BIRMINGHAM CITY University

That's Me!

PROJECT DEBRIEF FOR PARTICIPANTS

ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDY IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

That's Me! is funded by UKRI and The Office for Students

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THANK YOU FOR TAKING PART

Thank you for contributing to the That's Me! project at BCU. Through surveys, interviews, focus groups, workshops and creative activities, more than 300 people helped us explore how doctoral education can become more inclusive and equitable for Global Majority communities. This report shares the key activities, findings and outcomes from the project, and highlights how participants' experiences and insights have shaped new resources, initiatives and recommendations.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

That's Me! was a partnership between Birmingham City University (BCU) and the University of Wolverhampton. It was one of 13 projects funded by Research England and the Office for Students to address inequalities experienced by Global Majority communities in postgraduate research.

Over three years, the project brought together postgraduate researchers (PGRs), academics, professional services staff, employers and community partners to examine experiences of doctoral study and identify practical ways to improve access, success and career opportunities.

WHAT WE DID

During the project at BCU we:

- Engaged more than 300 participants.
- Worked with 33 partner organisations.
- Produced over 130 resources, reports and outputs.
- Shared findings through more than 40 events.
- Focused on three stages of the doctoral journey:
    - Routes in: accessing doctoral study.
    - Routes through: experiences during doctoral study.
    - Routes out: careers and opportunities after doctoral study.

ROUTES IN: ACCESSING DOCTORAL STUDY

WHAT WE LEARNED

Participants told us that interest in doctoral study among Global Majority students is strong. Many people were motivated by professional goals, personal growth, intellectual curiosity and a desire to make a difference.
However, pathways into doctoral study are often unclear.

Many participants described:

- Discovering doctoral study through informal conversations rather than university information.
- Limited access to clear guidance about applications and funding.
- A lack of visible role models.
- Admissions processes that can feel difficult to navigate.
- Financial pressures and competing responsibilities.

We also found that once enrolled, Global Majority PGRs achieve outcomes comparable to other doctoral students. This suggests that the challenge is often access and support rather than academic ability.

KEY OUTCOME: GETTING DOCTORATE READY

In response to these findings, we created **Getting Doctorate Ready**, a free online programme designed to help people understand doctoral study and prepare applications thorough a series of interactive exercises.

The programme includes modules on:

- Understanding doctoral study.
- Developing a research project.
- Applying for a doctorate.

USER FEEDBACK

"This was a good source for understanding what the process looks like."

KEY OUTCOME: THAT'S ME! PHD STUDENTSHIPS

BCU introduced That's Me! studentships for Global Majority candiates applying to the Arts and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Landscape Awards.

The studentship provides bespoke mentoring from Global Majority leaders at BCU.

AWARD HOLDER FEEDBACK

"I only applied for a doctorate at BCU due to the That's Me! project as it made me feel welcome as a Global Majority scholar."

ROUTES THROUGH: EXPERIENCES DURING DOCTORAL

WHAT WE LEARNED

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of effective supervision and a strong sense of belonging.

Our research showed that positive doctoral experiences are shaped by:

- Respectful and inclusive supervision.
- Recognition of different cultural experiences and identities.
- Opportunities to discuss challenges openly.
- Meaningful engagement with equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Participants also described challenges linked to:

- Isolation.
- Unequal access to opportunities and networks.
- Inconsistent supervisory experiences.
- Experiences of discrimination and exclusion.

KEY OUTCOME: INCLUSIVE SUPERVISION GUIDANCE

We developed guidance to support supervisors in creating more inclusive doctoral environments.

The guidance encourages supervisory practice that values:

1. **Cultural competency:** developing knowledge, awareness, and skills to engage effectively across different cultures.

2. **Cultural humility:** engaging in self-reflection, learning from others, recognising power dynamics, and valuing individual experiences.

3. **Inclusive practice:** being self-aware, and creating safe spaces for open conversations about culture, identity, and belonging.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTION

"They had a very good understanding of what the community needed. And to me, it was more of having that common understanding, seeing things almost in a very similar way that made our relationship stronger."

ROUTES THROUGH: EXPERIENCES DURING DOCTORAL

KEY OUTCOME: REVERSE MENTORING PROGRAMME

We created a reverse mentoring programme that paired Global Majority PGRs with senior university leaders.

The programme aimed to:

- Share lived experiences directly with decision-makers.
- Build mutual understanding.
- Challenge traditional power relationships.

WHAT WORKED WELL

Participants reported that trust, listening and genuine engagement were essential to successful mentoring relationships.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

"[They] asked how I would approach an emerging situation; that was empowering."

"...to see [them] writing down the notes, made me feel heard. [They were] reflecting on what we were talking about..."

KEY OUTCOME: EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Our work also highlighted the importance of moving beyond symbolic diversity. Participants emphasised that inclusion should be embedded in everyday university practices and should reflect the complexity of people's identities and experiences.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTION

"...I think what happens is when EDI becomes institutionalised, it loses that kind of radical vision and it loses that kind of connection to grassroots social movements."

ROUTES OUT: CAREERS AND OPPORTUNITIES AFTER DOCTORAL STUDY

WHAT WE LEARNED

Participants told us that support for doctoral careers often focuses too heavily on academic careers.

Many Global Majority PGRs wanted to explore a wider range of opportunities but reported:

- Limited knowledge of career pathways.
- A lack of role models and networks.
- Difficulty translating doctoral skills for non-academic employers.
- Barriers to building professional connections.

Employers also highlighted limited understanding of doctoral researchers and the value they bring to organisations.

KEY OUTCOME: BEYOND THE DOCTORATE

We developed Beyond the Doctorate, an online careers series designed by and for Global Majority researchers.

The series brought together professionals from sectors including:

- Health
- Education
- Government
- Law
- Business

Sessions explored career pathways, networking, mentoring and work-life balance.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

"Very honest and realistic about the challenges as well as the opportunities."

KEY OUTCOME: TALENT XCHANGE

The Talent XChange was created to help Global Majority doctoral researchers connect directly with employers.

The event included:

- Employer meeting sprints.
- Career panel discussions.
- CV feedback sessions.
- Informal networking opportunities.

PGR ATTENDEE FEEDBACK

"I had the best experience, I would say, from the start — speaking with employers, learning and asking questions. I also learnt about mentoring and selling yourself as a person. I got the opportunity to widely connect with different individuals on LinkedIn."

EMPLOYER ATTENDEE FEEDBACK

"The format worked brilliantly. It gave time to talk, listen, and really understand what each researcher brought, not just what was on a CV."

KEY OUTCOME: WORKPLACE EXCHANGE

Workplace Exchange offered short visits to regional employers, providing researchers with opportunities to learn about different sectors and build professional networks.

PGR ATTENDEE FEEDBACK

"The visit...was truly beyond my expectations! It was fascinating to gain insights into their daily work and see how their efforts contribute to improving the city and the lives of its citizens."

"This event allowed me the opportunity to hear directly from policymakers...and identify areas where my current research could contribute to these projects. I was also able to add new contacts to my professional network through this visit."

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The That's Me! project has demonstrated that improving doctoral access, success and progression requires action across the entire doctoral journey.

Through the contributions of participants, the project has:

- Generated new evidence about doctoral inequalities.
- Created practical resources and support programmes.
- Introduced new doctoral scholarship opportunities.
- Developed guidance for inclusive supervision and mentoring.
- Strengthened connections between universities, employers and communities.
- Created new opportunities for Global Majority researchers to explore career pathways.

Most importantly, participants' experiences and insights have helped shape recommendations that can support lasting change across doctoral education.

KEY OUTCOME:

Open Access Educational Resources

As part of the project's commitment to Open Access, we've developed a wide range of resources, all freely available.

These include:

- Research **designs**, including surveys, and focus group and interview templates.
- **Reports** on project activities and findings.
- Project management **policies** and **practices.**

THANK YOU

Every conversation, survey response, workshop contribution and shared experience helped make this project possible. Thank you for helping us better understand the challenges and opportunities facing Global Majority researchers and for contributing to a more inclusive future for doctoral education.

For further information about the project and its resources, visit the That's Me! project webpages at Birmingham City University.