

Lightening Talk 1 Q&A

1. Lack of representation is a recurring issue in research around lack of belonging, but a difficult one to tackle. What do you think institutions could do to increase representation?

- **Recruitment and Retention:** Actively recruit diverse staff and faculty, especially in leadership and teaching roles, and adopt to improve retention, by prioritising staff voice. Representation in curriculum design and delivery is crucial for visibility and belonging.
- **Pipeline Development:** Support pathways for underrepresented students to progress into academia through scholarships, mentorship, and research opportunities. E.g. the University of Leeds OfS funded project '[Generation Delta](#)' aims to improve the experiences and outcomes for Black, Asian and minority ethnic female students. It does this by providing support and guidance on accessing PGR study, progression through milestones of PGR study and training for careers, which includes CV and job application support. Another example is the [WHEN 100 Black Women Professors NOW](#) programme, that serves to remove barriers across higher education.
- **Curriculum Reform:** Embed diverse perspectives and authors into course content to reflect a wider range of experiences and knowledge systems.
- **Student Co-Production:** Involve students from underrepresented backgrounds in shaping policies and practices, not just as consultants but as co-creators.

These steps help move beyond tokenistic gestures, toward systemic change that fosters belonging and equity.

2. How do you make sure the right students are getting the information and support without profiling?

Work with student groups and networks to disseminate information in culturally relevant and trusted ways. It can also be useful to work with student tutors and supervisors (including academic support teams) to ensure that they are aware of targeted initiatives, so that they can signpost students when appropriate, or when students approach them requesting support.

3. Have the PG students you've engaged with highlighted any differences they've felt in their experience between undergraduate and postgraduate level study?

While the primary focus of the conversations was on postgraduate study, some students did reflect on their undergraduate experiences and noted key differences:

- **Increased Isolation:** Postgraduate spaces, especially at the PhD level, tend to be less diverse, which can intensify feelings of being “the only one” and reduce opportunities for peer support. The independent nature of postgraduate research, combined with limited contact with the wider research community, can make it harder to build relationships and can result in a reduced sense of belong.

- **Funding and Work-Life Balance:** Financial pressures and personal responsibilities are more pronounced at the postgraduate level, with many students juggling work, study, and family responsibilities. Institutional support doesn't always account for these challenges, for example, mitigating circumstances related to caring responsibilities are not consistently recognised or accommodated. Another example is the restrictions on working hours for students who are on scholarships, or international students. Some students felt that this restriction was a financial barrier for them.