Centre for EQUITY+ INCLUSION

Research

The University of Sheffield experience for international postgraduate researchers

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Executive Summary

This report identifies several key issues facing international postgraduate researchers (PGRs) at the University of Sheffield. They are grouped into three themes: 1) hidden labour and invisible barriers 2) navigating racism, xenophobia and "culture" 3) belonging, community and connection. In addition, the report outlines a series of recommendations for instituting change. These are summarised below.

Key Findings:

- Hidden Labour: International PGRs from racially minoritised backgrounds are forced to take on the additional work of navigating unfamiliar systems, overcoming barriers to access opportunities, and maintaining ties back home which is not supported or even acknowledged by the University. This includes managing finances, visas, limited leave options, and the emotional toll of navigating cultural differences and potential crises in their home countries. invisible barriers are experienced with funding, scholarship, professional development opportunities, social networks, social and cultural capital and administrative processes.

- Navigating Racism, Xenophobia, and "Culture": International PGRs experience racism, xenophobia, and microaggressions from supervisors, peers, and University staff. This includes assumptions about their abilities, language proficiency, and cultural norms. The concept of "British culture" is used to justify exclusionary practices.

- Belonging, Community, and Connection: Social isolation and lack of belonging is prominent amongst racially minoritised international PGRs. There is currently inadequate support on offer from the University's pastoral care system, with some advisors lacking the capacity to address issues of racial discrimination.

Some of the key recommendations:

- International PGR starter pack: This would provide essential information on navigating unfamiliar systems, including mental health support, reporting mechanisms, and cultural awareness training. It should also address issues of racialisation and racism in the UK higher education system, and provide guidance on how to get support if experiencing these issues.

- Dedicated international PGR support officer: A departmental officer would be responsible for addressing concerns, providing pastoral care, organizing social events, and fostering a sense of community.

- Supervisor training: This should include creating a document outlining expectations for both supervisors and supervisees, as well as mandatory EDI training that incorporates the realities of hidden labour and the challenges faced by international PGRs.

- EDI training and intersectionality: Training on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion should go beyond tokenistic efforts and challenge assumptions about international PGRs. It should be mandatory for supervisors, staff, and students.

- Accountability for funding: The University should be transparent about funding allocation and ensure equitable access to professional development opportunities, considering visa limitations.

- Safe reporting mechanisms: There needs to be a safe and trustworthy way for international PGRs to report racism and discrimination.

- Spaces for social connection: The report calls for activities that bring PGRs together, including those targeted at specific groups, such as women of colour in science PGRs.

- Collective organising: The report recommends creating spaces for PGRs to navigate racism and discrimination collectively, and to work towards challenging power structures.

- Mental health support: A dedicated and safe space for mental health and healing support, which considers the unique experiences of racially minoritized international PGRs, is recommended.

These recommendations aim to address the structural and systemic barriers faced by racially minoritised international PGRs at the University of Sheffield. By implementing these suggestions, the University can create a more equitable, humane, and inclusive environment for all PGRs.

Glossary

Deficit lens - a perspective or analytical framework that presents the problems faced by certain social groups as a result of inherent deficiencies (cultural, biological or otherwise) as opposed to external factors like economics, social structures or government policy. Often leads to reductive and harmful stereotyping and sees assimilation as the solution to race-based issues.

Hidden labour - involves tasks that require time and effort but do not result in pay and are not often recognised as work. For example, universities may see presenting at a conference as work, but not the process of securing a visa to attend, or the stress that comes with it.

Microaggression - brief and commonplace verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities grounded in racism. They are persistent, insistent, and often happen automatically, all day every day . "Micro" refers to this everyday interpersonal expression of racism , rather than suggesting a reduced impact. In fact, the cumulative impact of microaggressions takes a great psychological toll.

Racial Equity -the principle that each racial group is given the specific resources and support they need to overcome historical and structural discrimination. This is opposed to racial equality which suggests that each racial group is given the exact same set of resources and support.

Racially minoritised - a term used to categorise racial groups who are diminished and discriminated against as a result of institutional structures

Systemic racism- when the policies and processes forming an institution, sector or state result in the discrimination and oppression of specific racial groups

A note on language. Although we acknowledge that International PGRs of colour are part of a global majority, we want to draw attention to the structural discrimination they encounter in UK higher education. As a result we have chosen to use the term "racially minoritised" throughout this report.

PHASE I

Context

Introduction

Systemic racism continues to be widespread in UK Higher Education Institutions (Bhopal, 2022; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). There is increasing evidence of how it impacts racially minoritised postgraduate researchers (PGRs). Examples include but are not limited to: a lack of funding, a failure to prioritise diversity within the PGR community, widespread prejudice and discrimination, challenges in networking, supervision, skill development and sense of belonging in academia (Arday, 2021; Leading Routes, 2019; Pitkin, 2021; Smith McGloin & Wynne, 2022). There are specific issues facing international PGRs . The increasingly hostile environment against immigration continues to operate through institutional complicity across various UK universities (Swain, 2018) as well as in access to services outside the University such as healthcare, housing, and employment (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021). Recent policy changes to reduce the number of immigrants and international students bringing dependents/family members to the UK, rethinking graduate visa schemes and increasing immigration fees continues to highlight the current animosity towards international students. Taken together, this creates a unique context for racially minoritised international PGRs in the UK. It exacerbates the challenges typically faced by a postgraduate researcher and has the potential to impact their experiences of navigating UK academic settings during the doctoral journey and beyond.

With international PGRs representing 42% of the total British PGR population (HESA, 2022), it is important to understand their experiences of navigating University systems and structures. The Office for Students (2022) has highlighted the lack of knowledge nationwide and they have made addressing this issue a priority area. Although a body of research is developing, the voices and narratives of racially minoritised international PGRs are often absent. This report seeks to remedy the issue by sharing testimonies directly from international PGRs at the University of Sheffield and drawing out the key issues and potential solutions that emerged from group conversations.

Traditionally, dominant discourses about international students have portrayed them through a 'deficit-lens'. For instance, conceptualising international students as a homogenous group lacking appropriate language skills or critical thinking abilities compared to home students (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Studies which come from such a deficit perspective tend to focus on what international students lack and make recommendations as to how they should change in order to have a productive time abroad (Deuchar, 2022). This framing often leads to initiatives focusing on how international students can adapt, integrate and assimilate into established university cultures (Turner & Robson, 2008), with the burden on individual students to foster social change rather than for institutions to address their own structural inequalities.

Another common narrative is depicting international students as 'cash cows' with the potential to lower educational standards (Lomer, 2017). In doing so, the discourse on international students' contribution is oversimplified and commodified through transactional terms leading to their devaluation, dehumanisation and othering. They seem to be both 'desired' and 'unwanted' due to their financial contributions to the universities' sustenance as well as the politics of border control (King & Raghuram, 2012).

The aim of this present report is to explore, identify and understand the experiences of international postgraduate researchers from racially minoritised backgrounds at the University of Sheffield. But crucially it endeavours to give voice to the plurality of racially minoritised international PGRs' experiences and generate action-oriented, PGR-led recommendations for the University to find out more about what these challenges are and how we can address them.

This report has been authored by Ankita Mishra. Ankita's research interests and work include gender based violence, health and wellbeing, higher education and research cultures, and participatory action research. Her approach to these fields are rooted in critical race and disability, feminism, and intersectionality frameworks. Ankita has worked on a number of research projects alongside her PhD with over seven years of research experience using participatory approaches and collaborative endeavours with non-academic partners. She has undertaken the current piece of work having navigated the UK higher education as a racially minoritised international PGR. Ankita has been commissioned by the Centre for Equity & Inclusion as part of its work to provide support and opportunities for racially minorities postgraduate researchers at the University of Sheffield. Funding has been issued through the University of Sheffield's Research Cultures award.

Methodology

Design

Qualitative focus groups were conducted in the current study, as focus groups are a useful exploratory method with minoritised groups (Frith, 2000) for under-researched areas (Wilkinson, 1999). Further, they can be empowering for participants, as they provide an opportunity for participants to interact with people who share common experiences (Liamputtong, 2007). With pragmatic considerations of time and resources (Braun & Clarke, 2020), we conducted a total of five focus groups. These were both in-person and online with four-to-eight participants in each group.

Participants

The eligibility criteria for the study included: (1) International PGRs who self-identify as being from racially minoritised backgrounds registered currently at the University of Sheffield (2) International PGRs who self-identify as being from racially minoritised backgrounds who have graduated from the University of Sheffield in the past three years. Participants were 29 international Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) from racially minoritised backgrounds across various disciplines in the University. 23 participants were women and 6 were men with 9 participants from the Faculty of Social Sciences, 8 from Faculty of Science, 6 from Faculty of Engineering, 5 from Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health and 1 from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Participants identified as being of East Asian (n = 12), Latino (n = 4), South Asian (n = 4), Central Asian (n = 2), South-east Asian (n = 2), Arab (n = 1), Black African (n = 1), Black Caribbean (n = 1), indigenous North African (n = 1), Middle-Eastern (n = 1) heritage.

Procedure and Materials

Ethical approval was obtained from the University's ethics committee. Recruitment was carried out using the Centre for Equity and Inclusion mailing list, the University of Sheffield volunteer lists and announcement system, Alumni network, advertisements on social media (i.e., Twitter, Facebook), contacts and networks of the research team via email, in person, and social media platforms.

In addition to purposive sampling, we also used a snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) strategy by requesting those who expressed an interest to share any information about the study with their peers who would be eligible. After reviewing the recruitment advertisement and the participant information sheet, interested individuals completed a short expression of interest form, which consisted of questions on the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Those who expressed interest and met the criteria were contacted to confirm their place before being sent the consent form. Following consent, participants filled in the demographics questions (i.e., gender identity, racialised identity). Participants were invited to contact the researcher if they have had any further questions at this point; otherwise, their place in the focus group was guaranteed once their consent form was received.

Focus groups were conducted and recorded both in-person on campus at University as well as on Google Meet by the lead author. Participants were reminded of principles of engagement in the focus group (i.e., being considerate of other people's feelings and experiences, confidentiality of the group discussion) and in online discussions were given the choice to either keep their cameras on or off based on their preference. In total, we conducted five focus groups, three were in-person and two were online. At the end of the discussion for each of the focus groups, there was an opportunity for participants to debrief with the facilitator if required and choose their preferred pseudonym. The focus groups lasted between 1 hour 39 minutes and 2 hours 08 minutes (M = 1 hour 51 minutes; 9.25 hours in total); the participants were each given a £20 shopping voucher as a token of appreciation for their valuable time and efforts for engaging in and contributing to the research. Transcription was conducted by the author and once transcripts were pseudonymised, video and audio recordings were deleted. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

PHASE II

Key Findings

Hidden Labour and Invisible Barriers

This theme highlights the hidden labour that racially minoritised international PGRs have to undertake through the course of their doctoral research journey. This includes but is not limited to: access to opportunities for professional development such as internships, fellowships and/or conference presentations, networking, and hours of navigating visa constraints and admin to avail similar opportunities as their peers. As one participant noted:

If I wanted to go to a conference or summer school I would need a visa, that visa is going to cost lots of money which again makes my RTSG funds being spent much more than my peers for lesser opportunities plus all the admin of going to getting that done when I could be doing my PhD...so just because of the lottery of where we are from has sort of downstream effects on the kind of quality and quantity of training and opportunities that we get and the behind the scenes admin of having to enjoy the same level of quality of opportunities that a PhD student should have despite paying so much more.

Some participants discussed the need to work multiple jobs due to limited scholarship opportunities and higher fees for international students while pursuing a full time PhD. Participants with scholarships or funding pointed out that the cost of living and currency conversion still requires them to work alongside the PhD, without any recourse to switching to part time status like home students.

The limits placed on taking a leave of absence for international students (capped at a maximum of 60 days) and the expectation they can afford to renew their visa if they want to apply for additional days, adds to the invisible emotional and mental labour for international PGRs. This is a significant problem considering how common it is for PGRs to pursue a leave of absence to deal with general life stressors. As illustrated by one participant:

There's no room for flexibility as we are treated according to our visa status. In comparison to home students for example, who get to have part-time PhDs, longer leave of absence, we don't have that luxury to afford any crisis in our lives or work and study in a balanced way. And then there's the financial pressure because we pay so much more and there's limited scholarship, even if they pay scholarship there's so much more cost, the flights, the visa costs, the health insurance and the exchange rate is huge between my country and the British pound, so we need to work alongside doing a full time PhD. For our mental health, financially, academically, we are always racing against time.

Several participants discussed the hidden labour of maintaining ties back home and keeping track of events there, while also settling in the UK alongside the daily hassles and stresses of the PhD. This was reported to have an enormous impact on their health and wellbeing. The following account is indicative of the invisible labour international PGRs undertake on a day-to-day basis:

It felt like I had one body but it was in two time zones... I would have to extend my waking hours so that I could keep track of what was happening back home or check in with family but I also had to be awake here and you know if you do that a few times that's fine, but if you do that regularly days would become weeks and weeks become months and then you're suddenly running on sleep deficit for a year or two years.

And not just two time zones or multiple languages but having to kind of ultra adjust maintaining the ties there, building new ties here, that was sort of a double labour like you know two wheels spinning and they were spinning at slightly different time zones and slightly different frequencies and I had to kind of do that while doing a PhD, taking care of money, food, exercise and all the regular daily hassles.

The hidden labour that the participants highlighted also included navigating unfamiliar systems both within and outside the University. Their lack of social and cultural capital meant they found it harder to access networking, mentoring and other professional development opportunities than home students. This has important implications for equity in opportunities for professional and academic development with the potential to impact future career pathways for international PGRs. Other internal challenges include: going through laborious and often convoluted bureaucratic processes (intensified for international PGRs), negotiating working hours to satisfy visa requirements while enduring a complex, inflexible and alarmist jobshop system, and identifying the specific support offered by staff members, services and departments.

In navigating systems outside the University, the majority of participants expressed feeling frustrated and exploited by the health system despite having paid a lot of money in the form of the immigration health surcharge. The lack of access to care for their health conditions meant either undertaking the hidden labour of going back to their home countries for treatments or enduring the health difficulties if it conflicts with their PhD timescales or expectations. Furthermore, participants noted the emotional toll of socio-political and/or emergency crisis events in their countries of origin and concern for the impact of such events on family and friends. For instance, one participant noted:

'the constant stress and anxiety I had about the impact of the earthquake in Turkey on my family and friends, there was no support or even any genuine acknowledgement and checking in from anyone regarding my well being, also with the university's silence it just made things worse'.

Such instances illustrate the need to understand the consequences of geo-political events on international PGRs, who can suffer from emotional exhaustion and experience a significant negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. It makes clear the need to provide adequate support to International PGRs throughout and beyond their time at the University. Indeed, several participants noted that while they were left overwhelmed by too much information when first trying to make sense of an unfamiliar environment, they received little support as their studies continued.

In conclusion, this theme has demonstrated the various manifestations of the hidden labour and invisible barriers experienced by racially minoritised international PGRs during their doctoral journey. It emphasises the increased risk of exhaustion, burnout and debilitating impact of mental and emotional health and wellbeing for international PGRs. It also calls into question the notion of equality of opportunities for all PGRs in their academic and professional development, highlighting the multiple invisible barriers and constraints in their career progression and development. Finally, it suggests the need for the University to acknowledge and understand this hidden labour in order to provide better support to racially minoritised international PGRs.

Navigating Racism, Xenophobia and Culture

One of the major challenges racially minoritised international PGRs reported was the experience of being racialised for the first time. Encountering the racial system particular to the UK meant understanding and negotiating a new aspect of identity, made more difficult when intersecting with other marginalised features such as gender, sexuality, faith and disability. As one participant stated:

I had to deal with being a woman in STEM and then you are a woman of colour in STEM in this country and that was a huge challenge. I didn't know what was happening or could not make sense of it at that point because I had no social referencing to the race side of things before coming here, you know. I knew what it meant to be a woman in technology but to be a woman of colour, I had to learn it the hard way. There's a fundamental misunderstanding of also the intersectionalities that come with each individual. And I don't know if the university understands the harm that does, like you're trying to be diverse, but you're also not thinking about how the environment may affect these people that you're bringing in. A lot of things are seen as not a worry when they should be severely looked at.

Participants also discussed their experiences of racism and xenophobia through microaggressions, othering, exclusion, surveillance and abuse in multiple spheres including but not limited to: supervision, professional services, and Graduate Teacher Assistant (GTA) teaching. This extends beyond the University to: landlords, taxi drivers, and the NHS, as well as other aspects of their lives in Sheffield.

Several participants discussed the 'assumed homogeneity of minoritised groups' and 'deficit lens' used by their supervisors in terms of understanding their supervisees work, giving feedback and assuming lack of linguistic ability and fluency, despite many international PGRs having English as their first language.

They described instances of receiving feedback from their supervisors asking them to improve their English, and the humiliation of being mocked for incorrect grammar, despite no concrete evidence or examples of errors made. These stereotypes of racially minoritised international PGRs lacking linguistic proficiency or knowledge continue to harm and negatively impact many PGRs.

Several participants also discussed the control and power that supervisors have exerted on them in terms of what PGRs can or cannot do for their professional development such as discouraging international PGRs from teaching while encouraging their home supervisees to do so, lack of support for career progression or mentorship, insidious remarks and questions such as 'why have you come here'. As one participant noted:

The most challenging thing that I've faced so far during my PhD is supervision and also engaging with my environment because being the only Black person, particularly a Black dark skinned woman, has been extremely challenging because I've already faced the stereotypes that typically get placed on Black women for simply just existing. I don't think supervisors are very good at handling students of colour. I had to sit in silence with how something was handled because I can't express myself in the manner that I'm supposed to because I've already been lodged with so many different stereotypes. And I think that's a problem that should be rectified. I think that the University celebrates or sometimes glorifies itself on being international but if you're going to take on particularly international racially minoritised students, there should be more formal training rather than the simple, you watch a video and then that's it. I think it does a disservice because it really impacts our mental well-being.

The majority of participants pointed out this pattern continues in their interactions with peers. For instance:

'I become this representational figure of a country of 100 million people and I get asked questions if other people from my country eat like this or talk like this and so on'

'Everything is fragmented and you have to deal with bureaucracies and research services don't actually care or understand your complexities and make you feel like you are burdening them and they continue to ignore, it's just too tiring'.

These xenophobic experiences continue to prevail in their own development opportunities such as applying to be a Graduate Teaching Assistant. One participant noted:

'It's very rare that you'll see an international student, particularly international students of colour get chosen for any of the positions that they offer out, using the excuse of accents or lacking relevant skills vs home students'

Another participant made clear that even when an international PGR does secure a new role, there are issues:

"But even if you do get that position, you are still thought of not really deserving of it or you need more support than everyone else because of where you come from, completely ignoring our past experience of actually lecturing undergraduate and postgraduate students and I have observed this does not stop there, you also have to face the discrimination from students who do not seem to like you very much in comparison to your peers who are white male PGRs seen to be experts'.

Participants highlighted how University systems continue to Other racially minoritised International PGRs through monitoring and surveillance activities. These include, '*emails with the tone of checking your activity through PATS*', research and professional services '*controlling and intimidating tactics by constantly highlighting the need to report to Home Office at the drop of the hat'* and as another participant has described the following incident of surveillance within the University campus:

I went to the prayer room and I knew that I was being watched by cameras. So if you spend more than five minutes, they might come in and say, you should be out, I have had that in the past. So you're not even allowed to sit and relax. There's a lot of surveillance. And then if you think that people are seeing you like a terrorist, you won't stay there and get away from those spaces, despite the need to pray. And with what's happening with z spaces. Despite a majority of participants highlighting such instances, it was not easy for them to report such incidents or access formal support due to (mis)use of power by supervisors and staff, fear of being harmed in their PhD progression (for instance, when supervisors are Heads of Department or in charge of Postgraduate Research in the Department) or career progression (for instance, when supervisors are influential and renowned academics on whom their supervisees rely on for references) and other harmful repercussions, the lack of sense of safety and trust due to such prior experiences, all of which contributed to their silence around these pressing concerns.

Some participants highlighted how Othering continues through the use of 'British culture' as a way of justifying networking and socialisation activities centred on alcohol, which excludes a number of PGRs from being part of these spaces and thus impacts their professional development and social opportunities. All participants agreed that '*the politeness and indirectness in the name of British culture'* is extremely difficult to make sense of. As a result it adds *more mental effort and time in merely comprehending what's happening, it's like interacting with British people is like playing a game of dumb charades, and I am just tired of that*. One participant expanded on this:

Our directness is considered rudeness, but their indirectness and their lack of support, their lack of transparency is not considered, their lack of transparency is rather considered politeness. Although for me, it translates as, if you're being indirect and if you're being manipulative, then you're basically lying to me but they use this defence in the name of cultural differences to continue doing wrong to people like us. And this transparency is just one-way where you have to make sure whatever research you're doing is ethical, and you have to be this visa person who wants to report every month through your PATS system that you're going to be here, engaging in your course. And you're not working more than you're supposed to. All of those things, the reporting happens only one way. And that the university has nothing to be transparent about.

This lack of transparency and one-way accountability of international PGRs was highlighted by several participants as being extended to professional development and training funding pots, information on conference support, grants or bursaries for visa costs and the like. It shows the simultaneous hyper-visibility of racially minoritised international PGRs through surveillance and monitoring systems and invisibility of support structures for personal, social and professional development opportunities.

Navigating racism, xenophobia and the weaponisation of 'British culture' not only has an impact on international PGRs health and wellbeing, professional development and quality of doctoral experience, it also has serious consequences on their sense of belonging and connection. To address this the University needs to develop safer support systems and accountability processes that are applied equitably throughout the institution.

Belonging, Community and Connection

This theme highlights the lack of inclusion, belonging and connection that racially minoritised international PGRs continue to experience in their doctoral journey in the University. Participants highlighted the challenges of uprooting their entire existence from one's own country and social support system and starting afresh in a new context. This is a particular problem considering that the doctoral experience can often be a lonely and isolating journey for all students. Furthermore, the liminal space that PGRs occupy as neither being fully staff nor being fully student contributes to this lack of belonging, specifically for international PGRs who do not feel fully welcomed in the University. As one participant stated:

I really want someone I can trust but it's difficult to find that here compared to home, not just emotional support but also more instrumental support like advice and connections. Instead the way you are made to feel with all the racism and all aspects of your personal life is the feeling that you are not wanted here, so you internalise the feeling that I don't want to be here, but then you have to live with that feeling because you have to navigate it every day, wherever you go as you continue to work on your PhD.

Several participants shared that the PhD programme does not provide any means for social connection or shared spaces or experiences, such as taking a class together in undergraduate or postgraduate taught programmes. A number of them highlighted the impact of COVID on exacerbating their sense of loneliness and isolation, with no active efforts from Departments or wider University to foster such spaces of connection. One of the participants illustrated this:

I think the university has a tendency to, their first response is signpost, like you know here's a list of URLs and you know websites to go to, you know, I can google that I can chatGPT that.

It's nice for someone to curate a list but I want to talk to other people and you know feel like part of a community and access sort of resources together and again you're putting the burden on us to kind of seek out the help all the time, but what if life gets in the way and it's just one more thing to ask for. You're making us ask for it and again, sometimes it's just not gonna work ou

The vast majority of participants noted that despite their own individual efforts in initiating social connection and accessing events or social spaces, they continued to find the interactions with British peers surface level, superficial, transactional or business-like. It proves difficult to make friends or connect at a deeper level or penetrate in the social circles of the local PGRs. Participants presented different explanations for this. For example, '*British people are kind of aloof and not as warm as everybody else'*, '*activities are centred mainly around alcohol and I would rather prefer to sit and eat together than be in a noisy pub with an inability to communicate and socialise'*, and '*I miss out on the local slangs and jokes because I don't share the same pop culture exposure but they keep giving such examples without realising that I don't get it'.* In addition to navigating racism and xenophobia from home-based PGRs, participants reflected how such instances made them feel a lack of belonging and community at the University.

Participants impressed that they want to feel included while being their authentic and genuine selves. However, they often feel the need to compromise on this in order to integrate into these spaces. This leads to frustration at having to constantly remain flexible and adaptive to the standards set by a system which makes them feel out place. The following sentiment expressed by one participant echoed across the majority of participants:

We want to feel included, once in a while, you see, we want to feel at home you know, we want to be seen for who we are, like we want to have that feeling at least once in a while instead of us having to be the ones always adjusting to this system. I am fed up with being flexible and want to see my real self feel more welcomed and included.

Despite reporting loneliness, isolation and lack of belonging in the absence of a strong social support system, several people shared that they were able to form friendships with other international PGRs, and PGRs of colour generally, due to shared struggles and experiences. Some even found the focus groups a site of solidarity and connection. Participants noted how they attempted to build communities outside of the University through local grassroots volunteering and advocacy. However, the majority recognised and reiterated that the onus should not be on the PGRs to seek support out. All participants indicated the need for the University to undertake a proactive approach to PGR community-building activities (like they have for undergraduate students) to foster meaningful connections amongst racially minoritised international PGRs.

This theme demonstrates the lack of belonging and inclusion experienced by the majority of international PGRs, leading to loneliness and impaired mental health and wellbeing.
The lack of social support outlined above also has implications on professional development. It calls attention to the current understanding of social connection and community as an individualised phenomena with responsibilities on the PGRs to build those relationships, without considering the complex context of international PGRs navigating their doctoral journey.

PHASE III

Recommendations

Recommendations

During discussions with international PGRs we developed a series of action-oriented, PGR-led recommendations for the University to address the issues outlined in the report.

1. International PGR starter pack

This pack should provide clear information about how things work in the UK to ease anxieties about navigating unfamiliar systems both within and outside the University. It would include practical guidance on things such as leave of absence, mental health support, reporting incidents, medical services, transport, housing and landlords, and banking. But also share insights on racialisation and racism in the UK and higher education, as well as adequate avenues for support when experiencing these things. The starter pack should also include a humanistic-based induction session challenging and disrupting cultures of 'assimilation' or 'fitting in' to ensure international PGRs are able to remain authentic to their backgrounds and lived experiences.

2. A funded position for an international PGR support officer within each department.

The dedicated officer would be trained and equipped to address international PGR concerns and act as a pastoral advisor for their wellbeing, organise events to bring PGRs together and create a sense of community. Localised support within the department is more helpful than the general centralised service. And a dedicated role is better than an academic in the department taking up the role as an additional admin responsibility. This would ensure tailored support towards changing needs throughout the different stages of the doctoral journey.

3. Supervisor training

Creating a document that outlines the expectations both supervisors and supervisees have of one another, and a feedback mechanism for ensuring this is being followed. Furthermore, EDI training for supervisors should go beyond a few minutes video and has to embed care and lived experiences of the hidden labour of international PGRs and other challenges through mandatory workshops. There needs to be a system in place to demonstrate that the supervisors have actually learned something and implemented such training in their practice, they need to be accountable in their exercise of power over the PGRs.

4. EDI training and intersectionality

Any form of Equity Diversity and Inclusion training needs to challenge homogenous assumptions about international PGRs and their contexts and therefore incorporate intersectionality as a core value in educating supervisors, professional services as well as students across all levels and needs to go beyond tokenistic tick-box exercises such as online videos. The Centre for Equity and Inclusion can lead on this training from an anti-racist perspective.

5. Accountability at all levels

The University needs to be transparent about its funding pots and professional development opportunities. There needs to be the principle of equity, not equality, while allocating funds to international PGRs for development opportunities such as conferences, owing to visa costs. There should be a mechanism in place for holding the University to account if this is not followed.

6. Academic and professional development

Additional support for navigating the admin behind the visa process is important for enhancing the academic and professional development of international PGRs. Understanding the niche needs of racially minoritised international PGRs and providing them with specialist support in career progression, comprehensive upskilling beyond the PhD embedding the racially minoritised lens in academic skills development (eg, writing workshops by scholars of colour) and clear information on the opportunities they can access within the constraints of the visa. Networking and mentoring opportunities acknowledging the context of international PGRs and therefore need to be held regularly targeting their specific needs. Knowledge exchange and research opportunities should be provided for international PGRs beyond the PhD experience.

7. Safe reporting mechanisms

There needs to be a safe and trustworthy mechanism for international PGRs to share and report any concerns and issues that they might experience at any level in the University. Action needs to be taken while safeguarding the interests of the PGRs and considerations of the power asymmetry and imbalance needs to be part of the process. Surveillance in line with strategies such as PREVENT and University's hostile messaging in line with border agents needs to be reflected upon and changed to make international PGRs feel safe, genuinely cared for and humanise their experience.

8. Spaces for social connection

Community building activities aimed at bringing PGRs together through a shared social experience as part of a generic welcome programme with specific caucasus such as women of colour in science PGRs, disabled PGRs, people from a particular part of the world or from a specific religious background or parent PGRs or mature PGRs and the like. The Centre for Equity and Inclusion can also organise communal activities celebrating festivals from all over the world as a way of bringing international PGRs together and creating opportunities for social connection and community. Opportunities to connect with local communities and groups in Sheffield is important to foster relationship building and socialisation.

9. Collective organising and spaces of solidarity

To help navigate racism and discrimination as well as joined up collective efforts towards anti-racism and constant challenging of hegemonic power structures within and outside the University such as the passport power and visa constraints.

10. Mental health and healing support

A dedicated and safe mental health and healing support circle or space which embodies the principles of anti-racism and understands the context of hostile environment towards migration and the impact on international PGRs. See the Centre for Equity & Inclusion's "Centre Chats" model.

Literature, suggested reading and media

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