

LEADING ROUTES >

# THE BROKEN PIPELINE

## Barriers to Black PhD Students Accessing Research Council Funding

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## ABOUT LEADING ROUTES

### Our Mission

Leading Routes is a pioneering initiative that aims to prepare the next generation of Black academics. We are exploring new ways to strengthen the academic pipeline for Black students from African Caribbean backgrounds, from a Black-led perspective.

### Background

Leading Routes was founded by Paulette Williams in 2016 after over ten years working in higher education leading on widening participation and student success projects. Paulette is currently co-leading an institution-wide endeavour to address the Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) attainment gap at University College London (UCL).

Our work at Leading Routes is carried out acknowledging that Black students' accomplishments have been overshadowed by troubling admissions figures particularly in the Russell Group; disparities linked to attainment when compared to peers; poor retention rates; and unbelievably low numbers of Black professors. Not only are we shifting the narrative around higher education for Black students but we have also begun an open and honest dialogue with institutions in the sector about how higher education can drive real and sustainable change.

### Aims

1. Support prospective Black students to make informed decisions to navigate higher education at various stages of the student life cycle.
2. Provide a platform that celebrates Black students and academics in higher education.
3. Strengthen, over time, the pipeline into academic careers for Black students.
4. Build a network that encourages progress in higher education and works to make academia and research more accessible to the broader community.
5. Inform and influence policies that affect the Black student experience at a strategic level.

### What We Do

Our first event in April 2017 titled Paths to University aimed to support families to navigate the university application process and to demystify undergraduate study. Since then, the events have run each year welcoming over 300 attendees in total. Through several focus groups with current university students, we identified a range of challenges faced by students including unsatisfactory student experiences both academically and socially; and the lack of information on postgraduate study - particularly postgraduate research.

In February 2018, Chantelle Lewis joined Leading Routes to help direct our Black in Academia campaign which aims to further the conversation about representation and experiences of Black students and staff in higher education. Black in Academia is about creating spaces to celebrate Black achievement in higher education whilst challenging the sector to identify and address issues linked to postgraduate research admissions processes. Since the launch (November 2018), the campaign has received thousands of user engagement(s) via social media and our Black in Academia events have reached over 300 prospective and current Black academics.

Our sponsors and supporters include University College London (UCL), The Ubele Initiative, The British Library, Sage Publishing and Wellcome Trust, as well as incredible support from the Black academic community.

## BEYOND THE BME ATTAINMENT GAP

In February 2019, Leading Routes hosted a closed round table discussion with key stakeholders to explore the factors influencing Black students' experiences in securing fully funded postgraduate research (PhD) places. The initial focus of the talk was to address the relationship between the BME Attainment Gap and accessing UK research council funded PhD places in UK universities.

The meeting brought together sector professionals, students, academics and representatives from various higher education institutions and research funding councils. The aim was to discuss, in practical terms, how the sector can work collaboratively to address the long-term implications of the undergraduate BME attainment gap, in relation to further study.

The purpose of the roundtable was to have a meaningful discussion about the key factors that influence Black students' experience and how these can potentially be addressed by universities and research councils.

Attendees looked to discuss the link between the BME attainment gap at undergraduate level and experiences of Black (African and Caribbean) British students seeking council funded postgraduate research places.

### Roundtable Discussion Points

The discussion was chaired around the following points:

- What measures can be put in place to give greater consideration to the BME Attainment Gap during the postgraduate admissions process?
- Could the sector consider introducing contextual offers or funding for postgraduate research students, in any format, and how could this be implemented?
- How can research councils encourage universities to review the way in which funded PhD places are awarded?
- What best practice exists in the UK or elsewhere?
- How could the sector work collaboratively to support Black students into postgraduate research?

The undergraduate attainment gap was used as indicator of inequality in outcomes for the conversation. This is due to the lack of sector research and accessible information on the postgraduate taught attainment gap – which plays a huge role in determining the trajectory of a student's academic career. Similarly, the reference to 'BME students' is due to the limited availability of data that disaggregates the outcomes and experiences of Black students.

### Context

In 2017/2018, there were a total of 15,560 full time UK domiciled PhD students in their first year of study and just 3% of those students were Black (HESA, 2019).

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) brings together the seven research councils, Innovate UK and Research England and is by far the UK's largest postgraduate funder. A Freedom of Information request to UKRI revealed that over the last three academic years (2016/2017 – 2018/2019), of the total 19,868 PhD funded studentships awarded by UKRI research councils collectively, 245 (1.2%) were awarded to Black or Black Mixed students, with just 30 of those being from Black Caribbean backgrounds (UKRI, 2019).

Whilst the attainment gap was an integral part of the conversation, other factors surrounding inequality and racism were highlighted, all of which are being reproduced throughout higher education, impacting the experiences of both students and staff, and contributing to the lack of Black of PhD students - and ultimately Black academics in the UK.

### Racial Inequalities in Higher Education

BME students at UK universities are less likely than their white counterparts to graduate from undergraduate degree programmes with a first or upper second class degree (Miller, 2016); more likely to lack a sense of belonging in or satisfaction with higher education (Mountford-Zimdars, 2015) and less likely to complete their first

undergraduate degree (Woodfield, 2014, p. 8) - the lowest rates of continuation being amongst Black students (Keohane, 2017). Whilst the number of BME students attending university has increased by 34% since 2010-11 (HEFCE, 2017), only a small proportion enrol at highly selective Russell Group institutions (Boliver, 2016). These inequalities within academia continually undermine egalitarian ideals associated with equality, equity and diversity.

### Defining the Attainment Gap

In 2017, the gap between the number of UK domiciled Black and white undergraduate students being awarded a first or upper second class degree was 23.7 percentage points (Advance HE, 2018) - the largest gap between two ethnic groups with Black students also being the lowest performing group of students of all ethnicities (Advance HE, 2018).

There has been evidence (Ahmed, 2012; Alexander, 2017; Advance HE, 2018; Shilliam, 2014; Tate and Bagguley, 2017) to suggest that unconscious biases and dominant Eurocentric curricula can negatively impact aspects of degree attainment which disadvantage BME qualifiers.

The issue of race is decisive and renders discomfort, particularly when challenging discriminatory cultures and frameworks that continue to disadvantage BME students and staff. Many universities have been forced to acknowledge that BME undergraduate students achieve lower degrees on average than their white contemporaries based on inequitable frameworks that continue to systemically disadvantage this demographic of students (Arday and Mirza, 2018). The unsurprising truth is that the persistence and enduring nature of racism within the Academy and the inequitable inherent structures within them operate to facilitate an attainment deficit (Tate and Bagguley, 2017).

Institutions have historically opted to attribute the attainment gap to a range of factors and variables including gender, prior attainment, deprivation, age and subject of study (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Cotton et al., 2016). More recent data analysis methodologies emerging across the sector often attempt to account for these factors, yet a significant 'unexplained' gap still exists causing an important shift regarding this discourse which identifies 'ethnicity' as a key indicator in predicting differential achievement of 'good degrees' (Arday, 2017; ECU, 2015; Tate and Bagguley, 2017; Duhs et

al., 2019). Some results also imply that based on the trajectory they are on prior to enrolment, BME students should actually have a larger probability of getting a first, and therefore be eligible to enter higher degree programmes (Chaudhury et al., 2019). There is a need for the Academy to look beyond 'the deficit model' to explain the attainment gap (Cotton et al., 2016).

BME representation continues to remain relatively high among first degree undergraduates and taught postgraduates (23.9% and 22.0%, respectively). However, this has been markedly lower among all postgraduate research students where 16.8% are from BME backgrounds (Advance HE, 2018) - just 4% of which are Black (HESA, 2019).

The statistical narrative around PGR students points towards a paucity of opportunities and access for ethnic minority students as the sector has observed a rise in BME students attending university since 2003 (Advance HE, 2018).

### Contributing Environmental Factors

There are three factors that impact this discourse (Advance HE, 2018; Arday and Mirza, 2018; Tate and Bagguley, 2017):

*Structural:* The autonomous nature of higher education means that every institution has unique internal structures which often dictate how inequality is prioritised and played out.

*Organisational:* The nature of job titles and roles within higher education, particularly in leadership positions has always been problematic with regards to identifying the locus for change or 'ownership' of the BME attainment agenda. Typically, BME attainment has been situated between equality and diversity interventions and teaching and learning initiatives which historically have not been penetrative in cultivating institutional change or addressing long-term pipeline issues.

*Cultural:* Resistance to acknowledging that problems exist regarding BME attainment, constitute a significant barrier towards effecting positive change. Sector-wide reforms should include the introduction of inclusive curricula and environments which are reflective of multi-cultural student populations and cultures. Institutions must acknowledge the nuanced issues situated within this context whilst recognising their obligation and responsibility towards ensuring that all students leave university with good degree attainment and outcomes.

## KEY FACTORS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussion highlighted key factors which influence the decision making and application process for Black PhD students.

**Emphasis on prior attainment** – This immediately disadvantages Black students who are the least likely to achieve a ‘good undergraduate degree’ (upper second class or first class honours) (Universities UK, 2019). In addition, graduates with first-class degrees are more likely to embark on higher degrees and enter academia (Duhs et al., 2019).

**Preference for graduates from research intensive institutions** – Black students are more likely to attend post-92 universities (Boliver, 2016) however applicants who have attended Russell Group institutions are regularly favoured over post-92 universities when it comes to funded PhD places.

**Limited data and low conversion rates** – Indicative data suggests there is cause for concern regarding the conversion rate of Black applicants to secure funded PhD places. However, there is currently limited public data available on applicant ethnicity, making it difficult to ascertain the scale of the issue.

**Scholarship eligibility and recruitment** – An example of a scholarship application for BME students asked applicants to demonstrate their resilience in the face of adversity. Some attendees considered questions like this inappropriate as not all applicants may be comfortable sharing this information, moreover it may imply a student deficit. However, other attendees suggested these questions present an opportunity for applicants to demonstrate their skills and contextualise their application.

**Variability in application processes information and access to funded PGR places across the sector** – Almost half of all Black doctoral students are enrolled part time, the largest percentage of part-time PGR students across all ethnic groups (Arday, 2017; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019) and anecdotally part time students are generally more likely to also be self-funded. Black students may not always have access to the appropriate information, advice and guidance on application and funding processes. This issue exists from undergraduate (National Union of Students, 2011) through to postgraduate research (PGR). When compounded by class and other socio-economic factors (Department for Work and Pensions, 2019), Black PhD candidates are at a significant disadvantage from the start of the process.

**Fixed notions of ‘academic excellence’** – The sector encourages conformity to a strict idea of ‘academic excellence’ which focuses on academic entry requirements and prior attainment, both of which are not necessarily clear predictors of success at PGR level (Sørensen, 2016).

**Potential for bias or micro-aggressions in the current supervisory model** - The one to one supervisory model for PGR study, combined with underrepresentation of Black academic staff may present challenges for prospective Black students not only in terms of applicants identifying a supervisor with shared interests but also navigating this personal relationship alongside the complexities of racial discrimination or bias (Capers et al, 2017).

### Recommendations for Change and Research

**Improve national data collection processes and address data collection gaps** in applicant demographics for funded PGR study - from application stage through to place confirmation. Conduct research into Black students’ experience of applying for and undertaking funded PGR study. The potential postgraduate taught attainment gap and its impact should also be explored by the sector.

**Adopt a more open approach to assessing academic ability and defining ‘excellence’** possibly considering applicants on the basis of a diagnostic essay, or using a competency based approach (Sørensen, 2016).

**Ensuring PGR interview panels are diverse** may help to tackle issues around discrimination and bias.

**Clarify ownership of PGR admissions processes** to establish where the locus of change sits with regards to improvements to admissions. Research councils should give institutions the ‘green light’ to proceed with major changes.

**Provide opportunities for PGR applicants to gain relevant research experience via paid internships**

**Ensure application guidance is effectively disseminated** and that admissions processes are transparent to all applicants.

**Ring-fencing funding for Black PGR students** can be explored as a form of positive action to address under-representation at this level of study.

**Adopting a team supervisory model** gives PGR students the opportunity to engage with a diverse range of academics during their studies.

## ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: OUR RESPONSE

We would like to thank the participants of the roundtable for their time, transparency and contributions to the discussion. It was insightful and has provided us with a clearer understanding of this complex issue from various perspectives. We hope that institutions will be able to use the findings from the discussion to inform their practice locally. Whilst we continue to be a critical friend to the sector, we acknowledge that change is possible through effective and ambitious partnerships with the scholarly community. We have begun that journey and outlined below are the commitments we have made for 2019 -2020 in response to some of the key points from the discussion.

### Black in Academia - Staying the Course

Our Staying the Course event series includes an introductory key note speech from a leading Black academic in the UK; detailed advice on the PhD application and funding process; and a panel discussion which includes one established Black academic, one Black early career academic and one Black PhD student. The event closes with networking which provides a unique space for attendees to connect. The content of these events is carefully curated to ensure representation from a range of career stages and academic disciplines. In 2019/20 we will host four Staying the Course events and having secured sponsorship from Sage Publishing. As a result we will be able to deliver at least three of those events in key cities across the UK.

### Paid Summer Internships at Wellcome Trust

We have secured two places for Black undergraduate students on Wellcome's summer internships programme in 2020. This incredible programme offers students the opportunity to meet people from across Wellcome, hear from industry experts, attend career development workshops and participate in group volunteering days. Not only is the internship paid but students also receive discounted accommodation if they are currently located outside of London. The students will also be mentored by a member of the Leading Routes network.

### Research

During 2019, we will be conducting further research into the experiences of Black students through the education system and into academia in order to better inform our activities and those of our partner organisations. The report, published in partnership with UCL, will be released in 2019/20.

### Consultancy and Partnerships

We are currently developing the consultancy arm of Leading Routes which will offer bespoke workshops to organisations on the issues aligned with our aims. We are also open to considering new partnerships with organisations that are genuinely committed to seeing changes within academia and willing to take a new approach to addressing the long-standing inequalities that are disadvantaging Black students.

### Youtube Series and Podcast

In October 2018 we launched our #BlackinAcademia [Youtube series](#) where a collection of Black students and academics narrated their experiences of university and their research interests. Created from our Black in Academia and Paths to University events, our live podcast series will provide students with information about the journeys of our past panellists and speakers, and most importantly tips on the PGR applications and funding.

### Leading Routes Network

As our network grows we will continue to identify challenges and issues from our members and take the opportunity to highlight them with our partner organisations as they develop their initiatives to address inequality within the sector. The network also provides support for our members as they navigate the challenging PGR process.

### Black in Academia Live

In Summer 2019 we partnered with Wellcome Collections to launch a two evening education festival. We curated an interactive evening with special guest talks, lively discussions and debates and the opportunity to network. Attendees included school and college students, teachers, undergraduates, Masters/ PhD students and academics. We also partnered with three booksellers for the reception – Houseman's Radical Bookshop, Jacaranda Publishing and Own It!

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