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Exploring access to postgraduate research: Perceptions and experiences of ethnic minority students at a Post-92 United Kingdom university

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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of racially minoritised students and staff in accessing and participating postgraduate research (PGR) at a UK post-92 university. Framed through the Theory of Possible Selves (PST), the study used focus group discussions to examine aspirations, barriers, and support mechanisms related to PGR participation by collecting data from undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students and staff. Findings revealed that aspirations are driven by intrinsic motivations, such as intellectual growth, and extrinsic factors, including career advancement. Key barriers include financial constraints, the complexities of the application process, and balancing academic and personal responsibilities. Participants highlighted the need for culturally

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relevant mental health services, mentoring programs, and tailored support systems. Recommendations include enhancing financial support, streamlining application procedures, and implementing peer mentoring schemes to foster a supportive and inclusive environment for racially minoritised students in PGR programs. These findings highlight the need for institutional reforms to address systemic inequities and promote greater access, success, and inclusivity for racially minoritised communities in higher education (HE).

Keywords
postgraduate study, racially minoritised, barriers to education, educational equity, mentoring programs, mental health services

Introduction

Higher education (HE) is globally recognised as a catalyst for positive life change and social mobility (Christensen and Craft, 2021; O`Shea et al., 2018). Increasing the diversity of learners who enter HE has been central to the British government's political drive for addressing inequality of HE access for under-represented student groups (Bolton and Lewis, 2023; Conell-Smith and Hubble, 2018; National Institute Economic and Social Research, 2024; Thompson, 2019). This widening participation (WP) agenda has achieved relative success over recent decades, evidenced by the steady growth in proportions of the British population from non-traditional and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds gaining an undergraduate degree (Kneta and McCartney, 2018; Universities UK International, 2021). This includes those classified as, racially minoritised, disabled, mature and individuals entering from low-income households or deprived neighbourhoods (Younger et al., 2018).

The British HE sector remains committed to further increasing student diversity and for many HE institutions remains a key aspect of their student recruitment drives (AdvanceHE, 2020; Johnston, 2024). The WP agenda has challenged the concept of what it now means to be a university student, moving away from traditional views where they were often constructed as young, white males from upper or middle-class backgrounds (Chung et al., 2017). In England, for example, application rates for 18-year-olds living in areas with historically low HE participation rates increased to the highest recorded levels in 2023 despite the longer-term trend (Bolton, 2024). In 2023, 23% of UK 18-year-olds from low participation neighbourhoods (POLAR4 quintile 1) were accepted to study a full-time undergraduate degree through UCAS, compared to 14.1% in 2012 (Universities UK, 2023) and there remains a continuous increase in the number of 18 years old racially minoritised students accepted into HE in the UK (GOV.UK, 2023). Despite this increase, the gap between the most and least disadvantaged 18-year-olds in England has widened. For example, 25.3% of 18-year-olds from the North-East region secured a university place as compared to 42.5% from London (Department for Education, 2024). New figures revealed the proportion of school leavers going to university in Scotland has fallen to its lowest level since 2016. Official statistics show 37.7% of 2021–2022 leavers entered HE, down from 40.3% in the previous year (GOV.SCOT, 2023), but there is an increase in the number of school leavers in Further Education from 18.3% in 2020 to 21.6% in 2022. A diverse postgraduate student body enhances learning, fosters innovation, and improves cultural awareness. Inclusivity also helps to address societal inequalities (McDuff et al., 2020), improves career prospects (Neves and Hewitt, 2021; Olufemi et al., 2023), and strengthens research

impact. With more school leavers entering further education, ensuring inclusivity in postgraduate study is crucial to maximising these benefits and preventing inequalities from persisting.

Postgraduate study (PGR) plays a crucial role in contributing to a nation's economic growth (Christie et al., 2005; McPherson et al., 2017), skilled workforce specifically dedicated to research and development (Sotiropoulou, 2022) and achieving improved professional outcomes, including employability prospect, leadership skills and clinical research roles (Wakeling & Luis Mateos-González, 2021). However, across the UK HE sector, racial inequality gaps in access, success and progression to PGR continue to remain (Stevenson et al., 2019). Whilst there have been notably positive increases in HE undergraduate and taught postgraduate participation rates over recent decades (AdvanceHE, 2019; Bolton and Lewis, 2023), PGR study amongst racially minoritised populations remains low (Badrie et al., 2023). Students from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to experience unique challenges and opportunities in relation to economic growth, skilled workforce participation, and employability. Despite improvements in educational attainment, these students often face barriers in translating their qualifications into successful employment outcomes (Rasul and Mirza, 2022). These are through inequality in education, insecure employment, less income than their white British counterpart, and wealth inequalities (National Learning and Work Institute, 2022).

It is estimated that 27% of undergraduates, 24% of postgraduate taught students and 20% of PGR students who now enter UK HE programmes are from racially minoritised backgrounds (Lynam et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2019). PGR education influences employability for people from ethnic minorities in many ways, including career satisfaction (Lessard-Phillips et al., 2014), geographical mobility and occupational mobility with 88.3% people from Indian and 65.3% from black Caribbean ethnicities in sustained employment (Singh et al., 2023), while people from black 'other' ethnic groups had lowest average earnings of £19,400 1 year after graduating. However, as recently as 2019, only 3% of doctoral students were black (Badrie et al., 2023), and between 2016 and 2019, the United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) councils collectively awarded only 1.2% of PhD funded studentships to Black or Black Mixed students (Williams et al., 2019). Thus, this demographic continues to experience significant underrepresentation as PGRs in UK HE institutions (Arday et al., 2022; Badrie et al., 2023; Oruc et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2019). In academic year 2022–2023, the UK domicile postgraduate students with permanent UK address represented 48% of the current postgraduate population (426,515). This consists of 69% (295,535) identified as White, 11% as Asian and 7% as Black (UK Council for Graduate Education, 2022).

Some limited studies and policy reports have investigated the potential barriers faced by UK home-based racially minoritised populations with accessing and participating in PGR education in the UK. The key findings indicate how attainment gaps (Arday, 2021), unconscious bias (Washington and Capers, 2022), the application and recruitment processes (Badrie et al., 2023), shortage of academic staff from minority ethnic backgrounds (Arday, 2021) financial constraints associated with pursuing PGR studies (Badrie et al., 2023; Bolton and Lewis, 2023) and insufficient advice and support as being significant challenges (Bolton and Lewis, 2023). Additional obstacles may also include poor communication of opportunities and a shortage of targeted guidance or mentoring for intellectual and motivated students from underrepresented and non-traditional backgrounds (Lindner, 2020).

In their work exploring perceived barriers to entering PGR study with racially minoritised undergraduate students at a UK post-1992 university, Badrie et al. (2023) found limited PGR awareness, lack of knowledge on the application process and feeling they would not be

selected by a higher tier or research-intensive university. Bale et al. (2020) examined the racially minoritised undergraduate student experience at a university in Northern England, highlighting issues of isolation, the pressure to overperform and potential dissatisfaction leading to non-continuation of courses. The barriers faced by students from ethnic minorities in pursuing HE are multifaceted and deeply rooted in systemic issues, which uniquely affect these students compared to their peers. Badrie et al. (2023) discussed how increased awareness and institutional support can help mitigate barriers faced by minority students, suggesting that proactive measures may lead to improved outcomes. However, the persistence of these challenges highlights the need for systemic changes within educational institutions. These challenges stem from factors such as low-income status linked to socio-economic disadvantages and residence in deprived areas (Hao, 2024; Stevenson et al., 2019), cultural mismatches, stereotype threat, the imposter phenomenon, microaggressions and an overall climate of exclusion (HE Professional, 2023). Together, these factors contribute to the inequality and disadvantage experienced by ethnic minority students (Kbaier et al., 2024).

It is essential to recognise that identifying and addressing aggregated barriers that individuals face, often resulting from the intersection of multiple factors such as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, gender, and geographic location alone will not eliminate structural inequality. Therefore, it is important to explore the nature of barriers and facilitators to access and participation in PGR from the perspective of racially minoritised populations so that tailored and targeted intervention can be developed (Stevenson et al., 2019). Some of the facilitators include mentorship programs, culturally inclusive academic spaces, targeted funding initiatives and outreach programs designed to demystify PGR pathways for these population (Ajibade, 2023; Cavanagh et al., 2022). In 2018, the UK government introduced the Office for Students (OFS) which had a key strategic aim for ensuring that all students, regardless of background and experience, enjoyed a rewarding and productive HE experience that enhanced both their personal lives and professional prospects (OFS, 2019, 2022). Consequently, OFS has since mandated each UK HE institution with the responsibility of formulating an access and participation plan that aims to minimize disparities in access, success, and progression for every student irrespective of background (OfS, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2022; Bolton and Lewis, 2023). This approach will address challenges commonly faced by racially minoritised populations, including limited awareness of PGR opportunities, insufficient knowledge about the application process, and concerns about bias or exclusion during selection by certain higher education institutions.

Consistent with the regulatory framework, five universities in the North-East of England initiated the '*Postgraduate Research Opportunities for the Northeast/Network for Equity'* (Pro:NE) Project in 2022 which has a primary aim of broadening access and improving outcomes for potential and current PGR students, (Pro: NE, 2022). This project is one of the 13 UKRI-funded initiatives, collectively valued at £8 million, dedicated to enhancing access to PGR studies for racially minoritised communities, along with supporting their advancement within academia (UKRI, 2021). The Pro:NE project addresses the challenges faced by ethnic minority PGR students by tackling financial barriers, fostering culturally relevant mentorship, and advocating for institutional reforms to enhance diversity, inclusion, and support systems. Pro:NE creates equitable opportunities and fosters academic success for these students by simplifying application processes, promoting representation, and building supportive communities.

Theoretical perspective

In our exploration into the HE experiences of racially minoritised students, we employed the Theory of Possible Selves (PST) (Markus and

Nurius, 1986). PST provides a valuable framework for understanding the aspirations and challenges of racially minoritised students in HE. This theory conceptualizes possible selves as the future identities individuals aspire to achieve or fear becoming, influenced by sociocultural contexts, media representations, and lived social experiences. PST examines how these self-concepts motivate present actions and shape future aspirations, making it particularly relevant for exploring the experiences of racially minoritised students in HE.

Idealised Aspirations against Real Constraints

Application to racially minoritised students

Role of sociocultural contexts. For racially minoritised students, sociocultural contexts significantly shape the range of possible selves they envision. Factors such as systemic racism, cultural mismatches, and stereotype threats often create additional barriers to aspiring to or achieving positive future identities. Conversely, culturally supportive environments can enable these students to see themselves in roles of academic and professional success, as emphasised by Clegg and Stevenson (2012).

Influence of HE institutions. HE institutions serve as critical environments where possible selves are explored and developed. Educators, advisors, and mentors play pivotal roles in facilitating this process. For racially minoritised students, the representation and support from faculty who share similar backgrounds or experiences can validate their aspirations and help mitigate fears of failure or exclusion. As Clegg and Stevenson (2012) argue, HE institutions are not just neutral spaces but active contributors to the formation of students' self-concepts.

Challenges and opportunities. While PST highlights the motivational power of envisioning ideal selves, the reality for racially minoritised students often involves navigating significant challenges. The fear of becoming a marginalised or unsuccessful self-stemming from microaggressions, implicit biases, and systemic inequities can hinder academic and personal progress. Nevertheless, interventions like mentorship programs, targeted scholarships, and mental health services can transform these fears into manageable obstacles, making the aspirations of racially minoritised students more realistic and attainable.

Realistic goals of PST in the context of racially minoritised students. The goals of PST are realistic when institutions actively support the exploration and attainment of positive possible selves. This includes creating inclusive environments, promoting representation, and addressing systemic inequities. When such support is present, racially minoritised students are better equipped to overcome barriers, remain motivated, and achieve their aspirations, validating PST's applicability and utility in HE.

In conclusion, PST is a powerful lens for understanding and supporting the experiences of racially minoritised students in HE. By addressing sociocultural influences and institutional barriers, PST offers a pathway for these students to transform aspirations into achievable realities, emphasising the critical role of educators, mentors, and supportive environments.

Organisational context

This study was undertaken at an English post-92 university (hereafter referred to as BHA). BHA is a research-intensive and socially inclusive institution that is nationally renowned for teaching and research excellence. Ensuring fair access and reducing educational inequality are key strategic objectives of both its current Education Strategy and Access and Participation Plan. The institution currently has over 1050 registered PGRs, both full and part-time, across all levels (year 1, 2, 3 etc.) within its four Faculties, of which approximately 35 are categorised as racially minoritised UK home

students. Ethnic minoritised staff (including academic and professional roles) at the institution totalled 513 of which 381 were from an international background (BHA, 2024).

Overview of pro North-East

Access and participation for racially minoritised students is limited by persistent inequalities that exist throughout HE in the UK. This is of particular prevalence in the North-East region, which has some of the lowest numbers of racially minoritised students in England (HESA, 2022). Pro:NE is a network created by five universities in the North-East of England to widen access and participation for racially minoritised ethnic students and staff in postgraduate research. The background to this project stems from the paucity of opportunities afforded to racially minoritised students, particularly Black students, to pursue PGR study. The foundation of this project is built upon a recognition that PGR racially minoritised students require bespoke mechanisms to thrive and ultimately gain employment, either within academia or industry. Having identified several critical challenges to this vision such as lack of role models, representation, synergy in initiatives, inequity in opportunities, unmet needs around the provision of mental health support limited understanding of barriers for racially minoritised students by senior stakeholders and weak analysis of progress (Williams et al., 2019), the project aims to strengthen the pathway into academic employment for racially minoritised ethnic students. For doing so, it has established four key pillars: mental health, mentoring, development, and admissions.

This is supported by the work of Dare et al. (2022) who emphasised the cultural and systemic barriers to mental health support for African, Caribbean, and similar ethnic heritage students in the UK, highlighting stigma attached to mental health discussion with these communities and the preference for informal support networks, lack of representation in mental health professionals, limited culturally sensitive services, and fear of discrimination. The study underscores the interplay between mental health challenges and academic pressures, with mental illness often leading to disengagement and poor performance. This aligns with the Pro:NE project's focus on addressing these challenges by advocating for tailored mental health services, peer mentorship, and institutional reforms to enhance support for racially minoritised students.

Study rationale, aims, and research question

While prior research has examined barriers to participation and access in PGR studies (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Badrie et al., 2023; Bolton and Lewis, 2023; UK, 2019) a significant gap exists across the UK in understanding the perceptions and experiences of racially minoritised university students and staff. Thus, there is a need to further extend the current literature and provide practical implications that lead to positive outcomes for PGR populations. These insights may not only contribute to the academic discourse but also identify potential opportunities to foster greater access and participation in PGR amongst the UK racially minoritised community and beyond. Only a small number of qualitatively focused studies have previously explored ethnic minority group access to PGR studies which is surprising given the 18% UK population (Census, 2021) who identify as racially minoritised. This study responds directly to this gap in the literature and furthers theoretical understanding concerning racially minoritised access to PGR studies. The research question is below

How do racially minoritised students in the UK perceive and experience access to and completion of postgraduate research (PGR) studies, and what role do motivations, barriers, and support systems (e.g., training, mentoring, and mental health services) play in shaping their academic trajectories?

By further extending the work of Bale et al. (2020), Badrie et al. (2023) and Bunce et al.

(2021), this study aimed to qualitatively capture the motivations, barriers, perceptions, and experiences of racially minoritised PGRs regarding their access to and completion of PGR study, including their views on training, mentoring programs, and mental health services. The specific objectives aligned with PST were to:

- Explore the motivations and aspirations (hope and expected selves) of racially minoritised students for pursuing PGR studies.
- Examine the barriers and challenges (feared selves) that hinder their access and completion of PGR programs.
- Assess the role of support systems (support for selves) in bridging gaps between current and envisioned positive futures.
- Provide practical recommendations to enhance access, equity, and participation in PGR studies for racially minoritised students.

Methodology

Design

This qualitative study employed focus group discussions to gather information on motivations for enrolling in PGR studies and perceptions of existing training, mentoring programs, and mental health services among racially minoritised persons at BHA, including undergraduate, master's, and postgraduate research students.

Participant selection and recruitment

Participants for this study were UK students and staff who identify as racially minoritised at BHA. Additionally, due to the low numbers of UK racially minoritised staff members, we included international staff members who identify as racially minoritised. 'Racially minoritised' refers to groups systematically marginalised due to racial or ethnic identities, emphasising structural processes rather than numerical minority status. In the UK, this includes Black or Black British, Asian or Asian British (South, East, and Southeast Asian), Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups, Arab or Middle Eastern backgrounds, and other non-White ethnicities. The term highlights shared experiences of underrepresentation and systemic barriers across these diverse groups. The inclusion of international staff alongside UK-domiciled staff reflects the study's adaptive approach to recruitment, addressing the underrepresentation of racially minoritised UK-domiciled staff in higher education. UK-Domiciled staff face systemic and cultural barriers specific to the UK HE system, while international staff provide perspectives on challenges like immigration systems and cultural adaptation, adding depth to the study's understanding of diverse experiences (Ackah, 2021).

Given the nature of the study, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants via email invitations and through advertising the focus groups across academic departments and professional services. The inclusion criteria were that participants were from racially minoritised backgrounds and were aged 18 years or above. Overall, there were 6 focus groups comprising 32 participants including 1 with undergraduates (6 participants), 1 with PGTs (6 participants), who have not yet encountered PGR, 2 with PGRs (11 participants), and 2 with staff (9 participants). Each focus group consisted of 5-8 participants Table 1.

Staff members were included to offer insights into both their personal experiences navigating the PGR process and their roles in facilitating and supporting PGR students, enriching the study's exploration of barriers and supports (Ackah, 2021; Lynam et al., 2024). This aligns with the research questions by broadening the study's scope, offering comparative insights and supporting actionable recommendations for equity in PGR programs.

Data collection

This qualitative study used semi-structured focus group interviews because of their effectiveness in

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

N	Participants acronym	Gender (F-Female) (M-Male) Country of ethnic Origin	Level of education-undergrad (UG)/ PGT/PGR	Current academic discipline	Previous Post-92/Russel group university	First generation student
1	FG1 P1	F/Nigeria	UG	Mental health nursing	Post-92	Yes
2	FG1 P2	F/South African	UG	Business administration	Post-92	Yes
3	FG1 P3	F/Nigeria	UG	Business analytic	Post-92	Yes
4	FG1 P4	F/Nigeria	UG	Mental health nursing	Post-92	Yes
5	FG1 P5	F/Nigeria	UG	Mental health nursing	Post-92	Yes
6	FG1 P6	F/Nigeria	UG	Law	Post-92	No
7	FG2 P1	M/ Ecuadorian	PGR	Mechanical engineering	No-Ecuador	No
8	FG2 P2	F/Nigeria	PGR	Law	No-Nigeria	Yes
9	FG2 P3	M/Turk	PGR	Law	Russel group	No
10	FG2 P4	M/Turk	PGR	Law	No-Istanbul	No
11	FG2 P5	M/Nigerian	PGT	Mental health nursing	No-Nigeria	Yes
12	FG2 P6	F/Nepal	PGR	Human geography	No-Nepal	Yes
13	FG3 P1	M/Ugandan	PGR	Entrepreneurship, innovation, and strategy	No-Uganda	No
14	FG3 P2	M/Indian	PGR	Glacial geochemistry	No-India	No
15	FG3 P3	F/Nepali	PGR	Human geography	No-Nepal	No
16	FG3 P4	F/Sri Lankan	PGR	Built environment	No-Sri Lanka	Yes
17	FG3 P5	F/Kenyan	PGR	Computer network security	No-Kenya	No
18	FG3 P6	F/Pakistani	PGR	Earth and environmental sciences	Russel group	No
19	FG4 P1	F/Iranian	PGR	Architecture and built environment	No-Iran	Yes
20	FG4 P2	M/Nigeria	PGR	Computer science	No-Nigeria	Yes
21	FG4 P3	F/Nigeria	PGT	Mental health nursing	No-Nigeria	Yes
22	FG4 P4	M/Nigeria/ Spanish	PGT	Mental health nursing	No-Nigeria	Yes
23	FG4 P5	F/Nigeria	PGT	Mental health nursing	No-Nigeria	Yes
24	FG4 P6	M/Nigeria	PGT	Mental health nursing	No-Nigeria	Yes
25	FG6 P3	F/Lebanese	PGR	Marketing, operations, and systems	No-Lebanon	Yes

No	Participants acronym	Gender (F-Female) (M-Male) Country of ethnic Origin	Staff	Academic discipline	PGR supervision	First generation student
26	FG5 P1	M/Indian	Staff	Geography and environmental sciences	No	Yes

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

No	Participants acronym	Gender (F-Female) (M-Male) Country of ethnic Origin	Staff	Academic discipline	PGR supervision	First generation student
27	FG5 P2	F/Zimbabwe	Staff	Mental health nursing	No	Yes
28	FG5 P3	M/Iran/Canadian	Staff	Architecture and built environment	Yes	Yes
29	FG6 P1	F/Hong Kong	Staff	Sport and exercise psychology	Yes	Yes
30	FG6 P2	F/Malaysian	Staff	Research and innovation services (RIS)	No	Yes
31	FG6 P4	F/African	Staff	Social work, education, and community	Yes	No
32	FG6 P5	M/Korean	Staff	Social work, education, and community	Yes	Yes

gaining in-depth information about an individual's understanding, perception and experiences of a given phenomenon (Jamshed, 2014; Ryan et al., 2009). This data collection approach also allows for asking participants the same questions but with flexibility. Hence, it provides the researcher with the opportunity to use prompts and probe deeper when appropriate (Dearnley, 2005). The design and development of the interview schedule were informed by Arday (2021), Bale et al. (2020), and Bunce et al. (2021) and pilot tested on a participant from BHA who did not want their data to be included in the project. This confirmed an approximate completion time of 90 minutes, with all wording considered appropriate and understandable for students and staff. The data collection was conducted by all authors who all had experience in undertaking and publishing qualitative research. The authors' backgrounds, three from ethnic minority groups and one as a first-generation student from a WP background, enhanced their awareness of PST in preparing the interview schedule. This informed culturally sensitive and theoretically grounded questions exploring participants' *hope and expected selves* (motivations and aspirations), *feared selves* (barriers and challenges), and *support for selves* (role of institutional and peer support). Their lived experiences ensured the inclusion of intersectional and culturally relevant topics, fostering a safe and empowering environment for participants to openly reflect on their PGR journeys.

In total, 6 online focus groups lasting between 105 and 120 minutes took place on 'Microsoft Teams' at convenient times for all consenting participants over a 6-week period between late-October 2022 and mid-November 2022. When undertaking focus groups, it is important for the interviewer to quickly build trust and rapport with consenting interviewees so that they feel reassured, comfortable and relaxed to freely discuss topics they feel appropriate (Mcmahon and Patton, 2002). The authors undertook the interviewer role and had previously undertaken qualitatively based HE pedagogic research which ensured a good understanding of likely topics, events, and encounters discussed by participants. Every attempt was made to understand the unique experiences and accounts of each participant rather than following a standardised list of questions. Every participant was guided through a series of open-ended questions which probed their experiences of accessing and participating on PGR study. To ensure participants felt at ease to share personal and exclusive accounts, each interview started with a reassurance that all data would be anonymised at every analysis and reporting stage and that there were no correct or incorrect answers.

Consistent with many qualitative studies, focus group discussions were used to collect data from participants. Focus groups were chosen for this study as they align with its aims and research questions by exploring collective experiences, barriers, and perceptions of racially minoritised students and staff in accessing postgraduate research (PGR). They provide rich qualitative insights through dynamic interactions, uncovering nuanced themes that might not surface in one-to-one interviews. Additionally, focus groups are efficient in capturing diverse perspectives and fostering a supportive environment, encouraging participants to share openly about sensitive issues. This method enables a holistic understanding of institutional barriers and supports, making it an effective approach for the study's objectives. Probes were used to seek further clarity. Additionally, prior to focus group sessions, participants were asked to fill out a short demographics' questionnaire used to monitor the representativeness of the sample. Focus group participants were compensated for their time (£20 Amazon voucher). To elicit rich and meaningful responses, questions when necessary were supplemented by probes (Smith and Osborn, 2004). This flexible questioning approach ensured participant-centeredness (Kornbluh, 2015) and enabled the interview direction to be guided by participants rather than directed by the schedule (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The interview schedules differed between staff and students as indicated in Table 2.

Ethics

Once a local university had granted ethical clearance, an initial recruitment email briefly outlining the study aims, objectives and

Table 2. Example Interview Schedule for Racially Minoritised PGR Students and Staff.

For PGR students	For staff
1. How did you decide to do the PGR program you're doing?	1. How much do you feel you know about the so-called leaky pipeline for UK-based racially minoritised academia?
2. What did you know about the application process before going through it?	2. Have you supervised UK-based racially minoritised students?
3. What was your experience of the application process like?	3. Are you aware of any training or development opportunities that are designed specifically for PGR racially minoritised students?
4. Other than mandatory training or training relating to research skills, what training have you engaged with? What was it like?	4. During your academic career, and especially during your PGR studies, have you ever taken part in any really useful training courses (unrelated to research skills or teaching) that helped you in your career?
5. Do you have a professional mentor other than your supervisors?	5. During your academic career, and especially during your PGR studies, have you ever had a mentor (other than a supervisor or PI)?
6. Have you engaged in any peer-mentoring with other PGRs?	6. During your academic career, and especially during your PGR studies, did you ever take part in a peer mentoring programme?
7. What people or services are you aware of that offer mental health support in the university?	7. Have you participated in any academic mentoring schemes as a mentor? For example, the NU mentoring programme? Why or why not?
8. How much is mental health and mental health support discussed among PGR students in your experience?	8. What do you think about mental health services at your institution?

procedures, along with a participant information sheet and consent form were communicated by the research team to all participants. Written informed consent for inclusion in this research was obtained from all participants. Prior to data collection, consenting participants were informed they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without providing any reason and assigned numbers to protect anonymity.

Data analysis

The first, third, and fourth authors read all 6 transcripts multiple times with notes reflecting theme statements and their meanings placed within margins. The same authors then independently annotated each interview transcript with their personalised thoughts and interpretations of the data. All four researchers came together on multiple occasions to discuss the data to achieve shared understanding and agreed on the themes and subthemes. The four researchers also reviewed the data after receiving feedback from the editors. Braun and Clarke (2022) describe thematic analysis as a flexible and reflexive approach that can incorporate both deductive and inductive methods of coding. Deductive coding involves applying pre-existing frameworks or theories to data, while inductive coding focuses on generating themes directly from the data without prior theoretical constraints. Both approaches complement each other, allowing researchers to engage with data both systematically and creatively. Initial coding employed a deductive approach which is recommended for qualitative analysis when existing theories are being tested (Elo and Kyngas, 2007). Once the deductive approach was complete, an inductive approach was undertaken to identify potential new or unanticipated findings (e.g., Cho and Lee, 2014) and to allow for lower order themes to be derived. Primary associations and connections based on similarities and patterns between the main themes were made. Once finalised, direct quotes representing each theme were selected. The deductive phase applied the Possible Selves Theory (PST) to identify themes like *hope and expected selves* (motivations and aspirations) and *feared selves* (barriers). The subsequent inductive phase explored emergent themes beyond PST (Markus and Nurius, 1986), such as peer mentorship and cultural representation. This dual approach ensured a balance between theory-driven analysis and new data-driven insights. The iterative refinement of themes and the inclusion of participant quotes grounded the analysis in lived experiences, ensuring rigor and depth. The final analysis stage involved developing written accounts from identified themes which were reviewed and redrafted several times until the final version was agreed.

Results

The focus group discussions highlighted aspirations and challenges, particularly in navigating the application process, accessing tailored training, mentoring, and utilising mental health support services. The insights provide valuable feedback for the HE sector to enhance the experience and well-being of current and aspiring PGRs from ethnic minority backgrounds, including through improved information, guidance, and culturally responsive support systems. The responses from both the students and staff participants have been merged in the analysis as there are no distinct differences between the responses, therefore staff quotes are those referred to in FG5 and FG6. The PST provides a useful framework to understand the motivations, barriers, and support systems experienced by racially minoritised students in PGR programs, with findings categorised into Aspirations and motivations (Hope and expected selves), Barriers and challenges (Feared selves), and Effective guidance and necessary improvements (Available support to support selves). Aspirations highlight participants' career and personal growth goals, explaining their motivations for pursuing PGR studies. Barriers reveal systemic challenges, such as financial constraints and complex application processes that hinder access and participation. Effective guidance emphasizes the role of mentoring, training, and mental health services, while identifying gaps and

Table 3. Themes and Subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
1: Aspirations and motivations (Hope and expected selves)	1.1 Career advancement and professional stability 1.2 Intrinsic motivations and intellectual fulfilment 1.3 Intersection of extrinsic and intrinsic drivers
2: Barriers and challenges (Feared selves)	2.1 Financial constraints and barriers 2.2 Stressful application and admission processes 2.3 Challenges in balancing responsibilities 2.4 Institutional and cultural barriers
3: Effective guidance and necessary improvements (Available support to support selves)	3.1 Mentoring and guidance 3.2 Culturally relevant mental health support and well-being 3.3 Awareness and accessibility of support services 3.4 Practical training, skill development, and inclusive interventions
4: Compatibility in support systems (Available support to support selves)	4.1 Compatibility of mentors 4.2 Tailored interventions

proposing culturally relevant improvements. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, aligning with the research question's focus on motivations, challenges, and support systems. This is featured in Table 3 below

Theme 1: Aspirations and motivations (Hope and expected selves)

The concept of 'Hope and Expected Selves' in PST refers to the positive visions individuals have for their future selves. This theme captures participants' aspirations and motivations for pursuing PGR studies, reflecting their envisioned positive future selves. These motivations are categorized into subthemes that highlight both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers. Participants articulated strong motivations for pursuing PGR studies driven by aspirations for career advancement, professional stability, and personal growth.

Subthemes 1.1: Career advancement and professional stability. Participants expressed a strong desire to secure stable careers and professional opportunities. For many, PGR studies were seen as essential for achieving their academic and professional goals, particularly in academia or research roles. This subtheme emphasises the practical and extrinsic motivations linked to financial security and job prospects. The participant quotes reflect the motivations of racially minoritised individuals in pursuing PGR as a means of achieving career advancement and professional stability. Each individual actively works to develop and maintain a positive self-concept, particularly in ways that enhance self-esteem, self-efficacy, and resilience in the face of challenges. The sub-theme reveals several aspects of the experience of being racially minoritised in higher education and professional fields by increased pressure to prove competence, limited career mobility without advanced credentials, economic considerations and job security, and navigating systemic barriers through education.

> 'I am pursuing a PGR to join academia, earn more money, and secure a stable job and profession' (FG1, P2).

> 'When I was studying law, I was thinking about job opportunities. The best option was being a lecturer because I always loved teaching' (FG2, P2).

> 'I decided because I want to go into academics. It's a prerequisite to be in academia, so that's why I chose to do a research program' (FG3, P1).

Subtheme 1.2: Intrinsic motivations and intellectual fulfilment. Some participants were driven by a passion for their field of study and a desire for intellectual growth. This intrinsic motivation reflects their personal commitment to advancing knowledge and self-improvement, aligning with the PST concept of personal fulfilment. The participant's quote highlights how racially minoritised individuals pursue postgraduate research (PGR) driven by a passion for learning, self-improvement, and personal growth. Their decisions are not solely based on career advancement but also the intellectual satisfaction and emotional connection to their field of study. This sub-theme illustrates that racially minoritised individuals are not merely driven by external pressures but also by a deep-inherent passion for knowledge and self-growth. Despite potential systemic challenges, their intrinsic motivations highlight resilience, agency, and a commitment to lifelong learning, reinforcing the need for more inclusive and supportive academic environments.

> 'The prospect of self-improvement and professional growth through PGR education played a substantial role in my decision-making process' (FG3, P1).

> 'When I applied for it, I got the chance to be part of the group on digital literacy and I felt that was perfect for me because it's something that I loved' (FG1, P1).

Subtheme 1.3: Intersection of extrinsic and intrinsic drivers. Participants described how their intrinsic interests in research and learning intersected with extrinsic goals like career stability. This subtheme highlights the interplay between their personal interests and external aspirations, providing a holistic view of their motivations. This reflects both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, where the desire for intellectual fulfillment (intrinsic) and economic stability (extrinsic) intersect. The quotes highlight the coexistence of both extrinsic (external) and intrinsic (internal) motivations in the academic and career choices of racially minoritised individuals. These individuals are balancing practical considerations, such as job stability and career prospects, with their personal intellectual interests and aspirations. The subtheme of Intersection of Extrinsic and Intrinsic Drivers stresses the complexity of decision-making for racially minoritised individuals, who must balance passion for learning with the need for financial and career security. Their experiences reveal the structural challenges that necessitate careful career planning, reinforcing the importance of inclusive academic and professional support systems to help them pursue both intellectual and economic empowerment.

> 'I can get a stable job and a profession and at the same time I was very interested in doing research, especially when I was doing my final year dissertation research. So with all of these things, I decided to come to the academic field' (FG1, P3).

> 'I was also interested in doing a Masters. I wasn't too sure or I'm not too sure about it yet because I don't want to as I'm doing business management' (FG5. P2).

Theme 2: Barriers and challenges (Feared selves)

This theme explores the barriers and challenges participants feared might hinder their academic journeys. These challenges represent their negative envisioned selves and the potential setbacks they sought to avoid.

Subthemes 2.1: Financial constraints and barriers. Financial challenges emerged as a major obstacle, with participants citing the high cost of self-funding and limited access to scholarships. This subtheme underscores the systemic economic barriers that disproportionately affect racially minoritised students. The quotes reflect the significant financial challenges that racially minoritised individuals face when pursuing postgraduate research (PGR). These individuals express concerns about the high cost

of education, lack of funding opportunities, and the added pressures of family responsibilities, which impact their ability to access and complete higher education. The financial Constraints and barriers sub-theme focuses on how racially minoritised individuals face significant financial challenges that shape their educational and career trajectories. While they demonstrate resilience and strategic decision-making, the systemic lack of funding and greater caregiving burdens create additional hurdles to accessing postgraduate education. Addressing these financial barriers through targeted scholarships, grants, and institutional support is crucial to ensuring equitable opportunities in higher education.

> 'The cost of self-funding is extremely out of reach for me, so it would be helpful to have funding opportunities linked to the programs' (FG1, P3).
>
> 'However financial challenges is there and then family support as well because most of us here. It is just either us with our kids or us with our partners or husbands no other' (FG5, P3).
>
> 'I will say the primary factor would be the price of the master's degree and also, the reputation of the university' (FG5, P1).
>
> 'Funding probably 1. But also maybe the category of PGR students going in straight after they finished their undergrad. Or is it more mature students? That's trying to go in after having family and works or something like that' (FG6, P2).

Subtheme 2.2: Stressful application and admission processes. The complexity and length of the application process were significant sources of stress for participants. The lack of streamlined procedures and support compounded these difficulties, leading to prolonged struggles to secure admissions. Despite the challenges, participants demonstrated perseverance and persistence in navigating the application process. The quotes highlight the challenges and emotional toll that racially minoritised individuals face during the application and admission process for postgraduate research (PGR). The key difficulties include long waiting periods, lack of funding opportunities, complex application requirements, and the need to balance multiple responsibilities like family, work, and financial concerns. The Stressful Application and Admission Processes sub-theme highlights how racially minoritised individuals face prolonged, complex, and emotionally draining hurdles in accessing postgraduate education. Their persistence and resilience reflect their strong commitment to academic success, yet the structural challenges they encounter suggest the need for more inclusive policies, transparent funding opportunities, and targeted institutional support to create equal access to higher education. One participant applied to multiple universities for nearly 3 years before being accepted at BHA.

> 'It took me close to three years to get this admission' (FG1, P4).
>
> 'The process was gruelling and stressful, considering funding, family, work-life balance as factors' (FG4, P4).
>
> 'I tried reaching out to various universities for scholarships and in areas that I would have been before. It was stressful making my application and securing admission. It could have been easier and taken a short period if I had help' (FG1, P5).
>
> 'I come from Ghana but had always wanted to have my studies outside the continent. So I kept on looking out for offers that could give me a studentship. It has taken me close to three years to get this admission' (FG4, P1).
>
> 'I was shortlisted 4 times and put on many waiting lists. It took me close to three years' (FG2, P3).

Subtheme 2.3: Challenges in balancing responsibilities. Participants highlighted the difficulty of balancing academic demands with personal responsibilities, such as work and family commitments. This subtheme reflects the added pressures faced by mature students and those

juggling multiple roles. The findings indicated that some PGR students are already working and have other responsibilities.

> 'The demands of my clinical nursing job serve as a barrier to obtaining my doctorate' (FG1, P6).

Subtheme 2.4: Institutional and cultural barriers. Institutional practices and cultural biases within academia were seen as barriers to success. Participants noted that systemic issues, such as limited representation and perceived cultural mismatches, hindered their ability to thrive in PGR programs. The quotes highlight the challenges that racially minoritised individuals face, which stems from underrepresentation, cultural perceptions of education, and systemic barriers that shape how postgraduate studies, especially PhDs are viewed and pursued. The sub-theme reveals that PhDs may not always be seen as a professional necessity but those who pursue them do so despite institutional and cultural obstacles, reinforcing their resilience and commitment to education. Addressing these barriers requires greater representation, mentorship, and institutional support to create a more inclusive academic environment.

> 'Oh dear social cultural backgrounds. Not so many students. Not so many racially minoritised students going to university and started the PhD' (FG6, P3).

> 'I perceived a PhD as more personal rather than professional achievement' (FG6, 5).

Theme 3: Effective guidance and necessary improvements (Available support to support selves)

This theme focuses on the resources and support systems that helped participants navigate their academic journeys, as well as areas where improvements are needed. The available support, including mentoring and mental health services, is crucial in helping students navigate their PGR journey and realise their hoped-for selves. Participants highlighted the importance of guidance from mentors who understand their specific challenges:

Subthemes 3.1: Mentoring and guidance. Mentorship was identified as a critical form of support, particularly when mentors understood participants' unique challenges. This subtheme highlights the value of tailored guidance in fostering academic success and well-being. Some participants expressed a willingness to serve as mentors for junior students, motivated by a desire to help others avoid the struggles and challenges that they had faced. The quotes emphasise the need for mentors who understand their unique struggles, provide psychological and academic support, and offer different perspectives on research and career progression. The sub-theme highlights gaps in culturally relevant mentorship and requires additional psychological and career-oriented support. While some supervisors provide guidance, these students often seek mentors who understand their lived experiences and offer emotional and strategic academic support. The desire to mentor others reinforces the importance of representation and institutional investment in mentorship programs that cater for diverse student needs.

> 'As a black student, it would mean more to have additional guidance from someone who can relate to my struggles' (FG1, P3).

> 'The mentor should have knowledge of "psychological aspects" to support the participants' mental health' (FG4, P3).

> 'Normally we can trust our supervisors, so we have that support that support is already available' (FG3, P3).

> 'I would really be interested in being a mentor because I would not want someone to go through what I've gone through' (FG4, P6).

> 'I would have liked a mentor who provided a different perspective and third person lens on research' (FG2, P6).

Subtheme 3.2: Culturally relevant mental health support and well-being. Participants emphasised the importance of mental health services in managing the stresses of PGR studies. However, they also noted a lack of culturally relevant and accessible mental health support, highlighting the need for inclusive services. Beyond just raising awareness, participants also emphasised the importance of ensuring that the mental health services provided were inclusive and equitable. Conversely, staff believe that many racially minoritised students are not informed of the mental health and well-being resources available to them at their institutions. While mental health services exist, these students often struggle to utilise them fully, either due to cultural stigma, lack of awareness, or the way support is structured. The sub-theme reveals that, while awareness of mental health importance exists, barriers such as stigma, difficulties in emotional recognition, and inconsistent support systems prevent effective engagement. To improve mental health outcomes, institutions must provide long-term, culturally responsive mental health services that build trust, address cultural stigma, and create a safe space for racially minoritised students to seek support.

> 'I know there is mental health support, but I have never used it as much as I think it is important' (FG1, P1).

> 'It can sometimes be really difficult for us to recognise and understand the internal mental challenges we are experiencing, despite our academic capabilities' (FG2, P4).

> 'Having a mental health practitioner or psychologist for a while, then cutting off the relationship immediately is going to bring another difficulty in the person's life' (FG3, P2).

Subthenme 3.3: Awareness and accessibility of support services. Participants expressed concerns about the limited awareness and accessibility of available support systems, such as training programs and mental health resources. This subtheme points to the need for better communication and outreach. Despite the existence of support resources, students are either unaware of them or do not know how to access them, which limits their ability to seek help when needed. The sub-theme highlights a systemic issue in how mental health and well-being resources are communicated to racially minoritised students. There is a lack of awareness that prevents students from utilising them effectively. Addressing this gap requires proactive institutional efforts, culturally tailored outreach, and increased representation in mental health services to ensure that all students feel informed, supported, and included.

> 'Much more students should be aware that this support is available and can be reachable' (FG3, P5).

> 'Many PGR racially minoritised students were not even informed about the mental health and wellbeing programs and facilities that were available to them' (FG4, P5).

Subtheme 3.4: Practical training, skill development, and inclusive interventions. Tailored interventions that address the unique cultural and academic challenges faced by racially minoritised students were seen as essential. Participants called for programs that consider their specific needs, such as inclusive curricula and culturally responsive mental health services. The quotes highlight the importance of the challenges stemming from discrimination, isolation, language barriers, and heightened pressure to succeed, which require targeted support mechanisms to enhance academic experiences and professional development. The sub-theme highlights that their academic success and well-being depend on structured training, inclusive curricula, and institutional commitment to diversity and professional development. Addressing these gaps requires universities to take an active role in providing skill-building opportunities, promoting equity, and ensuring that all students, regardless of background, feel

empowered and supported in their academic journey.

> 'The mental health challenges faced by PGR racially minoritised students may differ from their peers due to factors like discrimination, isolation, language and the pressure to succeed' (FG4, P7).
>
> 'revising curricula to better reflect diverse backgrounds, implementing transition programs to support students' adjustment to academic life, providing skill-building workshops, introducing regular feedback sessions, and ensuring funding availability for professional development' (FG3, P4).
>
> 'I did training on how to do your research and it was quite helpful' (FG1, P5).
>
> 'If there is any training to be done it should be the university as focusing on you, know those areas that they draw from to make sure that the teachers are involved in selling this idea' (FG6, P6).

Theme 4: Compatibility in support systems (Available support to support selves)

Subtheme 4.1: Compatibility of mentors. This theme highlights the importance of relational compatibility in mentorship and mental health support over shared racial or cultural identity. Participants value mentors and practitioners who can connect with them personally and professionally, ensuring effective guidance and support. Interestingly, some participants did not necessarily prioritise having a mentor of the same ethnicity or background. Instead, they emphasised the importance of compatibility in terms of age, culture, and interpersonal skills. The provided quotes emphasise that for racially minoritised students, the most critical factor in a mentorship relationship is not the mentor's racial background, but rather the ability to connect, relate, and provide meaningful support. In both cases, students express that effective mentorship hinges on compatibility, characterized by empathy, understanding, and shared values rather than solely on racial similarity. Concerning PST, such compatible mentorship reinforces self-efficacy, resilience, and a positive self-concept key factors in navigating the complex academic landscape. This perspective highlights the need for institutions to foster culturally competent mentorship programs that emphasise relational quality and inclusivity, ultimately supporting the holistic development of racially minoritised students.

> 'it would not matter whether it is a racially minoritised person or somebody who is not a racially minoritised person' (FG3 P6).
>
> 'It does not matter if the mental health practitioner is racially minoritised, as long as we can connect and relate well' (FG4, P2).

Subtheme 4.2: Tailored interventions. This theme emphasises the need for institutional support programs to be customised to the unique needs of racially minoritised PGR students. Tailored interventions can help students overcome barriers and achieve their hoped-for selves, fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging that is crucial for academic and personal success. Therefore, improving overall well-being, addressing gaps in existing structures. The provided extracts emphasise that interventions, particularly those aimed at mental health and academic support, must be customised to meet the unique cultural backgrounds, experiences, and circumstances of racially minoritised postgraduate research (PGR) students. The subtheme illustrates that culturally responsive and specific support is essential in reinforcing a positive self-concept as described by Positive Self-Theory (PST). By addressing the unique challenges these students face—ranging from cultural isolation to systemic biases, tailored interventions can enhance self-efficacy, engagement, and overall well-being. This, in turn, helps create a more inclusive and supportive academic environment, revealing both the shortcomings of

generic support systems and the transformative potential of culturally attuned interventions.

> 'Interventions should be tailored to address the unique cultural backgrounds and circumstances of racially minoritised PGR students' (FG2, P7).

> 'While we generally find the mental health services at the university to be sufficient, we must acknowledge that there are certain areas that need improvement to truly support racially minoritised postgraduate research students' (FG4, P4).

Discussion

Racially minoritised PGR student numbers at BHA have historically been below national sector benchmarks. It seems that although a small number of racially minoritised students each year are eager to take up PGR study opportunities and have positive consequent experiences, others who may have much to benefit from this are either unable to commit or see little value in doing so**.** The study aimed to explore the barriers, motivations, and experiences of racially minoritised students and staff regarding access to and participation in PGR studies as there were no differences because all participants were from racially minoritised ethic groups who encountered similar experiences and continued to do so even as staff. Using PST, the analysis categorised participants' narratives into themes of *Hope and Expected Selves* (aspirations and motivations), *Feared Selves* (barriers and challenges), and *Available Support to Support Selves* (effective guidance and improvements). This framework illuminated the interplay of aspirations, challenges, and institutional support in shaping the academic journeys of racially minoritised students and staff. This is to also gain critical insights into their views on training, mentoring programs, and mental health services.

Hope and expected selves (Aspirations and motivations)

Participants from racially minoritised backgrounds expressed significant motivations for enrolling in PGR studies which were often driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Callison and DeBeliso, 2023). Intrinsically, the prospect of self-improvement and professional growth through PGR education played a substantial role in their decision-making process. This internal desire for personal development and fulfilment of their academic and professional potential is a powerful motivator. For example, participants were motivated by their passion for their field of study and the intellectual challenges that PGR studies offer.

Extrinsically, aspirations for better job opportunities, higher income, and a stable professional future were significant drivers. These external motivators reflect participants' recognition of the tangible benefits that PGR qualifications can bring in terms of career advancement and economic stability. The combination of these intrinsic and extrinsic motivations underscores the comprehensive nature of their decision to pursue further education, aiming not only to satisfy personal ambitions but also to achieve societal and economic mobility: For example, participants cited specific academic programs and research interests that aligned with their career goals as key factors in their choice of university. The role of institutions in shaping possible selves is significant was noted by Clegg and Stevenson (2012) who argue that HE institutions provide environments where future identities can be explored and developed. The findings of this study corroborate this, highlighting how institutional reputation, research facilities, and faculty expertise contribute to students' decisions to pursue PGR education.

Feared selves (Barriers and challenges)

Despite their aspirations, participants also identified several barriers that could impede their progress towards achieving their hoped-for selves. Financial constraints emerged as a significant concern, with participants expressing anxiety about the high costs of PGR education. This finding aligns with existing literature, which identifies financial barriers as a critical obstacle for racially minoritised students in HE (Stevenson et al., 2019). Another major barrier was the

stressful and often opaque nature of the PGR application process. Participants reported limited knowledge about application procedures, funding opportunities, and admission criteria, which exacerbated their stress and uncertainty. This lack of clarity and support during the application phase can deter potential applicants from pursuing PGR studies, as supported by The Broken Pipeline report, which highlights similar barriers (Williams et al., 2019). Additionally, balancing academic work with other responsibilities, such as employment and family commitments, posed significant challenges for participants. The demands of their professional and personal lives often conflicted with their academic aspirations, creating additional stress and hindering their progress.

Available support to support selves (Effective guidance and improvements)

Participants' perceptions of the available support services, such as training, mentoring programs, and mental health services, were mixed. While they acknowledged the existence of these services, many had limited direct experience or found it challenging to seek help. Participants emphasised the importance of culturally relevant support, suggesting that mental health practitioners who share similar cultural or religious backgrounds could provide more effective assistance. This aligns with findings from Arday (2021), who noted the significance of cultural competence in supporting racially minoritised students. Moreover, participants highlighted the need for better information dissemination about available resources. Staff members noted that many students were unaware of the mental health and well-being programs offered by their institutions. Institutional efforts to address these gaps could foster a more supportive and inclusive environment for racially minoritised PGR students.

Conclusion

This study contributes new knowledge by providing a nuanced understanding of challenges faced by ethnically minoritised students into and through PGR programs. Through the lens of PST, the study highlights the dual role of aspirations and fears in shaping students' academic journeys. Financial constraints and complex application processes are major hurdles that institutions must address. Addressing these factors through targeted interventions can enhance the participation, success and well-being of racially minoritised students in postgraduate research, contributing to greater equity and inclusivity in higher education. For example, enhancing available support, particularly through culturally relevant mentorship and accessible mental health services, is essential to help these students achieve their academic and professional aspirations.

Implications for further research

This study opens several avenues for further research. First, there is a need for longitudinal studies that track the long-term achievement outcomes of access to PGR for racially minoritised students, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their academic and professional trajectories. Additionally, research could explore the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as targeted scholarships, mentoring programs, and culturally responsive mental health services, in holistically supporting these students. Comparative studies across different institutions and regions could also offer valuable insights into the varying contexts and systemic factors influencing the experiences of racially minoritised students.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. The sample size, while adequate for qualitative analysis, limits the generalisability of the findings. The study focused on students and staff at only one institution which may not reflect the experiences of racially minoritised students at other domestic universities. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data could introduce bias, as

participants might provide socially desirable responses or recall experiences inaccurately. Future research should aim to include larger, more diverse samples and multiple institutions to enhance the validity and applicability of findings. We also acknowledge the limitations of PST in that racially minoritised students often operate under the vestiges of structural inequality/ internalised racism, which may affect the outlook of some.

Recommendations

The findings reveal the need for systemic reforms to enhance access and equity in PGR education and suggest several recommendations for improving the experiences of racially minoritised students in PGR programs:

Enhanced financial support. Increasing the availability of scholarships and funding opportunities can alleviate the financial burden on students, making PGR education more accessible.

Streamlined application processes. Providing clear, detailed information about application procedures, admission criteria, and funding options can reduce stress and improve accessibility for prospective students.

Culturally relevant mental health services. Developing mental health support systems that are culturally responsive and inclusive can better address the unique challenges faced by racially minoritised students. This could include recruiting racially minoritised staff to the team and educating current staff in cultural awareness.

Peer-to-peer mentoring programs. Implement peer-to-peer mentoring programs where current or recent PGR students mentor new students can provide practical advice and emotional support. This also enables networking opportunities, skill development, increased confidence, and cultural relevant advice and support.

Institutional commitment. Foster a strong institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion by implementing policies and practices that address systemic barriers and promote a supportive and inclusive academic environment. This could be achieved by including racialised minoritised PGR students in the development or review of the policies and completing equality impact assessments.

Authors contributions

All the authors contributed to all aspects of the manuscript

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