Summary of an Office for Students and Research England workshop on widening participation in postgraduate research

The workshop note does not represent regulatory advice or guidance, stipulate particular approaches, or endorse the actions of specific institutions. It reflects a summary of group discussions at a joint Research England (RE) and Office for Students (OfS) workshop that was held on 9 December 2019 with sector stakeholders (including providers, academics, students and interest groups).

Background

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) requires that the Office for Students (OfS) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) carry out joint working where a function will be more efficient, or will enable more effective exercise of functions. Research England (RE) is a council within UKRI and oversees UKRI's England-only functions in relation to university research and knowledge exchange.

Early discussions to identify areas of joint working bringing benefits to the sector and students highlighted shared interests in postgraduate research (PGR) and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and within these more specific areas of focus. Following earlier engagement with the sector, the OfS conducted a desktop review of EDI data for PGR students. The review highlighted compelling evidence that demonstrates persistent, year-on-year inequalities for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR study.

In continued discussions, both RE and the OfS have confirmed the desire to intervene in this disparity. The 2019 pre-election period limited our ability to communicate new policies or funds, however the outcomes of this workshop will direct activity, taking place early in 2020.

Aim

The aim of this workshop was to critically analyse the barriers to access and participation in postgraduate research (PGR) study for black, Asian and minority ethnic people.

Methods

We adopted an 'Issues tree' approach to the workshop. This methodology split the PGR experience into a series of lifecycle stages and examined the barriers that occur across those stages.

Outcomes

The workshop provided RE and the OfS with a developed understanding of barriers to access and participation in postgraduate research study for black, Asian and minority ethnic people. This information will be used to help inform a joint RE-OfS approach.

Access

Workshop attendees discussed a broad range of topics concerning issues of access, ranging from broad societal issues to issues concerning the PGR environment.

Systemic barriers

Some of the barriers faced by minority ethnic groups in accessing PGR study were thought of as systemic. The specific issue was conceptualised within tiers of broader systems, operating at a societal, sector and institutional level.

- **Societal racism and inequality:** This was frequently highlighted across working groups as an important influencing factor by workshop attendees. Pervasive racism in England was understood to harm those from minority ethnicity groups, limiting opportunity and severely impacting upon the individual. Consideration of higher education and particularly PGR study in the context of this larger societal problem, posed questions around the extent that higher education alone can overcome these inequalities and to an even greater extent, PGR level study alone. When thought of in this context, isolated solutions are likely to be limited in their effectiveness and a need for a holistic approach was highlighted.

- **Sector level inequality:** Workshop participants highlighted systemic inequalities present throughout education as barriers to access to PGR study for minority ethnicity groups. The group referred to a 'golden pathway' – the expected route by which individuals achieve access to PGR study. In part due to broader societal inequalities and racism, the pathway was understood to systematically exclude minority ethnicities at each stage of progression (for example access to schools, access to further education, access to undergraduate/research intensive institutions, success at undergraduate level), with the inequalities inherent within each stage, reducing the likelihood of access to subsequent stages. The golden pathway excludes the narrative of different types of students who adopt different modes of study, such as those who progress later in life.

  In line with the concept of a 'pathway' to PGR study, participants discussed a lack of a joined up approach from regulatory, policy and government bodies across the student lifecycle. It was thought that a lack of sector-level cohesion has resulted an accumulation of barriers that in combination, severely diminish the likelihood of access to PGR study. Specific examples are:

  - lack of movement between tariff group higher education providers
  - an accountability gap at PGR level – role of the regulator/decision makers
  - language and the conceptualisation of inequality – for example the 'attainment gap' suggests a failure of the individual to achieve
  - funding at an institution level rather individual level.

  It was highlighted that a focus upon international students by higher education providers (due to the revenue generated) can reduce opportunity for potential UK PGR students.

- **Institutional level barriers:** Systemic barriers were also understood to operate within institutions, particularly in relation to admissions to PGR study (which is discussed in more detail later). Other institutional barriers including the concentration of academic focus upon a predominantly 'white syllabus'. In particular it was thought that leadership within institutions plays an important role when considering institutional level systemic barriers.

Admissions

The process of admissions to PGR study was highlighted as a clear area of concern for workshop attendees. Broadly it was thought that the PGR admissions process is opaque. A lack of transparency around decision making and the availability of PGR opportunities was thought to severely impact upon equality of access.

When compared to the centralised admissions system for undergraduate study, student choice is lacking at PGR level and it was viewed that it is unlikely that admissions at PGR level are meritocratic. Participants highlighted the potential role for contextual admissions to level disparities, and supported the notion of equity over equality.

Data/metrics

The quality of data concerning access to PGR study for minority ethnicity groups was viewed as a barrier to a full understanding of the issue. The aggregation of data for different ethnic groups into one broad category can conflate the issues faced by distinct groups. In a similar manner, sector, or institutional level data can hide disparities at a subject level.

The focus upon excellence is dependent upon metrics. The workshop attendees highlighted that metrics are susceptible to implicit bias, as construed through a white lens, creating a framework that perpetuates inequalities.

Environment

Workshop participants discussed environmental barriers to access. A lack of existing representation of ethnicities can deny PGR students of role models, mentors, or sponsors.

Similarly, a lack of visible representation in leadership was understood to diminish the likelihood of individuals aspiring to participate in PGR study and increase imposter syndrome. A 'white syllabus/curriculum' was understood to also act as an environmental barrier for minority ethnicities to relate to PGR study and impact upon in aspirations to access. Such environmental factors were thought to impact upon the individual's sense of belonging.

Success and participation

Workshop attendees discussed a broad range of topics concerning issues of success and participation. Participation was viewed as a necessary part of success and barriers were often highlighted as impacting both success and participation. PGR study was conceptualised as a multi-stage process which highlighted sequential points where success and participation might be impacted.

Environment and support

Many of the barriers to success and participation related to the environment in which PGR study takes place and the available support.

- **Supervisory relationship:** The supervisory relationship was highlighted as a crucial determinant for success and participation for PGR students and was thought of as a single point of failure. The importance of the supervisor relationship was thought to be further pronounced for carrying out part-time study, or other alternative study modes such as distance learning. Participants viewed that cultural awareness and sensitivity was an important consideration for supervisors, especially where supervisors are a different ethnicity to their PGR students. Recognition of the potential impact of racism, or imposter syndrome was thought to be an important requirement for supervisors, where the mental health and wellbeing on the individual may be impacted. Stress for the individual was thought to be amplified further for those researching a topic related to their personal experience (related to ethnicity or racism for example), through increased emotional labour.

- **PGR role:** Participants highlighted an innate power imbalance suffered by PGR students. PGR students were described as 'falling through the gap', as not considered students in the same manner as the undergraduate population and also classified as employees. As such institutions support provisions provided to students and employees were considered not to comprehensively provide PGR students with the necessary support. For minority ethnic groups, this was understood to be further compounded by commonly a lack of representation of those group within faculties and leadership.

- **External support networks:** Workshop participants highlighted that a lack of external networks and support can also contribute as a barrier to success and participation.

Data

Data was also thought to be important when considering barriers to success and participation. It was highlighted that there is currently no analysis concerning completion rates by ethnicity. Therefore we are uncertain as to whether there are inequalities in success and participation for minority ethnicities (although it would be most likely that there is) and how patterns differ from issues concerning access. Further fine grain understanding would be useful around science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and non-STEM disciplines, the impact of types of study (for example campus vs lab time) and intersectionality.

Broader issues

Broder issues, not specific to ethnicity were also highlighted as important barrier for PGR students. This included a lack of accountability for student experience and understanding of what is evidenced to help PGR students participate and succeed in their study. Participants also highlighted broader issues concerning the culture of PGR study, such as a 'sink or swim' philosophy, testing the ability of the individual to complete, often impacting upon the wellbeing of PGR students. It was thought that expectations upon PGR students are often unclear.

Preferred outcomes and interventions

Workshop attendees discussed how the OfS and RE might take forwards the issues discussed during the workshop. Overall it was thought that a long term, holistic approach is needed to bring about real change, one that does not adopt a deficit model, recognising the shortcomings of the education system. It was also viewed that there should be clear linking of agenda between sector bodies and even within single organisations, such as between funding streams. A system that properly recognises innovation and progress in relation to this area was thought to be required.

The following levers available to the OfS and RE were highlighted:

- **Funding:** Workshop participants discussed funding as a potential means by which the OfS and RE might improve access and participation for minority ethnicity groups. Targeted funding with this specific purpose was thought to be one means by which this might be implemented. Targeted studentships and positive action were highlighted as potential actions that funders may take. Alignment of funding policies across funders was thought to be a broader ambition that the sector should work towards. It was also thought that potential funding should consider student lifecycle approach – the McNair Scholarships in the United States were highlighted as good example of early intervention in the student life course. Workshop attendees also highlighted a potential rethink of funding practices, where the individual receives funding rather than institutions.

- **Community of practice:** Developing a community of practice was discussed as an approach that could be taken by OfS and RE. This approach was thought to show leadership by central bodies and increase the focus of the sector upon the issue. This might allow for comparison of approaches and sharing of good practices and comparison within other sectors.

- **Research assessment:** Research assessment was discussed as a potential lever that RE may explore in conjunction with the other UK funding bodies. In particular, consideration of how ethnic diversity of PGR populations might contribute to the environment section of research assessment exercises. This might include analysis of the possible metrics that constitute an excellent research environment.

- **Regulation:** The OfS's role in regulation was raised as a potential means by which the ethnic diversity of the PGR population might be improved. It was noted that the OfS's requirements for access and participation plans do not extend to PGR study and that the regulatory role of the OfS is not implemented to as a great an extent as undergraduate. Full regulation of higher education providers in relation to PGR students, with focus upon ethnicity would act as lever.

Workshop participants also discussed important outcome areas:

- **Charters and pledges:** Charters and pledges were discussed in relation to both funding and research assessment. Parity between the inclusion of charter marks focusing upon different protected characteristics was highlighted as important. The inclusion of requirements or recognition of charter marks in funding terms and conditions or decision making was discussed as a potential mechanism that funders may adopt. Similarly, the consideration of charter marks in relation to research assessment was highlighted as a potential approach.

- **Admission policies**: Admission policies were highlighted as an important area that funding policies may seek to influence. Workshop participants discussed a joined up funder and regulator stance upon admission and admission policies as a desired outcome, with innovation in the selection process incentivised.

- **Increasing opportunity to participate in PGR study:** Widening the applicant pool in terms of those with the opportunity to take part in PGR study. Increasing the diversity of the pipeline of potential future PGR students.

- **Information advice and guidance (IAG):** Discussions highlighted that there is a role for the OfS and RE in improving IAG around PGR study and ensuring that the broadest pool of people possible are informed and guided in relation to PGR study. The aim would be to increase the numbers of undergraduate and taught postgraduate students considering PGR study from minority ethnicities. This should extend beyond academia.

- **Improved data:** Workshop participants highlighted that data concerning continuation and completion for PGR students should be improved. This might include continuation and completion data according to ethnicity. Overall, it was felt that the evidence base could be improved by more comprehensive, routinely collected data and analysis. Further understanding of underrepresented voices and the quality of experiences is needed.

- **Enhanced supervision:** Training for supervisors around increasing the ethnic diversity of the PGR population and sensitivity to cultural difference and needs. Linking of equality and diversity in supervision to performance management, pay and progression.

- **Positive action:** Workshop participants discussed the need for clear regulator and funder guidance and leadership around the use of positive action in the context of PGR study and in the sector more broadly.

- **Increased representation in leadership:** A system-wide, whole institution view was thought to be an important outcome - in particular representation of minority ethnicities in leadership roles within institutions and an increase in prominence in the sector more broadly.

- **Contextual excellence:** Participants highlighted a white syllabus and colonialised system where metrics and understanding of excellence are inherently biased towards whiteness. The broadening of definition of excellence that accounts for diversity and recognises the lack of a level playing field is required. This might be manifested through recognising the undergraduate attainment gap.