personal support

There were instances where students did not feel supported, particularly for needs arising from individualised and personal needs, such as mental health, accommodation support, financial pressures, and managing caring responsibilities. Furthermore, intersectionality (for example being a primary caregiver as a woman and having a disability), can give rise to specific needs that are not adequately considered through the general support available.

*“with chronic pain, it’s one of those things where it’s not really recognised,.....because it affects a really small portion of the population.”*

Sometimes, even when individuals are actively seeking support, they do not receive it. One participant kept asking for help with neurodivergent needs but she felt stereotyped as an angry Black woman; she reported that her needs were dismissed and she did not receive support.

## Support for international students

Given the range of adjustments that international students have to make as part of their UK doctoral study, many of them have a strong need for support during their doctoral journey (Evans and Stevenson, 2011). As a considerable proportion of the sample were international students, this study found that many of them require additional support needs. As one of the peer researchers said, international students are ‘strangers in this country’ and so can sometimes lack an awareness of how the British system works in their academic and social lives.

*“If you did not grow up in the UK, there are so many things that are different compared to your home country.”*

*“I was new in this country and didn’t know anybody at all so I had real troubles... it was hard to make friends. But, you know, the school tried its best actually... we had meetings online, international students, so I got to talk. Yeah, I would say that was one thing they helped out with.”*

*“They formed a WhatsApp group. And indeed, was a home away from home. And it helped us in integrating fast because, I mean, they were senior colleagues; they were able to quickly put us through what to expect. And that helps us to include people of similar colour as you that you can easily discuss[...] and they’ll have a better understanding what you’re talking about, willing to offer help. That was quite helpful.”*

There are also support requirements that arise from the UK visa system, particularly completing the visa application process, with different requirements depending on the country. Related to this, there may be some institutional practices that are regulatory that are outside of institution’s control that warrant differential treatment.

An example of such practice that can have a negative impact for international ethnic minority PGR students, if not done correctly, is the Home Office’s visa checking scheme, administered by institutions. Higher education institutions are expected to check the physical presence of students at predetermined checkpoints. In such instances, how these practices are delivered impact on students’ sense of belonging. If done with respect to the dignity of students in these interactions, further alienation of students can be minimised.

## Representation

Representation is important to the experience of ethnic minority students as it can facilitate their sense of belonging and minimise feelings of isolation.

*“I come from [a] very diverse university. And there’s loads of people from loads and loads of different backgrounds there [...] And it’s good, because you know no one’s really alone, because there is someone from another walk of life there.”*

However, in many of the institutions, there was a lack of representation which has been a persistent problem in the UK higher education sector. Students were aware of the lack of representation amongst academic staff, in the curriculum, and in teaching materials, which contributed to feelings of ‘not belonging’ in the institution. In addition, many of the institutions are not based in multicultural cities,



contributing to a sense of isolation. This lack of representation also meant that students were less likely to seek support as they questioned whether staff would understand and sympathise with their needs, as many are white and middle class.

*“But I would say, in most drama school settings, one doesn’t see, you don’t see yourself.”*

*“So, most of the ethnic minority students, they attempt to study something to do with international law but with, like, the white students, or, you know, British white students, [they] study something like, you know, domestic family law or domestic criminal law. So, the resources are widely available, because basically what they’re studying is a UK-based study.”*

*“I had an education and media course. And, you know, I said, ‘Oh, well, where’s the representation from different nationalities, different ethnic groups? In the work that we’re doing?’ [...] we were looking at Grange Hill, and just, you know, typical English shows and quite Western shows. And I said, ‘Well, where’s the representation across the board?’ ... ‘Oh, I can give you a list of, you know, maybe black authors if you want, or I can give you a list of shows that feature Asian groups in this data as well’, but why are they not included in what we’re doing?”*

*“There wasn’t really an attempt to make people from different backgrounds feel, accepted or welcomed”*

The lack of representation within the UK higher education sector in terms of staff and in the curriculum is not a new phenomenon. Campaigns such as ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ and calls to increase the number of Black professors have been demanding better representation in the sector. When students see people who look like them, whether that be staff or in the curriculum, it sends a powerful message that they belong in academic spaces.

## **Microaggressions, discrimination and racism**

Students acknowledged that overt racism was not something they experienced, which they attribute to a general awareness in UK society about what is acceptable and what is not. Likewise, training on equality, diversity and inclusion is instrumental in clarifying acceptable behaviour in institutions. However, it does not address deep-seated institutional racism such as bias with grades, microaggressions and denial of opportunities. Many of the students recounted instances of microaggressions and institutional racism. Students felt like not enough progress had been made, especially in light of the BLM movement, and sometimes even expressed a fear of repercussions and a sense of fatalism as to whether change can happen.

*“We’re only there as a side note, and only if people make a little bit too much noise. And that’s what I don’t like, you know. Right now, a lot of universities a lot of institutions are responding to what’s happened in America and you know, the tragic murder of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor. And it’s like, okay, yes, we have to do something. But you’ve known this. This is not new news. Racism is not new. You know, this discrimination, the prejudice, the bias ... Even teachers underestimating, you know, black young people, black students, I find that really, really difficult. You know, sometimes you put up your hand to speak and your comments are ignored. But if it comes from maybe a white person, then they take that comment on board.”*

*“There was one instance, I thought it was a microaggression. Or I don’t know what the word these days is, but at my university they were filming these commercial videos for that particular video that I took part in ... And then the film came out, somebody edited the film, and they sent it to me [...] So you know, I look at the film. And then the first thing I noticed was, I think it’s just me[...] that my name was spelled all wrong.”*

Repeated instances of discrimination when it comes to applying for opportunities, whether that be funding or placements for example, can lead to the development of a sense of fatalism.

*“So next time we hear anything comes in my department, I’m not going to apply. There’s no point. Why should I?”*

Due to the power imbalance between staff and students, there was a general sense of fear of repercussions on the student’s academic performance and not wanting to be viewed as a troublemaker. The onus of reporting was on the student, and they bore the consequences.

*“Now, the problem here is that ... in a case like that, if you bring something like that out, man, you will be a target. And you will go nowhere. So, the best thing is, keep it in. And so far, that’s how it goes.”*

The impact of discrimination and racism on ethnic minority students cannot be minimised whether it happens on or off campus. It diminishes their sense of belonging, which can cause their mental health to suffer.

*“It’s a very depressing thing to talk about. You feel like they undervalued you, you’re not regarded as the same, probably you have to perform. I remember one point, [...] taking again an analogy; in football, you have to perform five times better than a local, local – I mean, somebody who’s not a minority – to be now regarded as a power when you’re playing”*

*“I felt like I was invisible, like I didn’t exist ... And my hard work, my resilience to be here still, my intelligence, my lived experience, and the intelligence of that just wasn’t really considered or validated.”*

While institutions are unable to stop ethnic minority PGR students from experiencing instances of microaggressions, discrimination and racism, how these incidents are dealt with is critical. One positive example of how discrimination and racism was dealt with at an institution was shared. What was key here was

that the university took prompt action through an investigation and did not seek to protect the member of staff. When evidence emerged that the member of staff was racist, the member of staff was dismissed, sending a strong message of an intolerance of racist behaviours.

## Career prospects

In terms of what interviewees want to do post-PhD, there is a mixture of both academic and industry career aspirations, ranging from starting a business to working in the creative sector. This is reflective of the types of institutions that are GuildHE members.

For those seeking academic careers, formal and informal opportunities to develop skills and collaborate with academics were not perceived to be open and fair. Some participants felt that their ethnic minority background and individual circumstances were barriers to accessing these opportunities.

*“I should say, maybe they are just awarded to white peers, or students from, you know, maybe more aligned with white backgrounds that get the funding, and therefore they get every opportunity in terms of being coached how to go for these opportunities, and being supported and getting letters of support written for them.”*

*“I’m not happy. But you know, ... all you have to do is ...just accept it, and then go. So, deep down me, I believe, if anybody else from any other ethnic background, this wouldn’t have happened...I believe it is because of my background.”*

*“I have to work. I have to study. I have to take [the] kids to school. All this, then came the opportunity of graduate teaching experiences within the university. Knowing fully well that this is what I need to do to get experience so that when I finish I can go into lectureship. I know. I’m aware and upset, but I can’t take it.”*

Students feel that more could be done to facilitate students' ability to establish connections with academia and industry. To successfully transition into careers post-PGR education, connecting ethnic minority PGRs to networks which understand the specific experiences of ethnic minorities in the labour market is deemed crucial.

*"I've been able to approach some great academics who I know, across all kinds of different disciplines, different networks, with regards to looking at job opportunities, and so on. So that then looks at specifically our needs as ethnic minority groups and looks at the experiences that we know have come before us."*

*"They're white people that have an interest in anti-racism work and stuff. So they're people that really do take time to understand my culture and where I'm coming from. So I think I've been quite lucky, really being able to find allies, and also mentors within the institution that have opened doors for me. I realise I've been so, so lucky to have even been able to get my foot in the door in higher education. And it's because of people who have seen my potential and uplifted me really."*

For international ethnic minority students, visa restrictions impact their career prospects in two ways. Firstly, it limits the amount of teaching a PGR student can do during their degree to gain useful relevant experience. Secondly, finding an institution to support work visa applications also constrains their likelihood of getting a job on completion of their degree.



# Conclusion

By Susanna, Uchenna, Faith, and Jean Paul

Most PGR students we interviewed indicated that they are content with the support they have been given by their respective universities, but also indicated that there was a great absence of belonging, structured support, and cultural respect and consideration.

Universities have a responsibility to create spaces where PGR students 'belong' rather than just 'fit in'. 'Fitting in' necessitates changing ourselves to be accepted but 'belonging' is being accepted just as we are. Belonging in community doesn't just happen – acceptance is intentional, deliberate, and requires effort.

Diversity and inclusion require a great personal and higher education institutional effort to eradicate exclusion of any form. Based on responses from our participants, we observed that there isn't any clear direction to racial, exclusion and bias reporting platforms in place. This forces PGR minority students to be silent as they fear retribution if their complaints fall into the wrong hands.

Most participants we interviewed felt that their cultural backgrounds were not taken into consideration. So, there needs to be a higher education sector-wide push on regular cultural barriers and issues reporting, intervention and incentives that would support and empower minority PGR students. It is therefore important for institutions to create inclusive environments through formal learning opportunities, such as training to improve cultural awareness. This will enhance the sense of belonging and lead to better integration within the higher education sector.

When meaningful measures are put into place, such measures should genuinely attempt to communicate that every person has value and worth. These human needs were verbalised and communicated by every PGR student we spoke with. Measures must be explicit, inclusive, relational, and involve as many people as possible in the creation of communities for our minority ethnic students.

As a team, this project was a learning curve, and we were able to connect and share our experiences and views of our participants who placed enormous confidence and trust in us. The diversity and minority ethnic backgrounds within the group were significant to this study, adding richness, experience, and depth to the work.

This peer research has served to capture and amplify the voices of PGR students from ethnic minority backgrounds. It is our expectation that its findings will help in efforts to address issues of systemic inequalities and ensure a more diverse and inclusive culture across the higher education sector.

We anticipate that the research and recommendations produce useful information that will aid funders, policy makers and HE leaders to make informed decisions on diversity and inclusion that would create a positive impact towards minority ethnic research students.

# Recommendations

The findings discuss how a lack of financial and other forms of support, lack of representation, and discrimination/racism have an adverse effect on the experiences of ethnic minority PGR students. This section includes suggestions on how these could be improved, building on what students said positively contributed to their sense of belonging.

When thinking about ethnic minority students, it is important that institutions think beyond the labels of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups as it can homogenise Black and Asian groups as well as exclude many other identities such as Middle Eastern and Latin American. The first step is to understand the specific non-white populations in institutions by gathering relevant data to inform the development of strategies that will facilitate a sense of belonging. Institutions and the wider sector must also ensure that strategies and interventions which seek to challenge discrimination and institutional racism are intersectional, and that they highlight how multiple aspects of a person's identity can make them more likely to feel marginalised.

The recommendations below are not an exhaustive list, but they give an indication of strategies and interventions which the peer researchers identified as likely to enhance a sense of belonging amongst ethnic minority PGR students, which are linked to their retention and success:

- Increase the visibility of equality, diversity and inclusion, for example by appointing champions of inclusion or cultural ambassadors who will seek to raise awareness of diversity across institutions
- Set up an institutionally-supported ethnic minority PGR network, so there is a space for collective support. Institutional support should include resources to ensure sustainability of the network, including practical sessions on how to run a network. There was also an appetite for a network of ethnic minority students across these institutions that could be hosted and institutionally supported by GuildHE
- Create a functioning system for reporting discrimination and/or racism that avoids protectionism or prejudice. For example, a nominated contact person who serves as a race relations officer to support students in raising complaints. Consider partnering with other organisations, such as TELL MAMA UK, a support service for those who face anti-Muslim hatred and prejudice, to increase confidence that matters will be dealt with seriously. The system should incorporate a feedback loop between the university and the student, ensuring students have a named contact, timescale, information about next steps and feedback about the outcome.
- Ensure that supervisors have the prerequisite training in supporting ethnic minority PGRs. Supervisor training must recognise the supervisors' role in both information dissemination and the enhancement of students' social capital to enable students to make the most of PGR education and support their transition into careers post-PhD. The training should address issues including the racial literacy of supervisors, so they can build their awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of their students and have appropriate methods for supporting them.
- Where possible, provide students with access to a mentor outside of the supervisory relationship who can provide support and help remove barriers to requesting other support when needed.
- Where ethnic minority academics support ethnic minority students, their labour should be acknowledged and rewarded. While it is not always possible for a student to have a same ethnicity supervisor or mentor, there are steps that white staff can take that will facilitate a sense of belonging. White staff can take advantage of anti-racist education and training to know how best to support their students.

- Empirical evidence in the literature review and from this study show that ethnic minority PGRs are more likely to self-fund their PGR education. Higher education institutions need to reflect on how best to financially support their ethnic minority PGRs. With the lack of financial support, provision of targeted funding for ethnic minority students that is also open to international students will facilitate their access to higher education. Financial pressures do not ease during PGR education so provision of small pots of money to help with living expenses will also be beneficial.
- Smaller and specialist institutions do not typically have access to large financial resources, particularly for research. GuildHE and these institutions should explore options to develop relationships with research councils, governmental bodies, charitable trusts, and industry partners with a view to funding these initiatives through additional sources of income.



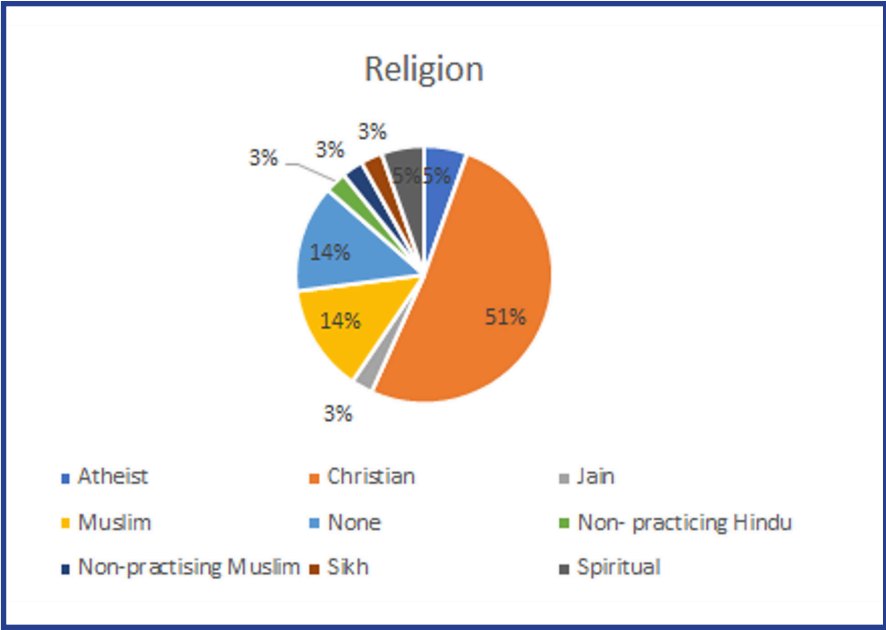
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# Appendix



Appendix 1: Pie chart showing religion of participants.



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