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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Race-centered initiatives as a targeted intervention: help or hinderance to Black British postgraduate research students' experiences and success?

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ABSTRACT

Known barriers to accessing higher education, which subsequently impact the attractiveness of doctoral-level studentships for Black British students, include widespread experience of racism at university, specifically stereotyping and low expectations of their abilities, and the underrepresentation of Black academic staff. This article investigates whether race-centered initiatives as a targeted intervention mitigate these factors and improve the experiences and success of Black British Postgraduate Research (PGR) students. As one of 13 nationally funded projects, we took a practical action research approach to developing and implementing initiatives aimed at enhancing Black British PGR students' experiences and career prospects within the UK Academy. After completing two cycles of action research with the initiatives, narrative interviews with four (out of an initial project cohort of 10) Black British PGR students were conducted to evaluate overall benefits and barriers to participation. Those who participated in multiple initiatives found benefits of engagement that built confidence, increased visibility and representation, and developed skills useful in enabling them to successfully remain on their studentships and ready themselves for their future careers. However, concerns were also raised around deficit perspectives that these types of initiatives create and their relevance. Undergraduate-level targeted interventions are well reported, but less is known about structures and mechanisms that can attract, recruit, and retain Black British students at doctoral-level study and support their success through and beyond their studentships. This article aims to add to the body of work on targeted interventions but also address the gap around doctoral-level action.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom (UK), widening participation agendas have broadened access to higher education (HE) for racially minoritized students, with increasing numbers entering the undergraduate level in recent years. However, these advances have not been sustained across the educational pipeline, particularly at the postgraduate research (PGR) level, where Black British students remain underrepresented. Despite the extensive rhetoric on tackling awarding gaps and embedding diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI)—which demonstrably benefits targeted student support programs—(Irwin & Knight, 2017) structural barriers to entry and progression persist in HE.

In light of these barriers, sector regulators have begun to position Black doctoral access as a test of institutional equity under the UK's Equality Act 2010. The Office for Students (OfS) now mandates that universities include PGR targets in their access and participation plans. Yet while policy momentum is building, there remains limited empirical evidence about what kinds of interventions, particularly those designed specifically for Black British students, are effective in addressing access and retention gaps at the doctoral level.

The Black PGR experience within UK higher education

Despite Black British students accounting for 8% of UK-domiciled undergraduates, fewer than 2% progress into doctoral programs (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2023). This underrepresentation reflects

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structural and institutional barriers that limit progression into doctoral study. Black PGR students experience a complex interplay of factors related to race and intersectional identity (Islam et al., 2024), which shapes their engagement, sense of belonging, and progression within doctoral study. Structural inequities, such as attainment gaps resulting from unconscious bias in assessment (Badrie et al., 2023), reinforce systemic barriers and significantly reduce the successful progression to higher qualification levels.

Disparities in undergraduate attainment have significantly contributed to Black PGR students' experience. Black students are significantly less likely than their White peers to achieve a first or upper-second class degree, which restricts eligibility for competitive postgraduate research funding and limits opportunities to progress into doctoral study (UUK and NUS [UUK], 2019). Access to funding remains deeply inequitable, with only 1.2% of nationally competitive UKRI PhD studentships being awarded to Black applicants (Arday, 2021). Black PGRs consistently report encountering systemic barriers at multiple levels within HE institutions, where dominant White norms, policies, and practices continue to shape institutional cultures (Garrett, 2025; Islam et al., 2024). These conditions manifest in experiences of "othering," undermining students' sense of belonging, academic confidence, and progression outcomes.

Studies have highlighted a tension between private coping strategies and public academic productivity, as well as how the interplay of race and gender as intersectional identities manifests as the dual burden of anti-blackness and sexism within HE (Sobande & Wells, 2023). These challenges are deepened by wider structural barriers, including institutional racism, exclusionary curricula that privilege Eurocentric perspectives, and the underrepresentation of Black academic staff in senior leadership roles. Collectively, these factors create academic environments in which Black PGRs often feel marginalized and unsupported (Arday, 2021; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015), providing a crucial context for the study.

This article contributes to existing literature through an action research study that explores the potential of student-centered, racially bespoke initiatives to support and motivate Black British students to enter and remain on postgraduate research studentships. Developed as part of a nationally funded project aimed at tackling racial inequalities in PGR, this designed program implemented and evaluated a range of targeted interventions across three key phases: pre-studentships aimed at undergraduate Black British students to encourage them to consider a career in research or academia (awareness-raising and aspiration-building), during their studentship focusing on representation within the university context (community-building, academic development, and belonging) and preparing for post-studentship transition and focusing on career skills in academia (career planning and academic employment skills).

Using a practical action research framework (Efron & Ravid, 2020; Mertler, 2009), this study adopted an iterative, reflective approach to intervention design, delivery, and evaluation of initiatives specifically created for Black British PhD students and tailored in real time within our institution. Through applying Riel's practical action research cycle (Mertler, 2009), this article presents findings that highlight how tailored, student-centered approaches were viewed and experienced. Moreover, analysis through the lens of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) illuminates whether the implemented initiatives held cultural value and enhanced participants' capital.

Methodology

Action research, simply put, looks to simultaneously investigate and solve an issue by implementing possible resolutions and evaluating and reflecting on their effectiveness. Stemming from the work of Kurt Lewin (Adelman, 1993), action research has evolved in the field of education to inform and enhance practices, curricula, and systems to improve educational experiences and outcomes. As such, action research in education is a method of action resolution through reflective inquiry and knowledge generation (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009), resulting in action for research purposes, action for problem solving, and action for educators' emancipatory practices (Robertson, 2000).

A key action research characteristic is that research is conducted systematically by insiders who are subjective, engaged, and involved in the context, where research questions arise from local needs and where research is applied directly to practices (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Practical action research seeks to solve specific identified problems through intervention, review, reflection, and evaluation processes, whereas participatory action research (often referred to as PAR) centers the contributions of the community to the study as active participants in the research process, utilizing

qualitative techniques of observing, documenting, and interpreting patterns and attributes of the phenomena under study (MacDonald, 2012). As the subjects of the study were not in place at the inception of the funded project, this study takes a practical action research approach through the project team asking the research question, “What initiatives effectively support Black British students to enter and remain on postgraduate research studentships?” although evaluations include the views of students who participated in the designed initiatives.

Project aims

This project is one of 13 projects being funded nationally to investigate how to increase access and participation of racially minoritized groups in postgraduate research across the UK. There are three main aims of this project. First, the project aims to increase the number of Black British students starting postgraduate research studies at the university where this research was conducted. Second, the project aims to provide an equitable experience for Black British postgraduate students equivalent to the White students’ experiences while studying at the university. Finally, the project aims to increase Black British PGR career opportunities, whether in academia or industry. By implementing a range of initiatives, the project looks to create systemic changes within the university’s doctoral provision that may impact national practices as part of the wider set of projects being funded.

Implementing Riel’s action research cycle

In response to the project aims, we drew on Riel’s four-stage action research cycle (Mertler, 2009), which looks to identify the issue under study and plan for solution implementation, take action, collect and analyze data, and finally reflect on the outcomes to move into the next cycle of progressive problem solving (Figure 1). A range of initiatives were designed and implemented aimed at enhancing the attractiveness of doctoral-level studentships and academia as a profession to Black British students. The range of initiatives designed and delivered as the “take action” phase of the cycle are outlined below (Table 1).

The design and implementation of all initiatives took place over two and a half years. Table 1 outlines the frequency in which initiatives were delivered. Each initiative gained participants’ (Black British undergraduate students or Black British PGR students) feedback at the end of the event to understand the usefulness and impact of the initiative as part of the “collect and analyze evidence” phase of the action research cycle. Feedback at the end of each event helped the project team to modify the initiative for the next round of implementation through the “reflection” phase of the cycle, enhancing the quality of experience or the process of access.

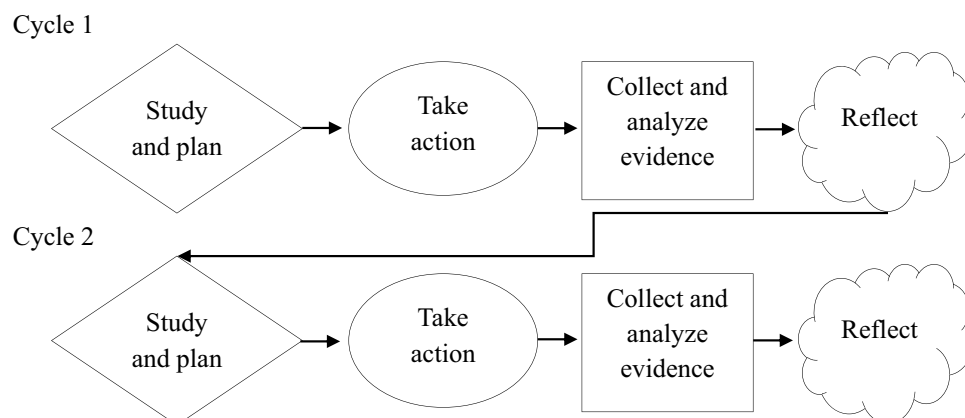


Figure 1. Riel’s four-stage action research cycle (adapted from Mertler, 2009) implemented twice.

Table 1. List of initiatives and frequency of delivery.

Area of focus	Initiatives	Frequency of initiatives
Pre-studentship (UG focus)	Summer Internship Scheme	Three
During studentship	External speaker series	Three
	Networking events	One*
	External placement scheme	One**
	Conference and research seminar series	Three
	Student newsletter	Two
Preparation for post-doctoral transition	Teaching recognition (AFHEA)	Two
	Employability boost opportunity	Two

*A second networking event in the pipeline and prior to the end of the project.
 **One round was offered but no take up due to possible time constraints, to avoid lengthening the studentship, and students struggling to find their own placements.

Data collection and ethics

The project's first cohort of 10 PGR students had opportunities to access and participate in the full range of initiatives offered across the lifespan of their studentships and throughout the duration of the project, to provide a detailed understanding of the benefits and/or barriers of such initiatives to Black British research students. The cohort was made up of seven female and three male Black British postgraduate research students, studying across social sciences, health sciences, and STEM subjects. Four of the Black British female PGRs participated in two or more of the project initiatives. The three Black British male PGRs participated in one or fewer of the initiatives offered through the project. Participants of each initiative provided feedback about benefits and/or barriers to success of participating in the initiatives, allowing for reflection and enhancement of students' experiences and efficacy of the activities before offering future modified iterations of each initiative in a second or third round. The action research cycle was implemented at least twice for most initiatives. All 10 Black British PGRs had opportunities to access initiatives either in the initial delivery of each activity or in later reviewed and enhanced iterations of the initiatives, where offered, but not all students took up opportunities.

To understand whether there is a broader need for race-centered initiatives, what they should look like if the initiatives offered were not attractive, and the impact of these initiatives on Black British students' participation in postgraduate research, it was also necessary to consider how the wider project can be modified and improved beyond the funding timeline. Drawing upon critical race theory's (CRT) tenets of centralizing voices of color and the ordinariness, hence persistence, of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), all 10 Black PhD students were invited to participate in narrative semi-structured interviews, which were conducted between June and September 2025 to "collect and analyze data" about the project as a targeted intervention. Only four Black PhD students consented to being interviewed, where two actively participated in a range of initiatives and two were less engaged (Table 2).

As feminist researchers who center the voices of marginalized groups, we take an anti-essentialist approach to research data analysis and dissemination, ensuring that the lives and experiences of individuals who are often unseen are not carved up to conveniently fit themes but are drawn upon holistically to provide stories that exemplify life experiences and realities. An anti-essentialist approach also avoids generalizations of experiences, recognizing that individuals have their own unique experiences and views. We use pseudonyms to provide anonymity. While we recognize that a sample of four is a limitation, as generalizations cannot be made, this article looks to illuminate Black PGR perceptions of participation in the project's initiatives (or reasons for not doing so) through rich contextual narratives rather than creating opportunity for generalizations, as per our anti-essentialist approach. We recognize the ethical conundrum of creating generalizations from individuals' lived experiences. We also understand that qualitative

Table 2. Interviewee details.

Pseudonym	Gender	Research field	Number of initiatives participated in
Dominique	Female	STEM	More than four
Evelyn	Female	Social Sciences	More than two
Samuel	Male	Health Sciences	None
Marcel	Male	Social Sciences	One

researchers often position themselves as non-positivist in a research landscape that is rooted in positivist and post-positivist traditions (Varpio et al., 2017).

Ethical approval was gained from the university's ethics committee in May 2025. Mitigating potential racial trauma that might arise from interviews, through participants sharing difficult experiences at the university, was specifically considered. We clarified how the research data would be captured and stored securely and considered ways of minimizing risk of harm to participants and researchers, including providing opportunities for breaks and sharing experiences for a sense of community and commonality.

Analytical lenses

We employed inductive thematic analysis to understand broad benefits and barriers, mirroring benefits/barriers evaluation of each initiative completed by participants, then viewed themed data through lenses of CRT's ordinariness of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and concepts of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). We aimed to examine whether barriers resulted from the existence of systemic racism within the institution and whether benefits stemmed from challenging forms of systemic racism by employing their community cultural wealth forms of capital ("aspirational capital," "social capital," "navigational capital," "familial capital," "linguistic capital," and "resistant capital" as alternative cultural capitals). As Yosso (2005) describes, aspirational capital is the ability to maintain hopes and dreams beyond historical and present circumstances. Social capital refers to the networks developed and community resources drawn upon for success. Navigational capital is the set of skills required to successfully maneuver through institutions while mitigating any potential harm that can be caused by the institution. Familial capital refers to the kinship felt by those in a marginalized community. Linguistic capital refers to the social skills developed when communicating in more than one language or style. Finally, resistant capital refers to how inequity is challenged through building knowledge and skills, acting as a form of resistance to structural oppression and invisibility. Interviews allowed for capturing more detailed and nuanced responses related to participants' experiences and perspectives, including from Black British PGR students participating in multiple initiatives that are not captured at the individual activity level. These wider evaluation data were required for reporting purposes to close the project and consider how to move the targeted intervention forward beyond the project lifespan.

Positionality

As the first author, I am a racially minoritized woman but not race-matched (Egharevba, 2001) to the participants and my coauthor. I understood that I needed to take a more peripheral position in this project, not being able to speak directly to experiences specific to Black students and not representing them fully. I, therefore, played a coordination and project evaluation role, contributing to external reporting, co-constructing data collection mechanisms, and analyzing collected data, having minimal direct contact with the project participants unless necessary.

As the second author, I undertook this research as a Black woman and a current postgraduate researcher in the UK, whose intersectional identities and positionality within the Black African diaspora shape my approach. My lived experience navigating HE provides insight into the barriers Black students encounter, particularly at the doctoral level, and informs my awareness of how diasporic identity can intersect with systematic inequalities in academic spaces. At the same time, I remain reflexive, acknowledging the privileges and limitations of my standpoint while centering the voices of participants and ensuring that their experiences drive the analysis.

Findings

The findings on the benefits and barriers to access and participation in the project are outlined through the individual perspectives of PGRs' experiences. Dominique and Evelyn participated in multiple initiatives (more than two), and we drew on their perspectives and experiences to exemplify key benefits of participation as they draw on capital (Yosso, 2005). In comparison, Samuel and Marcel participated in one or fewer

initiatives, and we drew on their perspectives to provide an understanding of the barriers that prevented engagement with the initiatives provided, seen through the ordinariness of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

How Black PGR students draw on capital

The following narratives outline the ways in which Dominique and Evelyn perceived benefits of participating in initiatives as they drew on capital that forms community cultural wealth. They found a welcoming community in the program offered. They drew on navigational capital, social capital, aspirational capital, and familial capital to articulate the perceived benefits they experienced.

Improved representation and having a space to highlight Black student success

Dominique spoke of the importance of representation as a key benefit. Dominique was one of the most active Black British PGRs in the initiatives offered through the project. She took up multiple opportunities that were both administrative and academic in nature, primarily to support her studentship and in preparation for a postdoctoral transition. Dominique acutely felt the lack of racial diversity in her discipline and spoke openly about the impact of this underrepresentation. She spoke of how the project helped her to manage being in her discipline space (through her navigational capital) and settle into the work of her PhD.

The [discipline] department is very lacking in diversity, and it felt a bit hard for me to integrate. It was very difficult to see people in my department where I can have these honest conversations [about race]. I have a White male supervisor, and he didn't understand some of the challenges I was facing being a Black person, and I needed to find a space where I can have these conversations, which ultimately led me to the Black Scholars program. Being part of the project brings awareness to disparities we experience as a Black person in academia. Other Black scholars I'm speaking to from different departments, they have the same issue where they are not seen, not heard. They're usually the minority, and it's very difficult to get that space to speak about issues [related to being Black in academia]. The project offers a space where we can have these discussions because sometimes it's not about finding solutions; it's about having a space where you can speak and share your voice. And it wasn't until I found this space I was able to settle in and do the [PhD] work . . . A lot of people have commented about how this space is really good.

Dominique goes on to explain how being in a discipline that is occupied by predominantly White academics and students is something that she thinks about constantly due to the lack of representation and the impact this has on her confidence. She reflects on being racialized in the UK and in academia, and whether she is operating on a level playing field.

I think it's important because no matter how much we deny it, race is a very important part of everything that we do in the UK . . . I think this always plays on my mind and it affects my confidence quite a bit. I think it was the first and only time I heard a Black [discipline] professor speak, and he was talking about how it was so hard for him to obtain grants and funding, and he's struggling in his career as a result. You experience these things as somebody who's in [the discipline], but it's something not spoken about. So, I guess people who look like me just eventually leave because of all of this frustration, and there isn't a space where people can talk about it. They usually just leave academia and go into industry. I noticed with people who are White, it's easier for them because when they go to conferences, there's so many people that look like them. They don't have the barriers of their skin color, all of those things. Their main priority is focusing on the research. But with the project, there is a space where you can come and have these conversations, talk about commonalities and just have a place where people can commend you about your skills and accomplishments. I can have a space where I can have a conversation, and it motivates me to go back out in the places where I have to constantly be thinking about race and how I'm perceived.

Dominique speaks of the benefits of having a space that represents her. Being involved in activities, like the project online newsletter curation that celebrates Black students' successes, raised her self-esteem through working with other PGRs who looked like her by drawing on social capital, and acts as a positive legacy that other Black PhD students can access for strength and improving sense of belonging in academia.

It's quite nice to have a space where we can discuss highlighting the accomplishments of minoritized people. Because in my department or even any other workplaces where I've been, I've usually been one or two Black people in that organization. I never really saw minority people being highlighted. So, it's nice to be in that space

where we can get to do that. I'm seeing there are other people out there doing the work despite having the challenges, and because I'm seeing that, it motivates me to keep going because I know that I am not the only one.

Dominique was clear that initiatives specifically designed for minoritized students are necessary. Her views create a narrative of hope and aspiration of being accepted in academia.

It also just makes me aware of opportunities that are specifically for minoritized students, and it gives me hope too because I can see someone who looks like me in these spaces. I think programs like this are very needed.

Mentors and role models

Evelyn took part in a number of initiatives (although less than Dominique) but also had a key role in the project's governance. Her biggest take-away came from the mentoring she received. She articulated the importance of having a mentor that looks like her, which she found motivational.

[Participating in the project] highlighted for me the importance of community in academia. I think because of this, I was exposed to like-minded people, and through that I've been able to network, and that has brought me different opportunities for further development, if that makes sense. So, it was through this networking initiative that led me to a Black mentor. Just being around Black researchers, there's something motivational about it. There are very few Black people in my department. I only know of two other people. Through mentorship, I have been able to feel like I have a space in academia, and if I have a space, then other people can have a space. So, if you are looking at more long-term initiatives aimed at improving representation, then I think mentorship would be a big one.

Evelyn goes on to clarify why appropriate race-matched mentorship was critical to her experience as a PhD student. For her, mentorship equated to affirming her acceptance in academia, navigating through an unrepresentative space, and hope of what is possible for her own future, drawing on her aspirational capital.

[Mentorship] normalizes the experiences of doing a PhD and those [experiences] that I have as a person from marginalized backgrounds or identities. But also, there's something about looking at someone who's been where you are, but is further down that journey, that makes it seem doable, but maybe from a cultural perspective. It's the idea of the elder and wisdom that makes it appealing to me . . . You see someone who's a professor, who's been married, an African woman, has three kids and has done it. I guess it's the relatability of it, the cultural sensitivity of it, as well as the cultural relevance of it.

Evelyn felt strongly that her Black female mentor was highly invested in her as a student, having experience of what it is like for Evelyn and other Black PhD students in the academy. Her mentor appeared committed to improving the learning experiences of racially minoritized students, taking on a nurturing and supportive role to many others (a form of familial capital, through supporting and nurturing in the way that family would) and being a role model, which gave Evelyn confidence about a future in academia.

You can tell that they are genuinely invested in you, but also in improving the representation in the academy. Having a mentor who's really dedicated to improving stuff or 'the cause' [enhancing Black and racially minoritized student experience], for lack of a better term, is important and a personal investment as well. You can tell how she takes on the role of 'guide' for many other people in her life.

Evelyn has not only benefited from being mentored by a positive role model but has also realized that she has become a role model to undergraduate Black female students in her discipline. She explains a surprising and positive encounter that solidified the importance for her of race-matched role models. Evelyn's experience also supports Dominique's views about improved representation.

So, part of my PhD experience has meant that I have been a GTA [graduate teaching assistant] and I was an academic tutor for a course for the first-year undergraduates. One of the girls, a Black girl, walked up to me and she's like, "Huh, I've never seen a Black researcher" or something along those lines, "How did you do it? I said, "Oh, the Black Scholars program," and she said, "Huh, interesting, interesting." There's something fulfilling about that . . . Maybe it showed her that there's a bit more representation than we think. Or there's people that look like you in this field.

Skills development for future employability

Both Dominique and Evelyn spoke positively of how participating in project initiatives has been beneficial in developing their employability skills. Dominique clearly lists the various skills that she has had the

opportunity to develop, improve, and use in other activities that are not part of the project, as ways to develop her social and navigational capital.

Definitely leadership, project management, and I think communication . . . through writing and through speaking. And being able to, in addition to the networking aspect, communicate in a way that other non-specialists can understand my research. Now I've spoken to people, especially through the project because they're not in my department; I had to learn how to convert it into layman's terms so people can understand. For example, I remember when I had to present for the Race Equity Conference; no one in the room was from the [discipline] department, and I explained it in such a way that I was able to spark conversations from sociologists, from people who were in health sciences and so on. So, I think that's definitely one of the most important things, up there with the project management.

Evelyn noted how participating in initiatives has pushed her out of her comfort zone, supporting her future career opportunities. She specifically speaks of enhancing her social capital through developing networking skills, which she found challenging, as a benefit of participation in the initiatives, but more widely developing her leadership and administrative skills.

Networking, I think, because networking doesn't come naturally to me. It has forced me to do something that I don't like, which I think will be important in the next phase. I've engaged in some initiatives that make me more employable, whether that's from a leadership perspective and admin or something that would look good on my CV. So, there were different opportunities that allowed me to even challenge myself and get out of my comfort zone and develop more employability skills.

Evelyn also spoke specifically about the employability boost initiative as a key experience. She felt that the real-life academic experiences were unique to the project, which she could not pass up, and gave her a taste of how to navigate post-doctoral employment.

The way [the employability boost initiative] is set up, it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, getting to go to different universities' labs and working on grant applications. So, I think that is an opportunity that I don't think I would have gotten anywhere else. I really think it's going to help with my next step, whether that's helping secure a grant or just getting an RA (research assistant) job at the end of it or a fellowship. I do think it will help.

Overall, Dominique and Evelyn's experiences demonstrate that participation in the project initiatives benefited their confidence in navigating unrepresentative spaces, enhanced their sense of belonging in their discipline, and prepared them for employability in the academy, drawing on forms of capital to succeed and resist structural oppressions. The three key benefits of participating in project initiatives were identified: improved representation highlighting Black students' successes, appropriate race-matched mentoring, and targeted skills development. These benefits have encouraged both Dominique and Evelyn to consider careers in academia or as industry researchers after they have completed their PhDs, contributing to meeting the third aim of the project.

Relevance and the ordinariness of racism as barriers to engagement

Samuel and Marcel articulated their reasons for lack of participation in the initiatives. While Samuel questioned the relevance of the offered program to his needs, both recognized that negative perceptions of Black students that exist within educational institutions, as the CRT's ordinariness of racism tenet, were a key barrier to engagement.

Relevance of the initiatives to discipline requirements

Samuel had chosen not to engage with any of the initiatives, primarily due to the nature of his discipline. He was undertaking a PhD in a field that supports public sector practices. As such, his priority was on practical application of knowledge and research in the field. This had a two-fold effect: a lack of time to participate in project initiatives and not seeing how the project initiatives could help him to work in his specific field. Samuel explains his position and why he did not access any project opportunities offered.

So, I probably haven't engaged much with the intervention [project] because I just haven't had the time to do it. The whole time I've been doing my PhD, I've been working one or two days a week as well with the [required discipline] training for my portfolio. So, I just haven't really probably had the time to engage. And for me especially, I haven't really seen many things in my field or opportunities that would help me that much.

Samuel appears to hold the view that initiatives should be designed as bespoke to students' discipline needs. So, he was less inclined to participate in the offered initiatives. Nevertheless, like Evelyn, Samuel felt that mentoring was important, but he felt that someone working in the public sector field he aimed to enter, regardless of intersectional identities, was more beneficial to his own development and preparedness for future employment.

Well, because I've never worked in a [public sector] setting like that before, when I went into it, I didn't really know what to expect or understand. But being guided by someone who's in the profession I want to do, yeah, it's shown me everything I need or things I should start to do to be able to get in that role when I'm ready . . . she's been mentoring me professionally, which, for me, has been extremely helpful because she's guided me into specific training courses in that sort of role.

Samuel's goal was geared toward the academic and professional needs of the discipline to ensure his future success. However, he did recognize the benefits of having culturally and racially appropriate mentors, due to the challenges of being racialized in academia, although he did not make efforts to seek out a mentor that looked like him.

If I was to share some part of my journey, things have happened to me in the past, I don't really know if people I work with or my supervisor would understand. If you've got someone on your same wavelength that can understand what you've been through, I think it just gives you that extra bit of help and understanding. So yeah, I do think that is really helpful sometimes.

Deficit perceptions of Black students

Marcel held very strong views about the perception of the project to peers and academics that did not look like him. Particularly, he articulated concerns about perspectives of other students who do not gain benefits of similar initiatives being offered to them and feeling like part of a social experiment. This appeared to be a major factor in his decisions not to participate in most of the project initiatives (he participated in one initiative at the suggestion of his supervisory team).

Maybe subconsciously it might be because, oh, it's got 'Black' in the title. Maybe if it was something more neutral, I don't know . . . Anything where you put 'Black' in it, then maybe to non-Black people you can maybe feel a bit uncomfortable saying you're part of the program. When you start saying you're part of the Black scholars' program, it can make you sometimes feel like, well, I'm only here because I'm Black . . . Among certain audiences, I'm sure the scheme would get some sort of pushback because to even be offered funding and employability boosts and research grants and placements, a lot of PhD students don't have access to [this support]. Just telling people I'm part of the *Black* [original emphasis] scholars and then you're telling them that, "Oh, I'm getting this funding, and I'm getting this, and I'm getting that," and then they're getting nothing . . . Is this purely because I'm Black? Am I a sociological case study? Am I here for the merits of my own research, or am I just a case study for someone who wants to prove that racism is real?

Moreover, Marcel raised concerns about deficit perspectives of Black students' abilities. Deficit perspectives and narratives exist to, first, denigrate people of one race or ethnic background while simultaneously elevating people of the dominant racial group. Second, deficit perspectives and narratives serve to justify the oppression of a racialized group by attributing negative characteristics to members of that group, such as being lazy and incapable. Finally, deficit perspectives and narratives maintain the power of the elite and dominant group, which in the United States (and UK) is White European (Russell et al., 2022). Marcel felt that race-centered initiatives only serve to reinforce ideas that Black students are less capable than their White peers and need a "special scheme" to be successful, serving to solidify systemic oppressions and negative stereotypes of Black learners. This raised an ethical dilemma embedded within the project design. By its very design, the initiatives potentially imply that the university needs to intervene for Black students to succeed, contradicting the intentions of the project. Marcel felt this acutely.

So I'm thinking, if you feel as a Black researcher that you don't belong in an institution and you don't fit in anyway or you don't feel good enough, then to be put on a special scheme which is just for you . . . you don't have to come in the institution and wear it as a badge of honor or a special badge we've got. [It says] they can't do it for themselves. We have to help them out.

Samuel and Marcel provide clear and rational reasons for not willingly participating in the initiatives. How these issues can be addressed adequately requires further research by the project team beyond the scope of

this article. In comparison, Dominique and Evelyn found that participation in a range of initiatives was beneficial to their sense of belonging through community building and celebrating Black student success.

Discussion

The difference between gender participation

Black British female PGRs involved in the project were more likely to participate in the range of initiatives offered. There is a growing body of literature that demonstrates that Black women in educational settings, in both academic and administrative roles, face invisibility, oppressions, and micro-aggressions about their abilities, leading to them building larger banks of experiences and credentials to counter deficit perspectives of their capabilities (Breden, 2021; Cepeda, 2024; Taylor McNeill & Jefferson, 2024). Drawing on the idea of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), Black women work toward exceeding expectations of them and gaining experiences beyond the minimum requirements of their roles as a form of “resistant capital” (2005, p. 80). In unrepresentative spaces, like predominantly White universities, they confront erasure and minimization by developing self-defined resistance identities (Newton, 2025). Black women, in particular, use their agency to oppose and resist power structures through their mind (knowledge and skills), body (being present and in spaces), and spirit (values and beliefs) in challenging inequalities (Lane & Id-Deen, 2023). Strategies that Black women use as resistant capital are a dedication to hard work and a strong work ethic, self-care through safe spaces to share experiences, the allocation of time to safely and positively manage challenges and to engage in activities that support their goals, and the development of support systems including family, friends, faith communities, and networks that contribute to their success (Grabsch et al., 2025). Although the Black male PGRs provided understandable reasons for lack of engagement in the initiatives offered, resistant capital and the underpinning strategies that Black women employ may explain why a higher proportion of Black female PGRs took up multiple opportunities provided through the project.

While Black women draw on their resistant capital to challenge inequalities, they also find resistance a form of empowerment and liberation through Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought provides a window to understand how Black women’s consciousness drives their actions of resistance that stem from their self-definitions and carve spaces for them to be seen and feel safe, often as a collective but also individually. Self-definition enables Black women to resist appropriated normative stereotypes and deflect “psychological attacks on their personhood, adulthood, their dignity ... and definitions of them as inferior” (Collins, 2000, p. 107). Black women’s empowerment to resist inequalities does not disregard or absolve the systemic oppressions they face within HE institutions, as outlined by Marcel’s narrative. However, Black women’s resistance and empowerment have the ability to flip the narratives of oppression, which are often associated with marginalized communities, to one of joy, success, and positivity that are minimal in current discourses.

Meritocracy

While some PGRs have clearly articulated their desire to be viewed on their own merits and through meritocratic lenses, the concept of “merit” is abstract and intangible, being defined and determined by context (Liu, 2011). The PGRs that are the focus of this project are confident that they deserve to inhabit doctoral-level academic spaces through their own rewards, tenacity, hard work, and successful outcomes, which has some truth. However, the reality of meritocracy is more nuanced and ambiguous in HE, particularly where structural inequalities operate. The seemingly perpetual existence of awarding gaps between Black and White students in HE undergraduate outcomes, which subsequently impacts Black students’ abilities to successfully gain PhD studentships, attests to such structural inequalities that have yet to be effectively addressed. In educational institutions, processes that are deemed meritocratic can be distorted, can be influenced by non-meritocratic factors, and favor some groups in society while disadvantaging others by its very definition, leading us to understand that meritocracy is not just an unfulfilled promise but one that is unfulfillable (Mijis, 2016). This provides the rationale for affirmative action, creating additional structures and processes, such as those provided in this project, that aim to adjust and balance the

structural inequalities that Black students face. Drawing on the work of key critical race scholars, Ford et al. (2023) note that affirmative action in education is a mechanism to remedy past and current institutional oppressions that can diversify future leadership pools in society and provide role models for minoritized community members to access HE. Although there are opponents of affirmative action who believe that activities that look to level educational opportunities create unfair competition (Alon & Tienda, 2007), there is an argument for intervention if it narrows awarding gaps, creates equity in education, and reduces access barriers to doctoral-level programs for Black students.

While DEI initiatives are less under threat in the UK at present than in other countries, any affirmative action activities or policies must sit within the boundaries of the UK's Equality Act 2010. Affirmative action should be grounded in equality of access but should also be transparent to avoid successful minority communities feeling like they fill quotas (Mujtaba, 2023) or need additional interventions to demonstrate their capabilities. Sharing a clearer rationale for the project at the start may have alleviated this concern and perception held by some participants.

Conclusion

Collecting this evidence about the project has provided an opportunity for reflection on how the initiatives can be modified, broadened, and made more relevant as an overall evaluation prior to implementing the project beyond the funding timeline. It has also raised our understanding of how forms of capital are imperative in creating self-definition to challenge structural oppressions, such as how race-centered initiatives inflate the deficit perspective, which will act as a catalyst for further research by the team and to employ asset-based frameworks, such as Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) or Community-Based Research (CBR) methodologies. Asset-based methodologies allow for adjusting project governance to center Black British PGR initiatives' needs through their voices and driven by the assets and capital they bring to their PhDs, within the parameters of feasibility set by the university when the external funding ceases. This may require a move toward participatory action research (PAR) and demonstrates a current limitation of this study. Modifications to providing initiatives also include decentralizing funding to disciplines that better understand employability and placement needs and opportunities that can support bespoke experiences, rather than central doctoral college funding. Decentralizing available funding will also ensure that activities, such as external speaker events and seminar series, are more discipline specific.

Those who participated in multiple initiatives clearly found benefits of engagement, which may be seen as a gendered benefit related to resistance and desire to thrive within an unrepresentative sector. Initiatives that build confidence, increase visibility and representation, and develop skills are useful in enabling Black British PGRs to successfully remain on their studentships and ready themselves for their future careers. These findings provide a rationale for continued application of the race-centered targeted intervention into a further reviewed cycle of action research beyond the funding body's time parameters to further support racially minoritized PGRs. Enhancement will need to address the concerns around deficit perspectives that these types of initiatives create and to make them more meaningful to individual needs.

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