



Raising outcomes for racially minoritised women on doctoral degrees in England

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Racially minoritised women remain significantly underrepresented and unevenly supported across doctoral education in England. Doctoral education plays a critical gatekeeping role in shaping the future workforce in academia and beyond. Strengthening doctoral pathways for racially minoritised women is central to research excellence, talent sustainability, institutional credibility and economic growth.

Evidence from Generation Delta highlights structural challenges: how opaque admissions processes, mystification of the doctoral journey, inconsistent supervisory practices, and limited culturally competent support cumulatively disadvantage racially minoritised women throughout doctoral study.

We identify five priority areas for action to address this challenge:

- Standardise and proactively deliver doctoral access support
- Embed doctoral peer support through national-to-local networks
- Formalise independent doctoral mentorship
- Strengthen cultural competence across doctoral governance
- Use targeted funding strategically and transparently



The policy challenge

Universities have expanded commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) with schemes such as Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter that contribute to institutional reputation and talent recruitment. However, additional action is required to translate these policies into consistent, institution-wide change in doctoral admissions, graduate support structures, progression and transition into academic careers for racially minoritised women. For these women, the pathway into and through doctoral study is marked by systemic opacity, mystification and uneven institutional support.

UKRI has invested £8 million across 13 projects to investigate this challenge. Generation Delta, one of these projects, found that racially minoritised women are less likely to benefit from:

- Informal mentoring and knowledge about doctoral funding and admissions
- Early exposure to research cultures and expectations
- Networks that demystify supervisory relationships, progression milestones, and career pathways

These disparities reflect differences in institutional access and social capital, not motivation or ability. Left unaddressed, these disparities undermine the investment in equity in higher education: they contribute to lower application rates, weaker experiences of belonging, higher attrition risk, and constrained academic career progression, undermining universities' strategic objectives on research excellence, research culture, and equality.

The evidence base

This policy brief is grounded in qualitative and quantitative evidence from the Generation Delta project. Funded by the Office for Students and Research England, this four-year multi-disciplinary project interacted – in person and via surveys – with over 1000 postgraduate research students across the country from at least 50 different

universities. Our findings document that:

- Satisfaction with wellbeing provision differs markedly by race and gender. Across the four annual Generation Delta surveys (2022–2025), awareness of university wellbeing services was high among all groups; however, only 36–39% of racially minoritised women reported satisfaction with wellbeing provision, compared with 48% of white women, indicating that inequities relate to the quality of services rather than their visibility.
- Supervisory and examination practices often lack cultural competence and racial literacy. While most doctoral students reported receiving academic guidance, perceptions of supervisory understanding differed substantially. Less than 50% of racially minoritised women felt that their supervisors understood the broader social or cultural contexts shaping their work, compared with between 74% and 79% of white women, with clear implications for progression, confidence and belonging.
- Access to mentoring and informal academic support is unevenly distributed. Only 37–41% of racially minoritised women reported having access to a mentor, compared with 56% of white women, reinforcing evidence that informal mentorship, advocacy and peer-based support are not equitably available.

Qualitative responses indicate that access to doctoral and funding knowledge is mediated through informal mentoring, supervisory guidance and peer networks—areas in which racially minoritised women report systematically lower access. Existing support mechanisms frequently rely on individual goodwill rather than institutional design, leading to uneven experiences across departments and institutions. These findings align with wider sector evidence on doctoral wellbeing, attainment gaps and research culture, reinforcing the need for coordinated institutional and sector-level action.

Recommendations

1. Standardise and proactively deliver doctoral access support

Action: Universities should provide institution-level doctoral access programmes for women undergraduate and Master's students from racially minoritised backgrounds, particularly addressing areas currently navigated through informal mentoring and academic networks, e.g. proposal writing, funding, finding a supervisor and doctoral expectations.

Why: While information on doctoral study and funding exists, Generation Delta evidence shows that access to understanding this information is largely mediated through informal mentoring and peer networks. As racially minoritised women report significantly lower access to mentoring and informal academic support, they are less likely to acquire the subject and institutional knowledge required to navigate the doctoral application and funding routes.

Who: Graduate Schools and Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs).

Outcome: More informed applicants and higher quality applications leading to increased doctoral entry rates for racially minoritised women. A stronger doctoral pipeline.

2. Embed doctoral peer support through national-to-local networks

Action: Establish a national doctoral peer network for racially minoritised women, with local or disciplinary clusters.

Why: Peer support improves belonging and wellbeing. Generation Delta evidence shows that racially minoritised women report weaker experiences of belonging, isolation and lower satisfaction with institutional support than white women. Structured peer networks provide a mechanism to address these issues where informal support and mentoring are unevenly distributed, while avoiding reliance on individual goodwill.

Who: Universities working collaboratively

with sector bodies (e.g. UKRI-funded doctoral consortia).

Outcome: Sustainable communities of belonging will reduce attrition and enhance retention on doctoral programmes for racially minoritised women resulting in higher rates of completion and the evolution of leadership capacity for academia and industry.

3. Formalise independent doctoral mentorship

Action: Introduce doctoral mentors (distinct from supervisors) for later-stage doctoral candidates. Doctoral mentors should be trained and receive workload allocation.

Why: Independent guidance supports navigation of institutional structures and career planning, but access to such support is uneven.

Who: Universities; Graduate Schools; Advance HE (guidance and standards).

Outcome: Doctoral students will approach the end of the doctorate with confidence and career readiness, supporting improved institutional outcomes beyond the doctorate.

4. Strengthen cultural competence across doctoral governance

Action: Mandate cultural competence and racial literacy training for supervisors, mentors, examiners and assessors. This training should be integrated into existing staff development.

Why: Racial illiteracy and lack of cultural competence undermines supervisory relationships and can taint progression decisions, with clear implications for wellbeing and completion.

Who: Universities; Staff Development Teams; Research Culture Leads.

Outcome: Fairer doctoral processes, improved supervisory quality and reduced attrition.

5. Use targeted funding strategically and transparently

Action: Deploy time-limited, targeted doctoral funding for racially minoritised women as part of a wider pipeline strategy, with clear review points.

Why: Funding remains a decisive barrier but must be linked to broader structural reforms rather than treated as a standalone solution.

Who: UKRI; Research England; Universities.

Outcome: Short-term access gains for racially minoritised women combined with sustained longer-term system change for diversity in research environments and careers.

Implementation and measurement

University leaders should integrate these actions within existing Research and Innovation Strategies; Research Culture and Concordat commitments; EDI governance and monitoring frameworks. Progress can be measured through: Application, offer, enrolment, retention and completion data; Doctoral experience and wellbeing surveys; Progression into academic and research roles.

Conclusion

Strengthening doctoral pathways for racially minoritised women is not a niche intervention. It is central to research excellence, talent sustainability, institutional credibility and economic growth. The recommendations above are practical, evidence-based, and achievable within current governance structures and should be approached as strategic priorities rather than optional enhancements.

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Further reading

Generation Delta is a 4-year project funded by the Office for Students and Research England and led by a consortium of racially minoritised women professors at the Universities of Leeds, Goldsmiths, Plymouth, Reading, Sheffield and Sunderland.

Find out more about the **Generation Delta project**.

Read more on **Generation Delta project findings**.

