

Understanding the lived experience of ethnic minority students in postgraduate research

Key findings &
recommendations
from peer research
initiated by GuildHE

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GuildHE

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Research



Strengthening EDI in the HE sector

Across UK sectors, efforts aimed at strengthening Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) continue to gain momentum
Increasing realisation that addressing EDI-related issues is strategically necessary for long-term success

In the Higher Education (HE) sector, significant gaps have been identified regarding how postgraduate research study is experienced; Particularly at smaller and specialist institutions

Against this backdrop, GuildHE, in 2021, initiated the first qualitative study with a peer research methodology at its core into the lived experience of PGRS from ethnic minority backgrounds

The report published in January 2022 provides a context-specific evidence base for GuildHE's work on anti-racism and associated activities. To access the GuildHE Report, see link on Slide 18

A Research Partnership



This research project was initiated by GuildHE



The Institute for Community Studies provided training and other forms of support



A team of researchers from GuildHE member institutions carried out the study





FALMOUT
UNIVERSITY



ROYAL CENTRAL
SCHOOL OF SPEECH & DRAMA
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
NEW UNIVERSITY

EST. 1891

The Research Team

- Eight ethnic minority PGRs were recruited and trained as peer researchers to conduct in-depth interviews with ethnic minority PGRs across GuildHE member institutions. The peer researchers conducted 39 interviews across 12 institutions.
- These institutions represent 37% of the research active members of GuildHE and are mostly located in London and south-east England. The interviews took place between August and October 2021.

Methodology: Peers to Peers Interviews

Strengths of using peer researchers: Trust building was easier. Participants were more engaged in the process, open about their experiences, often answered questions in detail.

The researchers were trained to mitigate against bias

Ethnic minority students' voices have therefore been amplified through this methodology. However, as some aspects of institutional life are invisible to students, the insight into their experiences is one aspect of the multi-faceted factors that influence students' experiences.



Interview Themes

Access and Participation

Support received (Academic work/mental wellbeing)

Representation

Emotional and psychological impact

Discrimination

Feeling of sense of belonging

Value attached to higher education

Career prospects

Analysis of Participants

There was an almost equal split between male (53%) and female (47%) students

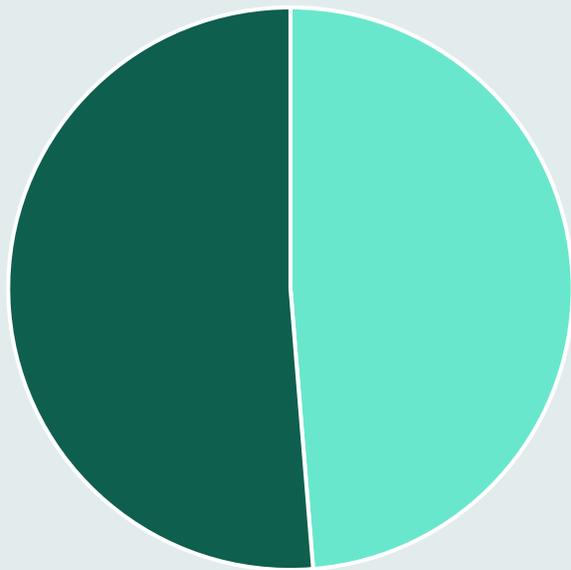
The sample was roughly split between international (46%) and home (54%) students

5% of the sample are aged between 18 - 24, about half (51%) of the sample were aged between 25 - 34, and 44% aged between 35 - 64 (35 - 44, 27%; 45 - 54, 14%; 55 - 64, 3%)

This is a relatively mature profile of participants, which aligns with the profile of students at GuildHE institutions

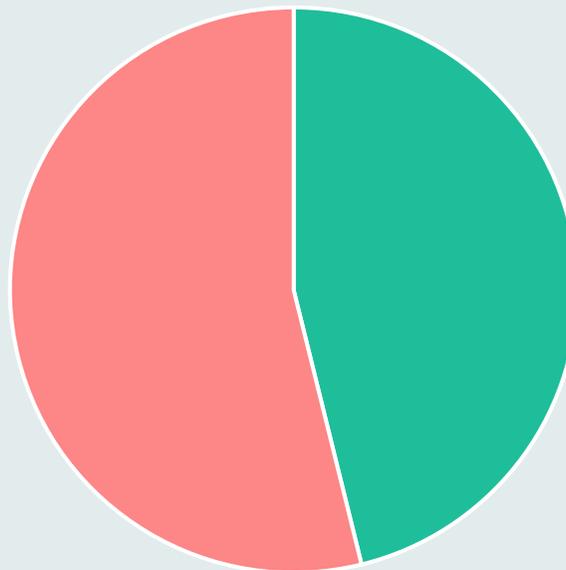
Analysis of Participants

Students by Gender



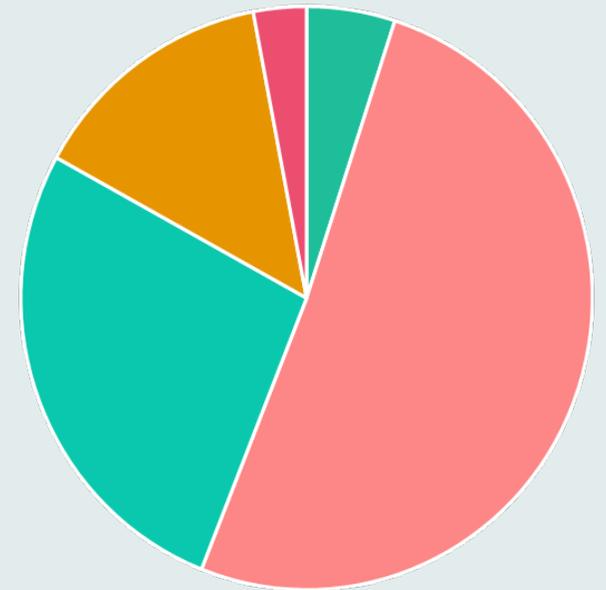
Male Female

International and home students



Home International

Age of Interviewees



18 - 24 25 - 34 35 - 44 45 - 54 55 - 64

Word Cloud showing participant responses to 'How do you describe your ethnicity?'



Findings: the lived experience of ethnic minority PGR students

The experiences of ethnic minority PGRs were mixed, with the interviewees reporting both negative and positive experiences. Although these experiences were personal to individuals, common themes emerged, and these form the basis of the GuildHE report. They echo findings from previous research in this area.

Overall, it is clear that institutions can do more to foster a sense of belonging in predominantly white spaces through the provision of adequate support, to champion diversity and challenge microaggressions and incidents of discrimination.

Verbatim, anonymised quotes from individual interviews are used throughout to ground each theme in the real experiences which were reported to the peer researchers.

Quotes: A Closer Look at Participants' Experiences

Academic Support

- [At] my university, although it is small, but the lecturers and the staff who are working here, they are very friendly, and they are very helpful... I found the offer, and everything is what I need."

Microaggression, Discrimination and Racism

- "But I would say, in most drama school settings, one doesn't see, you don't see yourself."
- "So next time we hear anything comes in my department, I'm not going to apply. There's no point. Why should I?"

Financial Support

- "So, I recently did a poll amongst black PhD students at my institution, just to try and find out who's funded, was self-funded, etc. And I think it was the stats were like, 98%, were self-funded. So, in terms of funding opportunities, they're just non-existent."

Career Prospects

- "I should say, maybe they are just awarded to white peers, or students from, you know, maybe more aligned with white backgrounds that get the funding, and therefore they get every opportunity in terms of being coached how to go for these opportunities and being supported and getting letters of support written for them."

Quotes: A Closer Look at One Participant's Experience

Adequate Representation

- "Things are improving, compared to experience at first degree, because of increased number of ethnic minorities."

Genuine Sense of belonging

- "No, not at all, after an experience .." Not satisfied in the way I was treated...It's unethical ... Deep down me, I believe it's because of my background...
- I believe 100% that if I was from any other background, that wouldn't have happened." ...

Impact on Mental Wellbeing

- "It is being affected. But it's just that I am dealing with it myself."

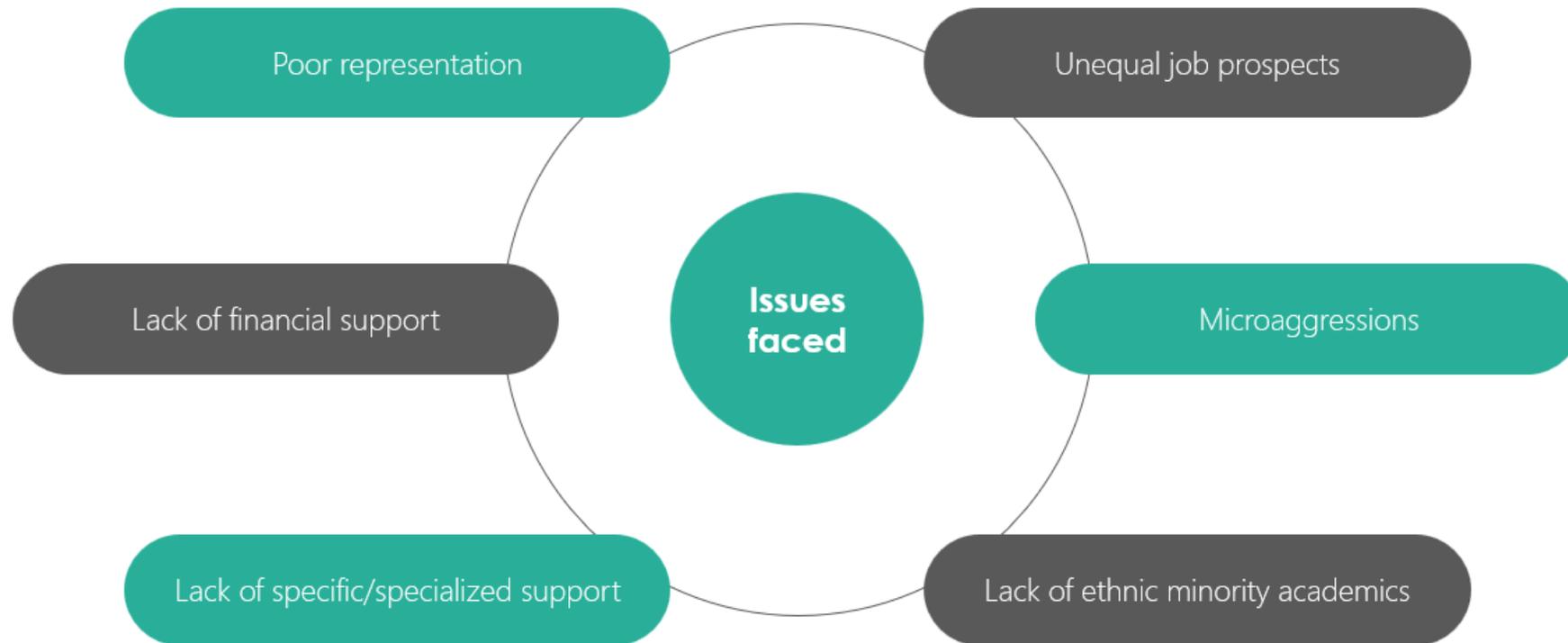
Forms of Help or Clarification Sought

- "I've decided to keep quiet....I am not happy...I thought about writing to the university, but I thought writing to them is not my priority. My priority is to get my qualification. If you bring something like that out, you will be a target, and you go nowhere. So, the best thing is to keep it in, and so far, that is how it goes."
- "This is very messy, believe me, it's very messy. But then I don't want to create any problem for the university, you know."

Fear of Being Targeted

- "I am open to you because you are doing research ... I believe you will get 5 out of 10 students that will probably say the same thing ... because as soon as you go and bring something like this up, you will be a target believe me, and you are going to regret it for the rest of your life."

Issues Identified



Research Findings

Despite a lack of funding, ethnic minority PGRs chose to attend GuildHE institutions so they could have access to a community of specialists. However, this lack of financial support contributed to financial pressures for some students and negatively impacted career development activities such as conference attendance

A feeling of belonging influences the education experiences of ethnic minority PGRs. The feeling of belonging is associated with the level of support received from institutions. Academic support relates to the degree they are studying for, personal support relates to individual circumstances such as having a disability. International students also needed specific support, particularly in relation to Home Office guidelines

Research Findings

Other factors that negatively impact on 'belongingness' include lack of representation in staff and in the curriculum, as well as experiences of microaggressions, discrimination, and racism.

Given the lack of ethnic minority academics in higher education, it was deemed crucial to facilitate access to networks that understand the specific experiences of ethnic minorities in the labour market

Recommendations

When thinking about ethnic minority students, it is important that institutions think beyond the labels of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups as it can homogenise Black and Asian groups as well as exclude many other identities such as Middle Eastern and Latin American.

Increase the visibility of equality, diversity and inclusion, for example by appointing champions of inclusion or cultural ambassadors who will seek to raise awareness of diversity across institutions

Set up an institutionally-supported ethnic minority PGR network, so there is a space for collective support. Institutional support should include resources to ensure sustainability of the network, including practical sessions on how to run a network.

Create a functioning system for reporting discrimination and/or racism that avoids protectionism or prejudice.

Where possible, provide students with access to a mentor outside of the supervisory relationship who can provide support and help remove barriers to requesting other support when needed.

Recommendations

Ensure that supervisors have the prerequisite training in supporting ethnic minority PGRs.

Where ethnic minority academics support ethnic minority students, their labour should be acknowledged and rewarded.

Empirical evidence in the literature review and from this study show that ethnic minority PGRs are more likely to self-fund their PGR education.

Smaller and specialist institutions do not typically have access to large financial resources, particularly for research. GuildHE and these institutions should explore options to develop relationships with research councils, governmental bodies, charitable trusts, and industry partners with a view to funding these initiatives through additional sources of income

Going forward, what are our expectations?

Wide report dissemination, to aid funders, policy makers and HE managers in making informed decisions.

A strengthening of EDI, and a more diverse and inclusive culture across UK higher education.

More equitable access to funding support and enrolment and a level playing field in terms of participation and opportunities for progression.

A HE sector that provides value to all its stakeholders, leading to enhanced outcomes for PGRS from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Evidence of togetherness, a real sense of belongingness, genuine feelings of fulfilled aspirations, and no despondence over persisting inequities in the system.

We desire to see results, and real change, from all the 'talk'.

Link for GuildHE Report:

<https://research.guildhe.ac.uk/2022/01/31/understanding-the-lived-experience-of-ethnic-minority-students-in-postgraduate-research/>

THANK
YOU FOR
LISTENING

Questions?

