



Eliminating barriers to postgraduate research study in the West Midlands



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04 INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSES OF EMPLOYER INTERVIEWS

THAT'S ME!

ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO
POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDY
IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building on **That's Me!**'s established partnerships with employers through its Employer Board, pledges, and engagement events, this report explores insights gathered from interviews with representatives across key regional sectors, including healthcare, manufacturing, and local government. These conversations aimed to deepen understanding of how doctoral education contributes to organisational growth, innovation, and workforce development. By analysing employers' perspectives, the report highlights the perceived value, challenges, and opportunities associated with recruiting and collaborating with doctoral graduates and considers how these insights can inform future approaches to inclusive talent development and employer engagement within the **That's Me!** framework. This report examines the purpose of employer-led research, the benefits of engaging Global Majority researchers, and the barriers to employer-funded doctoral study.

Employers increasingly conduct research to enhance service quality, strengthen evidence-based practice, and build organisational learning capacity (Anderson and Gold, 2019; Chandra et al., 2024). Investment in research-active employees can improve innovation, leadership, and workforce development, positioning research as a strategic asset. However, employers often balance these benefits against financial and operational costs, particularly the expense of doctoral training and potential staff turnover after qualification (Bryan and Guccione, 2018).

The inclusion of Global Majority researchers in the workplace offers significant advantages. Diverse research teams foster innovation, improve cultural competence, and enhance trust with underrepresented communities, leading to more equitable and contextually relevant outcomes (Hewlett et al., 2014; Chandra et al., 2024). Representation within research also acts as a catalyst for broader participation and role modelling. Nonetheless, structural inequalities persist; as Acker (2006) argues, gendered, classed, and racialised organisational norms continue to shape access to research opportunities.

Barriers to employer-funded doctorates include high financial costs, limited study time, and visa and sponsorship complexities, particularly for smaller employers (UK Home Office, 2020). Systemic inequalities in academia and employment further restrict access for women, carers, and Global Majority staff (Raine et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2013).

Overall, this report shows that while employer-led research and diverse participation deliver tangible benefits, these are contingent upon addressing inequalities, providing structured mentorship, and ensuring equitable access to funded research opportunities.

Report structure

The report is structured around three core themes emerging from the interviews with employers in healthcare sector, manufacture and local authority organisations (see Appendix A):

1. The Purpose and Benefits of Doctoral Education – exploring how doctoral study enhances skills, evidence-based practice, and innovation within organisations.
2. The Organisational Value of Researchers and Global Majority Researchers – examining how diverse research talent enriches workplace culture, problem-solving, and inclusion.
3. Barriers to Organisation-Funded Doctorates – identifying structural, financial, and cultural challenges that influence employers’ capacity to support doctoral study.

Together, these insights illuminate the mutual value of doctoral education for both individuals and employers; while offering evidence to inform more inclusive and impactful employer engagement within the That’s Me! framework.

Summary of Findings

The analysis of employers’ perspectives highlights several key areas for improving the engagement, retention, and impact of doctoral researchers within organisations. First, diversity and inclusion remain significant challenges, with barriers in recruitment, promotion, and representation for employees from Global Majority backgrounds and other underrepresented groups. Mentorship, sponsorship, and training in cultural competence and unconscious bias emerged as critical strategies to support equitable career progression.

Second, financial barriers continue to limit employer-funded doctoral initiatives, particularly for small and medium-sized organisations. Flexible funding models, co-sponsorship arrangements, and partnerships with higher education institutions were identified as effective approaches to reduce costs and make doctoral programmes more accessible.

Finally, visa and immigration costs present a practical barrier for international doctoral researchers, potentially limiting talent pipelines. Employers suggested financial support, administrative guidance, and sector-wide advocacy for streamlined visa pathways as key measures to retain and support international talent.

Overall, the findings indicate that organisations can maximise the value of doctoral education by embedding inclusive practices, reducing financial obstacles, and proactively supporting international researchers, thereby enhancing workforce development, retention, and organisational impact.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote Diversity and Inclusion

- Embed inclusive recruitment and promotion practices.
- Set and monitor diversity targets.
- Provide bias and cultural competence training.
- Support mentorship and sponsorship for underrepresented groups.

2. Reduce Cost Barriers to Employer-Funded Doctorates

- Introduce subsidies, co-funding, or flexible funding models.
- Partner with universities to reduce tuition and supervision costs.

3. Address Visa and Immigration Challenges

- Provide financial and administrative support for visas.
- Advocate for streamlined and affordable visa pathways.
- Collaborate across organisations to share resources and support international researchers.

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