

Barriers to Engagement: Examining impediments to participation in targeted educational interventions for Black British postgraduate researchers

Despite a growing range of support programmes available to racially minoritised students in UK Higher Education settings, and the conceivable benefits that these initiatives offer, significant disengagement persists among students who would benefit most from such interventions (Stevenson et al., 2019). Existing studies highlight multiple factors that may contribute to low undergraduate (UG) participation rates in such activities, including a lack of perceived relevance or value to academic goals (Carthy et al., 2012; Walsh, 2009), competing demands on students' time, and the voluntary nature of these initiatives (Carthy et al., 2012). Furthermore, practical barriers such as scheduling conflicts, the duration of programmes, insufficient advertising, and limited incentives also appear to play a role in the lack of UG engagement with supportive initiatives (Witherspoon & Taber, 2021). However, less is understood about the reasons why racially minoritised PGRs under-utilise research and career supporting initiatives, given the limited and competitive nature of such opportunities.

With Black PGRs reporting a deep sense of disempowerment in the UK (Lynam et al., 2024), the lowest levels of satisfaction regarding academic supervision, skills development, networking opportunities, and overall integration within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Pitkin, 2021), scholars emphasise a pressing need to actively identify and support this cohort of students throughout their academic careers (Arday, 2020). Despite this, there appears to be a degree of apathy and non-engagement with targeted intervention programmes, indicating a gap in understanding of the Black PGR experience. This paper focusses on addressing that gap in understanding by offering insights into the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of the intended beneficiaries of these educational interventions.

Our small-scale study explores the proximal and distal causes for disengagement from funded research and career development opportunities open to Black PGRs through the Surrey Black Scholars Programme (SBS), launched in 2022. The project is situated within a much broader £8 million initiative funded by Research England and the Office for Students, aimed at widening the access and participation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in postgraduate research throughout the UK. Our evaluative study is informed by Expectancy Value Theory (EVT) (Eccles 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), which proposes that students' choices in education (such as whether to participate in targeted intervention initiatives), as well as their persistence and performance in those choices, are motivated by expectations of success and beliefs about the value of those interventions. The theory suggests that students are more likely to participate and persist in an intervention programme if they believe it to be of value and achievable to meet their expectations of success. Deploying EVT as a lens enables further understanding of the impact and limitations of the support initiatives offered to

racially minoritised PGRs. Through analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups undertaken in 2024/25 (project evaluation year), we present and discuss findings through two key EVT lenses:

- 1) Expectancy - 'expectations for success' (i.e., competence-related beliefs), influenced by personal experiences, identity beliefs (e.g. gender, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic background) and broader contextual and cultural norms.
- 2) Value - 'attainment value (i.e., importance of doing well), intrinsic value (i.e., personal enjoyment), utility value (i.e., perceived usefulness for future goals), and cost (i.e., competition with other goals).

This type of research with Black students raises ethical concerns of potential harm, with PGRs sharing their vulnerabilities. As such, ethical approval paid explicit attention to mitigating harm and considering how to enable Black PGRs to express themselves in psychological safety. Data capture and storage was also a feature of successful ethical approval, given the sensitivities and vulnerabilities being shared by participants who are often considered marginalised in education and society.

The emerging insights presented in this paper are framed by a desire to ensure that race-conscious educational interventions like SBS can be sustained beyond the project's funding period. Detailed and theoretically based evaluation of SBS will help us to identify which components of the programme are most effective and valuable for students. As well as contributing to ongoing longitudinal research in this area, the findings of the study may be of interest to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) seeking to embed equity, inclusion, diversity (EDI) and social justice practices into existing structures. Furthermore, to ensure that future initiatives are meaningful to Black PGRs, the research centres student voices as a key driver for change and enhanced PGR provision, which local doctoral provision in HEIs would benefit from.

References

Arday, J., 2020. The black curriculum: Black British history in the national curriculum report.

Carthy, A., McCann, C., McGilloway, S. and McGuinness, C., 2012. A qualitative study of Irish first year undergraduate students' reasons for non-engagement with the provision of emotional competency coaching. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 4(2).

Lynam, S., Lafarge, C. and Milani, R.M. (2024) 'Exploring the experiences of ethnic minority postgraduate researchers in the UK', *Educational Review*, 76(7), pp. 1980–2000. doi:10.1080/00131911.2024.2316614.