Annual Evaluation Report – 2021/22

Evaluating the joint Research England and Office for Students programme to improve access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in postgraduate research study (2021-2026)

Report to the Office for Students and Research England by the Evidence Development and Incubation Team, in the Policy Institute at King's College London, and the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

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Dr Chiamaka Nwosu

Domenica Avila

Gabrielle McGannon

Susannah Hume

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List of abbreviations

- Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)
- Data Sharing Agreement (DSA)
- Department for Education (DfE)
- Difference-in-Difference (DID)
- Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
- Higher Education and Research Act (HERA)
- Higher Education Provider (HEP)
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)
- National Student Survey (NSS)
- Office for Students (OfS)
- Postgraduate research (PGR)
- Postgraduate teaching (PGT)
- Research England (RE)
- Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA)
- The Evidence Development and Incubation team (EDIT)
- The Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE)
- UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)
- Red-Amber-Green (RAG)

Executive summary

- The Office for Students (OfS) and Research England (RE) have adopted a joint approach to improving access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in postgraduate research (PGR). As part of this approach, they have launched a funding programme that has provided nearly £8 million to 13 projects. Overall, 25 lead and partner higher education providers (HEPs) are using these funds to carry out innovative interventions designed to address racial inequalities in PGR.

- The Evidence Development and Incubation team (EDIT) within the Policy Institute at King's College London has been commissioned as the evaluation supplier, in partnership with the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO). The approach to this evaluation will incorporate an impact evaluation to estimate the overall effect of the programme, as well as an implementation and process evaluation (IPE) to determine whether the programme was delivered as intended.

- The funded projects and the evaluation launched in January 2022. The impact evaluation is currently underway, beginning with the identification of outcome measures that are common across all projects and the analysis of data for the pre-intervention period (2017/18 to 2020/21) to be used in establishing a national baseline for the identified outcome measures, while the IPE has focused on interviews of project staff.

- In order to estimate the effect of the programme, the analytical approach will use a difference-in-difference design which requires identifying a group of HEPs that are as similar as possible to the intervention group in order to compare the trends in outcomes between the intervention group and the comparator group to estimate the effect of the programme on the key outcomes.

- The matching process resulted in 41 HEPs in the comparator group and the analysis of pre-intervention data revealed similar trends in progression rates, completion rates, retention rates, post-PGR destinations as well as sense of belonging for students from black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups in intervention and comparator HEPs. This will allow us to attribute any changes in outcomes in the intervention period to the funding programme.

- Based on data in the pre-intervention period, national baselines for each outcome measure have now been established which will be used to estimate the difference in outcomes for each year of the programme.

- Interviews with project leads from the projects that commenced delivery in early 2022 found that, despite some delays and complexities managing internal and external bureaucracies, delivery had progressed well. All project leads reported recruiting at or above their target levels for student-facing elements of the project, though some reported slightly under-recruiting for staff-facing elements. Project leads also highlighted the importance of incorporating lived experience in project design to ensure that the projects were done with, rather than done to, black, Asian and minority ethnic students.

- In the next twelve months of the programme, the impact evaluation activities will focus on data collection and analysis of each outcome measure in order to estimate the impact of the programme in the first year, while the IPE will focus on administering student and staff surveys, as well as focus groups and interviews for select projects.

1. Introduction

This report provides an overview of the activities carried out in the first year since the launch (in November 2021) of the evaluation for the Office for Students (OfS) and Research England (RE) funding programme to improve access and participation for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in postgraduate research (PGR) study. Chapter 2 of this report introduces the aims and objectives of the evaluation, while chapter 3 details the preliminary work that has been carried out in the first year. Chapters 4 and 5 describe, respectively, the impact evaluation and the implementation and process evaluation (IPE). In chapter 6, an analysis of the pre-intervention trends is presented, while chapter 7 includes insights from the qualitative work. Chapter 8 outlines the plans for the second year of the evaluation, and the report concludes with the risk log shown in chapter 9.

About the Office for Students and Research England

The Office for Students is the independent regulator of higher education in England. It was established by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA), which also sets out its powers and general duties. The OfS is an independent public body that reports to Parliament through the Department for Education (DfE). The OfS also works with the DfE and other government agencies and engages with student and sector organisations, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the devolved administrations and a range of other stakeholders.

Research England is part of UKRI, along with the seven discipline-focused research councils and Innovate UK, which funds innovation by businesses. RE is responsible for funding and engaging with English higher education providers (HEPs) to create and sustain the conditions for a healthy and dynamic research and knowledge exchange system in the higher education sector.

About the funding

The funding arose from the commitment of the OfS and RE to work together to promote equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in higher education and onward through to academic and research careers. Initially, the two organisations engaged with the sector and reviewed EDI data, which highlighted compelling evidence of persistent, year-on-year inequalities for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR study. Following this, the OfS and RE formed a joint approach to addressing these equality gaps. As part of this joint approach, the funding programme under evaluation here provided up to £8 million to consortia of HEPs, to achieve the following aims:

- Stimulate innovation in, scale-up and distribute effective practice in increasing access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in PGR,

- Ambitiously address evidenced issues of inequality across the PGR student lifecycle that create barriers for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, and

- Collaborate strategically to embed EDI across the sector to improve access and participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in PGR.

This funding was announced in October 2020. The original bid deadline of January 2021 was moved in response to COVID, and the final bid deadline was May 2021. Successful projects were announced in November 2021. Projects are up to four years in length and will finish by January 2026. The projects are led by the thirteen institutions listed below:

1. University of Bradford
2. University of York
3. Sheffield Hallam University
4. University College London
5. Durham University
6. University of Cambridge
7. University of Wolverhampton
8. University of East London
9. University of Surrey
10. University of Sheffield
11. Nottingham Trent University
12. University of Essex
13. University of Leeds

The overall programme involves 25 lead and partner institutions (The projects are also working in partnership with other external organisations. However, these partnerships are not directly assessed in this evaluation report.)

About the evaluation

The OfS and RE wish to understand both the effectiveness and impact of the overall funding programme, as well as the "who, what and how" of how that impact has been achieved. The Evidence Development and Incubation team (EDIT) within the Policy Institute at King's College London was commissioned as the evaluation supplier, in partnership with the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO). Individual projects have also received funding to enable them to conduct project-level evaluations. Accordingly, this overarching evaluation has two components, an impact evaluation and an implementation and process evaluation (IPE). The impact evaluation focuses on understanding the overall impact of the funding on the outcomes identified by the OfS and RE as being key to the funding achieving its goals, while the IPE focuses on understanding how the funding has been used by projects and in what ways this may have contributed to the impact.

The evaluation term was initially the 57 months from 1 March 2021 until 30 November 2025, running over the 2021/22 – 2024/25 academic years. Due to delays in the identification of successful projects, with flow-on effects to when those projects were able to commence, and therefore when evaluation activities could commence, the term of the evaluation has been extended to June 2026.

2. Evaluation aims and objectives

The aims of the evaluation are:

1. To assess the efficacy of the overall programme,

2. To evaluate the efficacy of the individual projects,

3. To identify and understand the emerging and long-term impact of the overall programme,

4. To understand the drivers of change (or lack thereof) among the institutions involved in the programme,

5. To understand the drivers of change (or lack thereof) among the individuals involved in the projects,

6. To assess the sustainability of any programme outcomes, and

7. To provide evidence that will inform future strategic decisions of the providers, stakeholders, and funders.

3. Preliminary work

Rapid review

We began the evaluation with a rapid review of the 13 projects' funding applications to prepare for the kick-off meetings with the projects. The rapid review focussed on:

- Identifying each projects' outcomes to help in setting common and project-specific outcomes for the programme evaluation,

- Reviewing evaluation plans to see whether there was space to align project-level and programme-level data collection, and

- Understanding each project's planned activities and timelines to assist with designing monitoring tools.

We also conducted a rapid review of relevant measures of wellbeing, sense of belonging and culture change. Given that these outcomes were repeatedly mentioned in the projects' bids we reviewed existing validated scales and pre-existing data collection sources for these outcomes.

Development of evaluation understanding documents

Between January and March 2022, we conducted virtual kick-off meetings with the lead institutions of the 13 projects and their HEP partners. Though projects had been required to complete a project activity table (mapping inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, targets and impacts) for their funding application, there was limited alignment between how projects had approached the creation of this table. Projects provided varying levels of detail, meaning that for some applications it was difficult to get a clear idea of what the project would include. It was also clear that projects had interpreted the meaning of input, activity, output, outcome, target and impact differently.

Therefore, to create a consistent approach, prior to the kick-off meeting, each project was asked to prepare a logic model using a template provided by EDIT. The template asked projects to set out their problem statement, context, interventions, mechanisms and outcomes. To ensure that all projects took the same approach to using the template, projects were also sent a two-page document explaining how to create a logic model and an example of a logic model. Projects provided their logic models ahead of the kick-off meetings and we reviewed each logic model to ensure consistency. For some projects it was necessary to make significant changes to create alignment between the logic model provided and the original template, while others needed only minor adjustments. The main changes we made were for brevity and ensuring that outcomes were simple, clear and related to the overall aims of the programme. The revised logic models were discussed with the projects during the kick-off meetings and provided to the projects for review and refinement. It should be noted that projects may not use this logic model for their internal evaluation as some projects preferred to use a different format for their internal reporting.

Using the information from the logic models, kick-off meetings and the bids, we created an evaluation understanding document for each project which has now been reviewed by and agreed with the project lead institutions and partners. To assist with project monitoring, each evaluation understanding document includes a list of activities to be delivered in each project year, with targets set against each activity. We will refer to these lists as the projects progress to understand the extent to which projects were delivered as planned.

Data protection impact assessment

Given that demographic information will be requested directly from students who participate in focus groups, we have completed a data protection impact assessment (DPIA) to identify privacy and data protection risks and outline strategies to minimise these.

4. Impact evaluation plan and progress

This section provides an outline of the impact evaluation, as specified in the evaluation plan, which is provided alongside this report, and an update on progress to November 2022. This date marks the end of the first year since the launch of the programme.

As outlined in the evaluation plan, we will use a matched difference-in-difference (DID) estimation to estimate the effect of the projects on the identified outcomes, by comparing the trends in outcomes between the intervention group and a matched comparator group consisting of HEPs whose outcomes, or changes in outcomes prior to the intervention, are as similar as possible to the HEPs participating in the projects.

This approach involves identifying a counterfactual group of HEPs whose time trends on the outcomes of interest prior to the intervention are as similar as possible to the HEPs participating in the projects (including lead institutions and partners). This will allow us to compare the trends in outcomes between the intervention group and the comparator group to estimate the effect of the programme on the key outcomes. (More details of the implementation of the DID are given in chapter 6.)

Research questions

The primary research questions for the impact evaluation are as follows:

1. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on progression rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic students into PGR?

2. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on retention rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR?

3. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on completion rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR?

4. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on post-PGR destinations for black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR?

5. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on the wellbeing of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR?

6. What impact do the projects in the OfS/RE funding programme have on the sense of belonging of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in the institution?

Outcome measures

After reviewing the logic models for each project, our team identified five core outcome measures that were common across all projects (shown in Table 1) and have collaborated with each project to identify project-specific outcomes that were unique to projects in instances where common outcome measures did not completely cover a project's core objectives.

Table 1: Common outcomes

Outcome measure	Definition	Collection	Timing
Progression rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic students into PGR	The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who have enrolled onto a PGR course set to enter as per the given academic year	Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA)	Baseline Annual
Retention of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who have continued onto a PGR course as per the given academic year	Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA)	Baseline Annual
Completion rates of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who have completed a PGR course as per the end of the given academic year	Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA)	Baseline Annual
Post-PGR destination of black, Asian and minority ethnic students in PGR	The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who after graduating (postgraduate or undergraduate) are in continued full or part-time study	Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) – Graduate Outcomes Survey	Baseline Annual
Sense of belonging of black, Asian and minority ethnic undergraduate students	The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic students who agree to the question "feeling part of a community of staff and students"	National Student Survey (NSS)	Baseline Annual

We investigated multiple options for measures of sense of belonging, which is, despite its importance, unfortunately not directly available through any standardised administrative dataset. Ultimately, it was determined to use the National Student Survey (NSS) question on feeling "part of a community of learners". While most projects are delivering interventions targeting postgraduate students, there are a few delivering interventions that target undergraduate students from black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups.

So, given that the NSS sample is undergraduate students, this means that we can measure the extent to which any improvement in the representation and support of black, Asian and minority ethnic postgraduates also flows through to more of a sense of community for black,

Asian and minority ethnic undergraduates. There are a couple of mechanisms through which this could happen; for instance, an improvement in the general climate of support, and improved representation among teaching assistants and junior faculty. However, it is not a direct measure of the belonging of black, Asian and minority ethnic PGR students, and this should be borne in mind when interpreting findings for this outcome.

In the IPE, we will explore qualitatively other measures of belonging with PGR students, and we expect the project-level evaluations will explore this too. In addition, we will seek to understand whether and how any changes as a result of the projects might be perceived by undergraduates, to contextualise any findings on this outcome.

Progress on impact evaluation

▸ **Matching intervention HEPs with suitable comparator HEPs**

In order to identify the most appropriate comparator HEPs, we compiled a comprehensive list of HEPs from publicly available HESA data, then we used a one-to-many (up to four), nearest neighbour matching process, with replacement. "Replacement" means that it was possible to identify more than one HEP that could be a suitable match for each project HEP and that the same comparator HEP could be identified for more than one project HEP. This matching process aimed to group each HEP in the intervention group with the most similar comparator HEPs based on the variables listed below

- Total number of postgraduates

- Proportion of students from black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups

- Proportion of female students

- Russell group membership

- HEP type (seven groups based on a cluster analysis by Research England[1] which uses existing knowledge base, knowledge generation, and physical assets to categorise HEPs) described in Table 2 below.

Table 2: HEP types

	HEP type
1	Large universities generating an average level of funded research, consisting of a large undergraduate population and a small postgraduate population of mainly postgraduate teaching (PGT) students
2	Mid-sized universities generating a small level of funded research

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[1] Ulrichsen, T. C. (2018). Knowledge exchange framework metrics: A cluster analysis of higher education institutions. *Bristol, UK*.

3	Small universities generating a small level of funded research
4	Very large, research-intensive universities with a significant postgraduate population (both PGR and PGT)
5	Large, research-intensive universities with a significant postgraduate population (mainly PGT)
6	Specialist universities focused on STEM disciplines
7	Specialist universities focused on art disciplines

The matching process resulted in 41 comparator HEPs identified as the best matches for the 25 lead and partner intervention group.

‣ Checking the quality of the matching using pre-intervention data

We received pre-intervention data covering the period 2017/18 to 2020/21 from HESA in July 2022. This included HEP-level data, which we have used to explore trends in the pre-intervention period across project and comparator HEPs and to establish the baseline.

Data on all outcome measures for the pre-intervention period were collected and processed. The preliminary analysis has focused on testing whether the parallel trends assumption holds in the pre-intervention period. This is required because for the DID estimate to be valid, there should be no time-varying differences between the treatment and comparator groups. That is, in the absence of the programme, the outcomes of the treatment group should be parallel to the outcomes of the comparator group.

Further discussion of the assumptions underpinning causal estimation using DID, along with results from this analysis, is provided in Section 6.

Project-specific analysis

To capture any impact of the individual projects not covered by the common outcome measures, we will also conduct project-specific analysis using the most relevant outcome measure identified by each project team, according to their internal objectives.

Depending on the project-specific outcome measure chosen for each project, we will use the following approaches to explore the effects of the intervention:

- Where the outcome measure is accessible from HESA, we will repeat the primary analysis using the project's institution information and its corresponding comparator pool.

- Where the outcome measure is collected through administrative data or repeated surveys (including a baseline), we will work with the project institution to obtain access to the

data and their impact evaluation. We will conduct a pre-post exploratory analysis repeating the primary analysis without a comparator group and including the covariates for which the project holds data.

- Where the outcome measure is not quantifiable, to assess change we will use the qualitative approach explained in section 5, Implementation and process evaluation plan and progress. We will access the projects' administrative records and internal evaluation reports to gather information to approximate the impact, and we will incorporate questions in the IPE surveys of students and staff to collect their perceptions over the outcome.

This analysis will be conducted in collaboration with the internal project evaluations, at set points during the evaluation.

5. Implementation and process evaluation plan

Research questions

As outlined in the evaluation plan, the implementation and process evaluation (IPE) will address the following research questions:

1. To what extent was the programme delivered as intended?
2. What factors have facilitated and/or hindered the implementation of the programme?
3. What are the experiences of students who have participated in the projects and what, if any, benefits did they perceive from them?
4. What are the experiences of staff who have participated in the projects and what, if any, benefits did they perceive from them?
5. How acceptable are the various project approaches to key stakeholders and beneficiaries?
6. How attractive are the various approaches likely to be to other HEPs, and why or why not?

Research methods

‣ **Focus groups with students**

At the end of each academic year (starting in 2022/23), students who have participated in projects will be invited to participate in focus groups to discuss their experiences of the projects, as well as broader perspectives on racial equality in their HEP. Three focus groups will be convened per year, with up to eight participants per group.

As projects will be conducting in-depth research with students as part of their internal evaluations, these focus groups will aim to draw out comparative insights between projects, rather than focussing on project activities.

Therefore, where possible, focus groups will bring together participants from different projects with similar interventions or intended outcomes. This will allow participants to identify differences and similarities in their experiences, drawing out comparative insights about various project approaches and broader HEP culture.

Given the limited number of focus groups taking place, the groups will be structured around research questions 3 and 5 to ensure conversations are focused on sector-level insights, rather than delving into the specifics of each project. We will develop a schedule focused on the following issues:

- Barriers to accessing PGR,
- Facilitators to accessing PGR (including, but not limited to, project activities), and
- Perspectives on the most effective approaches to increasing black, Asian and minority ethnic students' participation in PGR

In future reports, these findings will be presented as programme-level insights as we will not have adequate coverage within individual coverages to make insights about each project. Instead, project-level insights will be presented as synthesised findings from project's internal evaluation reports.

Focus groups will take place online to maximise accessibility. In recognition of the sensitivity of discussing racial inequality, and the need to create a safe and supportive environment, focus groups will be facilitated by black, Asian and minority ethnic researchers. As far as is possible, where projects focus on a specific demographic within the black, Asian and minority ethnic community (e.g., black students or black, Asian and minority ethnic women) we will also seek to match the facilitators to these additional demographic characteristics. In the event that a participant becomes distressed, facilitators will signpost individuals to support services.

‣ **Student survey**

A survey for all students who participated in project activities will be shared at the end of each academic year (starting in 2022/23). Where projects are also completing an end-of-year survey for their internal evaluation, the surveys will be aligned, and the programme evaluation questions will be included in the project-level survey. Otherwise, the survey will be distributed to students via the project lead.

The survey will be responsive to emerging findings, but will include questions relating to:

- Motivations for participating in project activities,

- Perceived impact(s) of project activities,

- Feedback on project activities, including the level to which project approaches are informed by the need of black, Asian and minority ethnic students,

- Barriers and facilitators to PGR study for black, Asian and minority ethnic students, and the extent to which HEPs are addressing these, and

- Perspectives on HEP culture, and the level to which staff are aware of and responsive to issues of racial inequality.

To avoid participant distress, the survey will not ask students about specific instances of racial discrimination. Further, students will be reminded throughout that they may skip questions that they do not want to answer and signposted to support services at the end of the survey.

‣ **Staff survey**

Each year (starting in 2022/23), project leads will distribute a survey to all staff members who have been involved in project activities, whether at a high level (e.g., theme leads) or more briefly (e.g., staff who have attended training sessions or been involved in mentoring). Depending on the staff member's level of involvement, they may be routed to answer fewer questions.

The survey will be adapted each year, but will explore areas such as:

- Awareness of the programme and its aims,

- Motivations for participating in the project/project activities,

- Perceived impact(s) of project activities,

- Feedback on project/project activities, including the level to which evidence is shared/distributed,

- Perspectives on HEP culture, including awareness and responsiveness to barriers faced by black, Asian and minority ethnic students, and

- Experiences of strategic collaboration with other departments/HEPs to embed equality, diversity and inclusion.

▸ **Interviews with project leads**

We will conduct annual interviews with project leads, interviewing up to five project leads per year to ensure that all projects are included over the evaluation lifecycle. These interviews will explore both programme- and project-level topics, such as:

- Project lead's relationship with the OfS and RE,

- Funding structure, and any impact this has had on project design or delivery,

- Collaboration across the programme, whether formal or informal,

- Project progress and implementation against project plans,

- Changes to project plans and implementation and any flow-on effects,

- Perceptions of project impact on students,

- Perceptions of project impact on HEP culture,

- Perceptions of project impact on sector collaboration and evidence sharing, and

- Project sustainability post-funding.

▸ **Synthesis of internal evaluation findings**

The projects' internal evaluation findings will be used to provide context and in-depth insight for the overall evaluation. Projects will provide their internal evaluation reports (this may be on a quarterly, biannual or annual basis) and these reports will be analysed to allow for deeper understanding of each project's progress, operating context, outcomes, barriers and facilitators.

Progress on IPE

This section provides an overview of the evaluation activities carried out from January 2022 until November 2022, with preliminary findings given in section 7.

▸ **Interviews with project leads**

Due to the delays in many projects starting delivery, it was not practical to conduct student focus groups, or staff and student surveys, in 2021/22. Therefore, three projects that commenced delivery in early 2022 were prioritised for interviews.

Topic guides were developed to capture the experiences and perceptions of staff leading the planning and delivery of these projects. Three semi-structured interviews were held with project leads from the subset of projects that had already begun student-facing activities. The interviews were all held online, using a video conferencing platform, and each project had a tailored topic guide to draw out perceptions of different elements of the intervention.

A summary of the insights from these interviews is provided in Section 7.

6. Results of analysis of pre-intervention trends

There are four main assumptions underlying the difference-in-difference estimation. In order for the analysis arising from DID to be robust and credible, it is important to consider whether each of these assumptions is satisfied. If any of them are not satisfied, this may bias the estimation of the treatment effect.

Satisfaction of assumptions in difference-in-difference estimation

▸ **Exchangeability assumption**

The first assumption is that the allocation of treatment and comparator groups must be unrelated to the outcome trend. This is plausible given that HEPs in the intervention group were selected through a rigorous funding competition, which focused on their proposals rather than their current status or equality gaps.

▸ **Stable unit treatment value assumption**

The second DID assumption is the stable unit treatment value assumption (SUTVA). This assumes that the outcome of any HEP is independent of the group assignment of other HEPs such that the outcomes of the HEPs in the comparator group will not be affected by the outcomes of the HEPs in the treatment group. This is plausible because all of the intervention group have already been selected and will not be changed for the duration of the programme. As this is a multiyear programme, it is possible that some individual staff members may move between the institutions during the evaluation period, but the impact of these staff moves is expected to be minimal. It is also possible that there may be some collaboration and knowledge exchange between project and comparator institutions. We will aim to understand the extent to which this has occurred as part of the IPE.

▸ **Excludability assumption**

The third assumption is related to the second; there should be no spillover effects (an extension of SUTVA). We also control for exposure and spillovers by including as part of the treatment group all institutions partnered with HEPs involved in the programme in the primary analysis.

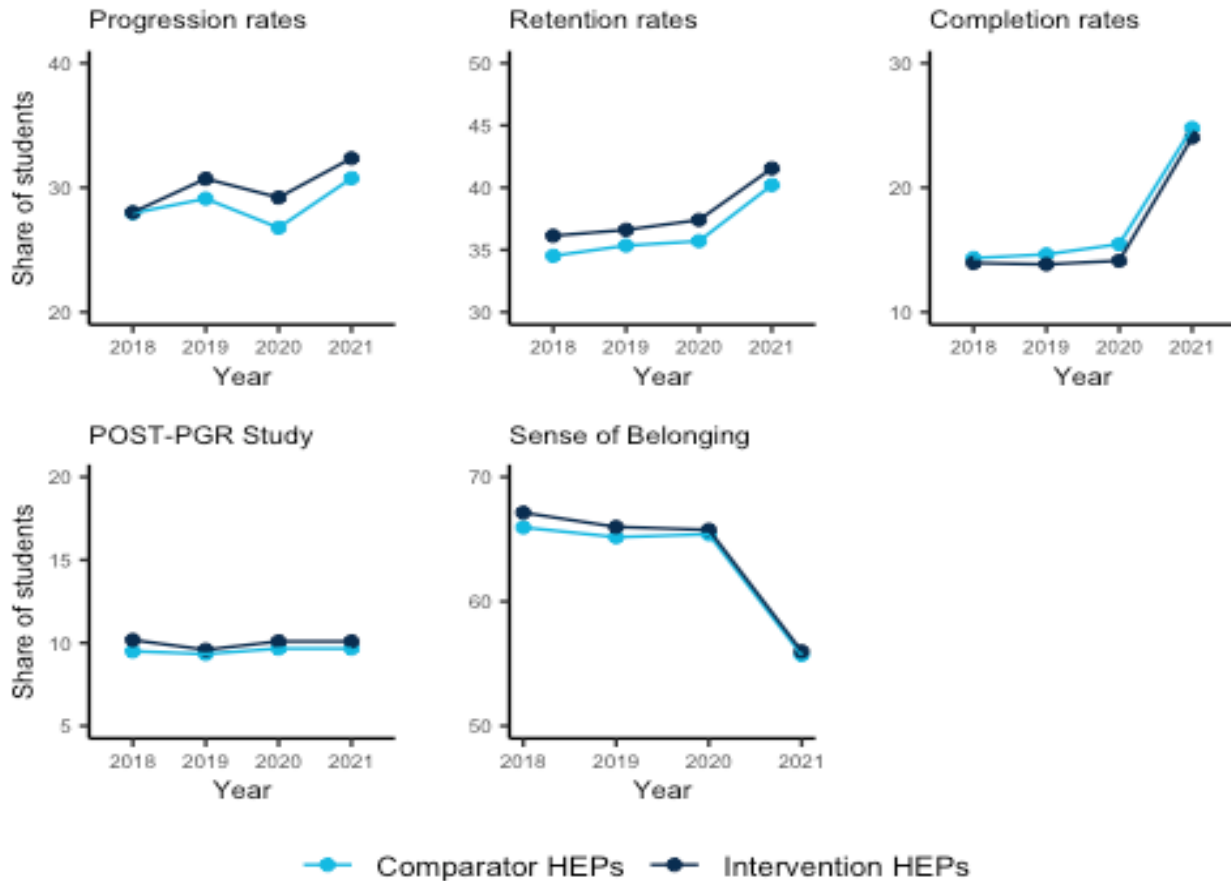▸ **Parallel trends assumption**

The fourth assumption is the most important; treatment and comparator groups must be assumed to have parallel trends in the outcomes, in the absence of treatment. For the DID estimate to be valid, there should be no time-varying differences between the treatment and comparator groups i.e., in the absence of the programme, the outcomes of the treatment group should be parallel to the outcomes of the comparator group.

This assumption is untestable; once the treatment group has received the treatment, it is impossible to know what their trends would have been without the treatment. However, it can be tested by comparing the changes in outcomes for the treatment and comparator groups in the period before the implementation of the programme. If similar outcomes are observed between the two groups over time, and if there are no obvious reasons why their trends would have

diverged – other than the treatment – then we may be justified in assuming similar pattern would have continued in the absence of the programme.

Whether the two groups show parallel trends in the pre-intervention period can be inspected visually by plotting the trends in outcome measures for both the intervention or treatment HEPs and the HEPs in the comparator group. We have done this for the five core outcomes in Figure1).

Figure 1: Outcome trends, 2018-2021

These charts give reason to be optimistic about the parallel trends assumption holding. There are clear fluctuations in the levels of each of the outcomes, with particular shocks in 2021. It is outside our scope to comment on the causes of these shocks, which most likely relate to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' participation in, and feelings about, higher education. However, importantly for our purposes, these shocks in 2021 appear to have affected treated and comparator HEPs very similarly.

Given that the chart above displays a similar trend in all outcome measures for both comparator and intervention HEPs, we can argue that the match yielded suitable comparators for the intervention HEPs and, therefore, the DID analysis can be carried out.

Next steps

Each calendar year, HESA data is published for the previous academic year. A data request for the 2021/22 academic year has been submitted to HESA and, once this has been obtained, we will rerun this analysis to measure the extent to which the treatment and comparator institutions' outcomes diverged following the first year of project implementation. It may be expected that the impact of the projects will build over time, and consistent with this, analysis will be conducted as per the specification in the evaluation plan. We will then rerun this analysis at the end of each year of project implementation.

7. Insights from qualitative work

This section sets out the findings from interviews with the project leads of three projects that commenced delivery in early 2022. The interviews explored the following research questions from the IPE:

1. What factors have facilitated and/or hindered the implementation of the programme?

2. What are the experiences of staff who have participated in the projects and what, if any, benefits did they perceive from them?

Though the programme had faced barriers to implementation, most notably delays caused by COVID-19, all project leads were positive about the future of the programme. Issues relating to staff recruitment and HEP bureaucracy were commonly raised, but project leads reflected that these had largely been resolved by the time of the interviews. Therefore, the main hindrances to implementation seem to have fallen early in the programme period.

Project leads also spoke of the importance of lived experience in delivering their projects. Among the project leads, lived experience looked like ensuring that the people designing and delivering the projects understood the barriers faced by the students they were working with. For some projects this lived experience was built in, with the project lead themselves coming from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background. Other projects had specifically recruited for staff members with lived experience in recognition of the limitations posed by the original project team.

Finally, though project leads were keen to note that it was early in the project to talk about impact, some leads highlighted various benefits to students and staff, as well as personal benefits. Though the project leads reported having limited contact with other HEPs regarding their projects, where such collaboration had taken place it was seen as a helpful benefit of the programme. Overall, project leads were positive about the programme's potential for impact.

Findings from interviews with project leads

Interviews were held with project team members from three projects in November and December 2023. The three interview participants had slightly different roles within their projects: one was a strategic lead responsible for high-level delivery, one was a project manager with responsibility for day-to-day delivery, and one was managing both strategic delivery and day-to-day delivery. For anonymity, we will refer to all three as "project lead" throughout.

The three projects were selected because they were better placed to comment on project implementation, having commenced student-facing activities in early 2022. The interviews followed a semi-structured topic guide that was built around the following research questions from the IPE:

1. What factors have facilitated and/or hindered the implementation of the programme?

2. What are the experiences of staff who have participated in the projects and what, if any, benefits did they perceive from them?

Key themes that emerged from the interviews are included below, including the importance of lived experience in creating authenticity, challenges with HE provider bureaucracy and recruitment, and early perceptions of project impact.

‣ **Reasons for applying for funding**

During the interviews we asked the project leads to reflect on their reasons for bidding for the funding. The reasons provided were similar, with the main reasons being to make a difference for students and within HEPs, and that the purposes of the funding aligned with the project leads' values and their institutions' values. One project lead recalled their own negative PhD experience and wanted to contribute towards reducing the likelihood of that becoming a typical experience for black students. The desire to help others avoid negative experiences was also communicated as a driver for students to participate in project activities by another of the project leads; this lead reported that, when recruiting students for paid delivery positions within the project, those from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds had been driven by their own experiences of academia.

> *"They'd all felt a certain degree of alienation during their time as undergraduates and PGRs, and they were really engaged in trying to just improve the atmosphere."*

Another project lead mentioned they wanted to make a difference in their region, which is recognised as one of the most deprived in the country, with this having knock-on effects for their institution's ability to recruit and retain PGR students.

> *"There is a wider issue in the region because we are one of the most deprived regions in the country and that's been recognised as part of the levelling up agenda. So we have on average lower qualifications than nationally, we have lower wages than nationally, there's a big brain drain in in the region. We've been trying for years to try and grow our own staff through PGR study because we are often finding it difficult to recruit because it's not necessarily a glamorous place that people want to locate to. So it was also part of the broader regional place agenda."*

‣ **Delivery in 2022**

All project leads spoke positively of project delivery throughout 2022, while acknowledging that there had been barriers, particularly early on. All projects reported that they had delivered most, if not all, of the planned activities for 2022. During the interviews, key themes emerged around challenges and enablers that the projects had experienced in 2022.

What factors have hindered the implementation of the programme?

Most of the project leads shared that their projects had faced similar initial challenges; short lead times, delays with contracts, and getting ethics approval. Bureaucratic and institutional barriers were also commonly raised, with project leads also commenting on the way in which different organisations and faculties had varied processes that needed to be brought together.

"January was our start date, and we had the launch event at the end of January…. With hindsight, it would have been better if we'd started in March because there were a lot of delays in getting the contract signed… [and] how bureaucratic some processes are."

Recruitment of staff was also a commonly raised reason for initial delays in project delivery. Short lead times from receiving funding to launching activities meant that some posts weren't recruited until after the project had commenced.

"It would have been better to start later because it took us, for example [three months] to recruit the project manager."

All projects reported exceeding their delivery targets in student-facing activities, with one recruiting 34 scholars compared to a target of 30, and another reporting higher than expected attendance at various workshops. However, though all projects met their recruitment targets, all the project leads raised that the cohort had looked different than anticipated. One project lead raised that they had received a lot of interest from international students who were outside the scope for the funding. Another project lead spoke about how the cohort had been significantly different to the anticipated cohort, requiring the project to shift approach.

"The cohort is not what we initially envisioned. So, the majority of them are remote and some have gone part time. Some are late career changers and freelancers. So, we really envisioned the project being just PGRs who were in their early 20s to late 20s who had come straight through from their bachelor's and master's, so we're working around it. We're trying to adapt the project to be less direct engagement and more supportive."

Recruitment and attendance for staff-facing activities was generally reported to be lower than that for student-facing activities, but project leads were still positive about the level of engagement throughout the year.

What factors have facilitated the implementation of the programme?

Project leads identified a number of enablers; particularly the ability to draw on their past research when designing the bid, but also their network of people. One project particularly benefited from having a collaborative delivery model and the project lead was able to bring in people with lived experience who believed in the programme and thus were committed to it and to making a difference.

"[I] had a big network to draw on, so the delivery of the programme, in terms of who facilitates the workshops, some of that was online, some of that was face to face, I'd recorded some podcasts with people and had done some of that work already. That required a lot of people and was a very collaborative delivery model, whereas with normal processes, you'd have to go through preferred supplier lists and there'll be quite a delay in trying to get people, I had all of those people who I could draw on and bring in because they really believed in the programme."

Having individuals with lived experience (both PGR experience but also people who are from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background) was also seen as a key enabler to project success due to their ability to bring enthusiasm and varied perspectives.

> *"We have a brilliant project manager. She has lived experience, is one of our former graduates… [she] is also aspiring to do a research degree at some point in her career, so she has brought so much energy and ideas to the project that it has been absolutely phenomenal. Then we employed the employer engagement champion who is also a former graduate who also has lived experience… it has again brought a different perspective to the project. So even though we have these delays to the project, we have recruited some really brilliant staff."*

Project leads also raised the importance of project team members with lived experience as an enabler to recruiting students onto the projects. One project lead shared that the project ended up recruiting a diverse group of students, with participants from a range of regions, backgrounds, and with varied previous experience. The project lead attributed this to both word of mouth, and the fact that the programme was "designed by black people for black people", which added to its authenticity. Another reason for its success, according to the project lead, was that it was a holistic programme that provided support for a wide range of issues faced by black students.

> *"And I do think the expression of interest event really landed with a lot of people in terms of it being not just a research programme, not just something that was about enhancing employability, but a really holistic programme where we really understood their lived experience and were providing support to help navigate and achieve their goals, and lifetime opportunities."*

One project lead also spoke about how co-design had been used to ensure that students' lived experience was reflected in the project design. However, contract delays had led to knock-on delays in the co-design phase as the project lead hadn't wanted to start working with students until funding was in place to allow for compensation, as they were conscious of the need to be particularly sensitive to hurdles to participation for black, Asian and minority ethnic students.

> *"We don't want this project to create extra burdens for people that have been historically excluded and had already been struggling."*

Another enabler that was raised was a positive and flexible relationship with OfS and RE. All project leads shared they have a good relationship with the funders. Project leads reported positive experiences working with both OfS and RE, particularly since some of the uncertainty around timelines had required adjustments to funding schedules.

> *"[The relationship] has been really good… there were a few things at the beginning of the project… [that] were a little bit tricky to navigate…. [My key contact] was instrumental with helping navigating that to start with. And as I say, there are things that are quite unique to our project that are different to the other projects that they've been able to help with."*

Project leads reported that they have a key point of contact at RE with whom they communicate regularly. One project lead spoke with their RE contact on a regular basis, while another had more ad hoc contact. Both felt that this was a positive thing, suggesting that RE has taken a flexible approach led by each project lead's preferences.

Two project leads shared they are now mainly in contact with RE rather than OfS. However, this was not communicated as a negative reflection, just a comment on their lines of contact and reflects that, as the lead organisation for monitoring, RE is responsible for direct contact with the project leads.

‣ Perceptions of project benefits

Project leads were asked for their perceptions of impact during the first year of the project. One project lead shared that the project surpassed their expectations in terms of the impact it has had on the students.

> *"In the bid we talked about increasing the number of black PhD students or people going on to do doctoral level study or going into graduate employment. And we've seen that, there have been people who... I've got one person, a particular PhD place, she'd applied last year, hadn't got it... re-applied, and has now got it and got funding, thanks to our foundation, which is amazing."*

While project leads were positive about potential early impact, they were also conscious that it was difficult to measure at this point in time. For example, one project lead reported that they are already seeing an increase in the number of students from black, Asian and minority backgrounds in their PGR intake, but shared that they didn't feel this could be attributed to the project.

> *"I was looking at our applicant data for last year, and we have increased the number and the proportion of students from black, Asian and minority backgrounds in our PGR intake. But I think it would be wrong to say that is a causal link."*

Project leads also reported early positive impacts on university staff, many of whom embraced the projects and wanted to be involved in the future. However, another project lead, whose project is aimed at black students, raised that they had seen greater commitment to the staff-led elements of the project from black staff.

> *"I think there is also something about this work. I think people put themselves forward with the best of intentions but then, actually, when you get into the kind of challenges with anti-racist work, people find it very uncomfortable.... From what I've been told, all the black supervisors did all the elements, but other supervisors didn't."*

In terms of impact on collaboration in higher education, all of the project leads spoke positively about working with other HEPs who had received funding through the programme. One project lead had found, though they had only had time for limited contact with other institutions involved in the programme, that contact had been very helpful for them.

> *"[Speaking with the other project] was very constructive…. The main thing I learned was the need to integrate, get people involved who weren't even in the doctoral college."*

However, a concern was raised about some of the interventions that had been funded through the programme. It was felt that, though it was positive that different opportunities were on offer for students, such as mentoring or reviewing admissions criteria, these activities may not address the systemic issue of racism and may only make small gains. Therefore, it was noted that it would be good to see the projects having a wider, more transformative impact beyond small pockets of good practice.

One project lead reflected on creating a scalable approach to increasing black, Asian and minority ethnic participation in PGR that other universities could adopt. However, they also noted that policy change would be necessary to create sector-wide impact.

> *"One of the things I put in the bid and genuinely would like to see, and there has been some interest already from institutions that have approached me, is kind of creating some sort of framework or blueprint that other universities can adopt, adapt and adopt to do something similar in their own institutions… not just individual institutions doing this good practice thing that's emerged from the work. But actually, it's something that's adopted at policy level and that then becomes a thing for the sector."*

Finally, one project lead commented on the positive impact that the funding had had on them personally.

> *"I was just, firstly, so pleased that there was something like this in the sector… and when I wrote [the bid] I thought, 'Well, do you know this is what I could have done with, and what I would have wanted [for my PhD journey]'… so actually getting this was a massive deal on a personal level as well."*

8. The year ahead (January 2023 – February 2024)

Our work over the next twelve months will focus on the following activities.

Evaluation administration

- **Six monthly and yearly progress updates to the OfS and RE:** We will keep constant communication with the OfS and RE and we will provide progress reports twice a year.

- **Data sharing agreements (DSAs):** Given that the DPIA has been approved during the first year of the evaluation, when relevant, we will develop and sign DSAs with the participant HEPs.

- **Communication with HEPs:** We will keep an open communication channel with the HEPs, updating evaluation roadmaps as the projects progress. We will also constantly touch base with the HEPs regarding timelines, to coordinate the IPE student survey and the focus groups, and to provide support when required.

- **Steering Group progress meeting:** We will provide insights from the evaluation to the Steering Group when required.

- **Collation and analysis of findings:** We will collate the results from the impact evaluation and the IPE and analyse the findings in an annual report. This will provide initial evidence of the impact of the programme, as well as revealing if there are projects that require additional support during the following years.

Impact evaluation

- **Project-specific outcomes:** We will request data about project-specific outcomes from the HEPs to get a sense of quality. When baseline and year 1 data is available, we will also explore the interventions' impact on the outcome.

- **Year 1 data analysis:** We will conduct the yearly update on the five common outcomes. To this aim, we will request HESA and NSS data for the interventions' first year. We will clean the data and conduct a first comparison with the baseline to explore the impact of the interventions.

Implementation and process evaluation

- **Development workshop:** We will run the first development workshop with project and partner HEPs in the last quarter of 2023. This workshop will facilitate collaboration across HEPs and provide a space for project to reflect on their successes and failures. We expect the workshop will help promote a consolidated network that facilitates the sustainability and scalability of the programme.

- **Year 1 student survey:** We will develop an online IPE student survey and distribute it across the projects. We will contact the project leads to send this survey out to the

participants who have engaged with any of the project activities. These results will provide initial evidence of students' perceptions of the programme.

- **Year 1 student focus groups:** We will conduct focus groups with a subsample of projects to explore in detail student experiences and engagement with the programme. We will coordinate timelines with the projects to prevent overburdening the participants.

- **Project team online interviews:** As in the first year, we will conduct interviews with a subsample of project leads to capture project progress. For the 2022 report, we prioritised the projects who launched student-facing activities earlier. For next year, we expect all projects to have moved from the scoping to implementation phase. We will then discuss which projects to interview during 2023 as per the evaluation needs.

- **Analysis framework for projects' internal reports**: We will collect the first round of projects' internal reports and extract the relevant information for the evaluation. With this information, we will also structure the analysis framework to feed into the evaluation objectives, and to be replicated in the following years.

9. Risk log

The below risk register outlines the anticipated risks associated with the evaluation of the project and is regularly maintained and updated throughout the project. The log will be reviewed frequently and if risks escalate to 'Red' status between regular progress meetings with RE and OfS, they will be informed immediately.

Risk/Issue	Mitigation	Post-mitigation Red-Amber-Green (RAG)
Reduction in essential staffing leading to delivery delays	Team manager will proactively identify any potential resource gaps and fill staffing positions before timelines are impacted. Where unexpected staffing changes occur, non-permanent contracts can be issued through the King's Talent Bank at short notice to flexibly fill any resource requirements with qualified candidates while recruitment processes take place.	Low
Coronavirus causes closure/disruption of universities causing changes/delays to project implementation	We will be as flexible as possible in our approach and seek to be guided by the OfS and RE in any necessary changes to timelines. We have implemented several evaluation projects during the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak and have mitigation plans in-place (e.g., delivery of all interviews to be done remotely, etc).	Low

Risk/Issue	Mitigation	Post-mitigation Red-Amber-Green (RAG)
EDIT is unable to agree suitable common outcome measure between the projects, OfS and RE	We worked with the projects within the first three months of the programme and reviewed and adjusted evaluation strategies to ensure alignment. The common outcomes framework has been discussed and agreed with all the projects. Each project has also reviewed the common outcomes framework in their Evaluation Roadmaps. We have included OfS and RE in development of common outcomes measures through regular updates during the kick-off meetings	Low
EDIT is unable to obtain institution-level black, Asian and minority ethnic PGR entry for intervention and/or comparator HEPs	EDIT confirmed the availability of five out of the five common outcomes, with the support of the OfS. EDIT has also already conducted the baseline analysis on all those outcomes verifying the data quality is appropriate for the evaluation's objectives.	Low
HEPs/projects do not collect required data or data collected is low quality	During the kick-off meetings, EDIT met with each project to discuss evaluation strategies and ensure alignment between the programme-level evaluation and the projects. For measuring the common outcomes, we won't be relying on HEPs to provide student data, what reduces this risk considerably on the impact evaluation side. We only require data from HEPs to measure project-specific outcomes and as part of the IPE.

Any templates produced for data collection will be sent to the projects with clear and accessible instructions and an invitation to contact EDIT for a training session. The EDIT team will periodically check in with the data collectors for each project to flag any issues and provide guidance. When relevant, if there are gaps in the final data, depending on overall data quality, missing data may be imputed. | Medium |
| Participant fatigue due to overlapping/duplicating evaluation strands | EDIT worked with the projects prior to implementation to align the project-level evaluation plans and timelines. EDIT is also working closely with | Low |

Risk/Issue	Mitigation	Post-mitigation Red-Amber-Green (RAG)
between programme-level evaluation and project-level evaluation	the projects to incorporate our data needs into the projects' internal evaluation strategies. EDIT will collect any relevant project-level IPE data and adjust interview topic guides if required to avoid duplication.	
Data breach	All data will be held according to the King's College London's Data Protection Policy and Procedure. All data collection will adhere to ethical practice ensuring the confidentiality of information shared and the secure handling of data in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and King's College London's Data Protection Policy. Sensitive data will then be stored on a secure section of the King's College London server, with access limited to those who have a direct purpose for using it as part of the project.	Low