

BARRIERS TO BELONGING: INSIGHTS FROM BLACK STUDENT'S EXPERIENCES

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Why Student Voice Matters

- **Enables active participation, co-creation, and collaboration in shaping higher education:** Student voice empowers learners to be co-creators of their educational experience, not just passive recipients. It encourages institutions to work with students to design inclusive policies, curricula, and support systems
- **Supports evaluation, decision-making, and the integration of diverse student perspectives:** By listening to students, especially those from underrepresented groups, universities can better evaluate what's working and what's not. This leads to more informed decisions that reflect the realities of a diverse student body.

Research Summary

- This study uses qualitative methods to explore the experiences of Black postgraduate students in UK higher education.
- It focuses on identifying barriers to belonging and highlighting student-led strategies for change.
- The research is grounded in student voice.

Why This Research?

- **Black postgraduates often overlooked in HE research:** most equity-focused studies concentrate on undergraduate experiences, leaving a gap in understanding postgraduate challenges—especially for Black students.
- **Persistent ethnicity degree awarding gap:** Despite efforts to close the gap, Black students continue to receive lower degree outcomes compared to their white peers. This research seeks to understand why.
- **Limited evidence on effective interventions:** There's a lack of robust data on what actually works to improve outcomes and belonging for Black postgraduates. This study aims to fill that gap.
- **This study explores barriers and strategies through Black postgraduate voices:** By centering lived experiences, the research identifies both the challenges and the solutions proposed by students themselves.

Racial Barriers

- Students report challenges related to representation, experiences of bias, and feelings of isolation.
- These factors can negatively impact confidence, engagement, and sense of belonging in academic spaces.

Socioeconomic Barriers

- Financial pressures and limited access to opportunities can create additional challenges for students. For example, financial support for postgraduate study is limited, and Black students are disproportionately affected by funding gaps. The Broken Pipeline Report reports only 1.2% of UKRI PhD funding has been awarded to Black students.
- Many students balance work with study and other responsibilities, which can impact their ability to fully engage with academic life and community.

Cultural Barriers

- Cultural misunderstandings and expectations to conform can make students feel unsupported or invisible.
- Academic environments may overlook or undervalue different cultural ways of knowing and communicating. This can affect how students are perceived and how they experience inclusion within academic spaces.

Call to Action

What can we learn from barriers to build equitable belonging?

How do we ensure student voices shape, not just inform, policies and practices?

How do we create supportive academic, pastoral and social spaces, ensuring that students feel they belong?

Breakout Room Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to encourage reflection and discussion on barriers, belonging, and meaningful student voice in higher education.

1. Reflecting on Barriers

- What barriers to belonging have you seen (or heard students describe) in your own contexts?
- How do racial, socioeconomic, or cultural factors intersect with these barriers?

2. From Voice to Change

- In what ways is student voice currently embedded in your institution?
- Where do you see gaps between 'listening' and actually acting on what students say?

3. Strategies for Inclusion

- What practical interventions (big or small) could help address these barriers in your setting?
- How might co-production with students strengthen these interventions?

4. Moving Beyond Tokenism

- How do we avoid tokenistic approaches to student voice, especially for students from marginalised backgrounds?
- What structures or practices help ensure student voice is meaningful and sustainable?

5. Linking to Belonging

- How can amplifying student voice contribute directly to a stronger sense of belonging?
- Can you share examples of a moments when student voice has led to change that has improved belonging?